

CIA Schemes, Gadgets Would

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The late Ian Fleming, who invented James Bond, the archetypal spy of our age, liked to imply that Bond was more than just an invention—that his “license to kill,” his exotic partners in espionage and his remarkable gadgets were more than figments of Fleming’s imagination.

That hint of verisimilitude helped explain the success of Fleming’s James Bond novels. Now the Senate intelligence committee has demonstrated that Fleming’s hints could have been stronger. It was all true.

Well, nearly all true.

Bond usually got his man. The Central Intelligence Agency agents exposed by the Senate committee—spies with code names like QJ-WIN, WI-ROGUE—never got their man.

WI-ROGUE (an acronymical pseudonym) was “an essentially stateless soldier of fortune . . . a forger and former bank robber,” according to an internal CIA report. He was “a man with an unsavory reputation who would try anything once, at least,” according to the CIA’s station officer in the Congo.

The CIA dispatched WI-ROGU to the Congo “after providing him with plastic surgery and a toupee so that Europeans traveling in the Congo would not recognize him,” according to the Senate committee. The Agency’s Africa Division had recommended him for the mission:

“He is indeed aware of the precepts of right and wrong, but if he is given an assignment which may be morally wrong in the eyes of the world, but necessary because his case officer ordered him to carry it out, then it is right, and he will dutifully undertake appropriate action for its execution without pangs of conscience. . . .” So reports the Senate Committee, quoting the Africa Division.

WI-ROGUE was in the Congo at the same time as QJ-WIN. QJ-WIN “was a foreign citizen with a criminal background recruited in Europe,” the Senate panel learned, “not . . . a man of many scruples,” in the words of another CIA operative.

These men were “assets” of the Leopoldville “station” of the CIA, though neither knew of the other’s status. Then one day they met. A CIA

agent in the Congo reported on the encounter in a cable to Washington:

“QJ-WIN, who resides same hotel as WI-ROGUE, reported WI-ROGUE smelled as though he in intel (intelligence) business. Station denied any info on WI-ROGUE . . . QJ-WIN reported WI-ROGUE had offered him \$300 per month to participate in intel net and be member ‘execution squad.’ When QJ-WIN said he not interested, WI-ROGUE added there would be bonuses for special jobs. Under QJ-WIN questioning, WI-ROGUE later said he working for (America) service (i.e., CIA)”

The CIA’s department of gadgets, the Senate committee discovered, is called the Technical Services Division, or TSD. In 1960 TSD considered a number of schemes “to undermine (Fidel) Castro’s charismatic appeal (in Cuba) by sabotaging his speeches.” For example:

“ . . . A scheme to spray Castro’s broadcasting studio with a chemical which produced effects similar to LSD, but the scheme was rejected because the chemical was unreliable

Amaze Even Ian Fleming

. . . TSD impregnated a box of cigars with a chemical which produced temporary disorientation, hoping to induce Castro to smoke one of the cigars before delivering a speech,” but that one also apparently did not get off the ground.

The most ambitious scheme of 1960 was a plan “to destroy Castro’s image as ‘The Beard’ by dusting his shoes with thallium salts, a strong depilatory that would cause his beard to fall out. The depilatory was to be administered during a trip outside Cuba, when it was anticipated Castro would leave his shoes outside the door of his hotel room to be shined. TSD procured the chemical and tested it on animals”

But that idea was dropped, apparently because “Castro canceled his trip.”

(The committee retold these stories from a report prepared by the CIA’s inspector general.)

Some of TSD’s inventions failed to work. The division produced some capsules of lethal poison for potential assassins who hoped to drop one of the

pills into something Castro was drinking. But “the first batch of pills prepared by TSD . . . would not dissolve in water.”

Another of TSD’s inventions could never be used because of the unwitting generosity of James Donovan, a New York lawyer who negotiated the release of Cuban exiles captured during the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion.

Someone in the CIA had the idea that Donovan could make a gift of a diving suit to Castro, known to enjoy deep-sea diving. According to the committee report:

“The Technical Services Division bought a diving suit, dusted the inside with a fungus that would produce a chronic skin disease (Madura foot), and contaminated the breathing apparatus with a tubercule bacillus.”

But Donovan, who had been negotiating personally with Castro, subverted this plan by giving the Cuban leader—on his own initiative, without consulting Washington—a different new diving suit, untainted by Madura foot or tuberculosis. After that, it seemed inappropriate to

present Castro with a second diving suit.

The Senate committee learned that the CIA has had a committee to pass on the use of biological and chemical substances. In one CIA document it was referred to as the “Health Alteration Committee.”

In 1960 the CIA’s Near East Division asked the Health Alteration Committee to endorse a “special operation” to “incapacitate” an Iraqi colonel who was thought to be “promoting Soviet-bloc political interests in Iraq.” The committee said a “disabling operation” could be undertaken.

According to the Senate committee report, “The approved operation was to mail a monogrammed handkerchief containing an incapacitating agent to the colonel from an Asian country”

The CIA informed the Senate committee that the colonel in question “suffered a terminal illness before a firing squad in Baghdad (an event we had nothing to do with) not very long after our handkerchief proposal was considered.”