

EAU CLAIRE LEADER-TELEGRAM (WI)
24 April 1985

CIA called a 'covert arm of presidency' by former agent

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The role of the CIA, according to a disillusioned former member, is to provide the president of the United States with those things he can't get through legitimate channels.

Ralph McGehee, a 25-year agency veteran, told a small audience at the Unitarian Church in Eau Claire Tuesday that the CIA is "the covert arm of the presidency."

In his book, "Deadly Deceits," McGehee wrote: "The CIA is not an intelligence agency. In fact, it acts as an anti-intelligence agency, producing only that information wanted by policymakers to support their plans, and suppressing information that does not support those plans.

"As the covert arm of the president, the CIA uses disinformation, much of it aimed at the U.S. public, to mold opinion."

Much of what he saw the CIA do in Vietnam between 1954 and 1975, McGehee sees being repeated today in Central America. He is particularly concerned about Nicaragua, where the Reagan administration is backing the Contras — guerrilla fighters who oppose the ruling Sandinista government. He calls the Contras "those killers that are going in murdering Nicaraguans."

If President Reagan "doesn't get his way through the Contras," McGehee said, he may turn to the CIA to stage an incident that will justify sending American troops into Nicaragua to topple the Sandinista regime.

The Gulf of Tonkin incident, which precipitated American troop involvement in the Vietnam War, was just such a CIA-staged event, he said.

When he joined the CIA in 1952, McGehee said, "I was a Cold Warrior. Barry Goldwater had nothing on me." He believed "we were out saving the world for democracy."

Gradually his view changed, and he spent his final few years in the agency fruitlessly "protesting from within." He finally retired and went public with his criticisms in 1977.

For 14 of his 25 years in the CIA, McGehee served overseas, in Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam.

It was while helping train special police forces in Thailand and Vietnam in the late 1960s that McGehee began to protest the CIA's reporting of "fantasy" about the war. In its reports to Congress, the agency knowingly denied the "mass base of support" the communists enjoyed in those two countries, he said.

Throughout American involvement in Vietnam, McGehee charged, CIA intelligence was concerned with "the creation of an illusion. It had nothing to do with reality."

Relying on the CIA for information "is like being the proverbial mushroom," he said. "You're kept in the dark and you're fed manure."

This policy of providing "disinformation" has been repeated wherever the CIA has worked to overthrow foreign governments, McGehee said. Since World War II, the CIA has overthrown, among others, the governments of Ecuador, Brazil and Chile, he said.

The CIA now is active in Central America, working to support a Reagan-backed military dictatorship in El Salvador and to oppose a generally popular Sandinista government in Nicaragua, McGehee said.

"The problem (in Central America) is abysmal poverty," he said. "Yet we see the problem there as Soviet involvement. That's the excuse we use to justify anything we do."

Common CIA tactics include forgery, staged communist weapons shipments and controlling elections, McGehee said, adding, "If the agency's good at anything, it's good at rigging elections.

"Death is almost a constant, concomitant with any activity of the agency," he added. "Of course, we see very active 'Death Squad' activity in El Salvador."

Through its covert activity, McGehee warned, the CIA "is destroying liberty, justice and democracy under the guise of fighting communism."

And thanks to an executive order signed by President Reagan on Dec. 4, 1981, McGehee warned, the CIA is now free to conduct covert operations in the United States.

McGehee's appearance was one of a series of events being held during Central America Information Week in Eau Claire.