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The CIA and America's Presidents

Some Rarely Discussed Truths Shaping Contemporary American Democracy

by JOHN CHUCKMAN

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Many people still think of the CIA as an agency designed to help American presidents make informed decisions about matters outside the United States. That was the basis for President Truman's signing the legislation which created the agency, and indeed it does serve that role, generally rather inadequately, but it has become something far beyond that.

Information is certainly not something to which any reasonable person objects, but the CIA has two houses under its roof, and it is the operational side of the CIA which gives it a world-wide bad reputation. The scope of undercover operations has evolved to make the CIA into a kind of civilian army, one involving great secrecy, little accountability, and huge budgets – altogether a dangerous development indeed for any country which regards itself as a democracy and whose military is forbidden political activity. After all, the CIA's secret operational army in practice is not curtailed by restrictions around politics, many of its tasks having been quite openly political. Yes, its charter forbids operations in the United States, but those restrictions have been ignored or bent countless times both in secret programs like Echelon (monitoring telephone communications by five English-speaking allies who then share the information obtained, a forerunner to the NSA's recently-revealed collection of computer data) and years of mail-

opening inside the United States or using substitutes to go around the rule, as was likely the case with the many Mossad agents trailing the eventual perpetrators of 9/11 inside the United States before the event.

As with all large, powerful institutions over time, the CIA constantly seeks expansion of its means and responsibilities, much like a growing child wanting ever more food and clothing and entertainment. This inherent tendency, the expansion of institutional empire, is difficult enough to control under normal circumstances, but when there are complex operations in many countries and tens of billions in spending and many levels of secrecy and secret multi-level files, the ability of any elected politicians – whose keenest attention is always directed towards re-election and acquiring enough funds to run a campaign – to exercise meaningful control and supervision becomes problematic at best. The larger and more complex the institution becomes, the truer this is.

Under Eisenhower, the CIA's operational role first came to considerable prominence, which is hardly surprising considering Eisenhower was a former Supreme Commander in the military, the military having used many dark operations during WWII, operations still classified in some cases. In his farewell address, it is true, Eisenhower gave Americans a dark warning about the "military-industrial complex," but as President he used CIA dark operations extensively, largely to protect American corporate interests in various parts of the world – everything from oil interests to banana monopolies in Central America. Perhaps, he viewed the approach as less destructive or dangerous or likely to tarnish America's post-WWII reputation than "sending in the Marines," America's traditional gang of paid-muscle for such tasks, but, over the long term, he was wrong, and his extensive use of CIA operations would prove highly destructive and not just tarnish America's image but totally shatter it. It set in motion a number of developments and problems that haunt America to this day.

In the 1950s, the CIA was involved in a number of operations whose success bred hubris and professional contempt for those not part of its secret cult, an attitude not unlike that of members of an elite fraternity or secret society at university. The toppling of disliked but democratic governments in Guatemala and Iran and other operations had, by about the time of President Kennedy's coming to power in 1960, bred an arrogant and unwarranted belief in its ability to do almost anything it felt was needed. The case of Cuba became a watershed for the CIA and its relationship with Presidents of the United States, President Eisenhower and his CIA having come to believe that Castro, widely regarded by the public as a heroic figure at the time, had turned dangerous to American corporate and overseas interests and needed to be removed. Fairly elaborate preparations for doing so were put into place, and parts of the southern United States became large secret training grounds for would-be terrorists selected from the anti-Castro exile community by CIA officers in charge of a project which dwarfed Osama bin Laden's later camp in the mountains of Afghanistan.

A just-elected President Kennedy was faced with a momentous decision: whether to permit and support the invasion of neighboring Cuba, great effort and expense having gone into the scheme. Kennedy supported it with limited reservations, reservations that became the source of the deepest resentment by the old boys at the CIA looking for someone to blame for the invasion's embarrassing public failure. The truth is the CIA's plans were ill-considered from the beginning,

the product of those arrogant attitudes bred from “successes” such as Guatemala. Cuba was not Guatemala, it had a far larger population, fewer discontented elements to exploit, a cohort of soldiers freshly-experienced from the revolution against former dictator Batista, and Castro was widely regarded as a national hero. The Bay of Pigs invasion never had a chance of success, and the very fact that the CIA put so many resources into it and pressured the President to have it done shows how badly it had lost its way by that time.

That failure of the invasion, a highly public failure, created a serious rift between the President and the CIA. When the President, in an unprecedented act, fired three senior CIA figures, holding them responsible for the fiasco, we can only imagine the words that echoed in the halls of Langley. CIA plots against Castro nevertheless carried right on. America was an intensely hostile place on the matter of communism at that time, its press continuously beating the drums, and no President could afford politically to appear even slightly indifferent. Kennedy himself was not quite the peace-loving figure some of his later admirers would hold him to be. He was a work in progress, and he gave speeches often colored by strident martinet and jingo phrases. Secret attempts were made to assassinate Castro, and the Kennedys, at that time, undoubtedly would have been pleased had they succeeded.

Again, in some these attempts, the CIA went to great and genuinely weird lengths, including an arrangement with Mafia figures, something the public did not know until the 1975 Church Committee looking into illegality in CIA operations. Rumors and threats of another invasion, likely often fed by the CIA itself as psychological warfare against Cuba, led to the confrontation known as the Cuban Missile Crisis in late 1962. Here, more than ever, the President was ill-served by the CIA and the Pentagon. They wanted an immediate invasion of Cuba when U2 spy cameras detected what appeared to be missile installations under construction, utterly unaware that Russia already had battlefield-ready tactical nuclear weapons mounted on short-range missiles ready to repel an invasion.

The 1975 Church Senate Committee looking into earlier illegality came into being because a number of sources were suggesting the CIA had been engaged in assassination and other dark practices, matters which at that time quite upset the general public and some decent politicians. The names in rumors included Lumumba of Congo, Trujillo of the Dominican Republic, Diem of Vietnam, Schneider of Chile, and others, but since only part of the Church Report was released we cannot know the full extent of what had been going on. Another possible name is Dag Hammarskjöld of the UN. It is perhaps a key measure of how far things have deteriorated with the CIA that the Church Committee today appears almost naïve. Following the committee’s report, President Ford issued an Executive Order banning assassinations. This was replaced just a few years later by an Executive Order of Ronald Reagan’s, Reagan being a great fan of dark operations, having appointed one of the more dangerous men ever to hold the title of CIA Director, William Casey.

The CIA, of course, now runs a regular assassination air force which has killed thousands of innocent people apart from the intended targets, themselves individuals proved guilty of nothing under law. The CIA today thinks nothing of using mass killing to reach desired goals, the Maidan shootings of innocent people demonstrating in Kiev being an outstanding example, shootings which precipitated a coup last year in Ukraine against an elected government. And

then there are the trained and armed maniacs which were set loose upon the people of Syria to do pretty much whatever they pleased.

Kennedy managed to resist demands for invasion in 1962, perhaps his one great achievement as President, and he took another path that eventually led to an agreement with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. That agreement, which included America's pledge not to invade Cuba, made Kennedy a marked man. He was hated by the fanatical and well-armed Cuban émigré community, and he was hated by all the men who had devoted a fair part of their lives to eliminating Castro, the émigrés' recruiters, trainers, handlers, and suppliers – members all of the CIA country club set whose commie-hatred was so intense it could make the veins in their foreheads pop. Some at the CIA were undoubtedly even further irked by backchannel communications that opened up between Kennedy and Khrushchev, and tentative efforts to open something of that nature with Castro. They weren't supposed to know about these efforts, but they almost certainly did.

It is difficult today for people to grasp the intensity of anti-communist and anti-Castro feelings that pervaded America's establishment in 1963, more resembling a religious hysteria than political views. One thing is absolutely clear, Kennedy's assassination was about Cuba, and it was conceived out of a simmering conviction that Kennedy literally was not fit to be President. No important person who ever expressed a quiet opinion on the matter – including Mrs. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and some members of the Warren Commission – ever believed the fantasy story fashioned by the Warren Commission. Neither did informed observers abroad – the Russian and French governments for example later expressed their views – as well as a great many ordinary Americans.

Other facts about Kennedy undoubtedly added to the volatile reactions of the plotters, facts not known by the public until decades later, one fact in particular was his relatively long and intense affair with Mary Pinchot Meyer, a highly intelligent woman, socialite, and former wife of a senior CIA agent, Cord Meyer, who for a time ran Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty. Kennedy and Mary Meyer are said to have had long talks about world affairs and prospects for peace, and she also is said to have introduced Kennedy to marijuana and LSD, he, given his chronic back pain, willing to try almost anything. She kept a diary that was known to the CIA's James Angleton because he was discovered searching for it after her mysterious, professional hit-style murder in 1964 (small calibre bullet by a gun held to the head). One can only imagine the raised eyebrows of CIA officials when they learned about drugs and Mary's influence on Kennedy (could some of their numerous meetings possibly not have been bugged?). Double betrayal over Cuba, backchannel communications with Russia, and drugs and sex with an artistic, intellectual type – those surely would have made the men who decided the fates of leaders in much lesser places extremely uneasy about the future.

My focus is not the assassination, but I've gone into some length because I believe it was a defining event in relations between future Presidents and the CIA. After this, every President would work under its rather frightening shadow.

Lyndon Johnson was ready from day one to give the CIA anything it wanted. Whether Johnson was involved in the assassination as some plausibly believe, or whether he was just intimidated

by those involved – after all, like all bullies, Johnson was at heart a coward as he demonstrated numerous times. He wasn't long in launching the most vicious and pointless war since World War II with the cheap trick of a story about an attack upon American ships. The CIA got right into the fun in 1965 with its Operation Phoenix, which over some years involved tens of thousands of silent assassinations of village leaders and others by night-crawling Special Forces soldiers guided to their targets by CIA agents.

Like all the CIA's more lunatic operations – this one just kept running until at least 1972 – chalking up a toll of murders estimated as high as 40,000 and proving a complete failure in its goal of securing America's artificial rump-state of South Vietnam. It was madness to be involved in Vietnam, and it proved in the end infinitely more embarrassing and destructive to America's morale and reputation than the Bay of Pigs invasion, but then more a few people who knew and worked with Johnson have said that he was pretty much mad himself. The CIA fed Johnson the kind of things he wanted to hear, but the War in Vietnam was always characterized by poor intelligence, and when the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese launched the huge, surprise of the Tet Offensive in early 1968, Washington was hit by an earthquake, and a lot of people suddenly understood Vietnam was a lost cause. Johnson, always the coward, his party starting to split into factions over the matter, announced his resignation not long after.

Of course, the truth is that the information side of the CIA's house has never been very good at its work. Apart from the abject failures of Vietnam, the CIA is said to have never once got the most critical assessments of the Cold War era, those of the Soviet Union's economic and military strength, anywhere close to accurate. There were many reasons for that, but the perceived need to exaggerate your enemy's strength to inflate the size of CIA budgets was an important one. Whether Big Intelligence ever really works in obtaining reliable information and reliable information that will be used by politicians is certainly a topic open for discussion. The most successful information-gathering intelligence service of the early Cold War, the KGB, often had its sometimes remarkable material questioned or cast aside by Stalin.

Richard Nixon's demise in the Watergate scandal likely was served up by CIA dirty tricks. The Watergate break-in was in mid-1972, although it took more than two years before Nixon resigned. Some of the old CIA hands who worked for Nixon's secret "plumber's unit," a private operations group which did jobs like breaking in to the Watergate Hotel offices of the Democrats, had a history going back to the assassination. They undoubtedly kept Langley informed of what steps they were being ordered to take. Nixon was a problem for some of the CIA's darkest secrets: he was jealous and bitter towards the Kennedys for beating him in the 1960 election (he also knew election fraud was used), and he had an obsessive curiosity about the assassination, having made a number of attempts to ascertain just what happened for which he was rebuffed.

A possible second reason for the CIA's wanting to dump Nixon was the deteriorated situation in Vietnam. The Paris Peace Accords were signed early in 1973, however there is evidence that Nixon and Kissinger actually put forward their proposals in the hope that they would be rejected and Congress then would allow them a free hand in seeking a clearer victory. But by that time even the CIA recognized the war in Vietnam could not be won by conventional means and that the interests of the United States were being damaged by its continuation. Despite press blurbs

about peace, Nixon always desperately wanted to triumph in Vietnam, having gone so far in secret as to discuss the possibility of using nuclear weapons on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Despite various speculations, we have never learned just what Nixon's burglars were after at the Watergate, and the reason for that may just well be the CIA's having baited him with false information about what might be discovered there. The job very likely was deliberately sabotaged when old CIA hands do things like sloppy door-taping. The neat little trick alerted a security guard and led to the whole long Watergate Affair and Nixon's eventual resignation, just the kind of neat outcome operations-types love to chuckle over at expense account lunches.

George H. W. Bush senior, the man for whom the Langley headquarters is named was more than a short-term appointed CIA Director. He had a long but never acknowledged background in CIA, a fact which has come to light from a few references in obscure documents obtained by assassination researchers over decades. He almost certainly was involved with the operations against Castro before the assassination. He was likely America's first official CIA President. One of the regular activities of the CIA abroad is to pay secret pensions to likely future leaders in select countries so that they will be both beholden and in a position to be compromised. They do this in dozens of significant countries as part of an effort to control future relations with America. So why not take a similar approach to leadership inside the United States? The first clear example was George H. W. Bush whose single term as President gave the CIA several schemes abroad dear to their hearts, including setting up Saddam Hussein for invasion after his foolish invasion of Kuwait (done following the seeming approval of the United States' ambassador to Iraq), and the invasion of Panama in 1989. Panama's General Noriega had apparently done the unforgivable thing of setting up "honey traps" in which American diplomats and CIA officials were photographed having sex, giving Noriega a powerful weapon against Washington's interference. So he was set up on drug charges – which may or may not have been true, but they were not the business of American justice – other provocations were arranged like a silly stunt about an American sailor being beaten up, and Noriega's country promptly was invaded.

Of course George Bush Junior was not CIA, lacking the fundamental requirement of a decent brain. But his presidency was effectively America's first dual presidency, with Dick Cheney serving as senior partner despite his lesser title, and Dick Cheney was CIA-connected, having served as Secretary of Defense under George Bush's father, overseen such operations as Desert Storm, and after George H. W.'s election defeat, serving as Chairman and CEO of Halliburton, a gigantic oil services company which operates all over the globe. Such companies – in much the same fashion as large American news organizations such as Time-Life, CBS, or The New York Times – notoriously are well connected with the CIA. Because companies like Halliburton operate in scores of countries, deal with strategic resources, travel to remote sites, and often have access to important figures, they provide perfect cover for CIA agents and other intelligence assets. The Bush-Cheney period was certainly a golden one for the CIA in terms of institutional growth and new projects. Many ugly projects now making our world a less secure place were started in this period.

The CIA now is so firmly entrenched and so immensely well financed – much of it off the books, including everything from secret budget items to peddling drugs and weapons – that it is all but

impossible for a president to oppose it the way Kennedy did. Obama, who has proved himself a fairly weak character from the start, certainly has given the CIA anything it wants. The dirty business of ISIS in Syria and Iraq is one project. The coup in Ukraine is another. The pushing of NATO's face right against Russia's borders is still another. Several attempted coups in Venezuela are still more. And the creation of a drone air force for extrajudicial killing in half a dozen countries is yet another. They don't resemble projects we would expect from a smiley-faced, intelligent man who sometimes wore sandals and refused to wear a flag pin on his lapel during his first election campaign.

More than one observer has speculated about Obama's being CIA, and there are significant holes in his resume which could be accounted for by his involvement. He would have been an attractive candidate for several reasons. Obama is bright, and the CIA employs few blacks in its important jobs. He also might have been viewed as a good political prospect for the future in just the way foreign politicians are selected for secret pensions. After all, before he was elected, there were stories about people meeting this smart and (superficially) charming man and remarking that they may just have met a future president.

If Obama is not actually CIA, then he is so intimidated that he pretty much rubber stamps their projects. A young, inexperienced President must always be mindful of that other young President whose head was half blown off in the streets of Dallas. Moreover, there are some shady areas in Obama's background around drugs and perhaps other matters which could be politically compromising. The CIA is perfectly capable of using anything of that nature for political exposure while making it look as though it came from elsewhere.

So, when people write of America's secret government or of its government within the government, it is far more than an exaggeration. It is actually hard to imagine now any possibility of someone's being elected President and opposing what the CIA recommends, the presidency having come to resemble in more than superficial ways the Monarchy in Britain. The Queen is kept informed of what Her government is doing, but can do nothing herself to change directions. Yes, the President still has the power on paper to oppose any scheme, and then so does the Queen simply by refusing her signature, but she likely could exercise that power just once. In her case the consequence would be an abrupt end to the Monarchy. In a President's case, it would be either a Nixonian or Kennedyesque end.