

this can best be accomplished. Too often a program designed to tackle head-on the problem of meeting basic human needs fails to consider adequately the technological, environmental, economic, social, and political framework in which it must operate. The failure to consider indirect effects can, in this case, lead to a total impact on the program which is quite different from that desired.

The major objective of the agricultural research which went into developing the high-yielding varieties of the green revolution was to find a technology which would permit a rapid increase of food production in the less developed areas of the world. The impact of this revolution on the distribution of income was not of immediate concern. As it turned out, many of the fears which later developed concerning the lack of direct participation by small farmers were unwarranted. Furthermore, despite some limited adverse effects on producers in less favored regions, the indirect influence of the green revolution on landless workers and consumers has been positive.

This is not to say that policies and programs cannot be better designed to aid the poor. Clearly, the green revolution has been more successful in improving the lives of small farmers where government policies have not favored capital-intensive techniques of cultivation by a few large producers. Nevertheless, development efforts must be undertaken with some understanding of the indirect as well as the direct effects they have on the poor. Where that knowledge is missing or incomplete, the experience of the green revolution suggests that the best strategy is one that encourages broad-based economic growth with active participation and benefit to the maximum extent possible by the poor.

A Moral Framework For Covert Action

STEPHEN D. WRAGE

It is hard to assess the political value of the CIA's covert operations since the Vietnam war. The defenders say the Agency's greatest successes were never uncovered, but that because of them history changed its course. The critics add that its greatest failures also had their effect on history, costing the U.S. prestige, trust and leverage on the international scene. When CIA activities on the domestic scene came to light — surveillance of the anti-war movement, opening of mail (including Senator Church's), infiltration or funding of student

Stephen D. Wrage is an M.A. Candidate, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.

groups, labor unions and immigrant organizations¹ — defenders were embarrassed and critics were enraged. News of operation CHAOS had been preceded by revelations about PHOENIX and MONGOOSE; amid the talk of rogue elephants and cobra venom it was hard to make sound judgments on the difficult moral questions involved.

In fact, it is possible to make cogent moral arguments for the value of covert action,² arguments which stand up well to counter-assertions regarding the rights and sovereignty of those acted upon. Indeed, some moral framework for covert operations, if broadly accepted, might have enabled us to avoid many of the excesses committed in the 1950s and -60s. Strangely, however, one seldom sees an attempt to justify the majority of the CIA's covert operations in moral terms, even though such a justification might profitably be undertaken. This is in part because attention is usually directed to those excesses which are hardest to justify morally. Yet even the most celebrated CIA adventures can at least be placed in a moral framework (or outside it) and judged in relation to the Agency's other activities. A more important reason why real moral discourse has had so small a part in the CIA debate is that from the beginning the Congress, the executive and the CIA itself have inadequately concerned themselves with moral justification. The essential moral issues have been slighted. Instead, the build-up of secret activities since World War II has proceeded in a strange moral vacuum.

William Sullivan's celebrated and frank confession to the Church Committee points this out:

We never gave any thought to this [the moral] line of reasoning, because we were just naturally pragmatists. The one thing we were concerned about was this: will this course of action work; will we reach the object that we desire to reach? As far as legality is concerned, morals or ethics, it was never raised by myself or anyone else.³

If the pragmatists concerned themselves only with what was do-able and not with what was conscionable, it was up to policymakers more removed from the action to set and enforce moral standards. There too, however, any sense of what was right seemed lacking. When, for example, President Johnson

1. *Final Report of the Select Committee to Study Government Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), Book III.
2. Covert action may be defined as intervention or interference in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state by unofficial and secret but not necessarily illegal means. This interference may take the following forms: financial and technical support of political parties, labor unions, newspapers and youth groups, or "dirty tricks" directed against them; straight news and cultural events, propaganda and rumor-mongering; economic pressure; gifts or sales of arms; training of persons in military skills; disbursement of money to individuals in grants or in bribes and payoffs; use or threat of use of force in the form of paramilitary operations; and exertion of influence through international organizations.
3. *Final Report*, Book I, p. 141.

demanded evidence of links between war protest groups and international communist agents (he seems to have demanded *evidence* rather than an *investigation*, as he would not accept an answer that no links could be found), then CIA director Richard Helms responded in a way which showed no regard for the law or the rights of citizens. Most of all, he knowingly violated the one effort by Congress at regulation of the CIA. In the cover letter to a CHAOS report to the National Security Advisor he wrote, "This is an area not within the charter of the Agency so I need not emphasize how extremely sensitive this makes the paper. Should anyone learn of its existence it would prove most embarrassing to all concerned."⁴ Kissinger recognized and accepted the illegality without question, and Helms concerned himself not with justification but only with secrecy. There was generally even less concern with justification in the CIA's secret operations overseas.

Even in Congress there was no unequivocal moral authority. There, too, moral questions were avoided, "finessed" by congressmen who declined to be briefed on CIA activities. This "hear no evil" device was also used by President Kennedy's Postmaster General, J. Edward Day. When CIA director Allen Dulles went to see him about the Agency's mail-opening program, Day said only, "Do I have to know about it?" Senator Saltonstall, then the ranking Republican on the Oversight Committee, explained that its members chose not to know what was going on rather than risk embarrassment later when illegal or improper actions they ought to have vetoed were brought to light:

It is not a question of reluctance on the part of the CIA officials to speak to us. Instead it is a question of our reluctance, if you will, to seek information and knowledge on subjects I, personally, as a member of Congress and as a citizen, would rather not have.⁵

This practice of innocence through ignorance meant that CIA operations, both domestic and foreign, went unchallenged on moral grounds.

In short, the moralist has had a small role in the evolution of the covert operations program of the CIA. He has been crowded out by the pragmatist, the expert meeting an immediate challenge. In the early days of the Cold War, the communist threat in Europe had to be met. Later, the demands of the policy of containment led to excesses in the conduct of covert actions. The pressures of the Cold War resulted in a policy of the ad hoc, a program constantly shifting to meet the latest crisis and little influenced by any overarching moral standard. Throughout the thirty-year evolution of this program of the do-able with little respect for the justifiable, no executor of covert operations wanted to limit his freedom of action and no overseer felt sure enough of his

4. *Ibid.*, Book III, p. 697.

5. *Ibid.*, Book I, p. 149.

moral stance to present a convincing, defensible system of principles. Resistance by one side was matched by timidity on the other; consequently covert operations careened along through the 1960s and into the severe congressional confrontations of the 1970s. It should be possible now, however, with the benefit of hindsight and a generous supply of cases on which to draw, to formulate some system of moral principles for covert operations.

The primary challenge to a system of moral principles for covert action is a set of arguments one could call the "amoralist arguments." It is, indeed, an *a priori* challenge, in that these arguments insist that moral discourse is out of order and has no place in a discussion of covert operations. The following four arguments roughly cover the range of the amoralist challenge:

1. Morality yields to dire necessity. America is threatened by an enemy willing to use any means, any weapon, any deception to weaken, undermine and destroy our system. We must fight fire with fire, and employ any means against them. No measure we might use is wrong — it is simply the necessary evil we must employ to avoid the greater evil of communist triumph.

2. Morality is suspended in a time of war. The Cold War is far more like Hot War than normal peacetime. Armies may not be marching, but this does not mean foreign agents are not at work striking at vital U.S. interests. We are belligerents in almost every sense, and even international law permits belligerents in a state of war to invade and destroy or subvert and intimidate the enemy.

3. Morality in international relations is an illusion. All international relations are simply relations of power, and morality is at best a powerless ideal, at worse a ruse behind which the real stuff of international politics — plays for power — can be carried out.

4. To talk of morality in U.S. foreign affairs is to feign a virtue the U.S. does not possess. Our record in the Congo, Chile, Guatemala and Indochina shows we have not been constrained by any principles, moral or otherwise, but rather that we have seized every opportunity to swell our power and spread our influence. Moral discourse will only cast a veil over our naked self-interest.

To answer these arguments in reverse order: The fourth argument decries a moral poverty in U.S. conduct but rejects attempts to establish a higher moral standard. True moral debate will draw no veils, but refusal to take part in such a debate will prevent examination of the real faults in our record and may allow bad practices to continue.

The third argument rejects the very notion of moral restraint and thereby puts the U.S. in a very risky position. Since one cannot answer a purely amoral assertion with a moralistic response, one can only point out that from a pragmatic point of view, moral restraint is much to America's advantage.

America and the West can compete with totalitarian states only in a forum ordered by law and respect for moral standards in which each side can present the values of its political and economic systems. In a chaotic world of secret wars, assassinations, sponsored coups and bought politicians, an open state held responsible by its electorate will not prevail or even survive. This may, indeed, be one of the major lessons to come from our experiences in Chile, Laos, the Congo and Angola.

The second argument stems from the height of the Cold War and is out of date. Detente offers us the welcome opportunity to cease behaving as undeclared belligerents and to scale down both the level and means of East-West conflict. Exercising restraint according to moral principles is an important part of this effort because in covert programs each side shapes its operations, to a large extent, in direct reaction to the other's. If we refrain from such extreme acts as the overthrow of a government in Latin America or the bombing of an army in Indonesia and limit ourselves to meeting Soviet initiatives, the intensity of conflict will continue to diminish.

The emphasis on belligerency in the second argument raises an important point. The nation which crusades for moral ideas that are not supported by national interest is likely to throw its weight around too much. The Cold War competition between those who were spreading the world revolution and those who were keeping the world safe for democracy led to destabilizing excesses. States should be guided by rationally defined self-interest. If one is not, the other must be.

The first argument, that the end justifies the means, is the most extreme and aggressive of all. The answers to the other three all apply here, as well as a warning on the dangers of over-reaction. One cannot realistically depict the threat of international communism as so grave a danger to the West that every means in our arsenal is justifiable against it. Such an attitude is reminiscent of the teachings of lay preachers in 1100 A.D., which incited peasants in Europe to destroy the infidel and free Jerusalem. Coexistence proved the better plan and became possible once the rhetoric was toned down.

The best way to refute an extreme and categorical assertion like the first argument is to take it literally. Is it true that any measure we might take would prove a lesser evil than this undefined "communist triumph"? Even if a communist triumph were defined as a complete military defeat, occupation of the U.S. and the end of our democratic institutions, would that be a greater evil than the most extreme means in our arsenal — a nuclear attack? In all likelihood, we would suffer more from nuclear devastation than from communist domination. Arguments like the first need to be moderated by an honest appraisal of our real national interests and the actual threat to them. Such an appraisal must have an important moral element.

If, then, the amoralists are wrong and a place is granted to moral discourse in

the consideration of international relations, one can go on to establish the broadest edges of a framework of principles for covert action. The issue of covert intervention is bounded on one side by the extreme interventionist position and on the other by the extreme isolationist. The former argues we ought to intervene, overtly or covertly, whenever we may forward our interests by so doing, while the latter insists that intervention is to be avoided in all cases. Two distinct moral imperatives make both stances unjustifiable.

The interventionist stand violates the most basic principle of international law, the principle of respect for the sovereignty of nations. This principle arises directly out of the very definition of wrongdoing: that is, the assertion of one's own interest with no respect for the rights or interests of others. By Reinhold Niebuhr's definition, "Evil is always the assertion of some self-interest with no regard to the whole, whether the whole be conceived as the immediate community, or the total community of mankind, or the total order of the world."⁶

This definition of wrongdoing would seem to justify or even require one's taking an isolationist stance, except that a second countervailing moral principle must be respected: that one must take moral responsibility for the wrong that one might have prevented. The U.S., in a position of predominant strength in the West, is justified neither in intervening as it sees fit to forward its interests nor in abstaining from all intervention, since the former would abuse the rights of less powerful states while the latter would leave them with no defense against the other great power in a bipolar world. We are, therefore, compelled morally to intervene, yet constrained in doing so by the principle of respect for sovereignty which is enshrined in international law. All morally justifiable behavior in the conduct of covert and overt operations will fall inside these extreme interventionist and isolationist bounds.

The practice of covert action is actually demanded by the moral responsibilities which come with the American position in the world. We find ourselves in a position somewhat like that of Athens after Salamis. Pericles told the people of the city that whether they had gained it justly or not, they had become masters of an empire and it was incumbent upon them to protect it. They found, as we have, that it is necessary to acknowledge one's preeminent position and that such a position may prove very difficult to abdicate. Athens could not decline to respond to Corcyra, nor could we fail to engage ourselves in Europe after World War II.

Our position of power at the center of the Western bloc compels us to take an international role, and to the extent that secret action is an important aspect of intervention, we are bound to practice covert operations of some types. Moreover, due to our preeminent position, it would be morally irresponsible to renounce covert action if that might destabilize the current East-West balance.

6. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), p. 9.

Cast as we are in the interventionist role and possessing great capabilities for covert action, it is up to us to impose on ourselves constraints which will compel us to exercise our capabilities in a principled way. I propose a system of three types of moral constraints for U.S. covert operations. The three types of constraints would be those which arise from our Constitution, those which follow from our commonly accepted American ideals, and those which are in accord with humanitarian principles.

The principles of the Constitution require first of all that any covert operations be consistent with openly announced international policies and objectives. These would be policies and objectives established by the normal processes of debate and consensus. While the executive is empowered to conduct foreign policy, it is not justified in secretly pursuing operations contrary to democratically conceived policies. Second, the constitutional principle of the separation of powers would dictate that the executive not use covert operations as a means to evade the broad lines of publicly generated foreign policy, or to escape public review. This principle would constrain the executive from pursuing covert operations which amounted to small undeclared wars. In accordance with the War Powers Act, the policymaker would undertake no secret coups, use no secret armies, conduct no secret aerial bombings and, in general, commit no secret acts of war.

Accord with American ideals would lead the executive to undertake only those covert operations which would contribute to the strengthening of open, democratic societies and the protection of less powerful groups. Interference in foreign elections is particularly problematic, but involvement could be justified when opposition parties were being backed by our foreign rivals. These ideals should prohibit our support for any but legitimate parties — those already in existence and with real domestic support, not those created to promulgate our interests.

Humanitarian principles would constrain the executive from undertaking covert operations which included assassination or terrorism, and would prohibit acts of great, undirected and uncontrollable destruction such as the use of toxins to ruin water supplies or biological agents to spread disease or destroy crops. These are particularly cruel and unconscionable instruments of war and are not justifiable tools with which to forward our true interests. (Moreover, they carry the danger of reprisal in kind and no society, particularly an open one, is secure against these techniques.)

Humanitarian principles would also demand that we not involve ourselves with, or support, police who use torture, states which run concentration camps, and administrations which murder their opposition, unless we use our connection to exert a moderating influence. In most cases, however, the greatest moderating effect could be achieved through a credible threat to withdraw.

Were the CIA to adhere to these guidelines in planning covert actions we

would not again be guilty of the excesses committed in Chile, the Congo and Laos. We would instead remain faithful to our constitutional, humanitarian and characteristically American principles while steering a course between the two moral imperatives which compel us to intervene in the affairs of other nations yet constrain us to show due respect for their sovereignty. Moreover, adherence to these guidelines and the principles behind them would save us from the sort of blunders we have made in the past and would make for effective, justifiable and prudent use of our covert capabilities.

Such moral considerations would have saved us from our excesses in Chile in the mid-1970s, for instance, but would have sanctioned actions such as those we undertook in Greece after World War II. There, our secret aid and technical advice was perfectly in line with the open policies established by our normal processes of government. A national consensus, expressed through acts of Congress, backed the support and encouragement of democratic regimes in Europe. Our aid was kept covert not to avoid a public review of our action in the U.S. but to save the recipient from politically costly embarrassment. In this light the Greek intervention observed the guidelines which arise from constitutional principles. Those which arise from American ideals were observed as well. Our actions contributed to the strengthening of an open, democratic society and our involvement could be justified as a move to counter support provided to indigenous communist parties by other states. The parties we supported enjoyed a degree of legitimacy made evident by their prior existence and their substantial popular support. Nor were we compromising our humanitarian principles by associating with groups which practiced torture, murder, or terror. Indeed, the parties we helped oppose were far more susceptible to such charges.

In Chile, however, our operations against Allende violated most of the guidelines I have proposed. In seeking to overthrow a democratically elected leader and encourage a coup by a rightist military junta we were pursuing no open policy objective, nor were our measures justified as countermoves to Soviet influence. Our initiatives went far beyond justifiable counterbalancing and were directed against leaders who, our best intelligence told us, enjoyed great popular support. The group we backed possessed no real legitimacy and our moves were kept secret as much to avoid public outcry in the U.S. as to save embarrassment to the Chilean military. The regime we helped bring into power has gone on to embarrass us in terms of our humanitarian principles as well. By violating so many of our moral principles we involved ourselves in an unjustified, imprudent and unfortunate intervention which cost us greatly in credibility and failed to forward our true interests. Chile remains unstable to this day while Greece, where our intervention was in accord with our principles, is today a stable democracy.

These guidelines would have ruled out the secret bombing in Indonesia, the assassination attempts in Cuba, the Congo and the Dominican Republic, and

the secret coup in Guatemala. It is not that measures against Sukarno, Castro, Lumumba, Trujillo and Arbenz could not have been taken, but rather that any measures would have had to be in line with our ideals, our Constitution and our humanitarian principles. These guidelines put pressure on policymakers to reject extreme measures and to seek to accomplish goals by more moderate means: not assassinations but economic pressure or aid to domestic opponents; not air strikes but influence from within or arms supplies to legitimate counter groups. Force is not ruled out totally; the recent overt military intervention by France to remove Bokassa met all these guidelines save the one on war powers, and since it did, the French could execute it openly. Bokassa was a monster without legitimacy; Dacko had been an elected official ousted by the dictator. France had real interests and obligations in the Central African Republic because it had been a colony and French citizens and capital there required protection; the minimum of force was used; and their goal, to substitute Dacko for Bokassa, was limited and clear. But even this clean, justifiable, bloodless intervention has had its difficulties since the French are morally obliged to remain long enough to ensure stability, and Dacko is saying that he might need them for years to come.

Compliance with these guidelines for covert operations often kills the promise of a quick fix which has tempted policymakers in past crises. Conducted by these standards, their usefulness lies in being a tactical tool to support diplomatic strategies arrived at by normal democratic means. As Kissinger told the Church Committee, "If the diplomatic track could not succeed without covert action, the covert action is unnecessary and should not be engaged in." One might add, the covert action has no place except in support of the diplomatic track. This is corroborated by David Phillips in his statement to the same committee:

In 25 years as a practitioner of covert action and covert activity in seven countries, I have found that most of our mistakes occur when we attempt to persuade foreigners to do something which the United States wants more than they do.⁷

Or, one ought not seek to enforce by covert action what one could not "sell" by diplomatic means.

Observers of these guidelines would probably find themselves more inclined to explore the increasing opportunities for overt intervention and influence which arise from the proliferation of international organizations, international trade and educational exchanges. These will generate cases of common interest which can be exploited quite forthrightly, generally to the good of both parties. Frequently, they will create greater opportunities for penetration and establish-

7. *Final Report.*, Book I, p. 518.

ment of contracts. Smaller nations, which cannot train and support elaborate counter-intelligence forces, are sure to be at a disadvantage in this field. The example of South Korea, however, shows that covert means, particularly influence-buying, may be the "equalizer" smaller states need in competing with larger ones. It seems also that within these guidelines there are unexplored avenues for skillful covert action aimed at particular targets. Discovering evidence of a dictatorial relationship between Moscow and Havana might have considerable propaganda value, just as the stealing of Khrushchev's speech on the satellite countries did in 1960. A morally responsible approach to covert operations, however, will inevitably direct attention toward the development of agents of influence and the transfers of aid, and away from the use of force. Attention should be given to the development over many years of human "assets" who may be called on to represent our interests in a regular fashion. Regrettably, reforms to end CIA adventures in Angola and elsewhere have cost us many of our assets, and our inability to influence recent events in Portugal has been attributed to the loss of our network of agents of influence there.

These suggestions for a moral framework for covert operations would be incomplete if the problem of enforcing their observance were ignored. It may be, as Morton Halperin argues in his statement to the Church Committee, that covert operations "are incompatible with our democratic institutions, with congressional and public control over foreign policy decisions, with our constitutional rights, and with the principles and ideals that this Republic stands for in the world."⁸ He insists this is so because he sees no means to control the executive's use of covert operations short of public debate on covert action decisions. "If a policy can be debated openly, then Congress may be persuaded to constrain a president and public pressure may force a change in policy . . . [Otherwise], the checks put on covert operations can easily be ignored."⁹ Since covert operations by their nature cannot be debated openly except in very general terms, this check on the executive cannot be exercised effectively. Therefore, he concludes, "the U.S. should eschew as a matter of national policy the conduct of covert operations."¹⁰

Despite Mr. Halperin's concern about the lack of public debate over covert action, there may be other sources of constraint on the executive. Policymakers will be constrained in the future by the lessons of the past, the threat of disclosure in the press, and the existence of a public consensus on what it is wrong for us to do covertly. We have learned that high-handed measures are risky and costly in terms of our image abroad; the Bay of Pigs taught this lesson. It has proven very hard to keep the grand endeavors, the secret armies and the clandestine "proprietary," out of the papers; even the most closely held

8. *Ibid.*, p. 520.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 522.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 520.