

The Counterproductivity of US Covert Action During The Cold War

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/09/22/the-counterproductivity-of-us-covert-action-during-the-cold-war/>

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Covert actions, by definition, are difficult to examine. The surrounding secrecy leads to uncertainty about the relevant data concerning their scope, origin and success. For the purpose of this discussion, covert action is defined as any clandestine activity designed to influence foreign governments, events, organisations or persons in support of US foreign policy during the Cold War. Covert action can include political and economic actions, propaganda and paramilitary activities and is planned and executed so as to conceal the identity of the sponsor or else permit the sponsor's plausible deniability of the operation.[1] Covert action became an instrument of choice for policymakers in the years following World War Two. In 1947 Congress created the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) granting authority "to perform other such functions and duties related to intelligence affecting the national security as the National Security Council may from time to time direct." [2] Within six months the CIA airdropped guns to rebels inside the USSR, plotted assassinations, supplied and trained private armies, conducted foreign wars by proxy, sponsored and instigated coup d'états, wrecked economies and manipulated the political process of allies. The scope and scale of such operations have been enormous, with paramilitary operations resulting in thousands of deaths and immense destruction. Their successes have been exaggerated, with some early operations against the USSR and later against Castro resulting in outright failure. The operations which were deemed successful at the time in Iran and Afghanistan have left a legacy of anti-Americanism which has continually hampered the contemporary foreign policy of the US and given rise to outward hostility. Yet for most of the Cold War, as John Nutter argues, "covert action was American foreign policy." [3]

US covert actions began during the Second World War under the auspices of the Office of Strategic Studies (OSS), the idea of William Donovan. Yet it was disbanded after the war ended when President Truman decided that the OSS was unnecessary in peacetime. However, the escalating tensions between Moscow and Washington at the outbreak of the Cold War, prompted Truman to reconsider his assumptions and seek congressional approval to establish a permanent CIA in July 1947. [4] After its establishment Truman signed NSC 10/2, a secret directive authorising the CIA to undertake covert action anywhere around the globe as part of the crusade against the USSR. The majority of early action took place in Eastern Europe where funds flowed to Italian Christian Democrats, Albanian exiles and anti-Soviet partisans in Latvia and Lithuania. [5] A cursory list of Cold War operations include efforts to influence the outcome of elections in Western Europe, the 1953 overthrow of Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran, the 1954 overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala, the 1963 attempt to assassinate Fidel Castro in Cuba, the 1963 overthrow of Juan Bosch in the Dominican Republic, the 1964 defeat of rebel forces loyal to Patrice Lumumba in the Congo, the 1965 propaganda campaign to overthrow the Sukarno government in Indonesia, the 1967 provision of aid to overthrow George Papandreu in Greece, involvement in the 1970 overthrow of Norodom Sihanouk in Cambodia, the supporting of the Contras in Nicaragua and the supplying of arms to the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan. [6] Many of these actions were legally acts of war yet undertaken with the specific purpose of avoiding war. The operations were intended to induce change so that the sponsor's role was not apparent and plausible deniability could be claimed. The standing and influence of the covert action sphere of the CIA increased as a result of the strengthening of cooperation between the CIA and the military brought about by the Korean War. The communist threat was perceived from a global perspective and the emphasis began to shift away from Europe crisis management to a worldwide effort to forestall and contain what was seen as communist aggression. [7] By the end of the 1950s, covert action had evolved into three main categories. Some operations intended to influence the general opinion in foreign

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states so they may favour US objectives. Other operations attempted to influence the political balance of power by strengthening the position of some individuals or institutions and weakening others. The third way hoped to induce some specific national interest serving US objectives.[8] Most publicised covert action has been conducted in this third category.

US covert action, at least until 1970, was well integrated into government planning. The requirement for coordination and clearance of covert operations in the government was firm. In 1955, two NSC directives were issued which provided basic policy guidelines for the critical period of the CIA's major covert action operations.[9] Thus the characterisation of CIA acting as a 'rogue elephant' is generally invalid. This characterisation is also misleading as it diverts attention away from the more important question regarding the success or failure of covert action during the Cold War. Was it the best method of achieving desired objectives or was it universally counterproductive? The justifications for covert action lie in a myriad of factors. The bipolar system of the superpowers reinforced a need to resist the Soviets everywhere yet at the same time wishing to avoid a potential nuclear war. The development of the domino theory in US strategic thinking meant there were no longer inconsequential countries. This factor was increased in the aftermath of decolonisation where such countries were outside their former colonial spheres of influence. These states were highly prone to civil wars, coups and radicalism. Therefore in order to not overtly confront the USSR, covert action offered an option in which the US could employ coups and use indigenous forces to resist the onslaught of perceived Soviet subversion. The key benefits were the low risk of dragging the US into a war, US troops were not directly engaged and if it did not work out then there would be no loss of credibility. Also important was the low cost of such operations. Covert action seemingly promised to offer a simple or clean solution to problems and was one of the few exercises of power in the sole purview of the executive.

Historians and analysts are divided on the merits of covert action during the Cold War. Three views tend to be prevalent in the literature on the topic, the first of which supports the use of covert action. William Daugherty claims that during the presidencies of Eisenhower, Kennedy and Reagan, covert action contributed significantly to the fall of the USSR and the end of the "nuclear nightmare".[10] However John Nutter contends that covert action was almost universally counterproductive and caused more problems than it solved.[11] The majority of opinion nevertheless lies within a balance of these arguments, with historians such as Willard Matthias concluding that the early actions of containing communism by supporting non-communist leaders, political action programmes to counteract Soviet propaganda and the neutralisation of the USSR's political allies was "sound policy" but lost their way by over relying on what it increasingly saw as a "magic bullet" option.[12] This precedent was set by the early apparent successes in Iran and Guatemala and as a result of this the wrong conclusions were drawn in Washington about the nature and utility of covert action. Those erroneous conclusions eventually led to less successful operations including the Bay of Pigs disaster.

The first two violent US covert actions against forms of elected governments can be considered together as they are often hailed as a model of success in the Cold War. Widespread populist movements brought Mohammad Mossaddegh to power in Iran and Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala. Both sought policies of land reform and redistribution of wealth which included the nationalisation of internationally owned companies. Therefore in Iran in 1953 and Guatemala in 1954 a combination of concern for economic advantage and perceived national security led the US to engage in covert action against the existence of regimes that were basically democratic and certainly far more so than what followed.[13] Operation AJAX was the first key covert action which overthrew the government in Iran in 1953. Mossaddegh had expropriated Britain's petroleum concession in Anglo-Iranian oil, flirted with the pro-Soviet Tudeh party and reduced the pro-American Shah to a mere figurehead. The US and Britain therefore began planning combined action which would topple the regime. Operation AJAX was supposed, "to cause the fall of the Mossaddegh government and replace it with a military regime which would reach an equitable oil settlement and vigorously prosecute the dangerously strong communist party." [14] The Shah issued a royal decree replacing Mossaddegh with a right wing general while the CIA spent several hundred thousand dollars to organise mass demonstrations supporting the change. Once the Shah was safely in power the CIA helped train the Iranian intelligence service to cement his hold on power. Similarly on the back of the success in Iran Operation PBSUCCESS was launched in Guatemala 1954. Arbenz had nationalised the American owned United Fruit Company which was the largest landowner and controlled the railways, ports and communications. Eisenhower and the director of the CIA, Allen Dulles, were easily convinced by the chief consul of the United Fruit Company that Guatemala was a

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soviet beachhead which needed to be taken care of. Therefore Operation PBSUCCESS sought to rely on similar methods of subversion and used psychological operations to strip the regime of support, especially the army and middle classes. A smoke and mirrors effort intended to fake a huge 'army of liberation' which would scare Arbenz into replying. Once Arbenz thought this force was going to attack, he purchased weapons and announced he would arm the people to fight the revolution. This infuriated the army officers who on 27 June 1954 demanded his resignation. While these actions produced short term gains and success, they left an ineradicable impression of guilt by association at best and sowed bitter seeds which would grow into difficult problems for future generations of US policy makers. The fact that these two operations, being so close together and having such great effect, produced an operational hubris that led to later disasters.

Perhaps the best documented covert action disaster was the Bay of Pigs Invasion in 1961. After Castro's successful 26 July Movement took power in Cuba in 1959, the US began a programme of covert action planned by a majority of those who has been on PBSUCCESS. Supporting the guerrilla insurgents soon turned to an invasion plan where the CIA would train and assist a small landing force of Cuban exiles that would ignite a popular rebellion and topple Castro. This plan was full of holes. Robert Bissell, the man in charge of the operation, counted on these landings to cause the local population to support the attack, despite analysts from CIA branches citing this as improbable.[15] If this was not to work then the rebels were expected to 'melt into the hills'. The problem with this was the chosen landing venue, the Bay of Pigs, was eighty miles away from the Escambray Mountains through dense swampland. Daugherty argues that the failure of covert action in this case was not because the CIA proposed a flawed programme which was ineptly managed, but because the President insisted on pursuing a risky programme.[16] However this argument is less than convincing on closer inspection. No one from the CIA had told the President that the plan virtually required a US invasion in order to succeed or truly understood the situation in Cuba. The indecision from Kennedy was due to an absence of good collection, analysis and counterintelligence which was at the disposal of the covert action operators but not used.[17] The first principle of covert action to be effective is for it to be part of a well-coordinated policy drawing on all principles of intelligence, not to be used as a substitute for other forms. The covert operators were woefully uninformed about the situation in Cuba for which it had grandiose plans and was therefore entirely counterproductive. The Bay of Pigs operation provoked a siege mentality and distrust of the US which ultimately prolonged the Cold War and, as Jeffrey-Jones points out, set the path to arguably the Cold War's most dangerous point, the Cuban Missile Crisis.[18]

Despite the fiasco, lessons were not learnt about the failures of covert action and instead focused on how to do it better next time. US covert operations became an integral part of government policy and their reason for existence remained unquestioned. A new operation entitled MONGOOSE began in Cuba with a series of disjointed raids, sabotage and assassination plots. This not only had the effect of costing the US tax payer over fifty million dollars per year, but also intensified and cemented Castro's hold on power.[19] Covert action in this case was certainly counterproductive as Castro was able to use clear evidence of US involvement as reasons to justify his policies born out of a siege mentality. MONGOOSE had a number of other serious implications. A precedent was set for the violation of US laws under a guise of national security and it produced a number of well-trained soldiers not under the control or accountable to the US, which later became involved in other secret wars, some of whom would engage in acts of terrorism and drug running against the US.[20]

Most operations and programmes of the 60s continued into the next decade. The decrease on the emphasis of plausible deniability made these operations less covert and, combined with the general exasperation and outrage of the Vietnam War, created a public backlash against the US intelligence services. A highly public and visible campaign of overt and covert methods helped dispose the democratically elected Salvador Allende in Chile. The CIA used economic sanctions and assured the Chilean military that the US would support a coup with US dollars flowing to a regime which undid Allende's socialist reforms.[21] In one respect covert action could be regarded as a success in the Cold War as South America's first democratically elected Marxist was disposed. However America's role was transparent and allowed the USSR to cite examples of US hypocrisy. Indeed the USSR intelligence services not only neutralised most CIA operations but also helped regimes such as Castro's to maintain their power by demonstrating outside forces were to blame for indigenous problems such as crop failures, bad economic performance and social unrest.[22] Covert action became detrimental for the Cold War effort as it allowed Soviet propaganda free reign in blaming the US for any problem. After a brief relaxation in the amount of covert action campaigns under Carter, once

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again under Reagan covert action was seen as the 'magic bullet' in the fight against communism. The support of the Mujahedeen against the invasion of the USSR into Afghanistan is often cited as one of the greatest successes of covert action. Indeed in the short term the results were excellent for the US. The USSR became involved in a long war of attrition which leached resources and manpower and it can be argued attributed to the internal divisions that eventually dismantled the USSR. However it left an Afghanistan devastated by war and internal strife and created a militant, insurgent theocracy funded by weapons of the US which in turn would be used against them in 2001. In spite of this covert action still has its supporters, in the dogmatic view of Mark Bowden, failing to help Islamic fighters against the Soviet invasion may have stunted the growth of Islamic terrorism, but it also may have prolonged the power and influence of the Soviet state. He claims, "I'll take the threat of an occasional terrorist attack over the threat of an all-out nuclear exchange any time." [23] Well the 'end may justify the means' argument that the most important factor in the Cold War was 'winning', this overlooks the possibility of the fact that different methods could have been implemented and still caused the fall of the USSR. The legacy of covert action makes it clear that the way on wins is critical for it determines the future.

It is difficult to assess the effect of covert action on the outcome of the Cold War. One difficulty is that much covert action happened at critical times and places during the Cold War as well as other forms of warfare. Covert action, by nature, is also shrouded in secrecy so it is challenging to find quantitative figures. Many programmes were hailed as successes but does that mean they caused the success or would they have happened anyway? Finally the fact that the US did indeed win the Cold War clouds the analysis of covert action as many commentators assume the logical fallacy of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. Therefore to evaluate the success one must look at a myriad of factors. Firstly the successes and failures need to be weighed so the balance of the costs and benefits can be assessed. Secondly the overall purpose served by covert action needs to be accounted, for example what did covert action contribute towards a successful end to the Cold War? Finally the long term and external costs need to be considered which is particularly important in the contemporary cases of Iran and Afghanistan.

Covert action apologists, such as Daugherty, can point out that the CIA installed governments did not go over to communism and therefore successfully helped in the battle against the USSR. [24] Eisenhower himself listed operations AJAX and PBSUCCESS as defeats for the communists and among his proudest achievements during his terms of office. [25] However perhaps the largest error of US policy was the misconception underlying all covert action that revolutionary agitation and ferment was either Soviet inspired or susceptible to Soviet exploitation. [26] There is little evidence to suggest that Arbenz or Mossadegh were actually communists or puppets of the USSR. They were essentially neutral in the Cold War, perhaps marginally friendly and most politically akin to social democrats, not the USSR. Even Castro's political leanings were ambiguous after the Cuban Revolution. It was only after the US imposed sanctions that Cuba was forced to find a new buyer for its sugar and, paired with the Bay of Pigs invasion, forced Cuba towards the USSR. Therefore covert action was entirely counterproductive as it caused precisely what US policy makers feared. Severe errors were made in mistaking nationalism for communism. There was also a premise that once a government 'went over' to the USSR it was gone forever. This line of thinking is distinctly flawed, for example Egypt kicked out the USSR in 1970 having previously relied on them and Ethiopia and Somalia switched back and forth. [27] The result of the covert action coups produced not a single democracy or free market and sired rulers who were corrupt, brutally oppressed the people and plundered the economy. In the view of John Nutter, "by imposing foul regimes on many of the peoples of the world, the US, even in winning, poisoned the well of friendship." [28]

Another serious consequence of covert action was the damaging of democracy and popular sovereignty in the US. Private companies often dictated covert action by providing support, supporting and mobilising economic warfare operations and identifying or publicising circumstances detrimental to the US. Therefore often the interests of specific companies prevailed over the US national interest, for example the United Fruit Company in Guatemala and Anglo-Iranian oil in Iran. The action also supported US economic interests by repressing the development of free markets and economic competition in the third world. As colonial powers withdrew, many fledgling governments attempted to regain control of their own national economic resources as they represented the only chance for development but they often remained in the hands of first world companies. The resulting kleptocracies were made possible by US covert action. This was politically damaging for the US in the Cold War as outsiders perceived it as an updated manifestation of colonialism. [29] Instead of directly ruling countries as colonies, the US used transnational

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companies to leach resources and change governments at will. The moral superiority of the US was destroyed by a willingness to overthrow democratic regimes and therefore validated USSR propaganda.

One cannot say that because covert action kept some countries out of the USSR camp that it played a necessary role in the outcome of the Cold War. One must re-examine the operations and evaluate what was contributed. In Iran PBSUCCESS enabled the Shah to rule for twenty-five years which served to stabilise the Persian Gulf, assisting US interests. However the coup in 1954 set the stage for the emergence of the revolutionary Islamic state in 1979. The revolution damaged the US immensely with a loss of prestige, the ensuing embassy hostage crisis and the continued Iranian support of terrorism which is felt resolutely today. Operation AJAX replaced an emerging democracy with an authoritarian system and a bloody regime. The event revolutionised many Latin Americans that the US would not permit self-determination, most famously Che Guevara. The failure of the Bay of Pigs helped entrench Castro in Cuba, sacrificed US credibility and helped perpetuate the intensity of the Cold War which resulted in the Missile Crisis. It is plausible to suggest that the Cold War could have been more successfully managed by using the goodwill of World War Two to establish a set of international norms advantageous to the US, in effect determining what the rules of competition would be. Instead by using secret armies, rigged elections and coup d'états, they lost all goodwill. Now any coup could be blamed on the US and therefore we can consider covert action to be counterproductive. Even CIA analysts doubted the efficiency and ethical foundation for covert action and believed it distorted the CIA's mission and took precedence over thorough analysis.[30] The long term consequences of covert action and the legacy left from ethically dubious plans have cost the US more than they gained. The covert action undertaken was counterproductive including the apparent successes in Iran and Guatemala. In 1961 the President's Board of Consultants on Foreign Intelligence told Eisenhower, "We have been unable to conclude that, on balance, all of the covert action programs undertaken by the CIA up to this time have been worth the risk or the great expenditure of manpower, money or other resources involved." [31] If only US policy makers had listened.

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Date written: January 2012