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Covert Action—The Limits of Intervention in the Postwar World

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as it is meant to be. Unfortunately, political and emotional factors may confine the audience to a few brave souls. Some may find it too disturbing for future East-West détente. Marxists will dub it neo-fascist. Others will assume it is an attempt to minimize German guilt. I suspect that, in true dictatorial fashion, Stalin would have thoroughly enjoyed the book's portrayal of his cunning and power. After reading it, accurate or not, he would have ordered the author shot.

Treverton, Gregory F. *Covert Action—The Limits of Intervention in the Postwar World*. New York: Basic Books, 1987. 293pp. \$19.95

Covert Action is one of those books that one does not have to agree with to appreciate. Zbigniew Brzezinski, for example, finds it "valuable" even though he strongly disagrees with its conclusions. I, too, disagree with its conclusions. I, too, think the book is valuable. This is not simply my charitable nature coming through. Rather, covert action is a very difficult topic to come to grips with, and Mr. Treverton's book contributes to an informed debate—up to a point.

Part of the difficulty for Americans is that we, as a nation, are fairly new to the game. Sun Tzu was thinking about covert action some 2,400 years ago. The czars had an organized intelligence service 400 years ago. The CIA, on the other hand, was established by the National Security Act of 1947—less than half a century ago. We simply have not had much time to come to grips with the issue.

A second problem is that covert action, by definition, is difficult to describe. The thing that differen-

tiates covert action from run-of-the-mill secret activities is the element of "plausible deniability"—hiding the sponsor of the act. There is not much of a data base. Most covert actions never become a part of our consciousness.

A third and final problem is that almost no one is neutral about covert action. Debates rarely focus on utility or effectiveness. Usually, the argument quickly zeroes in on moral and ethical issues. What passes for knowledge is usually opinion—for understanding, usually supposition.

The bottom line is, regrettably, that there is little grist for the mill of informed debate. *Covert Action* performs a valuable service by providing at least some of the background needed and moving the debate toward more useful issues. It is not (nor can any one volume be) *the* answer. To understand the good and the bad of this book, one should approach it from three different perspectives: history, issues, and prescriptions.

History: Students of the history of U.S. covert operations will find this book interesting for its coverage of the early years. Mr. Treverton was a staff member on the first Senate Select

Committee on Intelligence (the Church Committee) in the mid-1970s, and during that time he started work on this book. The year 1975, thus, represents a bit of a watershed. With the access attendant to his position, Mr. Treverton has done a thorough job of detailing the early (and well-known) examples of major covert action—Guatemala in 1954, the Bay of Pigs in 1961, Chile in the early 1960s, the exploding cigars. For the post-1975 period, the documentation tails off with decreased access, and there is not much in this book that has not been reported widely already. Nonetheless, the compilation is useful.

Issues: It is in the area of issues (perhaps more correctly dilemmas) that *Covert Action* is strongest. The coverage is well-balanced, raising the questions that, if addressed, could move the debate away from the issue of morality. One particularly valuable section is “Choosing the Covert Option,” in which Mr. Treverton poses the question that covert action planners (and most other planners) should, but too frequently do not, ask before committing people to action. Synthesized, that question is “What do we do if we fail?” The corollary, of course, is that if one plans to fail, success should be the outcome—the worst-case principle. Similarly, the concluding chapter, “Covert Action in an Open Society,” is well worth reading for its assessment of the tension inherent in balancing “need-to-know” (covert action) with “right-to-know” (a free society

based on representative government). The author’s thoughts on the role of Congress (what he calls “the messy bargain”) are particularly instructive.

Prescriptions: Regrettably, the author’s promising assessment of the issues fails to translate into what I consider sound prescriptions. The book falls short of being a guide for those who plan, approve, conduct, or, in the case of the general public, form opinions on covert actions.

The subtitle, *The Limits of Intervention in the Postwar World*, reflects Mr. Treverton’s basic premise that there are certain inevitabilities about covert actions, (a) growing unmanageably large, and (b) being “blown.” This may be a selective interpretation colored by his work with the Church Committee whose most publicized work centered precisely on such “blown” operations. The facts, however, argue against the inevitability theory. The Church Committee’s report, for example, noted that between 1951 and 1975 the United States conducted some 900 major or sensitive projects and several thousand smaller ones. Similarly, Mr. Treverton estimates that today’s intelligence committees must deal with “forty-odd covert actions.”

If the inevitability theory holds up, we should expect (and should have expected since 1951) a daily fare of titillating page-one coverage of covert action exotica. Obviously, this is not the case. The percentage has, in reality, been relatively small.

To be sure, in this field of activity, there are organizational limits.

There are problems with accountability in an endeavor that seeks to avoid accountability. There are thorny issues with regard to oversight and there are ways to be more effective than we are.

Covert action is a difficult undertaking, and the operations are sensitive in the extreme. Nonetheless, in a world in which one out of every four countries is engaged in some form of conflict, the United States can ill afford to eschew this option. Mr. Treverton's book should be factored into an agenda for improving, not discarding, our covert action capability.

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Brown, Anthony Cave. "C"—*The Secret Life of Sir Stewart Graham Menzies, Spymaster to Winston Churchill*. New York: Macmillan, 1987. 830pp. \$25

How strategic intelligence is woven into decisions which move armies is described in revealing detail in this well-written, carefully researched, and thoroughly documented book. Told in terms of the life and accomplishments of Sir Stewart Graham Menzies, decorated British soldier and long-time (1939-1952) chief of England's Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), the story reaches into the highest echelons of government in England and the United States and includes material that has become available only in this decade.

Menzies (pronounced Ming-iss) was born in 1890, graduated in 1909 from Eton College, and commissioned into the Second Life Guard's Regiment. In the first part of World War I, he endured 13 months of bitter combat in Belgium, winning two medals for heroism. As 1915 ended, Menzies transferred from line to staff, and thus began 37 years devoted to strategic intelligence.

Anthony Cave Brown points out that when Menzies was appointed to head the SIS in 1939, this office had become one of the most powerful in the British Government. The chief of SIS directed all espionage, counter-espionage, sabotage, and much of the political warfare outside the British empire. Concurrently, he was the principal advisor to the government in matters of foreign intelligence.

Step-by-step, the reader accompanies Menzies the chief, as he learns about the evolution of code-breaking capabilities (which began as early as 1933) and is party to the excitement surrounding the penetration of the most secret codes used by the German high command. This achievement gave the Allied commanders precise and timely knowledge of enemy intentions. The reader also shares Menzies' unceasing concern for the security of the Ultra secret.

Of special interest is Brown's revelation of Churchill's systematic efforts to "drag the United States" into the war. Playing upon the sympathies of President Roosevelt, Churchill followed a deliberate policy to influence American sentiment toward entering the conflict.