WXPost

The CIA: Security and Oversight

Q. Mr. President, recent congressional testimony has indicated that the CIA, under the direction of a committee headed by Dr. Kissinger, attempted to destabilize the government of Chile under former President Allende. Is it the policy of your administration to attempt to destabilize the governments of other democracies?

A. . . . Our government, like other governments, does take certain actions in the intelligence field to help implement foreign policy and to protect national security. I am informed reliably that Communist nations spend vastly more money than we do for the same kind of purposes. . . .

In a period of time three or four years ago there was an effort being made by the Allende government to destroy opposition news media—both the writing press as well as the electronic press—and to destroy opposition political parties. And the effort that was made in this case was to help and assist the preservation of opposition newspapers and electronic media and to preserve opposition political parties. I think this is in the best interests of the people in Chile and certainly in our best interest . . .

THUS, PRESIDENT FORD put on the public record, apparently for the first time, a presidential acknowledgement of American complicity in the overthrow of a foreign government. The President claimed that the United States had no role in "the coup itself," which is double-talk, if not actually duplicitous, in light of the American support given to the late President Allende's opponents in the months and years leading up to the coup. His assertion that the Allende government was trying to "destroy" opposition news media and political parties may be true. But it hardly serves as an argument in favor of what the CIA did when you consider that neither the political opposition nor the media were in fact silenced by Allende but have been in fact wiped out by the American-backed military government that ousted him. By his acknowledgement of CIA complicity in Chile, however, and by his general defense of subversion as a continuing instrument of "foreign policy" and "national security," President Ford has joined a major and overdue debate.

Is subversion a necessary element in American foreign policy? This is the right question. The example of Chile provides powerful reasons for saying, No. There, in response to what must be considered at best fuzzy anxieties about the leftist proclivities of the Allende government, the United States, however marginally, helped topple a democracy and install a dictatorship. To say, with Mr. Ford, that this was "in the best interest of the people in Chile," is mindless and arrogant. Before the President got around to acknowledging a CIA role, moreover, the agency's machinations had involved American officials in a sorry sequence of lies and deceptions in their dealings with inquiring legislators on Capitol Hill. The mocking of American values and institutions is a very large price to pay for a policy whose benefits in real political terms are very difficult to perceive, let alone to defend.

In short, the Chilean example proves as well as any the point of those who contend that the conduct of "dirty tricks" can be corrupting and harmful to the vital interests of the United States. Does this mean, however, that we should never resort to any kind of covert subversive activity in pursuit of American foreign policy objectives under any circumstances? The answer is not that subversion is necessary because, as Mr. Ford put it, "other governments" do it—although this is not an irrelevant consideration. If you accept as a fact, and we do, that the United States has world interests that are threatened by extensive covert activities conducted by a self-proclaimed adversary, the Soviet Union, then it does seem to us there may be circumstances when these interests, both strategic and economic, can be most effectively served by methods which, in the words of CIA Director William Colby, offer an alternative "between a diplomatic protest and sending in the Marines." If this country did not have such interests, or if it were willing to accept the consequences of having others make the crucial determinations on them, that would be one thing. But that is not the case.

Suppose, just to take one hypothetical example, that the oil policies of Upper Araby, or whatever, had brought the United States to the brink of a disastrous economic collapse. We are not so sure that in a life-and-death matter of this sort American devotion to nonintervention and the diplomatic niceties should be so absolute as to preclude taking extreme and necessarily covert measures to protect vital American interests.

Precisely here is where we must take issue with Rep. Michael Harrington (D-Mass.), whose article is printed on this page today, and with others who believe that the answer to this question lies in expanding congressional "oversight" over the CIA. This stands the issue on its head. If you are to conduct a foreign policy leaving open the option of covert operations, then you cannot avoid doing a certain damage—variously estimated—to the domestic process. To conduct prior public review of secret acts is simply impossible. Nor is it possible to conduct public post mortens on covert operations once they are held. The attempt to apply regular democratic procedures to dirty tricks can only produce the evasions, deceptions and embarrassments which we have seen in full measure in recent days.

No doubt it is feasible to improve oversight so as to better insure that operations are undertaken only in the most extreme cases and in the wisest possible ways. But as long as Congress condones a foreign policy served by secret deeds and delegates the oversight of these operations to a handful of members, it cannot groan when one goes sour and work off its chagrin in extremely damaging public examination of secret and sensitive operations, no matter how misguided these operations may have been or how badly they may have misfired. The solution for mistakes of this sort is not to be found in high-minded appeals for more intensive "oversight," for the current mode of oversight does not reflect congressional inattention. On the contrary, it derives from a considered—if publicly unacknowledged—judgment that there is no democratic way for a democracy to manage covert activities. No effort to improve oversight can ignore this fact of life.