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The CIA, licensed to kill

The agency has been involved in planning assassinations since at least 1954.

By David Wise
July 22, 2009

Back in 1960, the CIA hatched a plan to kill Patrice Lumumba by infecting his toothbrush with a deadly disease. The Congolese leader would brush his teeth and, presto, in a few days or weeks he would be gone.

Around the same time, the CIA's Health Alteration Committee -- who thought that name up? -- sent a monogrammed, poisoned handkerchief to Gen. Abdul Karim Kassem, the leader of Iraq.

And the CIA's "executive action" unit plotted for years to murder Fidel Castro. It hired the Mafia to poison his food and tried to give him a diving suit contaminated with Madura foot, a rare tropical disease that starts in the foot and moves upward, slowly destroying the body. The CIA also considered offing the Cuban leader with an exploding cigar, a poison pen and a seashell that would blow up underwater when he touched it.

Not one of the plots was successful. Lumumba and Kassem were executed by their foes, and Castro is still alive. But the plots make clear that the CIA has been licensed to kill for decades.

Congress -- especially congressional Democrats -- was outraged earlier this month when it was disclosed that, apparently on orders from Vice President Dick Cheney, the CIA for eight years concealed from Congress a program to assassinate the leaders of Al Qaeda, starting with Osama bin Laden. But they shouldn't have been surprised that such a plan was being hatched.

The CIA's involvement in planning assassinations goes back at least to 1954, when it prepared a manual for killings as part of a U.S.-run coup against the leftist government of Guatemala. The 19-page manual, which was declassified in 1997, makes chilling reading. "The essential point of assassination is the death of the subject," it declares, noting that while it "is possible to kill a man with the bare hands ... the simplest local tools are often much the most efficient means of assassination. A hammer, ax, wrench, screwdriver, fire poker, kitchen knife, lamp stand or anything hard, heavy and handy will suffice."

The agency's manual recommends "the contrived accident" as the best way to dispose of someone. "The most efficient accident ... is a fall of 75 feet or more onto a hard surface. Elevator shafts, stairwells, unscreened windows and bridges will serve." The manual suggests grabbing the victim by the ankles and "tipping the subject over the edge. ... Falls before trains or subway cars are usually effective, but require exact timing."

The manual goes on to discuss "blunt weapons," noting that "a hammer can be picked up almost anywhere in the world" and that baseball bats are also excellent. The manual explains the best place in the body to stab people or how to bash their skulls in and the pros and cons of rifles, pistols, submachine guns and other weapons.

During the Cold War years, the CIA plotted against eight foreign leaders, five of whom died violently. The agency's role varied in each case.

After the plots were publicized by a Senate committee, President Ford issued an executive order in 1976 barring political assassination. President Reagan broadened the ban, dropping the word "political" and extending the prohibition to include contract killers as well as government employees.

Although the ban remains in effect, it has largely been ignored on the premise that it does not apply in a military setting. Consider the following:

In 1986, Reagan ordered the bombing of Libya in retaliation for a terrorist attack on a Berlin disco that killed three people, including two U.S. servicemen, and wounded more than 200 others. In the airstrike, Libya's leader, Moammar Kadafi, a target of the raid, escaped unharmed, but his 2-year-old adopted daughter was killed.

During the Persian Gulf War in 1991, when the first Bush administration bombed Baghdad, Robert M. Gates, the former CIA director and current Defense secretary, said White House officials hoped that "Saddam Hussein would be killed in a bunker." At an air base in Saudi Arabia that year, Cheney, then secretary of Defense, and Gen. Colin L. Powell signed a 2,000-pound laser-guided bomb destined for Iraq. "To Saddam with affection," Cheney wrote.

In 1998, President Clinton ordered a cruise missile strike on Al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan after the bombing of two U.S. embassies in Africa. The White House was clearly disappointed when the strike failed to kill Bin Laden, who reportedly left one of the

camps shortly before the attack.

A year later, again during the Clinton administration, NATO bombed Belgrade after Serbia forced ethnic Albanians to flee from Kosovo. A cruise missile was lobbed right into the bedroom of Slobodan Milosevic, the Serbian leader and Yugoslav president, but he was not sleeping there and escaped injury.

In Yemen in 2002, a CIA Predator drone fired a Hellfire missile that destroyed a car in which a top Al Qaeda leader, Qaed Sinan Harithi, was riding.

The problem with assassination, morality aside, is that the U.S. is not very good at it, as the CIA's farcical efforts to murder Castro demonstrate. It seems unlikely that the CIA will kill Bin Laden with a baseball bat. And there is the real possibility of retaliation for a state-sponsored assassination. President Kennedy was quoted as saying, "We can't get into that kind of thing or we would all be targets." Perhaps CIA Director Leon Panetta had that in mind when he canceled the assassination program.

David Wise writes frequently about intelligence. He is the author of "Nightmover: How Aldrich Ames Sold the CIA to the KGB for \$4.6 Million" and "Spy: The Inside Story of How the FBI's Robert Hanssen Betrayed America."