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COVERT ACTION

COLD WAR DINOSAUR OR "TOOL" FOR THE 21st CENTURY

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COVERT ACTION

COLD WAR DINOSAUR OR "TOOL" FOR THE 21st CENTURY

Covert action, as a viable means to achieve strategic ends, has always been surrounded by controversy Emotions ranging from romantic mystique to outrage and condemnation are invoked whenever covert action is discussed During the height of the Cold War, while *Mission Impossible* and *Secret Agent* dominated television viewing, covert operations were frequently the instrument of choice to achieve foreign policy objectives However, just as television is an unrealistic representation of covert action, our current geopolitical situation is a far cry from the global environment of the 1950s and 1960s

Just as a carpenter must select the right tool, based on the job and materials used, the strategist must select the proper "tool" to accomplish his foreign policy objectives The appropriateness of the policy "tool" is based not only on the capabilities and limitations of the particular instrument, but the context of its employment The current international and domestic context has dramatically increased the risk and potentially limited the use of covert action as an instrument of power. To analyze the impact of these contextual changes, let's first take off the "trenchcoat" and clearly define the capabilities and limitations of covert action as a policy "tool "

The National Security Act of 1947 initially defined covert action and charged the Central Intelligence Agency as the proponent for planning and execution.

Since 1947, numerous executive orders, legislative acts, and judicial rulings have further defined, constrained, and regulated the resourcing and conduct of covert operations Covert action is defined as:

> "Any clandestine activity designed to influence foreign governments, events, organizations, or persons in support of United States foreign policy Covert operations may 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 to permit the sponsor plausible denial of the operation "

In short, the influence of another party through various coercive means while the source of the influence remains secret, at best, or unacknowledged in the worse case scenario [1]

Hollywood's portrayal of covert operations makes for sensational movies, but grossly misrepresents the method and focus of this "tool" of statecraft. In reality, covert actions are frequently as mundane as "providing foreigners, secretly, with money, weapons, or training" to influence their action in support United States policy objectives.[2] Covert actions generally fall into one of three broad categories with respect to the intent and purpose of the operation. First, covert operations are employed to shift the internal balance of power in another nation or organization to insure support and alignment with United States interest. Second, covert operations are conducted to influence the popular opinion within a nation or transnational organization in order to insure alignment with United States goals and objectives. Finally, covert actions are executed to conduct "specific acts" against an individual, a country or an organization to

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[1] Allen E Goodman, "Does Covert Action Have a Future?" *Parameters*, 18 June 1988, 74

promote or achieve foreign policy goals [3] The scope and type of "specific acts" may vary from a small intelligence collection network up to a full-scale invasion by paramilitary forces secretly trained and equipped by the United States.

Regardless of whether the operation is a small propaganda cell or a multibillion-dollar operation to train and equip an insurgent force, both the active and passive participants in a covert action must remain secret In fact, the very success of the operation is dependent upon protecting the identity of the participants, or maintaining their ability to avoid public acknowledgement of involvement. Although the operation may be essential to achieve legitimate policy objectives, accomplishing the objective by other overt means is impossible, or potentially damaging, for the participating nations or groups This constraint may stem from public opinion, ethnic pressures, conflicting alliances, or the threat of retaliation by a neighboring state For example, the United State's support of the Mujahiddeen's resistance against Soviet occupation was never acknowledged in order to protect Pakistan, which provided the safe haven for the transfer of arms and supplies to the rebels, from potential Soviet retaliation. The element of secrecy constitutes the unique nature of covert action and why, in certain situations, it may provide the only means to accomplish policy objectives.[4]

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[2] Gregory F Treverton, "Covert Action and Open Society," *Foreign Affairs* 65(Summer 1987) 1004

[3] Roy Godson, *Dirty Tricks or Trump Cards* (Washington, D C Brassey's, 1955), 132

[4] Treverton, "Covert Action and Open Society," 1008

Henry Kissinger described covert operations as a means to pursue policy goals "in the gray area between formal diplomacy and military intervention."[5] Secrecy allows certain flexibility that official protocol, or overt action, can not pursue without risking embarrassment, retribution, or escalation. Generally, covert operations are low in cost (resources) and do not require a significant amount of time to conduct relative to other instruments of power Often described as "surgical," referring to the ability to precisely structure the operation its specific objective, covert actions provide the statesman with a powerful "tool" to gain strategic "leverage " However, "there is nothing magic here" and big things do not come in small packages [6]

The essential secrecy and narrow "surgical" focus of the operation has a limiting effect on the objective that can be tasked and accomplished by a covert action Strategists earn their money by balancing "ends" with "means." Covert operations are seldom, if ever, capable of accomplishing a foreign policy objective single handedly Only when employed as part of a comprehensive strategy, inconjunction with other instruments of power, will covert operations provide the unique and powerful leverage to achieve strategic "ends." When the strategist forgets this cardinal rule, the results are disastrous. "How could I have been so stupid to let them go ahead" was President Kennedy's comment when

[5] Goodman, "Does Covert Action Have a Future?" 74
[6] Lloyd Salvetti and panel of CIA Operation Officers, seminar on covert action Ft McNair, Washington, D C , 11 September, 1998

he realized, too late, that his covert paramilitary operation (means) was grossly inadequate to bring about the over throw of Fidel Castro (ends).[7]

Despite its unique advantages, covert action has received significant criticism and outright condemnation as a viable "tool" for foreign policy. Former Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency Admiral Bobby Inman, an expected advocate, stated that "the potential value of covert operations is greatly overemphasized and problems [with its use] tend to be neglected."[8] A decade ago, covert operations were considered a low risk, low cost "means" to pursue policy objectives and was the "tool" of choice when policymakers needed to "do something right away." However, within the context of the post Cold War, information age, global "village" environment; the traditional strengths of covert operations have become potential weaknesses

The dramatic changes in both the domestic and international environment during the last eight years has significantly increased the risk, and therefore reduced the utility, of covert action Today, the risk involved with covert operations is significantly greater than the exposure of a collection network or the loss of a material infrastructure in a critical region of the world Even if the covert action is successful, our nation incurs the potential loss of prestige, legitimacy, and moral consistency with our democratic values At risk is a breech of faith with the American people, loss of credibility with friends and allies, and contradiction of the principles of our nation.

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[7] Treverton, "Covert Action and Open Society," 999
[8] Goodman, "Does Covert Action Have a Future," 77

From a domestic perspective, the appropriateness and utility of covert action is primarily challenged from the standpoint of values. America has never professed that the "ends justify the means." In fact, our country believes that the means must be legitimate and reasonable regardless of the goal that is pursued. During time of war, the "what is good for the goose is good for the gander" rule is usually applicable, even for the good old U.S.A But without a credible threat to our national security, "it is not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game" that governs the employment and use of power by the American people Because in the end, it is the American people who justify the means employed.

Covert action must conform to our national values or risk condemnation by the American people.[9] Although a foreign policy goal is universally supported, the American people, not to mention the international community, will not tolerate the use of assassination, bio-chemical agents, manipulation of election returns, or other means which contradict our values to achieve the policy objective. The Reagan Administration's covert negotiation with Iran, to exchange arms for hostages, clearly illustrates this point. Although the safe return of the hostages was paramount to the American people, the exchange of weapons and funds with a terrorist state was a contradiction in stated policy and a breech of faith with the American people and our allies. Exposure of the operation stained the Reagan White House and tarnished the nation's image abroad.[10]

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[9] Godson, *Dirty Trick or Trump Cards*, 130
[10] Treverton, "Covert Action and Open Society," 1011

Our stature in the world, and our ability to influence through a leadership role in global affairs, is based, to some degree, on the ideals and democratic values that we profess. According to Joseph Nye, the combination of globalization, information technology, and emerging democracies, has reduced the effectiveness of coercive power and promoted the use of "soft power " Nye defines "soft power" as the ability to influence through the attractiveness of beliefs, values, and way of life.[11] America's "soft power" is significantly undermined by incidents such as Iran-Contra that brings into question the credibility of our democratic values. How can a country that professes freedom of information and government by the people conduct illegal covert operations that only select officials know about and authorize? How can a country that was established on the principle of self-determination and self-rule authorize the manipulation and meddling in the internal affairs of another country? These are difficult questions for the United States to answer concerning the legitimacy and morality of a democratic society's conduct of covert action.

The fact that covert operations is on the fringe of legitimacy and potentially contradicts the values of our democratic society is not a new revelation In the past, the secrecy of the operation was virtually assured which minimized the risk of embarrassment and discredit associated with public disclosure. However, in today's information age, secrecy is virtually impossible to guarantee and plausible denial more difficult to maintain. Information technology, investigative

[11] Joseph S Nye Jr, *Bound to Lead* (New York Basic Books, 1990), 190-195

reporters, congressional oversight, and a public that is more skeptical towards its government have changed the approach and risk assessment for covert action. Instead of casual consideration of *possible* public disclosure, the realistic strategist must develop the covert action based on *when* the operation is exposed. The information age has replaced the "secret" operations of yesteryear with the "unacknowledged" actions of today The United States' support for both the Contras in Latin America and the Mujahideen in Afghanistan was clearly documented in countless investigative news reports, but the operations were never officially acknowledged by American officials [12]

The dynamics of today's domestic and international environment threaten to retire covert action from the policy maker's "toolbox." The lack of a perceived threat, importance of values and "soft power," and the unrelenting scrutiny of investigative reporters have exponentially increased the risk involved with the use of covert operations During the height of the Cold War, covert action was often the preferred instrument of policy makers Today, many would argue that covert operations should be place under glass with a label stating, "break only in time of war "

The improper or misuse of a tool is not the fault of the tool, but the failure of an unskilled carpenter. Likewise, the inappropriate utilization of covert action is not the "tool's" fault, but the policymaker who failed to properly employ the instrument of statecraft. The end of the Cold War and explosion of the

[12] Treverton, "Covert Action and Open Society," 1002 – 1004

information age have not changed the value and unique qualities that covert action provides the strategist, only the context for its employment The use of covert operations must be carefully planned and executed, within the framework of an overall strategy, in order to maximize the effectiveness of the "tool" while avoiding the backlash of failure

What are the guiding principles or criteria for its safe and effective employment within the context of our strategic environment? Former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance recognized the risk involved with the inappropriate and uncoordinated use of covert action Vance stated that covert operations should only be used as an exceptional measure when "absolutely essential to the national security" and no other means is available or capable of achieving the desired end state.[13] Although restrictive in nature, this cardinal rule forces the scrutiny and careful review required for the proper execution of covert action in today's foreign policy arena.

From this overarching principle, six basic criteria are derived for the initiation of covert operations. These six rules provide the strategic "carpenter" a checklist to avoid, or at least minimize, the risk involved with the use of this "tool."

1 Covert action must support a clearly defined policy. Covert action is a means to achieve a policy objective, not a substitute for policy.

2 Covert action can not contradict or violate established policy.

3 Covert action should be employed with other overt elements of power.

[13] Ibid , 1012

4. Insure the objective for the covert action is reasonable with respect to the scope of the operation and compliments the other elements of power.
5. Covert action must conform to American values with respect to both the mission and third party governments and organizations involved.
6. Covet operations must gain strong bipartisan support within the executive branch and congressional oversight. This support serves as a method to verify the soundness and legitimacy of the operation in the absence of public consensus
7. Every covert operation must be able to answer the question, "when the operation is compromised " in a positive manner

Like any checklist, these criteria do not guarantee success However, failure to consider these parameters will expose the strategy and the strategy maker to grave consequences [14]

Sun Tzu, in his timeless work *The Art of War, stated* that "secret [covert] operations are essential in war "[15] Today, many critics of covert action would agree with Sun Tzu, but quickly emphasize that we are not at war and covert action is neither essential or appropriate policy instrument for our nation. Despite the absence of a declaration of war, competition, conflicts, and threats to our national security have not diminished since the end of the Cold War. Covert action continues to provide the strategist a unique "means" to influence a

[14] This list is the compilation of the articles by Godson, Goodman, Boren, and Treverton that weave these critical points throughout their discussions on the use of covert action
[15] Sun Tzu, *The Art of War,* trans Samuel B Griffith (London Oxford University Press, 1971), 149

state or transnational organization to support or comply with U.S. goals and objectives. Certainly the current dynamics of our domestic and international environments increase the risk involved with this "tool" of statecraft However, with careful employment, based on detailed planning to insure the operation is "nested" within official policy and American values, covert action provides a precise and subtle "means" to accomplish policy objectives that are "absolutely essential to the national security."