

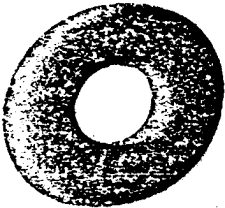
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THE C.I.A. A LUMUMBA

The C.I.A. in the fall of 1960 undertook to assassinate Patrice Lumumba. Critics of the agency fear that if since 1975 are loosened, the U.S. may see a return to practices of that kind.

By Madeleine G. Kalb



On Sept. 19, 1960, the Central Intelligence Agency's station chief in Leopoldville, capital of the newly independent Congo, received a message through a top-secret channel from his superiors in Washington. Someone from headquarters calling himself "Joe from Paris" would be arriving with instructions for an urgent mission. No further details were provided. The station chief was cautioned not to discuss the message with anyone.

"Joe" arrived a week later. He proved to be the C.I.A.'s top scientist, and he came equipped with a kit containing an exotic poison designed to produce a fatal disease indigenous to the area. This lethal substance, he informed the station chief, was meant for Patrice Lumumba, the recently ousted pro-Soviet Prime Minister of the Congo, who had a good chance of returning to power.

The poison, the scientist said, was somehow to be slipped into Lumumba's food, or perhaps into his toothpaste. Poison was not the only acceptable method; any form of assassination would do, so long as it could not be traced back to the United States Government. Pointing out that assassination was not exactly a common C.I.A. tactic, the station chief asked who had authorized the assignment. The scientist indicated that the order had come from the "highest authority" — from Dwight D. Eisenhower, President of the United States.

Twenty years have passed since this bizarre plot against the life of Patrice

Lumumba wound its way to an unexpected denouement in the back regions of the Congo and the front pages of the world, but the issues it was ultimately to raise for the American people remain highly relevant — and more so today than at any time during the past five years. For reasons it deems vital to national security, the Reagan Administration wants to remove the restrictions that were placed on the C.I.A. as a result of the investigation conducted by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Activities, under the chairmanship of Senator Frank Church, in 1975. The committee, after extensive closed hearings, revealed in its report that the C.I.A. had plotted to assassinate Lumumba and several other foreign leaders and had engaged in a variety of other illegal activities at home and abroad — all this under four Presidents (two Republicans and two Democrats).

Congress, reflecting the public mood, established permanent Intelligence Committees in the House and Senate, which were to be informed in advance of the C.I.A.'s covert overseas operations. President Ford issued an executive order, worked out in consultation with the two new committees and the C.I.A., sharply limiting the agency's activities at home. Under this order, renewed by President Carter, the C.I.A. could no longer conduct covert operations — such as wiretaps, surreptitious entry, opening of mail and infiltration of domestic organizations — within the United States.

Officials of the Reagan Administration, who are now in the process of modifying the executive order, argue that these restrictions hamper the C.I.A.'s ability to monitor and counter the worldwide upsurge of terrorism, which they contend has been financed

and its allies. They want to let the C.I.A. resume covert operations in the United States, when deemed necessary for carrying out the agency's tasks abroad. They also support the C.I.A.'s efforts to weaken existing Congressional controls over its covert operations in foreign countries.

Others, including the C.I.A.'s critics, warn that if these restraints are loosened, the United States may well find itself slipping back to the situation that prevailed in the 1960's, when the agency was virtually unbridled, when assassination of inconvenient foreign political figures was an acceptable technique, and when top officials cultivated a deliberate fuzziness that obscured the line of command from the President to the Director of Central Intelligence and on down to the operatives in the field. These critics fear that if the C.I.A. is given too much leeway in the means it employs, it may once again be tempted to interpret a President's wishes in a way that will damage the good name and long-range interests of the United States.

The plot against Lumumba is a classic example of American policy out of control — an assassination attempt launched by the C.I.A. without any known record of a Presidential order, merely on the assumption, which may or may not have been correct, that this was what the President wanted. The story of the plot, largely buried in the voluminous report of the Church committee, and now amplified by many hitherto classified cables, merits a searching examination before the safeguards now in effect are discarded as no longer necessary.

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