

How the CIA Seduced

By Taylor Branch
New York Times

Washington

THERE HAVE been enough revelations about the Central Intelligence Agency over the past two years to keep diplomats, prosecutors, reporters and philosophers busy for entire careers.

Three separate investigations not only stretched the imagination with show-biz material about cobra venom and deadly skin-diving suits, but twisted the lens on the American self-image in foreign affairs. In contrast to Watergate, the CIA investigations proved that abuses of power have not been limited to one particular administration or one political party. They also established facts that few people were prepared to believe — such as that distinguished gentlemen from the CIA hatched assassination plots with Mafia gangsters.

With all these surprises percolating, the most interesting surprise has been largely ignored. And that is how the CIA investigations ceased. The topic faded away so quickly as to make the whole episode look like a fad. Unlike the FBI issue, which has moved to the prosecutors' offices and stayed on the front page, the vaunted trial of the CIA has already become a memory. And the agency itself has survived the scandals with its covert operations intact, if not strengthened.

The collapse of the CIA investigations has been due largely to ineptitude, poor judgment and lack of will on the part of the congressional committees.

But the agency also played a role. Its strategy was flawless. "Those guys really knew what they were doing," says a staff member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence chaired by Frank Church. "I think they defended themselves just like any other agency would, except they're better. They had a whole office set up to deal with us, and I sometimes had the feeling that they ran operations against us like they run them against foreign governments. It was like the CIA station for the Congress instead of for Greece or Vietnam."

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IN THE SPRING of 1975, the Church committee had been spinning its wheels for several months without much success. Charged with the task

*CIA turned over
more information
than the panel
could digest*

Congress

of investigating more than a dozen intelligence agencies, any one of which was an enormous challenge, the senators became ensnarled in debate over how to proceed. The agencies were stalling, hoping to deflect attention elsewhere. Then the committee got a break.

The Presidential commission set up under Vice President Nelson Rockefeller that January, to inquire into charges of illegal domestic spying by the CIA, announced that it had received evidence of CIA involvement in attempts to kill foreign leaders. Rockefeller said his commission had neither the time nor the mandate to pursue the matter, and he turned the evidence over to President Ford, who quickly passed it along to the Church committee.

Suddenly, the senators found themselves with a large batch of classified documents and with the responsibility for the hottest issue since Watergate.

In November, 1975, the committee published an interim report on this one aspect, and senators and staff alike were proud of it. As an exploration of the Machiavellian underside of American foreign policy it was, in fact, a tour de force. Yet it failed to build public support for investigating or controlling the CIA.

Press and TV coverage was intense but shortlived, focusing on certain salacious details. The rest of the material was extremely complicated, conclusions were tentative, and the assassination plans fell short of the dramatic expectations that had grown up.

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THE COMMITTEE did not claim to have found a "smoking gun," in the form of a kill order ringing down from the Oval Office, through the CIA chain of command and out to some mysterious trigger man in a foreign capital. Quite the contrary. Where the American efforts to kill were most direct and persistent, they were unsuccessful. And where the foreign leaders were actually killed, there was no hard proof that CIA operatives actually took part in the murders. Everything was a little blurred.

The assassination report was publicly judged by standards built for



Senators Church and Schweiker (above) with the assassination report. Chief counsel Schwarz (right).

Church's panel gambled on the assassination report. And lost.



**REP. OTIS PIKE
After the CIA for its abuses**

palpable and exotic murders. Because no foreign leaders were killed outright by American initiative, planning and execution, the CIA benefited from a general impression that it came out of the assassination inquiry with clean hands. This impression is false.

Certainly many thousands of people have died as a result of secret CIA paramilitary intervention. (The Church committee obtained some casualty figures but did not publish them at the agency's request.)

"By the time we finished the assassination report," recalls the leader of one of the committee's task forces, "we had lost three things — the public's attention; much of our own energy and will power, and our leadership. Quite candidly, we had lost Frank Church." The senator, according to this investigator, had given up hope of achieving major reforms in the prevailing atmosphere.

Assassinations proved peripheral to the main business of CIA covert action, and the investigation of that realm had scarcely begun. With investigation of the other intelligence agencies, including the FBI, still ahead, five crucial months had been lost — along with much of the committee's momentum. The Senate's February, 1976, deadline for the completion of all work loomed large. And Church wanted to wrap up his investigative chores to begin his own presidential campaign.

The Church committee had gambled heavily on the assassination report. And lost.

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ACCORDING TO Mitchell Rogovin, the CIA's special counsel during

the investigations, the crux of the inquiry from the agency's point of view was covert action — secret interventions abroad by means of propaganda, bribes, manipulation of foreign agents and, in some cases, paramilitary force — as distinct from gathering and analyzing intelligence. The promotion system for CIA case officers has been built around operations, and CIA leadership has been drawn from the operators — Allen Dulles, Richard Helms, William Colby — instead of intelligence analysts. Veteran agency operatives often say that without covert action the CIA would be nothing but a collection of sophisticated professors with mounds of intelligence, and the agency itself would be only a more specialized version of the State Department.

The CIA approached the congressional investigations with one central objective: to protect the means and practice of covert action. It was in line with this strategy that Colby and Rogovin gave ground on the marginal issue of assassination, cooperating with the Church committee, turning over more information than the committee could digest, helping the committee use itself up. Then, when the assassination report was completed, Rogovin became tough about information — especially on covert action. The committee was floundering; Rogovin pressed his advantage.

"We agreed with the committee that they could have access to information for six case studies in covert action," he says, "provided they would go public with only one of them. They swore all kinds of secrecy oaths that they would not even let the names of the other five countries leak."

The case study chosen was Chile — a selection favorable to the agency,

since a lot of material on the CIA's intervention in Chile had already leaked to the press.

"It was a bad deal," says F. A. O. Schwarz, the committee's chief counsel. What little they had learned about covert action in the course of the assassination investigation had made them realize it was one of the hardest but also one of the most important issues to deal with.

The assassination report, outside sources generally agree, was the high point of the committee's investigation. After that, the staff divided into two groups; one known informally as "the lawyers" — a group drawn together largely by Schwarz — and the other as "the professors," who were generally foreign policy experts with academic roots or Capitol Hill experience. Under task-force leader William Bader, the "professors" became responsible for the CIA investigation, while the "lawyers" went off after the FBI. Frictions developed between the two groups. Discouraged by the covert action compromise, the "professors" never recovered the initiative.

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IN THE HOUSE, the Select Committee on Intelligence chaired by Otis Pike — the counterpart of the Church committee — pursued an arduous and independent course.

Created only after a long interne-cine squabble over its leadership, its mandate weakened by continuing feuds in the House, the committee struggling through the summer of 1975 — seeking, on one occasion, to justify its existence by leaking the sensational but unverified story that Nixon aide Alexander Butterfield had been a CIA "plant" in the White House. The story was refuted, leaving the committee with less credibility than ever.

Some Neglected Matters

NO ONE knows how much material remains buried in the Church committee files or how much the agency held back, but a brief investigation revealed an impressive list of subjects the committee either deleted or consciously failed to explore:

- Two draft sections of the report — "Techniques of Covert Action" and "Covert Action Projects: Initiation, Review and Approval" — remain classified.

- So do the five covert action case studies the committee agreed to keep secret. According to committee sources, the five countries are the Congo (now Zaire), Greece, Indonesia, Laos, and Vietnam.

- The committee's investigation into the use of classical espionage remains classified.

- The committee broke no new ground on the agency's use of



American corporations for intelligence work, cover or covert action.

- The committee is silent on the issue of the CIA's use of American labor unions abroad, even though former agency employees, such as columnist Tom

Braden, have written on the subject. One committee source says "no committee in a Democratic Congress is going after labor unions in an election year."

- The committee learned of, but did not investigate, the extensive network of American professionals who have secretly assisted the CIA.

- The committee agreed to a CIA request that it classify the details of a report on the clandestine use of American academic institutions.

- After the CIA issued new, restrictive guidelines for the use of American news personnel, the committee submitted to a request that it classify the details of a report on the question. Moreover, the agency refused, to supply the committee with the titles of several hundred books it has subsidized.

—Taylor Branch

By fall, the traditional jealousy between the House and the Senate had flared up behind the scenes, and Mitchell Rogovin, negotiating with both committees, was finding them competitive. "Church," says Rogovin, "held his 'toxin hearings' because he was afraid Pike would do it if he didn't."

By December, the House and Senate committees were set on opposite courses. Pike wanted to impale the CIA for its abuses. Church wanted to show that a Senate committee could handle national secrets responsibly. The Ford administration played the committees against each other.

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NO SINGLE EVENT did more to turn public opinion against the investigations than the assassination of Richard Welch, CIA station chief in Greece. As 1975 ended, the press was shying away from the CIA issue, and hostility toward the inquiry was building up in Congress itself.

As to the CIA's private thoughts on whether naming senior officials makes them more vulnerable, a move that escaped public attention may provide some insight: Welch was replaced in Athens by a man who had been identified as a CIA official by Greek newspapers and an American magazine.

On Jan. 29, 1976, Representative John Young, a Democrat of Texas, offered a motion on the House floor to suppress the final report of the Pike committee. The House ordered its own report to be locked away in the clerk's safe.

The document did not remain suppressed very long. It was leaked to CBS correspondent Daniel Schorr, who in turn leaked it to The Village Voice through a series of intermediaries. It became the most spectacular leak of the investigations.

Pike developed two thematic criticisms of the CIA. First, he amassed evidence of repeated intelligence failures, showing how the agency had failed to anticipate such major world

events as the 1968 Tet offensive in Vietnam, the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia the same year and the 1973 Yom Kippur War in the Middle East. Pike took the agency to task for bungling the one function — gathering intelligence — against which there is no audible dissent.

Pike's second line of criticism was more substantive: he attacked covert action by revealing a few of the more startling case studies.

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AS THE PIKE committee sputtered to disaster, the Church committee released its report on Chile. "We negotiated with the agency, people on the wording of that report, line by line," says one of the principal authors. Still, while abstract and incomplete, the report is the most comprehensive account of a CIA covert action yet written. From 1963 to 1973, the report reveals, the CIA spent more than \$13 million to influence Chilean politics.

Whether or not this covert action "caused" Allende's downfall and death, the Chile report did not make much news, nor spark much debate.

CIA spokesmen studiously avoided comment. They had the upper hand, and did not want to say anything that could somehow rekindle interest in covert action.

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BY THE TIME the Church committee drafted its recommendations on covert action, the political base for reforming the CIA had disintegrated. The committee itself was badly divided. Accordingly, the senators decided not to take a firm position for or against covert action, or even to push

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for a national political debate over its proper use.

This amounted to a clear, though tortured, endorsement of the CIA's covert-action program. Moreover, they gave the agency enormous bargaining leverage in its efforts to keep information secret.

"The problem with the CIA," says F. A. O. Schwarz, "is that once you accept the kinds of things they do, it's hard to argue that they shouldn't disguise it better."

The Church committee's CIA reports are impressive on the surface — full of bureaucratic history and weighty essays on subjects like "command and control." But the tepid conclusions and the omissions cited render the work incomplete, if not irresponsible.

The contrast with the thoroughgoing investigation of the FBI is striking. The main reason for this is that the FBI wrongdoing involved deviation from generally accepted standards for the bureau, whereas the CIA's covert actions are integral to the agency's practices.

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THE COMBINATION of events enabled the CIA to prevent a debate on whether covert action is justified or necessary. The CIA bowled over the Pike committee and seduced the Church committee.

Several sources on the Church committee assert that the outcome was the result of a strategic decision — to duck the issue this year, so as to be able to take it up again, perhaps with the assistance of a new Democratic administration.

The record thus far, however, is not one to make for much optimism. No oversight committee is likely to have a better opportunity to control the CIA than the Church and Pike committees, and the CIA has shown itself to be quite adept at managing the political climate.

The agency began these searching investigations hanging on the ropes, and clearly emerged the winner. Its powers, so unique and still largely hidden, remain essentially unchallenged.

Taylor Branch is the Washington columnist for Esquire.