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# Covert Doesn't Pay

**E**ver since World War II, Presidents have been using "covert operations" to pursue political aims that they did not want to admit — often with consequences damaging to the United States as well as to the target nation.

Now Congress is considering a bill — which is classically too little and too late — to require Presidents to report to Congressional intelligence committees within 48 hours of authorizing one of these cloak-and-dagger schemes. Robert Michel, the House Republican leader, says that would "put a straitjacket on a future President."

Baloney. The bill would only require a President to let Congress know what he's doing, and object if it wishes. Even a President *totally* deprived of covert operations would retain a vast array of military and other powers to carry out his policies effectively. He might even be better off to be so restricted, considering the historical record:

President Eisenhower ordered the C.I.A. to overthrow the Mossadegh Government of Iran in 1953. This famous victory cleared the way for the Shah's quarter-century of increasing tyranny, and led to the Ayatollah Khomeini's disastrous revolution in 1979.

Eisenhower also authorized the C.I.A. in 1954 to overthrow a Guatemalan Government that his Administration, with laughable and partly rigged evidence, labeled "Communist." The resulting triumph of "democracy" brought Guatemala 30 years of military rule, repression and bloodshed, ended only recently by an elected Government; and it brought the U.S. no credit in Central America.

President Kennedy had his Bay of Pigs, L.B.J. his secret war in Laos, Richard Nixon the destabilization of Chile. Jimmy Carter is not known to have undertaken such grandiose secret political operations, but did suffer the failed mission to rescue American hostages from Teheran.

Either in the short term or the long, all these operations backfired on their perpetrator or his successors. Nor can a good case be made that covert operations for political purposes that Presidents do not want to acknowledge have ever advanced U.S. interests in any significant way.

Ignoring all warning precedents, however, Ronald Reagan — urged on by his guru in conspiracy, William Casey — succumbed to the charms of operating in secret. He organized and financed, one way or another, the contras in Nicaragua; he covertly supplied Iran with arms while urging the rest of the world not to do so — and in the latter case failed for 10 months to meet the legal requirement of "timely" notification to Congress.

Mr. Reagan, brought by exposure of his Iranian operation to the lowest point of his Presidency, has shown again that covert operations undertaken on White House authority alone risk more than they can deliver. There are numerous reasons:

They presuppose a small, secret action group around the President, which may not receive or fully consider dissenting views and skeptical analysis, and some of whose members may have a career or ideological stake in a proposed operation.

Even mere notification of Congressional committees — all the current bill would require — would increase the opportunity for such dissent and analysis, by critics with no personal commitment to the operation. Members of Congress, moreover, will have a better sense of the public acceptability — if any — of an operation, should it become public, than the bureaucrats, spooks and Presidential aides who conceived it.

If notification of Congress results in a leak to the public, the leaker most likely considers an operation — such as arms to Iran — unwarranted or unworkable or both, and he may well be right. President Kennedy came to wish that press leaks had saved him from the Bay of Pigs debacle.

When a covert operation is exposed, as is all too likely in this age of information and communication, it can damage the public's confidence in a President's judgment. And since a covert operation will almost always force a President to lie — to the American public as well as the world — its exposure also erodes the public's trust in his integrity.

Public trust in a President's good judgment and integrity, however, is the essential ingredient in his ability to lead. But that's precisely what, above all, he puts at risk when he turns to secrecy and covert operations to achieve aims he cannot share with the nation.