

Assassination as a Weapon of Diplomacy

IT NOW SEEMS CLEAR that in the late Eisenhower years and the early Kennedy years, American officials contemplated measures to bring about the assassination of Fidel Castro of Cuba, a country with which the United States had sharp political differences but not one with which we were at war. President Kennedy, in particular, appears to have been prepared to consider this last resort after the fiasco at the Bay of Pigs when the United States failed miserably in its efforts to overthrow Castro by sponsoring an invasion of Cuban exiles in 1961. In view of that plain evidence that Washington felt threatened enough by the Castro regime to use covert violence against it, the allegations that the CIA was subsequently ordered to study a remedy as drastic as assassination should come as no great surprise.

In the current passion for scrutiny of the cold war, however, attention has been turned to new suggestions that the CIA conducted, or encouraged, or at least knew of other political murder plots, including some that actually took place, such as the killings of the Dominican Republic's Trujillo and the Congo's Lumumba. The degree and kind of CIA participation in these cases, if any, should become better known as the several investigations of the agency roll on; the President's own study, done by the Rockefeller commission, is to be made public on Sunday. In the meantime, there are several things to be said.

To play a part in the murder of a leader of a state with which our country is not at war is an abject confession of both moral and political bankruptcy. Far from being the mark of a great power, such acts are a demonstration of impotency, the more so when they are directed, as they apparently were, against the leaders of small, weak nations. It would be interesting and no doubt sobering to know whether the availability of murder as a feasible tactic for easing a particular foreign-policy problem has made our political leaders less ready to explore alternate diplomatic or legal approaches to it. In any case, it is significant that the resort to murder inevitably followed humiliating failure in the exercise of conventional political and economic efforts to influence the course of events.

All the same, no one trying to understand these allegations can ignore the political context of the times. In the case of Castro, the cold war was raging. Virtually no one in the political community was concerned that war had not been formally declared. The public quite fully shared the government's alarms over the new "Communist" regime "90 miles from Florida." The Bay

of Pigs invasion, for instance, was widely thought to be a tolerable, perhaps even valiant, enterprise mounted by patriots seeking liberty of their land. The chief criticism of it was that it was badly botched. The Latin countries which were the targets, real or imagined, of Cuban subversion were then linking themselves with Washington in what was purported to be a glorious new "Alliance For Progress." The details of assassination maneuvers now coming into public view convey a sense of the frustration and weakness of the plotters. But what is overlooked is that the plotters were not only carrying out presidential policy but were acting in furtherance of objectives which were widely perceived by the public to be very much in the national interest at the time.

The question for public consideration then, is not whether the United States should engage directly or indirectly in assassinations. There is not even the basis for a useful public debate over whether murder is a proper tool of public policy in a democracy. To that question the answer is relatively easy and not very meaningful—the answer, in short, is No. The real policy question is more difficult: How can the United States define its legitimate security interests in a way which does not even raise the question of resort to assassination and to a larger bagful of undercover activities. This is a problem which has to do with the preservation of traditional ideals and principles and one, we suspect, which no amount of scrutiny of the CIA alone will resolve.

A large part of the answer surely lies, however, precisely in that redefinition of American objectives and capabilities which began when John Kennedy passed through the crucible of the Cuban missile crisis and other international adventures and emerged with a new understanding of the need to tolerate diversity in the world. It has taken a decade and more of overly ambitious undertakings—notably in Indochina—to demonstrate by tragic failure that a world "made safe for diversity" may be as much as even a super-powerful United States can hope to attain. It cannot be said that this concept of a more limited and selective U.S. role in the world is widely understood or shared among the public or within the government. What does seem clear to us, however, is that a willingness to temper the objectives and moderate the ambitions of foreign policy offers the best assurance that the United States will not again be tempted to turn to assassination as a means of achieving its purposes and safeguarding its interests around the world.