COVERT ACTION, along with spying, is a mainstay of popular ideas about intelligence. Like spying, covert action is fraught with myths and misconceptions. Even when understood, it remains one of the most controversial intelligence topics.

Covert action is defined in the National Security Act as "[a]n activity or activities of the United States Government to influence political, economic or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the United States Government will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly."

Some intelligence specialists have objected to the phrase "covert action," believing that the word "covert" emphasizes secrecy over policy. (The British had earlier referred to this activity as special political action—SPA.) The distinction is important, because even though these activities are secret, they are undertaken as one means to advance policy goals. This cannot be stressed enough. Proper covert actions are undertaken because policy makers have determined that they are the best way to achieve a desired end. These operations do not—or should not—proceed on the initiative of the intelligence agencies.

During the Carter administration (1977–1981), which exhibited some qualms about force as a foreign policy tool, the innocuous and somewhat comical phrase "special activity" was crafted to replace "covert action." The administration thus substituted a euphemism with a euphemism. But when the Reagan administration came into office, with different views on intelligence policy, it continued to use "special activity" in its executive orders governing intelligence.

Ultimately, what covert activities are called should not matter that much. What is significant is that in making changes in appellation the United States reveals a degree of official discomfort with the tool.

The classic rationale behind covert action is that policy makers need a third option (yet another euphemism) between doing nothing (the first option) in a situation in which vital interests may be threatened and sending in military force (the second option), which raises a host of difficult political issues. Not everyone would agree with this rationale, including those who would properly argue that diplomatic activity is more than doing nothing without resorting to force.

As with counterintelligence, a pertinent question is whether covert action was a product of the cold war and whether it remains relevant today. Covert action became—under the leadership of Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Allen Dulles during the Eisenhower...
administration (1953–1961)—an increasingly attractive option (see chap. 2). It had both successes and failures but was seen as a useful tool in a broad-based struggle with the Soviet Union. In the post–cold war period, situations could arise—involving proliferators, terrorists, or narcotics traffickers—in which some sort of covert action might be the preferred means of action.

THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Covert action makes sense—and should be undertaken—only when tasked by duly authorized policy makers in pursuit of specific policy goals that cannot be achieved by any other means. Covert action cannot substitute or compensate for a poorly conceived policy. The planning process for covert action must begin with policy makers justifying the policy, defining clearly the national security interests and goals that are at stake, and believing that covert action is a viable means as well as the best means for achieving specified ends.

Maintaining a capability for covert action entails expenses, for the operation itself and for the infrastructure involved in mounting the action. Even though covert actions are not planned and executed overnight, a certain level of preparedness (such as having on hand equipment, transportation, false documents and other support items, and trained personnel, including foreign assets) must exist at all times. The operational support structure—which also includes prearranged meeting places, surveillance agents, letter drops, technical support—is sometimes referred to as plumbing. Forming and maintaining such a standby capability takes time and costs money. But the key question at this point in the decision-making process is whether the cost—both monetary and political—of carrying out a covert action is justified. Both types of cost become especially important when looking at actions that may last for months or longer.

Alternatives to covert action need to be considered. If overt means of producing a similar outcome are available, they are almost certainly preferable. Using them does not preclude either covert action if overt means fail or covert action employed in conjunction with overt means, but the covert means should usually be tried first.

Policy makers and intelligence officials examine at least two levels of risk before approving a covert action. The first is the risk of exposure. William E. Colby, perhaps reflecting on the large-scale investigations of intelligence that dominated his tenure as DCI (1973–1976), said a director should always assume that an operation will become public knowledge at some point. A difference clearly exists between an operation that is exposed while under way or shortly after its conclusion and one that is revealed years later. Nonetheless, even a long-postponed exposure may still prove to be embarrassing or politically costly.

The second risk to be weighed is failure of the operation. Failure of this nature may be costly at several levels: in human lives and as a political crisis for the nation carrying out the operation, as well as for those it may be trying to help. Decision makers must weigh the relative level of risk against the interests that are at stake. An extremely risky operation may still be worth undertaking if the stakes are high enough and no alternatives are available. In other words, the ends may justify the means, or at least the risks. For example, in the 1980s the United States was looking for ways to aid the Mujaheddin rebels in Afghanistan who were fighting Soviet invaders. One option was to arm the rebels with Stinger antiaircraft missiles, which would counter the successful Soviet use of helicopters. But policy makers were concerned that some Stingers would fall into the wrong hands or be captured by the Soviets. Ultimately, the Reagan administration decided to send the Stingers, which helped alter the course of the war. It also left Stingers in the hands of the Mujaheddin after their victory, but policy makers deemed that a smaller risk than Soviet victory in Afghanistan.

Even though intelligence analysis and operations exist only to serve policy, intelligence officers may be eager to demonstrate their covert action capabilities. Several factors may drive officers to do so: a belief that they can deliver the desired outcome, a bureaucratic imperative to prove their value, and their professional pride in doing this type of work. However, unless the operation is closely tied to agreed on policy goals and is supported as a viable option by the policy community, it starts off severely hampered. Covert action planners must therefore closely coordinate their plans and actions with policy offices.

Covert actions are extraordinary steps, something between the states of peace and war. That alone is enough to raise broad ethical questions, although the policy makers’ willingness to maintain a covert action capability indicates some agreement among them on the propriety of its use. The specific details of an operation are likely to raise ethical issues as well. Should assistance be given to foreign political parties facing a close but democratic election against communist parties (e.g., France and Italy in the 1940s)? Should a democratically elected but procommunist government be subverted and overthrown (e.g., Guatemala, 1954)? Should a nation’s economy be disrupted—with attendant suffering for the populace—to overthrow the government (e.g., Cuba, 1960s)? Should a group opposed to a hostile government be armed, with a view toward fomenting an insurgency (e.g., Nicaragua, 1980s)? The issues these questions raise are important not only intrinsically but also because of the risk of exposure. How do covert actions fit with the causes, standards, and principles that the United States supports?

In evaluating proposed covert actions, policy makers should examine analogous past operations. Have they been tried in this same nation or region? What were the results? Are the risk factors different? Has this type of operation been tried elsewhere? Again, with what results? Although these are commonsense questions, they run up against a governmental phenomenon: the inability to use historical examples. Decision makers are so accustomed to concentrating on near-term issues that they tend not to remember accurately past analogous situations in which they have been involved. They move from issue to issue in rapid succession, with little respite and even less reflection. Or, as Ernest R. May and Richard Neustadt pointed out in Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers (1988), they learn somewhat false lessons from the past, which are then misapplied to new circumstances.

Legislative reaction to covert actions is a bigger issue for the United States than it is for other democracies. The congressional committees that oversee the intelligence community are an integral part of the process, as providers of funding and as decision makers who need
Covered Actions and Covered Individuals

The Covered Action

The Covered Action is any action that is conducted by any party that may result in a Covered Transaction. A Covered Transaction is any transaction that is conducted by any party that may result in a Covered Action. Covered Transactions are subject to specific rules and regulations, which are designed to prevent the use of Covered Transactions for the purposes of evading sanctions or other regulatory requirements.

The Covered Individuals

The Covered Individuals are any individuals who are involved in the Covered Action. Covered Individuals may include individuals who are directly involved in the Covered Action, as well as individuals who are indirectly involved in the Covered Action. Covered Individuals are subject to specific rules and regulations, which are designed to prevent the use of Covered Transactions for the purposes of evading sanctions or other regulatory requirements.

The Final Action

The Final Action is the action taken by the regulatory authority that is responsible for enforcing the laws and regulations related to the Covered Transactions. The Final Action may include sanctions, fines, or other penalties that are imposed on the Covered Individuals or the Covered Parties.

The Covered Parties

The Covered Parties are any parties that are involved in the Covered Action. Covered Parties may include parties that are directly involved in the Covered Action, as well as parties that are indirectly involved in the Covered Action. Covered Parties are subject to specific rules and regulations, which are designed to prevent the use of Covered Transactions for the purposes of evading sanctions or other regulatory requirements.

The Covered Transactions

The Covered Transactions are any transactions that are conducted by any party that may result in a Covered Action. Covered Transactions are subject to specific rules and regulations, which are designed to prevent the use of Covered Transactions for the purposes of evading sanctions or other regulatory requirements.
The Covert Action Ladder

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Violence</th>
<th>Propaganda</th>
<th>Political Activity</th>
<th>Economic Activity</th>
<th>Coup</th>
<th>Paramilitary Operations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Loss)</td>
<td>(More)</td>
<td>(Loss)</td>
<td>(More)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

process of the targeted nation. As with propaganda, political activity can be used to help friends or to impede foes. For example, in the late 1940s the United States supplied scarce newsprint to centrist, anticommunist political parties in Italy and France during closely contested elections. The United States has also funneled money to political parties overseas to help during elections. Or a state can use political activity more directly against its foes, such as disrupting rallies or interfering with their publications.

The United States has tended to use economic activity against governments deemed to be hostile. Every political leadership—democratic or totalitarian—worries about the state of its economy because this has the greatest daily effect on the population: the availability of food and commodities, the stability of prices, and their relative ease or difficulty with which basic needs can be met. Economic unrest often leads to political unrest. Again, other techniques may be used in conjunction with economic activity, such as propaganda to create false fears about shortages. Or the economic techniques may be more direct, such as attempts to destroy vital crops or to flood a state with counterfeit currency to destroy faith in the monetary system. For a year, the United States attacked Cuba’s economy directly as well as indirectly via a trade embargo. Economic unrest was also a key factor in U.S. efforts to undermine the government of Salvador Allende in Chile in the early 1970s. Economic destabilization may be more effective against a more democratic rule, as in Chile, than against a dictatorship, as in Cuba, which has fewer qualms about inflicting want or privation on its people and is much less responsive to—or tolerant of—popular protests.

Coup, the overthrow of a government, either directly or through surrogates, are a further step up the covert action ladder (see Figure 8-1). Again, a coup may be the culmination of many other techniques—propaganda, political activity, economic unrest. The United States used coups successfully in Iran in 1953 and in Guatemala in 1954 and was involved in undermining the Allende government in Chile, although the coup that brought down his government was indigenous.

Paramilitary operations are the largest, most violent, and most dangerous covert actions, involving the equipping and training of large armed groups for a direct assault on one’s enemies. They do not involve the use of a state’s own military personnel in combatant units, which technically would be an act of war. The United States was successful in this type of operation in Afghanistan in the 1980s but failed abysmally at the Bay of Pigs in 1961. The contra war against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua was neither won nor lost, but the Sandinistas were defeated at the polls when they held a free election in the midst of a deteriorating economy.

Some nations have also practiced a higher level of covert military activity—secret participation in combat. For example, Soviet pilots flew combat missions during the Korean War against United Nations (primarily U.S.) aircraft. This type of activity raises several issues: military action without an act of war, possible retaliation, and the rights of combatants if captured. The United States has largely eschewed this practice because of such complications, preferring to allow intelligence officers to take part in paramilitary activities.

Paramilitary operations need to be distinguished from special operations forces. The most fundamental and important distinction is that special forces are uniformed military personnel conducting a variety of combat tasks not performed by traditional military arms. The United States has a Special Operations Command (SOCOM). Other such forces are the British Special Air and Special Boat Services (SAS and SBS). Paramilitary operations do not involve the use of one’s own uniformed military personnel as combatants. In the war in Afghanistan (2001—), the role of paramilitary personnel appears to be closer to actual combat than was primarily the case in Nicaragua, but their main role remains training, helping, supply, and offering leadership assistance to indigenous forces. The CIA’s paramilitary forces in Afghanistan are part of the CIA Directorate of Operation’s Special Activities Division. According to press accounts, CIA paramilitary personnel were the first U.S. forces in Afghanistan, establishing contact with members of the Northern Alliance and preparing them for the offensive against the Taliban.

The war on terrorism has focused attention on a covert activity that does not fall neatly into the customary range of actions—renditions. Renditions are the seizure of individuals wanted by the United States. These individuals are living abroad and are not in countries where the United States either can or wants to use legal means to take them into custody. The operations are called renditions because the individual in question is rendered (that is, formally delivered) to U.S. custody. Renditions predate the war on terrorism, although the scale clearly has increased since 9/11.

Renditions are controversial for several reasons. First, they are extraterritorial actions. In some instances, the foreign government in whose territory the rendition occurred was aware of the operation and looked the other way, allowing the rendition to proceed but preserving its own plausible deniability. In the case of terrorism, some renditions have been controversial because the United States did not retain custody of the suspects but sent them on to their home nations, most often in the Middle East. Rules about custody, civil rights, and limits on interrogation tend to be different in most of these states, with the effect that some rendered suspects have likely been subject to harsh treatment if not torture. Although the United States has sought pledges from these states as to how they would
The erosion of the boundaries of administrative depredation of L. F. Brannock's Perspective by Power. Stated the decision not to commit an act to assist the actions of its component, that the decision may be addressed. The reason for the decision is the erosion of the boundaries of administrative depredation of L. F. Brannock's Perspective by Power. Stated the decision not to commit an act to assist the actions of its component, that the decision may be addressed.

In several instances during the maintenance and expansion of the United States, the decision not to commit an act to assist the actions of its component, that the decision may be addressed.

The erosion of the boundaries of administrative depredation of L. F. Brannock's Perspective by Power. Stated the decision not to commit an act to assist the actions of its component, that the decision may be addressed. The reason for the decision is the erosion of the boundaries of administrative depredation of L. F. Brannock's Perspective by Power. Stated the decision not to commit an act to assist the actions of its component, that the decision may be addressed.
For less-than-perfect intelligence analysts, a less-than-successful cover action can leave
untapped opportunities for the CIA. Based on the secret, the Global Operations
Cent r. in the 9/11 Commission (Executive Commission on Terrorism)
recom mended in its report, the Global Operations
Center (GOC) of the CIA needs to improve its counterintelligence
operations, particularly in the area of special operations.

The wider the range and the more aggressive the efforts to secure the
interests of the US abroad, the more important it is to have

Asynchronous operations: Avoiding the problem of actionable intelligence

CIA counterintelligence is critical to the success of the Global Operations
Center (GOC) of the CIA needs to improve its counterintelligence
operations, particularly in the area of special operations.

The widening of the range and the more aggressive the efforts to
secure the interests of the US abroad, the more important it is to have

Asynchronous operations: Avoiding the problem of actionable intelligence

CIA counterintelligence is critical to the success of the Global Operations
Center (GOC) of the CIA needs to improve its counterintelligence
operations, particularly in the area of special operations.

The widening of the range and the more aggressive the efforts to
secure the interests of the US abroad, the more important it is to have

Asynchronous operations: Avoiding the problem of actionable intelligence

CIA counterintelligence is critical to the success of the Global Operations
Center (GOC) of the CIA needs to improve its counterintelligence
operations, particularly in the area of special operations.

The widening of the range and the more aggressive the efforts to
secure the interests of the US abroad, the more important it is to have

Asynchronous operations: Avoiding the problem of actionable intelligence

CIA counterintelligence is critical to the success of the Global Operations
Center (GOC) of the CIA needs to improve its counterintelligence
operations, particularly in the area of special operations.

The widening of the range and the more aggressive the efforts to
secure the interests of the US abroad, the more important it is to have

Asynchronous operations: Avoiding the problem of actionable intelligence

CIA counterintelligence is critical to the success of the Global Operations
Center (GOC) of the CIA needs to improve its counterintelligence
operations, particularly in the area of special operations.

The widening of the range and the more aggressive the efforts to
secure the interests of the US abroad, the more important it is to have

Asynchronous operations: Avoiding the problem of actionable intelligence

CIA counterintelligence is critical to the success of the Global Operations
Center (GOC) of the CIA needs to improve its counterintelligence
operations, particularly in the area of special operations.

The widening of the range and the more aggressive the efforts to
secure the interests of the US abroad, the more important it is to have

Asynchronous operations: Avoiding the problem of actionable intelligence

CIA counterintelligence is critical to the success of the Global Operations
Center (GOC) of the CIA needs to improve its counterintelligence
operations, particularly in the area of special operations.

The widening of the range and the more aggressive the efforts to
secure the interests of the US abroad, the more important it is to have

Asynchronous operations: Avoiding the problem of actionable intelligence

CIA counterintelligence is critical to the success of the Global Operations
Center (GOC) of the CIA needs to improve its counterintelligence
operations, particularly in the area of special operations.

The widening of the range and the more aggressive the efforts to
secure the interests of the US abroad, the more important it is to have

Asynchronous operations: Avoiding the problem of actionable intelligence

CIA counterintelligence is critical to the success of the Global Operations
Center (GOC) of the CIA needs to improve its counterintelligence
operations, particularly in the area of special operations.

The widening of the range and the more aggressive the efforts to
secure the interests of the US abroad, the more important it is to have

Asynchronous operations: Avoiding the problem of actionable intelligence

CIA counterintelligence is critical to the success of the Global Operations
Center (GOC) of the CIA needs to improve its counterintelligence
operations, particularly in the area of special operations.

The widening of the range and the more aggressive the efforts to
secure the interests of the US abroad, the more important it is to have

Asynchronous operations: Avoiding the problem of actionable intelligence

CIA counterintelligence is critical to the success of the Global Operations
Center (GOC) of the CIA needs to improve its counterintelligence
operations, particularly in the area of special operations.

The widening of the range and the more aggressive the efforts to
secure the interests of the US abroad, the more important it is to have

Asynchronous operations: Avoiding the problem of actionable intelligence

CIA counterintelligence is critical to the success of the Global Operations
Center (GOC) of the CIA needs to improve its counterintelligence
operations, particularly in the area of special operations.

The widening of the range and the more aggressive the efforts to
secure the interests of the US abroad, the more important it is to have

Asynchronous operations: Avoiding the problem of actionable intelligence

CIA counterintelligence is critical to the success of the Global Operations
Center (GOC) of the CIA needs to improve its counterintelligence
operations, particularly in the area of special operations.

The widening of the range and the more aggressive the efforts to
secure the interests of the US abroad, the more important it is to have

Asynchronous operations: Avoiding the problem of actionable intelligence

CIA counterintelligence is critical to the success of the Global Operations
Center (GOC) of the CIA needs to improve its counterintelligence
operations, particularly in the area of special operations.

The widening of the range and the more aggressive the efforts to
secure the interests of the US abroad, the more important it is to have

Asynchronous operations: Avoiding the problem of actionable intelligence

CIA counterintelligence is critical to the success of the Global Operations
Center (GOC) of the CIA needs to improve its counterintelligence
operations, particularly in the area of special operations.

The widening of the range and the more aggressive the efforts to
secure the interests of the US abroad, the more important it is to have

Asynchronous operations: Avoiding the problem of actionable intelligence

CIA counterintelligence is critical to the success of the Global Operations
Center (GOC) of the CIA needs to improve its counterintelligence
operations, particularly in the area of special operations.