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 Erasing the 'C' in 'Covert': In complete

By Ray S. Cline

WASHINGTON—At the end of 1974, Congress enacted and President Ford signed into law restrictions on the Central Intelligence Agency's overseas operations that virtually put the C.I.A. out of the business of giving covert political assistance to friendly foreign governments or political groups. The White House did not make an issue of the legislative restrictions, nor did the C.I.A.

A great many critics of United States policy in the 1950's and 1960's, especially the young ones who grew up in the era of retreat from Vietnam and of worldwide détente, have applauded United States withdrawal from the clandestine international political arena. They consider covert activities incompatible with international law, morality and the fundamental principles of our open society.

And yet, there lingers an uneasy, doubtful feeling about the wisdom of this move in the minds of many Washington officials, especially career public servants in the "national security establishment" and political figures who remember the dark days of Europe in the time of the Berlin airlift (1948-1949) and the military invasion of South Korea (1950).

By and large, they are not confident that "détente" with the Soviet Union has eliminated the dangers of Soviet efforts to dominate smaller nations, some of which are important to the United States security. They also doubt that it is really moral for the United States to be too high-minded to help friendly democratic governments threatened with one-party dictatorship. Covert political action is a way of aiding governments threatened by a foreign-supported take-over without sending in the marines.

The "realists" of the "national security establishment" argue that covert action ought to be taken in those relatively few cases in which world events can be turned in a direction more favorable to the United States by a crucial marginal boost from the C.I.A. for moderate constitutionalists.

Proponents of selective covert political action abroad believe that all great nations try to influence political

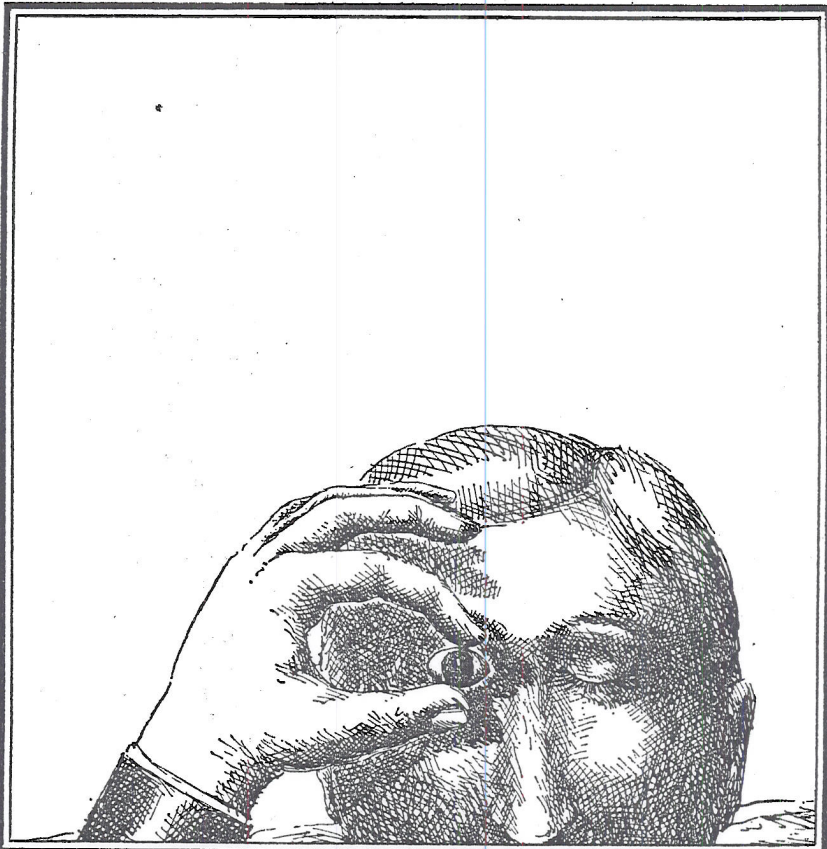
developments in other countries when their strategic interests are affected. The Soviet Union and China both have a well-defined political philosophy of intervening in non-Communist areas to promote violent revolutionary action and overthrow existing regimes.

The "realists" say that C.I.A. support helped the Christian Democratic-centered majority in Chile stay alive and resist the minority rule of President Salvador Allende Gossens, which

tion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, guarantees in perpetuity the security of pro-Soviet regimes within the commonwealth of Communist nations.

Serious foreign policy experts now point out that an excellent strategic case could be made for covert aid to non-Communist groups in Portugal.

The fall of the decaying authoritarian regime there left the country with virtually no organized political structure except for the Communist



Philippe Weisbecker

would have brought Chile to total ruin. They are not particularly happy that a military junta rather than a parliamentary regime has taken charge, but they believe military regimes are impermanent whereas establishment of a Communist-dominated dictatorship with Soviet support is a one-way street.

The Soviet "Brezhnev Doctrine," invoked to justify the military occupa-

underground. The armed forces are divided between conservative and revolutionary wings. The latter seems to be dominant and is generally tolerant of Communist demonstrations, political strikes and physical harassment of democratic politicians.

The advocates of covert political action say the national security of the United States is at stake, since continuing Portuguese permission for

Security

American bases in the Azores is vital to antisubmarine reconnaissance and defense systems in the Atlantic. Loss of these bases, they say, would also make impossible prolonged American military assistance to Israel in the event of another Middle East war. Finally, it is noted, the Mediterranean flank of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization might fall apart if a Soviet-influenced Communist-dominated regime gained control of Lisbon.

If this happened, say the national security professionals, what does the United States do? Retreat to Western Hemisphere quasi-isolationism? Spend massively on economic and military aid to shore up NATO's Mediterranean flank? If necessary, send in the marines? Might it not be better to let our covert operators quietly try to assist the moderate center in Portugal to establish a working multiparty parliamentary system, countering Soviet moves to help the local Communists, who are undoubtedly a minority but an efficient political force? Among these unattractive choices, some of the old hands, argue, covert political action is the best.

Later, American options may shrink to a choice between military intervention and strategic retreat from southern Europe and the Mediterranean. To avoid this harsh dilemma, whether in the case of Portugal or some other threatened nation, the United States ought to have an option of covertly aiding constructive constitutionalists and resisting the rise to power of dictatorships hostile to American interests.

Some observers of the international scene think American strength is so great that it materially affects what happens in the world, whether the United States acts or fails to act, uses diplomatic and economic pressures, or military aid or covert assistance. There is no way to shirk this awesome position, and the vital thing is to use all American assets in a stabilizing, peace-preserving role.

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