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LOS ANGELES TIMES
21 MARCH 1982

# Blurring Its Trail, the CIA Steps Up Covert Action

By DAVID WISE

WASHINGTON—"The United States does not condone the assassination of foreign leaders," President Reagan's press secretary, Larry Speakes, declared several months ago, "and we do not condone the overthrow of foreign governments by the U.S. government."

Last week Washington was abuzz with reports, which were not denied by the White House, that the President had approved a number of covert operations designed to "destabilize" the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. One published report said that the Central Intelligence Agency had been given $19 million to build a 500-man paramilitary force to operate against Nicaragua from Honduras. Another report said that the Reagan Administration was covertly funneling aid to moderate political and economic forces inside Nicaragua.

Despite Speakes' disclaimer, the United States under Reagan—and under every chief executive since World War II—has engaged in a number of covert operations around the globe. Indeed, if Speakes' statement that the United States does not overthrow other governments was to be taken literally, it would be big news, marking a major change in American foreign policy.

Although there have been some revisions in the laws and ground rules governing covert operations, the CIA is still free to conduct such operations if the President approves them. And by all accounts, the pace of covert action is increasing under the Reagan Aministration. Aside from Nicaragua, it is widely believed here that the CIA is running covert operations in Afghanistan, Iran and Cambodia. And sometimes, secret operations do indeed overthrow foreign governments. In 1953, the CIA was instrumental in toppling the Mohammed Mossadegh regime in Iran and restoring the shah to the throne. The following year, the CIA plotted the overthrow of the leftist government in Guatemala.

In all, the CIA has conducted about 900 major covert operations in the past 20 years, as well as thousands of smaller projects, according to a recent government report.

Covert operations, by definition, are supposed to be secret, or at least secret enough to permit "plausible denial" by the government. The term "covert operations" appears nowhere in the law, but the executive order on intelligence activities signed by President Reagan on Dec. 4 permits the CIA to conduct "special activities." These are defined as operations in which "the role of the U.S. government is not apparent or acknowledged publicly."

The 1947 law establishing the CIA does not specifically authorize covert operations. In fact, when Congress set up the CIA, it thought it was creating an agency to collect and evaluate intelligence information. But the same law also authorized the CIA to perform "other functions" for the President, and the phrase has been used as the legal basis for covert operations. The CIA is divided into two parts—intelligence, which analyzes information, and operations, which conducts espionage and other covert action. Unlike the analysts, the covert operators seek to manipulate events, not merely to report on them.

Under Reagan, although the fact has largely escaped public notice, the White House committee that is supposed to approve covert operations has itself vanished into the mists of the national security bureaucracy. Over the years, the panel has had various names—the Special Group, 303 Committee, Forty Committee, and under President Carter, the Special Coordination Committee. Carter's executive order on intelligence described the duties of the SCC and listed its members.

But when the Reagan executive order was published last year, the SCC had disappeared. The order contained no mention of the committee or of any successor panel. A White House official who declined to be identified said the SCC had been replaced by not one but three National Security Council committees, the "senior interdepartmental groups known as 'SIGS'." One group deals with foreign policy, another with military policy and the third with intelligence.

Jay Peterzell, who has been studying covert operations for the Center for National Security Studies, believes that the senior interdepartmental group for intelligence, known as SIG-I, may be the panel that approves covert operations. When that panel meets, its chairman is CIA Director William J. Casey. If so, the CIA would be in the position of approving its own operations.

But Peterzell said that another NSC panel, the National Security Planning Group, is also believed by some to be the unit that passes on covert operations—a belief shared by a spokesman for the House Intelligence Committee. The planning group is usually chaired by the President. It includes diplomatic and military officials and the CIA director, but it also includes the President's three principal aides, Edwin Meese III, James A. Baker III and Michael K. Deaver.

Officials at the NSC are notably reluctant to discuss the machinery for approving covert operations. But a

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congressional source well versed in intelligence matters said: "They're obscuring the paper trail. Are there records of the committee's actions? What committee?"

Although the idea gains currency that there are restrictions on CIA covert operations as a result of legislative and other reforms, in fact the intelligence agency and the President are largely free to act as they wish. Since 1974, however, under the Hughes-Ryan Amendment, no funds may be spent for covert operations without a presidential "finding" that the operation is "important to the national security." Until that time, Presidents have been able to disclaim knowledge of such operations.

In 1980, Congress reduced from eight to two the number of committees on Capitol Hill to which the President must report on covert operations. Now, only the Senate and House Intelligence committees are briefed. In theory, the Administration must report on such operations in advance, but a loophole in the law permits the President to report to Congress after the fact if he wishes. And if the President decides it is "essential" to limit prior notice, he can tell only eight people in Congress—the committee leaders of both parties and key congressional leaders.

There are three other qualifiers on covert operations, in addition to the requirement that they be approved by the President. Recent presidential executive orders on intelligence rule out assassination of foreign leaders. The Clark Amendment, passed in 1976, prohibits covert operations in Angola (where the CIA spent more than $31 million in an unsuccessful operation in 1975), and the United States is party to treaties that would, in theory, rule out the use of biological weapons in CIA operations.

Last year, reports of a covert operation in Africa led to a written protest to the President by the House Intelligence Committee. At first it was reported that the operation was designed to overthrow Libya's dictator Moammar Kadafi, possibly by assassination. Finally it turned out that the plan involved Mauritius, an island in the Indian Ocean. The covert operation was designed to aid the island's government against opposition forces backed by Kadafi. The episode was a classic example of the mystery and confusion that can envelop those most secret of CIA activities, covert operations.

*David Wise is the author of "Spectrum," a novel about a struggle for power inside the CIA.*

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