

The Assassination-Plot Rumors

By CLIFTON DANIEL

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, June 5—For two decades, assassinations—or alleged assassinations—by American secret agents have been a subject for movie scenarios and cocktail party gossip in Washington.

Now, in the new atmosphere after détente and Watergate, they have suddenly become front page news. Why?

Washington officials and former officials have a variety of theories, depending often on the point of view of the theorizer. The most prevalent theory, and perhaps the fundamental one, is that exposing the dirty tricks of the Central Intelligence Agency is simply a reaction to the Watergate scandal and the traumatic Vietnam war.

Some say that there has been a revival of morality in Washington—or, to say the least, morality has become politically more fashionable. It is perceived as a vote-getter.

In such an atmosphere, actions that in World War II and the cold war might have been viewed with equanimity or indifference or even applauded are now regarded by many as unworthy of a democracy.

Historical Sequence

One person who is prominently involved now in investigating the C.I.A. recalls the historical sequence this way. In World War II, Americans were so incensed by Hitler's methods that, when the United States became involved, it fought Hitler on his own terms and with his own techniques.

Some of those techniques such as subversion, were later applied in the struggle against Communism, which became the post-war obsession of the United States. They eventually were used not only in enemy countries, but also countries that were thought to be potential enemies.

Finally, as has been acknowledged by the C.I.A. itself, some of the techniques so long used abroad were improperly employed at home against Vietnam war dissidents and other American citizens.

"When we found an American President [Nixon] employing these [intelligence] people and using them for his own political purposes, we began to realize we were endangering our own society."

'Nature of the Dead'

That was a comment today from Senator Frank Church, Democrat of Idaho, chairman of the Senate select committee investigating the C.I.A. and

Rising Interest Laid to Watergate and Vietnam War

Other components of the intelligence community.

It was not a question of how many transgressions the G.I.A. committed in the United States, Senator Church added, but "a question of the nature of the dead."

Senator Church's committee is only one of three bodies created to investigate the intelligence community. The two others are a Presidential commission headed by Vice President Rockefeller, whose report is going to the White House tomorrow, and a House committee under Representative Lucien N. Nedzi, Democrat of Michigan, which has barely started to work.

The proliferation of investigations has, not surprisingly, led to a proliferation of news leaks about the subjects under investigation, especially the allegation that the C.I.A. in 1961 recruited two men from the Mafia, Sam Giancana and John Roselli, to assassinate Premier Fidel Castro of Cuba.

As is usual in Washington, leaks lead to counter-leaks by those trying to protect themselves from the original leaks, and that helps to account for the spate of front page stories about assassinations.

For example, Adam Walinsky,

former legislative assistant to Senator Robert F. Kennedy and aide to Mr. Kennedy when he was Attorney General, said today that the Rockefeller commission was responsible for "an unprecedented series of leaks."

"This commission," he said by telephone from New York, "is engaged, with the assistance of the C.I.A., in a concerted effort to absolve the C.I.A. for any of its questionable or scummy activities, and, after the fact, to place the responsibility on public officials who are, from the C.I.A.'s point of view, conveniently dead."

The officials to whom he alluded were Senator Kennedy and his late brother, the President, both of whom have been mentioned in speculation on the origins of alleged plots to assassinate Premier Castro.

"It is not coincidental," Mr. Walinsky said, "that the Republicans all think that [Senator Edward M.] Kennedy will be the Democratic President nominee in 1972."

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Other Democrats suggested that, aside from trying to dispel the Kennedy mystique, the Republicans might want to shift some of the onus of scandal from themselves by loading it onto Democratic heroes. Republicans, for their part, denied any such intentions.

Political Motive Denied

David W. Belin, executive director of the Rockefeller commission, emphatically denied today that there had been leaks from the commission, or that its inquiry was politically motivated. He said, "I call 'em as they are. I don't care who's involved."

As for who was involved, Maj. Gen. Edward G. Lansdale, a former C.I.A. adviser who retired from the Air Force in 1968, reiterated today that "it simply wasn't true" that President Kennedy "wanted me to assassinate somebody."

General Lansdale has acknowledged writing a memorandum in 1962, when the Cuban missile crisis was approaching, exploring the possibilities of dealing with Premier Castro and his Communist Government.

He said that one of the possibilities, when, according to the general, millions of American lives were in danger from Soviet missiles implanted in Cuba, might have been assassination, but he did not recall exactly what he had said and had no copy of the memorandum.

"Fortunately, it did not come to that," General Lansdale said, speaking of assassination.

There has so far been no public indication that the Rockefeller commission has got to the bottom of the Castro story, and one highly knowledgeable official said today, "We will probably never find out the full story."

Reportedly, a quarter of the Rockefeller commission's report is devoted to assassinations, and that it ironic, because it was never intended that the commission would deal with anything but allegations of improper C.I.A. activities inside the United States.

One of President Ford's aims in deciding on the commission's terms of reference and its membership was to insure that the embarrassing subject of political

murders abroad would not be explored and that the C.I.A.'s effectiveness would not be impaired.

Another of his aims—again ironically—was to avoid rattling the skeletons in the closets of his predecessors who were no longer able to defend themselves. He thought it unfair to expose actions that were judged at the time to be proper and in the national interest, but might later be regarded as cruel and un-American.

President Ford's concerns on that score have proved to be well founded. While both he and the C.I.A. have sought to put yesterday's dirty tricks behind them, there is manifestly a public appetite for the assassination story.

"It evokes a reaction in the country," a senior Federal official observed today. "People don't like it."

While people may generally not approve of assassinations, some would not rule out assassinations as a last resort in a desperate situation.

"If somebody had knocked off Hitler in 1936 or 1937," Nicholas DeB. Khtzenbach, former Attorney General of the United States, remarked today, "I think it would have been a big help."

However, Mr. Khtzenbach, speaking by telephone from Armonk, N. Y., said that he questioned whether the United States itself should engage in assassinations because of its peculiar vulnerability of its own Presidents.

A foreign diplomat, obviously disapproving of the American penchant for self-flagellation, expressed the opinion that the less that assassinations were talked about, the better it would be.