

Innocence Abroad: The New World of Spyles Coups

Post 9/24/91 By David Ignatius

NOBODY WAS rude enough to say so during last week's confirmation hearings for Robert M. Gates to head the CIA, but the old era of covert action is dead. The world doesn't run in secret anymore. We are now living in the Age of Overt Action.

The great democratic revolution that has swept the globe over the past few years has been a triumph of overt action. The CIA old boys spent a generation fantasizing about this sort of global anti-communist putsch. But when it finally happened, it was in the open. There were no secret paramilitary armies, and there was almost no bloodshed. The key operatives in the conspiracy turned out to be telephones, televisions and fax machines.

Working in broad daylight, the United States and its allies were able to do things that would have been unthinkable dangerous had they been done in the shadows. Consider:

When Boris Yeltsin's aides were trying to rally support for their resistance in Moscow on Aug. 19, the first day of the coup, they needed to broadcast their defiant message to Russia and the world. One of them sent a fax to Allen Weinstein, a pro-democracy activist who heads a think tank in Washington.

"Did Mr. Bush make any comments upon the situation in this country?" implored the handwritten fax message. "If he did, make it known by all means of communication to the people of this country. The Russian government has no *NO* ways to address the people. All radio stations are under control. The following is [Boris Yeltsin's] address to the Army. Submit it to USIA. Broadcast it over the country. Maybe 'Voice of America.' Do it! Urgent!"

And it was done, in the open.

Next, it was time for the leader of the free world to contact the Kremlin rebel who was seeking to dismantle the Soviet empire and destroy the Communist Party. And how was this contact, arguably the most sensitive and delicate in the history of the Cold War, handled? George Bush called Boris Yeltsin on the telephone. And then he went on television and described his conversation.

We didn't need the CIA to support Yeltsin's counter-

coup. We just needed a telephone operator.

Preparing the ground for last month's triumph of overt action was a network of overt operatives who during the last 10 years have quietly been changing the rules of international politics. They have been doing in public what the CIA used to do in private—providing money and moral support for pro-democracy groups, training resistance fighters, working to subvert communist rule. And, in contrast to many of the CIA's superannuated Cold Warriors, who tended to get tangled

See COUPS, C4, Col. 1

David Ignatius is foreign editor of *The Washington Post* and author of "Siro," a spy novel.

COUPS, From C1

in their webs of secrecy, these overt operatives have been immensely successful.

There's an obvious lesson here for Gates, or whoever ends up heading the CIA. The old concept of covert action, which has gotten the agency into such trouble during the past 40 years, may be obsolete. Nowadays, sensible activities to support America's friends abroad (or undermine its enemies) are probably best done openly. That includes paramilitary operations such as supporting freedom fighters, which can be managed overtly by the Pentagon. And it includes political-support operations for pro-democracy activists, which may be best left to the new network of overt operators.

Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.) thus has it half-right when he urges that the CIA be abolished. The main problem, contrary to what Moynihan says, is not with intelligence collection—"spying," in its purest form. That part of the CIA needs to be strengthened, not cut.

What may need abolishing is the covert-action role that was awkwardly grafted onto the CIA's basic spying mission when the agency was created in 1947. The covert-action boys were known back then as the Office of Policy Coordination. It may be time, at last, to bid them adieu. They're obsolete. They've been privatized.

That's especially true in the realm of what used to be called "propaganda" and can now simply be called information. The CIA worked hard in the old days to draw foreign newspapers and magazines into its web, so as to counter Soviet disinformation. Frank Wisner, the head of CIA covert operations during the mid-1950s, once remarked that he

broadcasting equipment," according to Karatnycky.

The sugar daddy of overt operations has been the National Endowment for Democracy, a quasi-private group headed by Carl Gershman that is funded by the U.S. Congress. Through the late 1980s, it did openly what had once been unspeakably covert—dispensing money to anti-communist forces behind the Iron Curtain.

To read through the NED's grant list (a public document) is to take a stroll down the democracy movement's memory lane: In Czechoslovakia, the endowment began aiding democratic forces in 1984, including support for Civic Forum; in Hungary, the aid began in 1986 and included election help and funding for Hungary's first independent public-opinion survey; in Romania and Bulgaria, the endowment has supported new intellectual journals and other tools of democracy. Among its many activities in Poland, the endowment has backed the Gdansk Video Center, which helped produce and distribute pro-democracy videos throughout Eastern Europe during the 1980s. And through the Free Trade Union Institute and the Center for International Private Enterprise, the endowment helped support new unions and employers' associations across Eastern Europe—building the infrastructure of a free economy.

The endowment has also been active inside the Soviet Union. It has given money to Soviet trade unions; to the liberal "Interregional Group" in the Congress of Peoples Deputies; to a foundation headed by Russian activist Ilya Zaslavsky; to an Oral History Project headed by Soviet historian Yuri Afanasyev; to the Ukrainian independence movement known as Rukh, and to many other projects.

Covert funding for these groups would have been the kiss of death, if discovered. Overt funding, it would seem, has been a kiss of life.
