

# Are 'Dirty Tricks' Needed?

By Tom Wicker

Representatives of the Senate Intelligence Committee, the Ford Administration and the so-called "intelligence community" have started joint discussions on what, if any, reforms are needed in that community. Unfortunately, the most far-reaching proposal—the prohibition of covert operations abroad—appears to have been rejected in advance.

My Favorite Unannounced Presidential Candidate was recently quoted in this space, with approval, in advocacy of just such a prohibition. Since My Favorite Candidate keeps a low profile, I was called upon to defend his view in a brief debate on ABC television with William Rusher, publisher of the conservative weekly, *National Review*.

Mr. Rusher—terrifyingly articulate as always—managed to state his position in four precise sentences:

"Short of throwing away our weapons and disbanding the armed forces, a decision to end all covert activities by our Government abroad is the most dangerous proposition I can think of. We live in a world where the Soviet Union, Red China and Cuba all engage in covert actions every day—supporting their friends and undermining ours. For us to abandon ours would make the outcome inevitable in country after country. Among other things, it would probably destroy the prospects for greater freedom in both Chile and Spain."

Let us pass over the irony of Mr. Rusher's citation of Chile, where the United States' covert "destabilization" efforts did as much as anything to produce the repressive Pinochet Government, and the effrontery of his proposition that only through American

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covert actions are the Spanish people likely to attain "greater freedom." Bypassing also the question of international morality (lest we be accused of having soft noses), My Favorite Candidate and I state the case for prohibition of covert operations as follows:

¶Conducting what are euphemistically called "dirty tricks" against other governments inevitably forces

the Administration in Washington to lie and cover up. The habit of lying and covering up becomes contagious and spreads to conceal or misrepresent other Government activities. Lying and covering up is not only wrong in itself; but when confidence in the integrity of government already is at a low ebb, it suffers further every time the Administration or the President is caught out in a lie or a cover-up.

¶As for a strong and effective American foreign policy, its development would be helped, not hindered, by restored confidence at home in the Government's credibility, and restored confidence abroad in American devotion to the principles of self-determination and a world made "safe for diversity."

¶If the President has the power to order covert operations against other nations, he has the power to do secretly what would embarrass him and the country to do publicly, and what in many cases would violate both the Constitution and the War Powers Act.

¶The mere existence of a huge bureaucracy with a secret budget and trained spooks encourages—even creates pressures on—a President to turn to covert operations he might not otherwise undertake, often as a short cut or an expediency rather than from real necessity. The secrecy enables him to escape international opprobrium and the accountability he supposedly owes to Congress and the people, and when such an easy way out exists, Presidents will skimp or default on the harder task of educating the American people to the complexities of world affairs.

¶While not all covert activities are assassination attempts or efforts to overthrow governments, most "respectable" operations—for example, financial support of democratic labor unions or deserving political parties—either could be accomplished publicly or involve risks substantially greater than any benefits to be gained.

¶Richard Nixon's plumbers and their Watergate operation suggest the danger that covert techniques developed for use against other nations may be imported for domestic action—not only assassinations but, more ominously, the habit of using secret, extra-legal means to accomplish purposes not easily achieved by ordinary political processes.

¶Even if in giving up all covert operations some useful end that could only be accomplished secretly had to be forgone, the sacrifice would be worth it when weighed against the dangers and disadvantages of most covert operations, and the disastrous failure of many—the Bay of Pigs fiasco, for one notable example.

Besides, as Mr. Rusher's argument illustrates, the case for covert operations is essentially that "they're doing it to us, so we have to do it to them." Aside from the fact that we more often do it to Chile, Guatemala, Greece and the like than to the Soviet Union or China, this argument misses the vital point that we count ourselves different from *them*. My Favorite Unannounced Presidential Candidate says he'd like to see us act as if we really were.