

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEAN (TN)

9 December 1984

How and Where Did the CIA Go Wrong?

By HARRY HOWE RANSOM

ONCE again the Central Intelligence Agency is in trouble.

In 1981, Ronald Reagan issued a directive confirming earlier chief executive orders prohibiting CIA participation in foreign assassinations. In 1982, Congress passed a law barring any CIA effort to overthrow Nicaragua's government. Last Week, the majority on the House Intelligence committee reported that the CIA-sponsored manual for contra rebels violated both prohibitions.

THE HEART of the House Intelligence Committee's report was that the CIA training manual for Nicaraguan insurgents was prepared with unintentional disregard for federal law. The committee also pointed to a lack of CIA command and control procedures. The agency was charged with "negligence."

Many Americans may be wondering whether the CIA is a "rogue elephant" after all, or whether the Reagan administration is pursuing a secret foreign policy with the agency as fall guy.

After a decade of efforts by presidents and Congress to restrict its activities and bring it within the law and the Constitution, the CIA still shows signs of being a state within a state. CIA accountability remains elusive. With regard to recent Central America escapades, Reagan appears to evade responsibility and CIA Director William Casey continues to live a charmed political life.

WHY IS the CIA perceived as the problem child of American government, the juvenile delinquent of American foreign policy? As a long-time academic observer of the CIA, I suggest the following answers: serious organizational mistakes at the beginning of the CIA's development, presidential misuse of covert operations, congressional timidity in its watchdog role and recent tendencies to politicize the CIA.

Two other complications can be cited. One is constitutional. The United States is the only nation that attempts to manage secret operations by separating executive and legislative institutions while having them share authority.

This invites presidential-congressional conflict over who is to determine policy and control secret operations.

A second problem is that America is perhaps the only major nation that takes its ideals seriously in the realm of foreign affairs. Americans are uneasy in peacetime with the secrecy, deception and illegal actions inherent in clandestine operations. These may be indelible, so we must look to those parts of the system that can be repaired.

BETWEEN 1948 and 1952 separate organizations existed for foreign espionage, clearly a CIA role, and covert action, which Congress never directly assigned to the CIA.

A separate "Office of Policy Coordination" was created in 1948 and controlled by the State and Defense Departments to carry out secret foreign political interventions incompatible with diplomatic and military practices. Espionage and covert action were combined under the CIA roof in 1952 to avoid duplication. That was a mistake. Clandestine activities became the CIA's dominant function. Intelligence analysis suffered.

The CIA takes its assignments from the National Security Council on which only one person has a vote, its chairman, the president. In reality, the CIA is the president's secret weapon, to be used at his discretion.

SOME presidents, notably Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and Reagan, have misused the CIA as an expedient, usually in the absence of foreign policy consensus. The hope was to evade public and congressional debate. On occasion, the CIA has even been directed to violate its legislative charter prohibiting domestic spying. And presidents have ordered the CIA into foreign interventions that Congress would not approve.

Controversies that have ensued from exposed covert actions have politicized the CIA. Jimmy Carter made the CIA a major issue in his 1976 presidential campaign. He was the first President to treat the CIA directorship as a partisan appointment in his incoming administration.

Continued