

USA - The Varied Forms of Covert Action

Covert operations, by definition, are difficult to examine. Because they are shrouded in secrecy, one is never sure whether all the relevant data concerning their scope, origin, and degree of success are at hand. By the end of the 1950s, covert action had evolved to the extent that its purposes could be grouped into three broad categories. Some operations were initiated to influence the general climate of opinion in foreign states, so that they might favor American objectives and democratic values in general. Other operations attempted to influence the political balance within foreign countries by strengthening the position of some individuals and institutions and by weakening those of others. A third hoped to induce some specific national interest serving U.S. objectives. Most publicized covert operations have been conducted in this third category. According to John Oseth, an army intelligence officer, the types of covert operations most often undertaken in the third category include the following:

1. 1. Provision of political advice and counsel to leaders and influential individuals in the foreign states
2. 2. Development of contacts and relationships with individuals who, though not in leadership or influential positions at the time, might advance to such positions
3. 3. Provision of financial support or other assistance to foreign political parties
4. 4. Provision of assistance to private organizations such as labor unions, youth groups, and professional associations
5. 5. Promulgation of covert propaganda undertaken with the assistance of foreign media organizations and individual journalists
6. 6. Establishment of relationships with friendly intelligence services to provide technical training and other assistance
7. 7. Provision of economic operations by which financial assistance can be provided to foreign states for various purposes but conducted through intermediate sources not overtly connected with the American government
8. 8. Provision of paramilitary or counterinsurgency training to regimes facing civil strife where acknowledgement of official U.S. involvement is not desired
9. 9. Development of influential connections inside a particular regime with government departments and factions
10. 10. Development of political action and paramilitary operations that attempt to topple foreign regimes and install successors more favorable to U.S. objectives

One of the more interesting aspects of U.S. covert-action programs, at least until 1970, was how well they were integrated into governmental planning. Scott Breckinridge, a retired CIA officer, confirms that, since the early days of the post-World War II era, the requirement for coordination and clearance of covert operations in the government was firm. In 1955, as a result of the Hoover Commission Report, two new NSC directives were issued. They remained in effect until 1970, providing basic policy guidelines for the critical period of the CIA's major

covert-action operations during the ensuing 15 years.[25]

Thus, the characterization of the CIA as a "rogue elephant" out of control is generally invalid. It has, in fact, served the larger objectives of U.S. foreign policy as defined by high-level officials. The term "rogue elephant" is misleading because it diverts attention from two far more crucial questions: Do covert activities provide the best method of achieving desired objectives? Are they a logical part of America's foreign policy? The use of the rogue elephant cliché impedes meaningful reform, because the focus is then on overseeing the intelligence agencies rather than policymaking levels of the executive branch, which is the source of the policies the agencies implement.