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Self-Inflicted Wounds

By Anthony Lewis

The disclosures of covert C.I.A. operations in Chile raise questions on two distinct levels: Was the particular activity against the Allende Government justified? In general, is it wise for the United States to intervene surreptitiously in the internal politics of other countries?

Covert action by the C.I.A. has caused so much embarrassment to this country in recent years that only a serious threat to U.S. national security could begin to justify it. In those terms, putting aside all concern about American values and international proprieties, the intervention in Chile was plainly a mistake.

The Allende Government, whatever its faults, did not threaten anything of ours except the property of American businesses—which it had support from all Chilean parties in expropriating. Moreover, economic disaster was overtaking President Allende in any case. By becoming involved directly with the elements that brought him down, the United States unnecessarily made itself accessory to a bloody coup and a particularly cruel repression thereafter.

The argument offered by Secretary of State Kissinger for the operations in Chile must set some kind of record in cynical contempt for his listeners' intelligence. It is that the C.I.A. was only defending freedom by giving money to the opposition press and parties.

There is no evidence that Mr. Kissinger has ever shed a tear for freedom of the press—or done anything about the brutal repression of freedoms by a dozen right-wing tyrannies. The image Mr. Kissinger has given this

ABROAD AT HOME

country is that of a friend to the Greek colonels. Now he is advising President Ford to visit South Korea, where the feeblest criticism of government may bring a death sentence.

Chile itself is a complete answer to the notion that our interest in intervening was liberty. The military regime that rules it now is one of the most repulsive governments in the world. A recent report by the International Commission of Jurists, confirming other studies, said that torture was in substantial use, including "electric shock, burning with acid or cigarettes, extraction of nails, crushing of testicles, sexual assaults, hanging. . . ." That is the regime that the U.S. rushed to support, after the coup, by resuming various forms of aid.

The argument that we were only protecting the opposition press and parties in Chile is also unpersuasive because it is untrue. As Seymour Hersh of The New York Times has brought out, most of the millions spent by the C.I.A. in 1972 and 1973 went for support of striking truckers, shopkeepers and others whose activities played a significant part in bringing Mr. Allende down.

Official lies are a problem of covert activity in general. They inevitably become necessary. And then, again and again in this country, they are exposed, adding to the weight of public disbelief that has increasingly burdened American policy-makers.

Concern about the credibility of U.S. foreign policy is one strong reason for giving up the practice of covert C.I.A. operations. This case was made definitively just a year ago, in the magazine *Foreign Affairs*, by Nicholas deB. Katzenbach, former Undersecretary of State and Attorney General.

"Our foreign policy must be based on policy and factual premises which are accepted by the overwhelming majority of the American people," Mr. Katzenbach wrote. As one step toward re-establishing credibility, he said, "we should abandon publicly all covert operations designed to influence political results in foreign countries. . . . We should confine our covert activities overseas to the gathering of intelligence information."

Mr. Katzenbach was making not a moral but a pragmatic argument — that American covert operations were harming us more than others. Even the current C.I.A. director, William E. Colby, recently took a very limited view of their utility, saying that it was "legitimate" to consider abandoning them and that there would be no great impact on our security.

But there are questions of values, too. Does the United States want to proclaim to the world that covert political intervention abroad is a regular part of our national philosophy? President Ford came close to doing so the other day when he said that everyone does it — only the Communists spend more than we do. Are we really no different? We may not always live up to what we say, but do we want to set our standards so low?

Those like Mr. Kissinger who say that morality must give way to effectiveness in these matters really favor covert operations, and secrecy in general, because they are more convenient. It is easier to have a confidential chat with Bill Fulbright or John Stennis than to justify a policy in public. But in the long run it is more dangerous. The habit of dirty tricks abroad can slip into corrupting illegality at home. That, at least, we should have learned from Watergate.