

The Uses of Indifference

By Adam Walinsky

Even careful newspaper readers might admit to some sense of bewilderment at the current inquiries into whether the C.I.A. attempted to assassinate certain foreign leaders. The confusion is natural, for there is not one plot but several, and at least one is still in progress.

First, there are the plots to assassinate foreign leaders, particularly Fidel Castro. There is clear evidence that beginning about 1959, the C.I.A. employed dissident Cubans and Mafia gangsters in attempts to assassinate Mr. Castro. These plots seem to have continued well into 1962 and even beyond, although Robert Kennedy, while Attorney General, believed he had stopped one plot, in which the agency dealt with the Mafia, no later than 1961.

A second group of C.I.A. assassinations is at present attracting far less attention: these are the killings carried out in Vietnam under the code name "Phoenix." In this program, the aim of which was to destroy the Vietcong "infrastructure," more than twenty thousand Vietnamese suspected of being Vietcong collaborators or sympathizers were killed by C.I.A.-trained and directed Vietnamese. (A recent article by a former C.I.A. analyst, Samuel Adams, suggests that the Vietcong had so thoroughly infiltrated the Vietnamese secret police that they probably selected many Phoenix victims; at any rate, the director of this program, William Colby, was eventually promoted to director of the C.I.A.)

Whatever its successes in the murder field—Fidel Castro is alive and well, the Vietcong "infrastructure" is now the Government of South Vietnam—the C.I.A. excels at public relations. This is the area of the agency's deepest and most complex plot, now in progress: a desperate effort, aided by the Rockefeller commission, to impede and obfuscate any serious inquiry into its operations.

Of course, the agency cannot hope completely to block revelations of all of its activities. Rather it has given the commission—which has given us—as much titillating detail as is necessary to create

a gloss of authenticity for a report that finds no present wrongdoing and blames no names—in other words, a whitewash.

More than this, the C.I.A. and the commission have been positively eager for us to learn some of their darker secrets: It is the C.I.A. itself—through Mr. Colby, former Director Richard Helms, and star operative Gen. Edward Lansdale—that has leaked most of the recent spate of "secret" stories and memoranda for publication.

For the C.I.A. knows it can no longer have true secrecy: Too many former agents have gone public, too much is already known or glimpsed. What it wants instead is complicity: that we should know, and not care enough to do anything about our knowledge. That is the central importance of the agency's attempt to fabricate a case that its attempts to assassinate Castro were authorized by President Kennedy. (Just as Howard Hunt, formerly of the C.I.A., tried to forge cables to saddle Mr. Kennedy with the responsibility for the murder of former South Vietnamese President Diem.) What the agency hopes to show by this is that it may be a gang of murders, but it is Our Gang. Killers, but obedient; not independent entrepreneurs, but faithful servants of the Company.

Of course the C.I.A., contrary to Nelson Rockefeller's fatuous reassurances, is very much "a secret agency run amok," without effective control or direction of any kind, its agents able to dispose of money, arms and plots never dreamt of by the political authorities who are their nominal superiors. Indeed, Presidential counsel Roderick Hills admitted as much when he said there is no credible evidence that any President ever authorized the C.I.A.'s assassination attempts.

What the agency is really counting on, therefore, is less our gullibility than our indifference. And it may be right: After all, how seriously will the Senate quibble at the C.I.A.'s attempted assassination of one foreign leader thirteen years ago, when it routinely and knowingly confirmed, as director of the entire agency, the man who directed twenty thousand assassinations in Vietnam?

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