

Newsweek _____
 Time _____
 U.S. News & World Report _____

NATION p. 449
 Date 2 April 88

The Oddest Couple

STAT

Over there was William Colby, former Director of Central Intelligence, munching a salad with researchers who spend all their days trying to uncover the agency's secrets. Over here was Leslie Cockburn, the former CBS News producer who wrote a book on the *contra* drug connection, chatting up Col. Nestor Pino-Marina, who testified in court on behalf of a *contra* supporter deeply implicated in a plot to import 350 pounds of cocaine into the United States. It's no surprise that odd couples abounded at a symposium held at Tufts University February 26-27. The subject was perhaps the oddest couple of all: Covert Action and Democracy.

Sissela Bok, author of several well-reviewed volumes on ethical dilemmas, opened the proceedings with a classic liberal exposition about the dangers of deceit in government. "Respect for truth and the law are not particularly idealistic or unworthy," she told the overflow audience in the auditorium of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. She asserted that "it is not possible to keep a secret in a democracy. You have to realize it's going to be found out sooner or later." She spoke clearly and gracefully. She invoked basic civic and humane values. She was applauded.

Daniel Ellsberg spoke next and punted Bok's pleasantries out of the auditorium. He noted that the Central Intelligence Agency's covert activities in the Gulf of Tonkin in the summer of 1964 are still largely secret. Those activities (as even Ellsberg's fellow panelist William Colby conceded) provoked North Vietnam into attacking a U.S. warship. President Lyndon Johnson used the "unprovoked" incident as a pretext for escalating the Vietnam War. To this day, Ellsberg observed, virtually the entire American public is still deceived about the covert action that helped plunge the country into a catastrophic war. "You see, not all secrets are exposed, even twenty-three years later," he said.

One of Ellsberg's jobs in 1965 was compiling lists of Vietnam atrocities that could be publicly cited as justification for the Johnson Administration's carpet bombing of North Vietnam. Ellsberg then acknowledged the more difficult moral question: Did the terrorism of Vietnamese Communists justify the much more vast violence of U.S. bombing? Ellsberg answered by citing Nietzsche: "When you look into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you."

Down the speaker's table, Thomas Polgar was ruffled. Polgar is a former C.I.A. station chief in South Vietnam, Mex-

ico, West Germany and Argentina, who generously came out of retirement to work on the staff of the Iran/*contra* Congressional committees. He reminded the audience of an unpleasant truth: Congress doesn't object to being deceived by covert action.

"Covert action, as a policy, exists; it is legal and it is based on funds appropriated by Congress," Polgar noted, adding accurately, "I see no inclination in Congress to depart from covert action. We simply want more control, to keep covert action in the boundaries of good taste and law." As for Ellsberg's talk of morality, Polgar said that the "morality of covert action depends on its purpose."

When an astonished undergraduate asked Polgar if he really believed that, Polgar recanted, which I cynically figured was just his cover story. But Colby stepped in to confirm just how capacious the boundaries of "good taste and law" are for former top C.I.A. officials. For successful covert actions, Colby stressed the need for "good local leaders like General Vang Pao" of Laos. Vang Pao, it should be recalled, was the General Noriega of Southeast Asia in the 1960s: a prominent U.S. ally who befriended top C.I.A. officials, trained pro-U.S. insurgents and, by most accounts, amassed a fortune in drug dealing.

I snuck out to interview Colonel Pino-Marina outside the auditorium. The colonel is a Bay of Pigs veteran who now serves as a staff member of the Inter-American Defense Board. He stressed that he was not speaking in any official capacity. He blurted out his defense of Maj. Bueso Rosa, the Honduran military officer sentenced to five years in jail for his role in a complex cocaine smuggling and murder plot. "I know this man. He had nothing to do with drugs." The idea that Bueso Rosa had been prosecuted rankled him.

"What is the only crime mentioned in the Constitution?" the colonel suddenly demanded. "Do you know?" He answered himself: "Treason." And who was guilty of treason, I asked. "Supporters of the Boland amendment," he said. "They have given aid and comfort to the enemy." Another reporter and I suggested that maybe opposing *contra* aid wasn't traitorous. The colonel was adamant: "When it passed, they celebrated in Moscow, Havana and Managua. That is 'aid and comfort.'" The colonel reminded us that the punishment for treason is death.

Continued

Back inside the auditorium it was announced that Nestor Sanchez, a thirty-five-year C.I.A. veteran and former Assistant Secretary of Defense, would not be able to appear as planned. Sanchez had sent word that he had to go to Panama on business. The morning paper had reported an effort in Panama to oust Gen. Manuel Noriega, who is under indictment in the United States for drug smuggling. Sanchez, it turns out, was well known in the Pentagon for his support of General Noriega.

On Saturday morning the conference resumed with a session on the Iran/*contra* affair. Panelist Stephen Engelberg of *The New York Times* recounted all that is not known about the scandal. He raised the possibility that "Oliver North was raising money for the *contras* as a cover for a less socially acceptable purpose." Engelberg noted that a reprisal raid for the bombing of the marine barracks in Beirut had been called off. "Maybe Marine Col. Robert McFarlane and Marine Lieut. Col. North were out for vengeance independently."

The most intriguing presentation of the conference followed. Steven Emerson, a senior editor at *U.S. News & World Report*, explained why the C.I.A. is no longer even half of the covert action problem. Emerson's upcoming book, *Secret Warriors: Inside the Covert Military Operations of the Reagan Era*, documents the massive shift of covert operations from the agency to the Pentagon.

As Emerson explained it, the shift began after the failure of the hostage rescue mission in Iran in April 1980. The planning of a second rescue attempt was assigned to Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard Secord. The mission never came off, but Secord's plans for improving military tactical intelligence and counterterrorism capabilities became the blueprint for the Pentagon special operations of the 1980s.

"These operations continued to grow after 1981—and grow and grow," Emerson said. "A vehicle for military covert actions is a network of commercial front companies all around the world. They can be used to insert agents as intelligence gatherers or as commandos." According to Emerson, "The Pentagon leadership was not even informed of everything that was going on." Congress knew very little.

Emerson cited one of the few Pentagon special operations whose existence has been made public, a project known as Yellow Fruit, which collapsed amid financial irregularities in 1983. According to Seymour Hersh of *The New York Times*, the operation ferried undercover Army operatives to Honduras, where they trained Honduran troops for bloody hit-and-run operations into Nicaragua. Through a private front company, Yellow Fruit also supplied rapid-fire cannons to the C.I.A. operatives who mined Nicaragua's harbors and raided oil depots in 1984. All of these activities were carried out in violation of Congressional legislation barring the Defense Department and the agency from taking any action aimed at overthrowing the Sandinistas.

Afterward, I cornered John Saxon, staff director of the Senate select committee investigating the Iran/*contra* scandal. Saxon had said that the Army, after a series of financial scandals involving its top-secret covert units, had instituted "a very tight, a very good system for maintaining secrecy and accountability." I asked how that system works.

"The Army created an office that does nothing but oversee special operations," he said. What office is that? "The name is classified," he said apologetically. Saxon added that the special operations oversight offices of the Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force are less vigilant than the Army's office.

I found that less than reassuring. So I asked Bernard McMahon, former staff director of the Senate Intelligence Committee and special assistant to Director of Central Intelligence Stansfield Turner from 1977 to 1979, how the public could know that an unknown office somewhere in the Pentagon was doing a good job of monitoring unknown operations around the world. He assured me that the oversight process worked, although he acknowledged that a loophole exists in the current oversight legislation.

He said that the existing law does not give Congress authority over "sensitive intelligence collection" by Pentagon operatives. "The next covert action scandal will come in the collection of information against terrorists. There's a lot of political pressure to get the information, and when there's pressure people react quickly and do stupid things."

I had to leave the conference early, but I managed to catch the thoughtful presentation of Bode, a shaggy-haired State Department official, on Why Government Officials Lie. Bode acknowledged that his was an unpopular proposition. He said he had protested the Vietnam War when he was a student and had later changed his mind. He urged the students to keep an open mind. "Someday you, too, may be in government, and you may have to lie."

Bode explained that as a student at the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1960s he had attended antiwar conferences, including one where Governor Ronald Reagan spoke. With tears welling in his eyes, Bode confessed that he and other members of the Communist Workers Party had snuck up to the speaker's platform before the event and slipped seventy-five hits of LSD into Reagan's glass of water.

Actually, Bode didn't say that. I just want to work in government someday.

JEFFERSON MORLEY