

Higher Authority Seen Behind CIA Actions

By Laurence Stern
Washington Post Staff Writer

The U.S. espionage establishment was carrying out its basic institutional role—though one little understood by most Americans—in the assassination case studies described by the Senate intelligence committee report.

Although in its epilogue the committee described the assassination plots as "aberrations," the mass of evidence in the 347-page report suggests that each of the episodes took place within a firm context of national policy going all the way to the Oval Office.

In one way or another, the five assassination targets were regarded as personages inimical to U.S. national security interests. At the same time, the various administrations in the White House did not want to be saddled with the open responsibility for the downfall of the individual leaders or their governments.

But the testimony of witnesses who were central

News Analysis

participants in the events covered by the assassination report tends to push the trail of responsibility to the door of the White House.

Richard Bissell, the Central Intelligence Agency deputy director for plans (head of the dirty tricks division) and a principal Castro assassination plotter, told the committee the schemes were authorized by "highest authority"—by which he meant the President.

As Sen. Howard H. Baker (R-Tenn.) pointed out in a supplementary report, Bissell testified that it would not have been "consonant with the operations of the CIA" to conduct operations of such extreme sensitivity without the President's knowledge and permission.

The recurrent theme in the testimony of the upper-level CIA functionaries was that they were acting within a framework of authority within which all their programs and schemes had an ultimate presidential sanction.

The CIA has been described as a "king's army" at the disposal of the President when

he has to resort to secret action to carry out his foreign policies. And the Senate committee, in its unprecedented detailed portrait of the upper levels of the American espionage system, describes an agency that is anything but the "rogue elephant" that the committee chairman, Sen. Frank Church (D-Idaho) once suggested it was.

Former CIA Director Richard M. Helms, recalling his departure from the White House on Sept. 15, 1970, with President Nixon's orders to prevent the election in Chile of Salvador Allende, a Socialist, later testified: "...If I ever carried a marshal's baton in my knapsack out of the Oval Office, it was that day."

Despite titillating accounts of exploding seashells, contaminated diving suits and exotic poisons that fill the pages of the report, the underlying truth is that the CIA has functioned as a strongly hierarchical bureaucracy that owes its final allegiance on operational matters to the White House.

William Harvey, the CIA agent put in charge of recruiting underworld figures for the Castro poison schemes, repeatedly followed this line of testimony:

"I was completely convinced during this entire period that this operation had the full authority of the White House, either from the President or from someone authorized and known to be authorized to speak for the President."

The CIA's involvement in covert political warfare got its start in the idiosyncratic relationship between the Dulles brothers during the Eisenhower administration.

John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State, according to intelligence veterans of that era, did not trust the State Department bureaucracy on matters of high sensitivity and would call his brother, Allen, the CIA director, who would deploy the clandestine services of the CIA to the task.

The tradition of CIA covert operations with its clubby, swashbuckling, secretive panache, took firm root in the Dulles days. During the 1950's, the clandestine

programs of the CIA were rated within the government as a success, primarily in battling Communist mass organizations in Europe.

The agency survived the humiliating fiasco of the Bay of Pigs in 1961 to entangle itself in a continuing series of misadventures during the 1960's—some of them chronicled in the assassination report.

It had once been a boast of Allen W. Dulles that Americans never heard of the CIA's successes—only its failures. However now that so much of the agency's clandestine history has been laid bare in congressional and executive investigations, the claim does not stand the test of public scrutiny.

The Senate intelligence committee acknowledged that it did not find any smoking guns in the White House. But the report hinted that this may have been because of the elaborate system of bureaucratic obfuscation built into the system for the purpose of affording "plausible deniability" to the President.

In the Chilean intervention, CIA witnesses maintained that Henry A. Kissinger, then President Nixon's national security affairs adviser, was informed throughout of covert U.S. activities targeted against the Allende government.

Kissinger testified, however, that the White House withdrew its support for efforts to intervene in the election on Oct. 15, 1970—a week before the attempted kidnaping and murder of Chilean Army Chief-of-Staff Rene Schneider.

While the "rogue elephant" theory did not survive the hard evidence of CIA excesses in the report, the committee did single out examples in which CIA officials failed to inform their superiors of politically sensitive schemes or obtain authorization before carrying them out.

Helms and Bissell were the chief offenders, the report indicates, in the Bay of Pigs episode.

But the record does not show any serious deception by the agency of the White House, to which it owes its ultimate loyalty.