

By Charles Peters

THE CURRENT discussion about removing restraints on the CIA reminds me of the 1950s, when the talk was about unleashing Chiang Kai-shek and the image evoked was of an efficient military machine straining at its shackles, ready to leap across the Formosa Strait and devastate the Reds. The catch was that in prior engagements with the Communist armies, the generalissimo's forces had a batting average of around .150. The situation at the CIA is not unsimilar, only its average may be a bit lower. Recall its wrong predictions — that the shah was secure in 1978, that Vietnam would not collapse in the spring of 1975, that war would not break out in the Middle East in the fall of 1973 — and the grotesque mixture of evil and clownishness that characterized its assassination attempts. And think for a moment — can you name even three major actions of the CIA that were both wise and effective?

There is always the argument that it's better to assassinate a Hitler than to fight a world war. That sounds persuasive, but my guess is that if we'd had the CIA in the '30s, it would have tried to assassinate not Hitler, but Tito, de Gaulle and Count von Stauffenberg. By 1944, of course, when von Stauffenberg carried his bomb-filled briefcase into a meeting with Hitler, the CIA's parent agency, the OSS, was in action. Of this we can have no doubt. Who else would have moved the briefcase away from the fuhrer the precise distance necessary to let him escape unharmed?