

## When Secrecy Meets Democracy

**C**an Americans do anything in secret anymore? You are a Russian or an Israeli or an Iranian. Tomorrow you are approached by an American agent to help his cause in a secret operation. Do you accept the offer? Not unless you have a lot of life insurance and a craving for publicity.

The arms-for-Iran turned into cash-for-the-contras scandal is just beginning to unravel. One sure consequence of that unraveling will be an endless series of disclosures—names, dates, places, faces—that will make it very unsafe to be an American agent. For some Americans that will mean the end of a political career. Elsewhere survival has a different meaning. In the early '80s, Israel had, then lost, contacts in the middle levels of the Iranian military. "They died out," said an Israeli official to the *New York Times*. "I mean that literally. Our contacts were executed."

The U.S. is the only country in the world where "covert" funding for "secret" wars is not only front-page news but the subject of open parliamentary debate. At a meeting with columnists and editors last year, President Reagan was asked why he was not doing more to help efforts in Congress to send aid to the rebels in Angola. Reagan replied that he didn't want to go that route, but that he would give covert aid instead. The President was speaking on the record.

In American political debate, the words covert and secret have lost all meaning. It is not just that, as the European traveler invariably notes, Americans are more open and informal in their social relations. It is that the very idea of secrecy carries a moral taint. Americans are passionately democratic, and thus acutely sensitive to the contradiction between democracy, with its promise and premise of openness, and the secret world of diplomatic and paramilitary intrigue.

Only what is known can be consented to. Secrecy smacks of tyranny. Americans do not readily accept the argument that secrecy is necessary for reasons of state. Americans would never stand, for example, for Britain's Official Secrets Act. In Europe the state predates democracy. In America, where the state and democracy were joined at birth, reasons of state are not permitted to supersede reasons of democracy.

The contradiction between secrecy and democracy did not much matter to Americans during their first century and a half, when they looked mostly inward and let two great oceans and the British navy keep the world at bay. It was only after America suddenly became a great power after World War I that the contradiction presented itself most starkly. Woodrow Wilson immediately proposed a typically American solution. From the New World, a new way to do international business: open covenants, openly arrived at. America would indeed enter the corrupting arena of great power politics—but incorruptibly, without secrets. In 1929 Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson found out about American code-breaking and interception operations. He abruptly terminated them with his deservedly famous dictum, "Gentlemen do not read each other's mail."

Another world war, the cold war and now the "low-intensity war" against terrorism have dimmed American faith in gentlemanliness. The first of these gave birth to the OSS, the second to the CIA and the third to everything from secret Delta Force commandos to Lieut. Colonel Oliver North and the other NSC "cowboys" who dreamed up the Iran-*contra* connection.

Still, Americans remain uneasy about secrecy. The firestorm reaction to the Iranian fiasco has much to do with its secrecy. "They were running the State Department, the CIA and the Defense Department out of the basement of the White House without any kind of congressional oversight," complained Patrick Leahy, vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee. Sure, disclosure would have prevented the fiasco, but in the same way that the guillotine prevents headaches. Disclosure of a secret mission to a leaky Congress might kill it, and thus kill any chance of failure (or illegality). It also kills any chance of success.

As will undoubtedly be proved in the North affair, secrecy is a breeding ground for lawlessness. It is also a breeding ground for genius. Without secrecy we would not have had the Kissinger trip to China or the interception of the *Achille Lauro* hijackers above the Mediterranean (North's idea, by the way). The problem with the North operation was not the secrecy. It was the policy of trading arms for hostages and then misappropriating the profits. The test of a policy is not its openness, but its wisdom. If the outcome of the North affair is that the covert becomes impossible, then it will have been far more damaging than we now imagine.

American antipathy to secrecy could be somewhat mitigated by one act of furniture rearranging that would deal Congress back in on the intelligence game and thus reduce the tension between secrecy and democracy. In the past two decades congressional oversight of intelligence operations has increased dramatically. The CIA must report some of its activities to as many as eight committees (Intelligence, Foreign Affairs, Armed Services, and Appropriations in both houses) with hundreds of members and staff. Because of these reporting arrangements, certain to leak and to endanger policy and people, both the Carter and Reagan Administrations increasingly entrusted secret missions to the NSC, which is not equipped to run them. One change that might encourage the return of secret work to the CIA (which is so equipped) would be the consolidation of congressional oversight into a single Joint Committee on Intelligence modeled after the old Joint Atomic Energy Committee, which had an almost spotless record of maintaining confidentiality.

But the deeper issue remains. Americans abhor secret covenants secretly arrived at because they smack of Old World realpolitik, a way of doing business that the American Republic was to make obsolete. But this objection is today no more than nostalgia and sentimentality. America cannot be Sweden. (And without America, where would Sweden be?) Americans may not like being a superpower, but they have no choice, there being no one else to carry the burden. So they have to face the responsibilities of power. And one of them is the necessity for secrecy.

There will be future covert actions, and some are sure to go wrong. No amount of structural tinkering will prevent that. A world of Ayatullahs and Sandinistas is a world that will often demand clandestine deals. The particular deal now unraveling was cockeyed to begin with and probably illegal. Nevertheless, we may have to deal secretly again. If we are going to play the great power game, and ask others to risk their lives to help us win it, we had best accept the need for sordid secrecy. Or give up the game altogether.

—By Charles Krauthammer

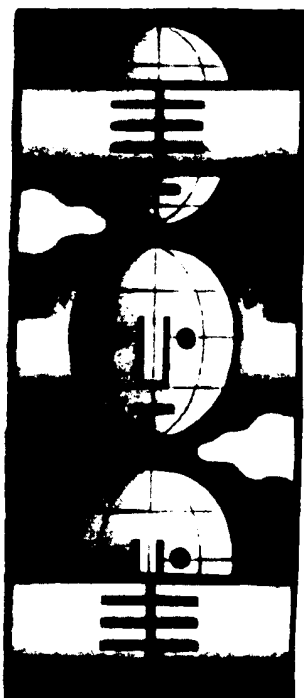


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