

JAN 28 1975

The Dangers of Damaging the CIA

The Central Intelligence Agency has had such a poor press over the past decade that it is inevitable, and probably a good thing, that a full investigation has been launched. CIA has been guilty of some embarrassing apparent failures and excesses, so its operations should be reviewed. But let us be careful we do not destroy the agency in the process: CIA is a delicate mechanism; those who tinker with it must do so with sophistication and perspective.

It is important at this moment that the public understand the very broad range of CIA's functions and the na-

Mr. Lindsay served in OSS in World War II and in the CIA from 1949-1953. He is now chairman of Itek Corporation.

ture of its accomplishments in the post-war world. The United States needs the capabilities of intelligence today more than ever before. One example: without these capabilities, the SALT I arms control agreement with the Soviets would never have been possible.

It is helpful, also, to recall how the CIA came into being. It was established by Congress in 1947 in response to the threat of Stalinism, which was perceived to be bent on world revolution under Moscow rule. It was in this atmosphere that an urgent need was felt by the Truman administration to create an organization that could provide intelligence on Communist plans and capabilities and that could counter to some degree the massive political and subversive action programs supported by Moscow.

In the intervening quarter century, the nature of the threats and the problems they generate have changed. The organization and priorities of the CIA have changed correspondingly, although in some cases, not as fast as they should have. Today, by far the largest part of the budgets of CIA and the Defense Department's intelligence agencies are spent on collection of information by technical means, such as monitoring radio transmissions and seismic signals, and photography. And in the opinion of many intelligence experts, a very large part of the "value" of intelligence obtained comes from these sources. Indeed, these technical intelligence activities have been implicitly sanctioned by the two superpowers as the means each side will use to monitor the other's adherence to the agreed arms levels. Further, the SALT I agreement provides that neither nation will interfere in the operation of the other's "national means" for verification.

The CIA has also performed a valuable function in verifying the estimates of foreign military arms levels made by our own defense departments. This has served to reduce the danger that a foreign arms build-up will be undetected or understated and equal danger that it will be overestimated and thus fuel a new round of arms procurement. If we know the strength of a potential adversary, we will not need to overbuild our own defenses as added protection against the uncertainty of what he might have.

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The CIA analysts have performed similar functions in the political field, often with greater accuracy than others have shown. A leading French political analyst and commentator, Raymond Aron, has recently written about CIA's assessment of the efficacy of bombing in North Vietnam.

"Equally striking is the contrast between the accuracy of the analyses supplied by the intelligence services, especially the CIA, and frequent errors of the civilian advisers, especially the academics. The CIA had foreseen that the bombing would harden the North Vietnamese leaders' will and

would not prevent infiltration, and that increased aid to the North would be the response to any reinforcement of the American forces. President Johnson, before starting the air strikes, had transmitted a threatening message, virtually an ultimatum, through the Canadian member of the International Control Commission. This attempt at "compellence" had met with an inflexible determination, which the intelligence experts, unlike the arm-chair theoreticians, had appraised at its true worth, and whose implications it had accurately predicted. Similarly, these experts had repeated over and over again to unheeding Presidents and their advisers that the roots of the war and the key to success — assuming there was a key — lay in the South, not the North, or in other words, that it was essential for the United States to establish a government in Saigon capable of winning popular support and installing in the South Vietnamese a will to independence against the Communist North."

There is a continuing place for both covert operations and secret intelligence activities, but they must be used carefully and only after the risks of exposure, especially of covert operations, are fully weighed. Clandestine activity is an instrument to be used by the President in carrying out his foreign policies, not an independent activity. I believe that CIA leadership has always accepted this concept and that covert activities have had advance approval from higher levels of government. The trouble is that the high level approving committee — presently called the 40 Committee — is made up of very busy government executives who simply do not have the time to assess in depth either the likelihood of exposure or its repercussions. I would suggest that a more effective way to apply the sort of mature judgment needed would be to create a review committee composed of men seasoned in foreign affairs who have reached a career position where they can put in the substantial time necessary to think through the risks of covert operations and the possibility of accomplishing the same ends by overt means. Such a review committee would buttress and support the present highest level policy approving process. The President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, which does not review individual operations in advance, cannot fulfill these particular functions. But it does provide a high level mechanism which can be used by him to assure himself that the supervision and control processes for the entire intelligence community are working properly. But it will need his active support if it is to be effective.

Another issue that has been raised is whether covert operations should be separated from CIA and placed in an independent organization. British experience, as well as our own, is that separation is both dangerous and impractical. The danger comes from the increased possibility that a foreign intelligence service can play one secret organization off against the other. The impracticality arises because a single foreign individual or group may simultaneously be a source of intelligence and a recipient of covert support.

Every intelligence organization must have a counterintelligence arm. Its function is to protect the organization from penetration by a foreign intelligence organization. To recognize the

importance of this function, one needs only to remember that the Soviet intelligence service recruited the British intelligence officer, Kim Philby, before World War II and that until 1952 he regularly supplied the Soviets with secret documents of both the British and American governments. The counterintelligence organization exists to prevent such penetrations, to prevent other governments from knowing how we are getting our intelligence about them, and to prevent them from deliberately injecting false information into our own intelligence system. Counterintelligence is hard, painstaking work which involves piecing together thousands of bits of information about people, their backgrounds and with whom they are or have been associated. It is not easy to separate, between CIA and the FBI, the responsibility for understanding this watchdog program. If the CIA is tracking a foreign agent who then crosses into the United States — it is difficult to stop tracking and turn the whole thing over to the FBI. It is this borderline area where our government appears to have misstepped and is the prime subject of the new investigation of the CIA.

Emerging as still another new area of major concern, which will require CIA capabilities, is the threat of nuclear theft and blackmail by terrorist groups. Unlike governments that possess nuclear weapons, terrorist groups are less likely to be deterred by the threat of nuclear, or non-nuclear, retaliation. Where and who would one hit in retaliation? Secret intelligence and counter-intelligence of a high order seems to be the only way to forestall or cope with such potential terrorist activities as nuclear hijacking or diversion of nuclear materials we have provided other nations for power reactors. This too can lead into borderline areas which demand a high awareness of appropriate and inappropriate action.

The United States needs an intelligence organization; it needs highly motivated people who have within themselves the "ethical compass" to know when ends don't justify means, but it also needs mature and uninvolved people to review its operations and to provide a second line of defense against the temptation to use covert funds and people in ways harmful to the long-run interests of the United States.

In light of the Watergate scandals, restoration of public confidence in the CIA is essential. Only a thoughtful, full investigation will accomplish this. But for the sake of the country's stability in this period of worldwide nervousness, let us not cut down the tree in order to prune out a few dead branches.