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Director Colby on the Record

In a rare on-the-record interview with TIME Correspondent Strobe Talbott, Director William Colby defended the CIA against its critics, ranged over the current functions of the agency, and discussed future prospects. Highlights:

Why does the CIA intervene in other nations' internal affairs?

I'm not saying we're engaged in a campaign to bring democracy to the world. That's not what the U.S. Government expects from this agency. We're expected to carry out U.S. policy. Over the years, we've helped democratic forces rather broadly. In those cases where we have got involved with military regimes, we did so because there was a greater danger from some place else. I don't think we've toppled democratic regimes, and I don't think we did so in Chile. First, we didn't bring about the coup, and second, the Allende regime was not democratic. Granted the military regime is not democratic, I don't think a Communist regime is democratic.

Our program in Chile was to sustain the democratic forces against the Allende political forces, which were suppressing various democratic elements in a variety of ways—harassing radio stations, harassing some parts of the press and some political groups. We looked forward to the democratic forces coming to power in the elections of 1976.

To what extent had Communist forces intervened in Chile?

Castro spent about a month down there in the late spring of 1973. There were a lot of extremist exiles in Chile from other countries in Latin America. There was a lot of assistance going into Chile from Cuba and other Communist sources. There are indications that there was some Soviet activity. They were putting some money in, as well as hardware of various sorts. This was a program to support an eventual takeover in what I would call a nondemocratic fashion—suppressing the opposition and extending Communist influence elsewhere in the hemisphere.

Will the CIA continue to mount covert operations?

The CIA has three major functions: science and technological work, analysis, and the clandestine collection of intelligence. Now there's been a fourth responsibility, and that is positively influencing a situation through political or paramilitary means. That's the one that goes up and down depending on national policy. Right now it's way down.

The degree of our involvement in covert activities reflects the kind of world we live in. If it's a world where two superpowers are peering over the fence at each other, then it's a matter of concern when a hostile political group is about to take over a country. But if it's a world in which we've worked out a relationship of reasonable restraint, or détente, with the other superpowers, then it won't matter to us who runs one of these countries in a far-flung area. Of course, something very close to us might still be important for political or security reasons. There may still be certain situations where U.S. interests—and I don't mean corporate interests, but fundamental political interests—can be adversely affected. In some of those cases it would be appropriate to take some modest action such as establishing a relationship with somebody who needs the help. But I stress: it's not now our Government's policy to engage in these situations around the world.

How is a covert operation started?

We follow the traffic with the embassy. We follow the political attitudes that we have toward that country. We generate a specific suggestion in the light of what we think would be national policy. We don't do anything without approval.

Sometimes we get the specific suggestion from the outside—from an ambassador, from the State Department or from the National Security Council staff. They'll say: "Why don't you guys do so and so?" We have the technicians here who decide what is possible and what is not. It's the same sort of thing you get with military activity. How you land troops on a hostile shore is not developed in the White House. The Joint Chiefs develop a proposal. Then if the White House approves it, you go ahead.

But I want to emphasize that we're talking about a very small number of covert actions. Policy is generated at the NSC, not here.

What would you regard as a successful covert action?

Laos. It was considered important to the U.S. that a country remain friendly and not be taken over by hostile forces. Rather than use our military force or an enormous political effort, you try to influence some key people and key political groups. The Laos operation cost substantial amounts but was cheap compared with other ways of doing business. We were not involved in the 1967 coup in Greece or in the coup in Chile last year.

Should the operational side of the CIA be separated from intelligence gathering?

That proposal stems from the Bay of Pigs. The problem there was that we didn't let the analysts in on the act. Now senior levels of the analyst community are aware of covert activities and have a chance to comment. In the early years of the agency, we tried conducting intelligence and action operations through two separate units, but they kept getting in each other's way.

What alternatives to covert operations are possible for the CIA?

We could not—and did not—conduct the SALT negotiations and reach a SALT agreement until after our intelligence techniques had improved to the degree that we could tell whether the Soviets were going to abide by the agreements. On a number of occasions, we have identified a situation that was getting very sour in some country or between two countries. By reporting the facts and our assessment, we generated diplomatic action so that the trouble we predicted did not happen. For instance, peace arrangements might have broken down, but because of our intelligence, negotiations saved the situation.

In the future this sort of intelligence will help our country in negotiations and diplomatic relationships. As a result, we will be less likely to get into screaming crises, and there will be less need for covert action. It will be the increasing responsibility of the CIA to give our leaders the knowledge necessary to move into a dire situation and defuse it.

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