

Week 10. Covert Action

A. Background

-Covert Action-Clandestine activities undertaken to influence foreign governments or situations while concealing US involvement. Plausible deniability key to success, and major difference between secret and covert.

-Activities include propaganda, intelligence support, political influence, and paramilitary operations. The latter is most controversial. Should US military do it?

-Historically most controversial CIA mission. Dates to 1947 but has long prior history in international relations. Tool of foreign policy as well as intelligence activity.

-Used extensively during Cold War to counter Soviet covert action. Exposed by Congress in 1970s, particularly assassination attempts, of which none succeeded directly. Last major review was 1987 Iran-Contra Report. Now more widely accepted as tool to fight terrorism.

-Most believe it is useful tool if consistent with foreign policy and authorized by President. Congress must be informed of "finding" and agree to funding. Separation of powers never tested by Supreme Court. Presidents may use it to conceal politically controversial actions. Must consider risk of exposure and risk of failure. Iran-Contra example. Secret prisons.

B. Propaganda, Intelligence Support, and Political Influence

-CIA often called upon for these roles because of rapid access to agents of influence and clandestine capabilities (keeping it covert). Contacts with foreign journalists and political parties. Restrictions on propaganda use in US media. ie letter to Zarqawi.

-CIA also has ready access to key foreign officials and close contacts with host intelligence services and security forces (security training role in Third World). Intelligence support usually covert, even with allies. Most such activities normal aspect of intelligence and not controversial.

-Like most CIA actions, success gets little notice, failures and exposures get much attention. Funding of foreign politicians/parties gets much attention, but widely practiced.

C. Paramilitary Operations.

-Paramilitary opns often done with DOD. Some in CIA would give all business to DOD as recommended by 911 Commission, but both CIA and DOD have rejected this proposal.

-CIA capabilities declined in 1990s after Soviet exit from Afghanistan and end of Cold War, but revived after 9/11. Assisted ouster of Taliban from power and invasion of Iraq. DO controls all covert ops, including paramilitary. Uses ex-military and foreign hires, often under cover. ie Contra operation.

-CIA advantages. Fast, cheap, agile, covert. Disadvantage, limited funds and capability. DOD has greater capability and new funding to support special operations. But legal constraints on DOD, including Geneva convention and desire to protect POWs. Also harder to keep covert once exposed.

D. Regime Change, Coups, and Assassinations.

-Most CIA officers oppose on principle. Contra policy best example. Violent regime change vs political and material support for opposition.

-Coups are particular problem. Should we warn host government? We will warn democratic and friendly governments, and not inform but discourage others. Policy decision, not intelligence call. But want to protect sources and methods. How do you know?

-Assassinations. All in favor? Can we contract out? Executive order says no, but unintended consequences happen. CIA will help target, but wants military to pull trigger. ie Yemen and Iraq. Fear of blowback if exposed ie Kennedy. CIA can use lethal force in pre-emption or self-defense.

E. Key Issues-Criteria for Covert Action

-Consistent with, not substitute for, policy.

-Risk assessment. Consequences of failure/exposure. Will public support? But many actions politically or morally controversial.

-Past failures. Was opposition, once exposed, based on who did it, what was done, who it was done to, who authorized it, who was informed, or unintended consequences?