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David Atlee Phillips' article on CIA covert actions [Outlook, April 6] was a poignant reminder of the complexity of international relations. He indicates that withdrawal of U.S. support from clandestine operations against foreign governments has caused remorse and anger among "our paramilitary forces" and CIA officers alike.

Mr. Phillips seems to be making a case for continued aid to the contras, but I think his assumptions about our society, democracy in general and moral tactics are open to question. Mr. Phillips claims to tell us "some painful things about our society: . . . our covert-action operations . . . and moral commitments we have made to them." What he fails to realize is that "our society" did not make these decisions. The CIA is a specialized segment of our national bureaucracy that has for too long acted in our country's name without appropriate oversight by Congress or the free press.

Too often the CIA has made commitments to odious forces in our name, and then the American people and Congress have had to bear the blame, the shame of these failed projects. Why Americans, whether private citizens or CIA intellectuals, would commit to supporting men who were officers of the Nicaraguan army under the brutal regime of dictator Somoza escapes me.

When we stoop so low as to hire former torturers and assassins to do our

bidding, even if we are backing the "democratic" revolutionaries, are we now assuming that the end that we desire justifies the means, however evil?

Furthermore, just because CIA forces are attacking or undermining a "leftist government" does not make the attackers automatically democratic or just, nor does it make the "leftists" necessarily authoritarian or despicable. In fact, CIA support brought antidemocratic, repressive military regimes to power in Guatemala and Chile, for example. And catering to the whims of the shah of Iran probably made the rise of the ayatollah more likely.

Mr. Phillips finally does question whether we should be in the "paramilitary covert action" business at all, but for the wrong reasons. True, it is wrong to leave our mercenaries "hanging" when Congress changes its policy. Yet we should also question whether armed intervention against "leftists" always serves our interests.

Could it be that the CIA's shadow warriors are an anachronism in a world that must now go beyond war as a way to resolve conflict between peoples and nations? If we value freedom and self-determination, then let us practice it at all levels of our lives, as individuals under law and as a nation in the international arena.

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