The CIA's New Cover

The Rope Dancer
by Victor Marchetti.
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I

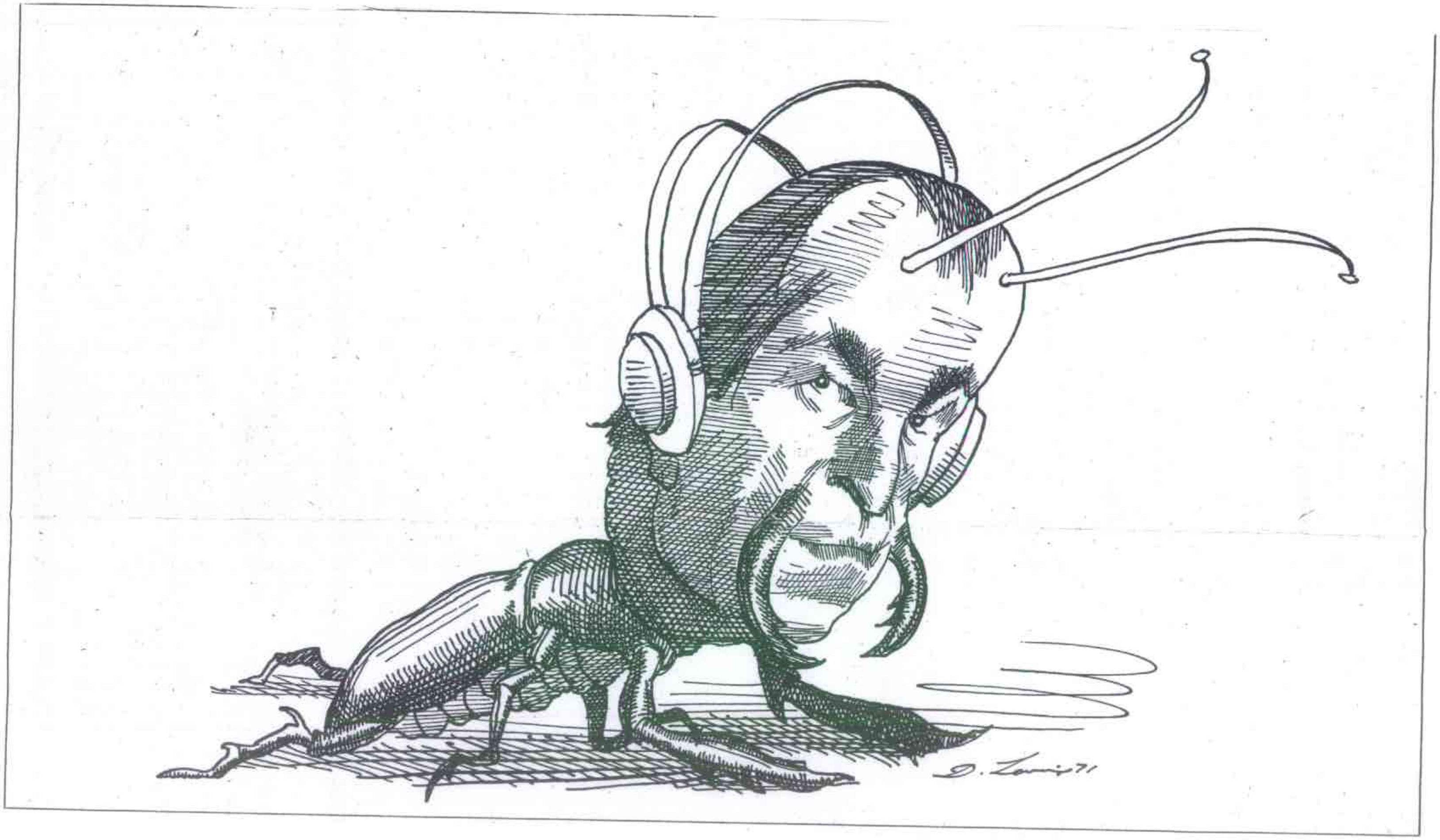
In late November the Central Intelligence Agency conducted a series of "senior seminars" so that some of its important bureaucrats could consider its public image. I was invited to attend one session and to give my views on the proper role of the Agency. I suggested that its legitimate activities were limited to studying newspapers and published statistics, listening to the radio, thinking about the world, interpreting data of reconnaissance satellites, and occasionally publishing the names of foreign spies. I had been led by conversations with a number of CIA officials to believe that they were thinking along the same lines. One CIA man after another eagerly joined the discussion to assure me that the days of the flamboyant covert operations were over. The upper-class amateurs of the OSS who stayed to mastermind operations in Guatemala, Iran, the Congo, and elsewhere—Allen Dulles, Kermit Roosevelt, Richard Bissell, Tracy Barnes, Robert Amory, Desmond Fitzgerald—had died or departed.

In their place, I was assured, was a small army of professionals devoted to preparing intelligence "estimates" for the President and collecting information the clean, modern way, mostly with sensors, computers, and sophisticated reconnaissance devices. Even Gary Powers, the U-2 pilot, would now be as much a museum piece as Mata Hari. (There are about 18,000 employees in the CIA and 200,000 in the entire "intelligence community" itself. The cost of maintaining them is somewhere between $5 billion and $6 billion annually. The employment figures do not include foreign agents or mercenaries, such as the CIA's 100,000-man hired army in Laos.)

A week after my visit to the "senior seminar" *Newsweek* ran a long story on "the new espionage" with a picture of CIA Director Richard Helms on the cover. The reporters clearly had spoken to some of the same people I had. As *Newsweek* said, "The gaudy era of the adventurer has passed in the American spy business; the bureaucratic age of Richard C. Helms and his gray specialists has settled in." I began to have an uneasy feeling that *Newsweek*'s article was a cover story in more than one sense.

It has always been difficult to analyze organizations that engage in false advertising about themselves. Part of the responsibility of the CIA is to spread confusion about its own work. The world of Richard Helms and his "specialists" does indeed differ from that of Allen Dulles. Intelligence organizations, in spite of their predilection for what English judges used to call "frolics of their own," are servants of policy. When policy changes, they must eventually change too, although because of the atmosphere of secrecy and deception in which they operate, such changes are exceptionally hard to control. To understand the "new espionage" one must see it as part of the Nixon Doctrine which, in essence, is a global strategy for maintaining US power and influence without overtly involving the nation in another ground war.

But we cannot comprehend recent developments in the "intelligence community" without understanding what Mr. Helms and his employees actually do. In a speech before the National Press Club, the director discouraged journalists from making the attempt. "You've just got to trust us. We are honorable men." The same speech is made each year to the small but growing number of senators who want a closer check on the CIA. In asking,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on November 10, for a "Select Committee on the Coordination of United States Activities Abroad to oversee activities of the Central Intelligence Agency," Senator Stuart Symington noted that "the subcommittee having oversight of the Central Intelligence Agency has not met once this year."

Symington, a former Secretary of the Air Force and veteran member of the Armed Services Committee, has also said that "there is no federal agency in our government whose activities receive less scrutiny and control than the CIA." Moreover, soon after Symington spoke, Senator Allen J. Ellender, chairman of the Intelligence Operations Subcommittee, admitted on the floor of the Senate, as the Washington *Post* reported, "that he did not know in advance about the CIA's financing of any army in Laos." Symington was able to get only thirty votes in favor of a Select Committee. An attempt to impose a budgetary ceiling on intelligence activities also failed.

Always intimidated by the mysteries of intelligence, senators were particularly unwilling in this case to assert their constitutional responsibilities because the President had just reorganized intelligence operations. Richard Helms had been given new authority over the budget of the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, the Intelligence and Research Bureau of the State Department, and the other intelligence agencies. This centralization of intelligence, adopted over the protests of the military services, gives the Central Intelligence Agency and its director new and important powers.

The most striking feature of Nixon's reorganization is the enhanced role of Henry Kissinger, who as chairman of a new National Security Council Intelligence Committee and supervisor of a new Net Assessment Group can now function as a chief of staff to the President on intelligence matters. Even more than before, his view of the world is the basis for the President's decisions. The military services will now have fewer chances to sell the President their own version of events.

For more than ten years the CIA has had one public failure after another—the Bay of Pigs, the failure of its counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam during the early 1960s, its incompetence during the Dominican operation in 1965, the scandals over its penetration of the National Student Association and dozens of other organizations. But the Agency is once again becoming the most powerful bureaucratic force in foreign affairs. In part, its new prestige results from the Pentagon Papers.

The record made available thus far shows that the CIA analyzed South Vietnamese politics in the late 1950s with remarkable accuracy. The Agency's Board of National Estimates, which prepares the National Intelligence Estimates for the President, was perceptive about the weakness of the Diem regime and, unlike Rusk, Bundy, and McNamara, the Agency saw that the Viet Cong was an authentic southern movement, not merely the creature of Hanoi. The CIA presented a strong case showing that bombing the north would not win the war in the south. Each time a major escalation of the war was proposed, its predictions, though always hedged in the characteristic manner of investment analysts and other professional prophets, were duly pessimistic.

The current prestige of the CIA is also explained by the failure of competing agencies. Robert McNamara's effort to create the Defense Intelligence Agency, a little CIA to consolidate the intelligence work of the military services, was not a bureaucratic success. A former Air Force man described it for a *Newsweek* correspondent as a "giant vacuum cleaner picking up millions of pieces of lint that we store in our computers." It did not help the reputation of Army intelligence inside the government when it was caught spying on such figures as Senator Adlai Stevenson. The State Department Intelligence and Research Branch, which also had a reasonably good record of accuracy in the Vietnam war, is small, depends upon other agencies for information, and shares the generally low esteem in which the State Department is held by those in charge of American foreign policy.

But the most important reason for the new ascendence of the CIA and its highly publicized professionals is the Nixon Doctrine, which is in many ways a throwback to the policies of the Eisenhower era, the CIA's Golden Age. John Foster Dulles and his brother used the CIA as an instrument of political warfare to extend US control over the internal politics of countries throughout the world, without military intervention. During the Eisenhower years troops were used only in the brief adventure in Lebanon and for evacuating some tiny islands off China. But CIA agents brought down governments in Iran and Guatemala, attempted to do so in Indonesia, installed Mobutu in the Congo, and staged a secret war in Laos.

These were the years in which the CIA established itself as the principal arm of US diplomacy in a number of countries and reduced many ambassadors to embarrassed ceremonial figures. Sometimes intelligence agents were openly appointed to strategic embassies. In 1953, for example, General "Wild Bill" Donovan, the creator of OSS and the senior American specialist in espionage, was appointed ambassador to Thailand so that he could set up a variety of covert operations in Southeast Asia, of which many still survive. The Eisenhower era was a period of intense undercover activity, but under the cover of Dulles's belligerent rhetoric Ike delivered eight years of peace.

Nixon now promises a full generation of peace. According to the neo-Metternichean vision of Henry Kissinger, expounded in State of the World messages and in the President's major foreign policy speech last summer at Kansas City, US troop strength around the world will be reduced and large-scale military interventions will be avoided. Instead, Nixon will take diplomatic steps to reduce confrontations around the world. When the United States finds that it has no alternative to the use of force to protect what are still deemed our "vital interests" in other countries, the emphasis will not be on crude military power. The Nixon Doctrine calls for increased use of foreign military assistance, the development of an "electronic battlefield" and other lethal technology that can be operated at a safe distance, and reliance on air power.

When the United States finds it necessary to use military action abroad, every effort will be made to ensure that the color of the bodies on the battlefield will render them invisible to US newspaper readers. President Nixon has made it "perfectly clear" that the United States is not abandoning its traditional view of its interests in Southeast Asia or Latin America. We will continue to resist or harass revolutionary movements even when, as in Chile, they come to power by legal means. But a major effort is being made to find ways that are cheaper, more effective, and more acceptable politically than sending in the Army or the Marines. Clearly such a strategy creates irresistible opportunities for CIA action, the more "covert" the better.

II

In recent months much evidence about how the CIA operates has come to light. As we have seen, the Pentagon Papers provide the first public glimpse of its "estimating" process, but the papers also show how little such estimates can matter. On the major foreign policy crisis of this generation, the Vietnam war, they were continuously ignored. When I asked one of the government officials responsible for war planning how he could have recommended escalation in the face of the CIA analyses of the nature of the NLF and the impact of air bombardment on North Vietnamese resistance, he replied testily that nobody pays much attention to intelligence estimates. Remembering how bored and confused I was by the reams of red, yellow, brown, green, and blue documents from intelligence sources during my own days in the State Department, I had to admit he was right.

On really important questions, such

as the political intentions of adversaries whom for some reason you are afraid to ask directly, the analyses seldom rise above the level of sophisticated gossip. There is always more than you want to know about personal idiosyncrasies, for example the sex habits of Congolese generals. On military matters, such as the number of Soviet aircraft of a certain class, the estimates often are not attempts at establishing truth so much as essential elements in the bureaucratic conflict over the US military budget. Whether the Soviets have fifty or a hundred more or fewer aircraft has no effect on the "military balance," but it will determine whether certain funds will go to the Air Force or the Navy. For this reason the military services have signed "treaties" with one another which are compromises on estimates of enemy forces.

The CIA does not benefit directly from increased military appropriations and it is to some extent insulated from interservice rivalries; but while it has shown it can sometimes be objective on military questions, its estimates too are colored by bureaucratic politics and self-interest. A real test of the CIA's objectivity would be the accuracy of its reporting on its own paramilitary operations in Laos, where the Agency remains in charge of a full-scale war.

No one in the intelligence business is naïve enough to think that estimates, particularly on intangible political questions, can be separated from policy recommendations. Policy is influenced by the picture of the world on which it is based. Because the CIA in preparing its estimates does not normally divulge its sources, the estimators have wide latitude to select and weigh facts for their psychological impact on policy makers. (One former CIA official recalls the highly emotional estimate Allen Dulles sent President Eisenhower the day Castro marched into Havana. Dulles predicted a bloodbath and thereby set the tone for treating Castro as America's number one obsession and number one target.)

Some of the most revealing new information about the CIA is to be found in the excellent investigations of the Symington subcommittee during its Laos hearing. There is also a small but growing group of CIA alumni who are sufficiently concerned with the threat that a largely uncontrolled and growing intelligence organization poses to a free society to speak candidly about the Agency. Most of them are reluctant to be quoted, but one articulate exception is Victor Marchetti, who has not only written a novel, *The Rope Dancer*, dealing with the Agency, but has been willing to talk to writers on public affairs, including myself.

For three years Marchetti worked as special assistant to the CIA's executive director and as executive assistant to the Agency's deputy director, Rufus L. Taylor. During these years in the "executive suite" he attended daily meetings with the director and high Agency officials. While working in the office of the comptroller he was in a position to see how the money was spent and where. In view of the lack of effective congressional oversight, his information is unusually important because it provides a rare view behind the CIA's cover.

The characters in Marchetti's novel are wooden and one-dimensional but his book is useful because it provides authentic details of life in the Agency. Marchetti gives a convincing account of what he calls the "clandestine mentality," the peculiar mindlessness of spying. The chief defect of his book as a work of literature may be the most revealing thing about it. His characters have no plausible motives. A happily married man with a bright future becomes a spy for the Russians in order to get money which he does not need and in which he shows little interest. In the end he is killed, but it is never clear why he went to all the trouble. But in the espionage business plausible motives are not necessary. The clandestine mind may not care at all about the goals for which it plots or even about which side it is on. The excitement of spying, the thrill of being able to invert moral conventions, is its own reward. Marchetti shows that the impulse to lie is so strong in the clandestine world that intelligence officials ostensibly working on the same side cannot help deceiving each other.

In his book, and in interviews,

Marchetti has already disclosed enough concrete facts to contradict the image the Agency has been trying to promote about itself, and particularly its claim that clandestine operations are a relatively small and dwindling part of its work, while the really important CIA activity consists of research and analysis. When Marchetti left the Agency in 1970 about one-third of its 18,000 employees worked on "research and analysis," including "current intelligence," "strategic research," "economic research," photo interpretation and broadcast monitoring, and "technical research"—the latter including new or improved bugs, cameras, sensors, data processors, methods of fouling Cuban oil tanks, etc. The Board of Estimates, the most visible of the CIA's Washington activities, employed exactly eighty people, including secretaries, when Marchetti worked for it four years ago.

According to Marchetti, another third of the agency's employees are directly carrying out "clandestine activities." They are assigned to Foreign Intelligence, which is the covert collecting of information, e.g., by stealing codes or tapping wires, or to Covert Action, which includes such activities as the recent phony broadcast in Cambodia in which a giggling voice described as "Prince Sihanouk" advised Cambodian women to sleep with the Viet Cong. They may also carry on counterespionage. Richard Bissell, the former CIA Deputy Director for Plans (covert operations) has defined "covert action" as "attempting to influence the internal affairs of other nations—sometimes called 'intervention'—by covert means."

The remaining third provide a variety of "support" services such as transportation, communication, and logistics. But most of these, as Marchetti points out, help out the clandestine services. Analysts who sit at desks at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, and read *Pravda* need and get little such "support." But the covert work of contriving "dead-drops," "safe houses," "cut-outs," and of paying huge bribes to needy union leaders and disloyal colonels requires the efforts of thousands of employees. It is also expensive. Marchetti estimates that at least 65 percent of the Agency's annual $700 million budget is spent on clandestine activities. And this figure, he emphasizes, is deceptively low, for the Agency also draws on funds budgeted for the Department of Defense. To run the war in Laos, for example, the CIA spends $50 million of its own funds, most of which are concealed in the defense budget, and over $400 million of the Defense Department's funds.

Much of Marchetti's information is confirmed by the record of a discussion of covert operations which was led by Richard Bissell on January 9, 1968, as part of a Council on Foreign Relations study of the intelligence community. A copy of the minutes of the meeting fell into the hands of the Africa Research Group, which has published it. (The complete text is available for $1 from the Africa Research Group, PO Box 213, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138.) Although Mr. Bissell was dismissed from his job as manager of the nation's spies after the Bay of Pigs, he is still, according to former associates, close to the Agency and regularly consults with its top officials. Thus, in the view of CIA alumni and other sources, his discussion of covert activities reflects current thinking inside the Agency.

Bissell made it clear that the character of espionage is changing. There has been, he says, a "shift in priorities for classical espionage toward targets in the underdeveloped world. Partly as a result of this change in priorities and . . . partly because of other developments, the scale of the classical espionage effort in Europe has considerably diminished."

> In contrast the underdeveloped world presents greater opportunities for covert intelligence collection, simply because governments are much less highly organized; there is less security consciousness; and there is apt to be more actual or potential diffusion of power among parties, localities, organizations, and individuals outside of the central governments. The primary purpose of espionage in these areas is to provide Washington with timely knowledge of the internal power balance. . . .

As one former CIA official explained it to me, Europe used to be an underdeveloped country from the spy's point of view. After the war the continent was in ruins and everyone was either on one side or the other in the cold war. Now local authorities resent it when Soviet and American agents chase each other in their countries. This complicates the game of spying. Besides, diplomats now talk more freely anyway.

The disorganized, highly corruptible societies of the Third World make much more inviting targets. The same official pointed out that there is not much worth knowing about Chile, for example, that can be discovered by a reconnaissance satellite or other "stand off" techniques of intelligence collection. To discover intentions, which is the essence of political intelligence, so-called "close in" methods must be used. This means penetrating foreign governments and societies. Bissell put it this way:

> Only by knowing the principal players well do you have a chance of careful prediction. There is real scope for action in this area; the technique is essentially that of "penetration".... Many of the "penetrations" don't take the form of "hiring" but of establishing a close or friendly relationship (which may not be furthered by the provision of money from time to time).... In some countries the CIA representative has served as a close counselor (and in at least one case a drinking companion) of the chief of state. These are situations of course in which the tasks of intelligence collection and political action overlap to the point of being almost indistinguishable.

Bissell recounted how "in the case of a large underdeveloped country" money was "put into a party's funds without the knowledge of that party." The United States, he said, "should make increasing use of non-nationals, who, with effort at indoctrination and training should be encouraged to develop a second loyalty, more or less comparable to that of the American staff."

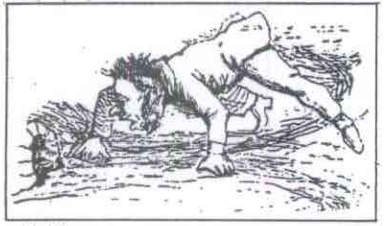
> If the Agency is to be effective, it will have to make increasing use of private institutions on an expanding scale, though those relations that have been "blown" cannot be resurrected. We need to operate under deeper cover, with increased attention to the use of "cut-outs" [i.e., middlemen who protect the professional case worker or spy supervisor from direct contact with the agent who does the actual spying]. . . . The CIA interface with various private groups, including business and student groups, must be remedied.

III

Many of the ideas that emerged from the Council on Foreign Relations study group, former CIA insiders say, were incorporated in a task force report prepared inside the CIA shortly after the Nixon Administration took office. The recent reorganization reflects both the criticism of the intelligence community by high national security decision makers and long-standing complaints by intelligence professionals themselves.

The most obvious purpose of the reorganization is to reduce "collection overkill," i.e., the expensive, mindless duplication of information that nobody reads or that makes no difference. The increased supervisory power of the CIA and the White House over intelligence operations is primarily designed to keep the expanding intelligence bureaucracies of the military services in check. The CIA's clandestine services have complained about the military's moving in on secret operations which, Agency officials believe, they often perform with extreme incompetence. The White House is also interested in maintaining tighter control over intelligence activities in the field, for the United States is now more vulnerable politically than ever when covert operations backfire. The Administration is also obviously interested in saving money.

This much of the story is reasonably clear from public statements. What is not clear is the extent and nature of the use of clandestine services. The official line promoted in private press briefings, dinners with the director, and confidential chats with key members of Congress, is that the clandestine services, except for the technical people, have been trimmed and that the US now makes little use of covert means to manipulate the internal politics of other countries. *Newsweek* correspondents in twenty-five capitals around the world apparently corroborated this claim when they reported a cutback of secret activities.



But this of course could mean either that clandestine operations are in fact declining or that they are skillfully being performed by agents with the "deeper cover" that Bissell called for in 1968. As of 1970, as we have seen, Marchetti found the Agency was still heavily weighted in its personnel and budget in favor of clandestine work. In trying to understand what the Agency does, he contends, one must keep in mind that its managers, including the director, have made their careers in the clandestine services. He recalls that top officials of the CIA were interested mainly in secret operations, not in intelligence analysis. Helms, he remembers, often seemed bored by meetings of the United States Intelligence Board but was alert and lively when working with the clandestine services.

Former CIA officials contend that the Agency is now trying to "professionalize" the clandestine services. Many CIA operations, as Bissell pointed out, have had their covers "blown." As the CIA applies new techniques, especially in the underdeveloped world, these operations are being quietly phased out. The CIA used to pour money lavishly into organizations around the globe as, for example, the labor unions in British Guiana which were enlisted in the fight to overthrow the radical Cheddi Jagan. Now such techniques appear too risky. It is more "secure" to cultivate individuals rather than organizations for covert operations. At the same time Marchetti believes that the Agency is also anxious to "professionalize" spying on American radicals, thus removing such politically sensitive operations from what the CIA experts regard as the clumsy hands of the FBI and military intelligence. All the alumni of both the FBI and the CIA to whom I've talked agree that the two organizations are engaged in a bitter jurisdictional rivalry over such "counterespionage" work.

The intelligence specialists I spoke to now anticipate two other developments in US espionage activities. To obtain the deeper cover that Bissell says is essential, more use will be made of "illegal" agents. These are spies, Americans or foreigners, with no discernible connection with the United States who live under an assumed identity in a foreign land. Most US operations have been carried out by "legal" agents, i.e., identifiable US employees using a cover. (In Laos, for example, it has been admitted that CIA agents engaged in training Meo tribesmen posed as AID agriculture experts.) Legal agents are obviously easier to recruit since the maximum risk they face is deportation rather than the firing squad. But suspicions now run high, and it is harder to do successful spying out of the US embassy.

The new emphasis will be on recruiting strategically placed "foreign nationals" in Third World governments, for the intelligence "requirements" of the 1970s will increasingly center on the intentions of volatile regimes rather than on weapons developments, which are relatively easily discovered by technical means and which make little strategic difference.

As Bissell pointed out, covert collection of information and covert action, while separable in theory, "interact and overlap." Although an effort was made in the 1950s to separate the two by placing covert action in a "separate organ" under Frank G. Wisner, General "Beedle" Smith, according to Bissell, ordered the "complete integration of intelligence collection and covert action functions in each area division." In practice, this means that an agent who is trying to find out what is happening inside a foreign government or movement may at the same time try to influence the very developments he is reporting on.

It can also be anticipated that intelligence agents will be increasingly recruited from the international under-world. At the height of the cold war it was possible to enlist businessmen, foundations, universities, and churches in covert operations. Espionage was respectable among the intellectual and business elite. But spying is not in high favor among the younger generation, and it is now much harder to find well-placed lawyers and professors to cooperate in performing what Allen Dulles used to call "dirty tricks."

Thus while the CIA's management in Washington will continue in the hands of liberal, polished, and well-spoken professionals, operations in the field will be more and more entrusted to such adventurers as the CIA agent who—according to Fred Branfman, who spent a year and a half interviewing US employees in Laos—drops grenades on villages from airplanes and likes to send Lao heads to his friends; or the group of hired killers who run the Phoenix Program in Indochina which, according to CIA official William Colby, claims to have assassinated more than 6,000 civilians in a single year.

It is of course in Laos where CIA operations are so ambitious that they become highly visible. The Pentagon Papers contain a July, 1961, memorandum by General Lansdale which states that "command control of Meo operations is exercised by the Chief CIA, Vientiane with the advice of Chief, MAAG." The Agency has recruited, trained, and financed several secret armies made up of Meos, Yaos, Thais, Nationalist Chinese, and Nungs. The CIA's foreign legion sets tribe against tribe and nation against nation. The Agency is now carrying on similar activities in Cambodia and parts of Thailand. The close coordination of the CIA target spotters on the ground and the air force may well be the model for the "low-profile" paramilitary operations of the future.

The increasing use of such "low profile" and paramilitary operations and the employment of "deeper cover" penetration by "illegal agents" means that more and more power over foreign affairs will be concentrated in the office of the President. It is hard enough for Congress to supervise the Pentagon; legislative review of large-scale clandestine operations is a virtually hopeless task. The only chance of ending the increasingly dangerous role of intelligence organizations in making and carrying out foreign policy is to cut their budgets drastically and to set up accounting procedures to make certain that the cuts are in fact observed. Congress has the power to do this but it will not act so long as it accepts the mystique of intelligence.

The short history of American intelligence is a record of tactical virtuosity and strategic stupidity. Much of the information obtained by covert means is either unused or used in connection with aggressive and illegal covert operations which often fail. An honest and intelligent observer working in the open or in a library can learn more that is useful and true about the world than a clandestine operator aided by the most sophisticated spy paraphernalia. Information obtained by clandestine methods more often than not has a built-in bias that makes it suspect, as is to be expected when people are paid or pressured or blackmailed to deliver the goods. A careful reader of *Le Monde* would have a far more accurate grasp of the true significance of politics and military operations in Indochina than someone condemned to reading every intelligence document published in the Pentagon Papers.

Brilliant techniques have indeed been developed by the CIA for assassination, sabotage, and deception. Governments in Latin America have been neatly dispatched and African generals discreetly rented. Safes have been stuffed with purloined information. But to what end? The people of Guatemala and Iran are scarcely better off because of the CIA coups in their countries. American oil companies have benefited but the American people are neither more secure nor better liked because of these "intelligence" triumphs. The old imperial game of dividing and conquering weak countries serves the interests only of those who enjoy engaging in it and of those commercial interests that derive direct (and often short-term) benefits from it. It has yet to be demonstrated what security interest the United States has in manipulating the politics of other countries other than the perfect security of world domination, the dream that destroys great nations. ☐