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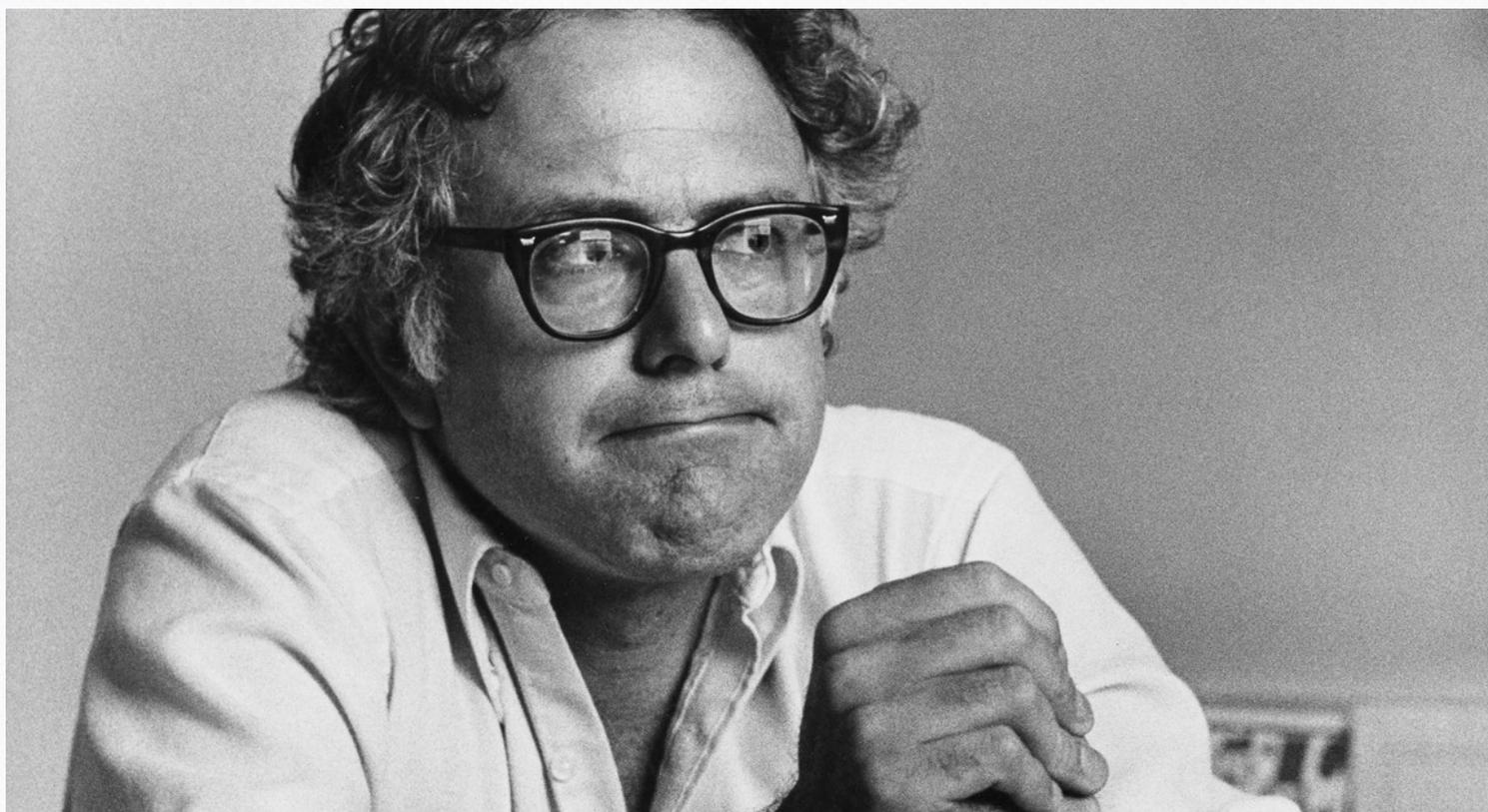
Bloomberg's trial balloon isn't rising yet

2016

Sanders once urged abolishing CIA

As anti-Vietnam War activist, he called the spy agency 'a dangerous institution that has got to go.'

By MICHAEL CROWLEY | 02/22/16 05:01 AM EST



Bernie Sanders spoke of the CIA as an agency that was accountable to no one "except right-wing lunatics." | AP Photo



In his most recent debate with Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders befuddled some viewers with an arcane reference to a 1953 U.S.-backed coup in Iran, which Sanders called an example of America's history of "overthrowing governments."

It turns out that the Vermont senator has railed against that coup — assisted by the Central Intelligence Agency against Iran's prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh — since he was a young radical activist in the mid-1970s.

One big difference between then and now: Forty years ago, Sanders didn't just complain about CIA interventions abroad; he called for abolishing the spy agency altogether.

The CIA is "a dangerous institution that has got to go," Sanders told an audience in Vermont in October 1974. He described the agency as a tool of American corporate interests that repeatedly toppled democratically elected leaders — including, he said, Mosaddegh. The agency was accountable to no one, he fumed, "except right-wing lunatics who use it to prop up fascist dictatorships."

At the time, the 33-year-old socialist was running for U.S. Senate on the ticket of the Liberty Union Party, an anti-war group that likened the draft to "a modern form of slavery" and called for reducing the U.S. military in favor of local militias and the Coast Guard.

While Sanders' extreme leftist past is well known, many of his specific views from the 1970s and '80s remain unfamiliar even to Democratic insiders. And while those views have mellowed considerably over time, Sanders' unexpectedly strong performance in the presidential race has party leaders increasingly alarmed that Republicans would make devastating use of his early career should he win the Democratic nomination.

For now, it's Democratic allies of Hillary Clinton who are on the attack. "Abolishing the CIA in the 1970s would have unilaterally disarmed America during the height of the Cold War and at a time when terrorist networks across the Middle East were gaining strength," said Jeremy Bash, who served as chief of staff to CIA director Leon Panetta and now advises Clinton's campaign. "If this is a window into Sanders' thinking, it reinforces the conclusion that he's not qualified to be commander in chief."

Sanders allies bristle at questions about his views from four decades ago, saying they have little to do with his current candidacy.

"I think people should look at his 25-year congressional career," said one person who worked for Sanders

in the House of Representatives, and whose employment circumstances prohibit him from speaking on the record. “You don’t have to look at some speech from the early ’70s to know where he is on issues. There’s a very clear congressional record. I think he should be measured and judged on that.”

2016

Nevada: Polling's black hole

By STEVEN SHEPARD

A Sanders campaign spokesman did not respond to a request for comment.

Though extreme even by the standards of that time, Sanders’ call to eliminate the CIA came amid widespread fury at an agency many Americans believed was running amok. Shortly after Sanders’ comments, a special congressional panel known as the Church Committee published a series of damning reports on agency abuses like assassination attempts against foreign leaders and illegal domestic spying on Vietnam War protesters.

If the government couldn’t rein in the CIA, the committee [concluded](#), “covert action should be abandoned as an instrument of foreign policy.”

Sanders’ call for the CIA’s demise came during a Senate candidates forum also attended by a rival: Patrick Leahy, who is now Vermont’s senior senator. Leahy, then a young state’s attorney, took the more moderate view that the CIA should be limited to intelligence gathering. (Leahy won that election — but Sanders won audience cheers on the question, according to a Bennington Banner account.)

Sanders lashed out at the CIA for years to come. In a 1989 C-SPAN [interview](#), he argued that every “revolution for the poor people” in Latin or Central America had been “overthrown by the CIA” or some other arm of the U.S. government.

But after his election to Congress in 1990, Sanders toned down his anti-CIA rhetoric — and shifted his focus from morality to the size and opacity of U.S. intelligence budgets.

In May 1996, for instance, Sanders offered an amendment to cut the intelligence budget by 10 percent. Speaking on the House floor, he asked whether colleagues who had voted to cut social spending “now have the courage to take on the very powerful intelligence community.”

Sanders, Clinton hunt for rural votes

By GABRIEL DEBENEDETTI

“While I disagree strongly with the amendment of the gentleman from Vermont, I do respect ... his

tenacity in his annual concern about the spending of intelligence,” replied the Republican then-chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, Rep. Larry Combest of Texas.

Since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, Sanders has turned that tenacity against the swift expansion of power for U.S. intelligence agencies. He was among just 66 House members who voted against the 2001 PATRIOT Act; he also opposed last year’s USA Freedom Act — which undid parts of the PATRIOT Act — on the grounds that it didn’t go far enough.

Sanders has said that Edward Snowden’s leak of National Security Agency secrets was “extremely important” for revealing “the degree to which the NSA has abused its authority and violated our constitutional rights.” And he voted against the 2013 confirmation of CIA director John Brennan, [questioning](#) Brennan’s ability to protect civil liberties amid the agency’s “use of drones and other methods.”

Although those positions put Sanders to the left of all but the most liberal Democrats in Washington, he has come a long way from his days with the Liberty Union Party, on whose ticket he made four unsuccessful runs for office — twice each for Senate and for governor — between 1971 and 1977.

Like so many young liberals of that era, Sanders was galvanized in his 20s by the Vietnam War, which drew him to Liberty Union, founded by a group of Vermont activists in 1970. “Opposition to the war in Vietnam was the focus point that brought us together,” said one founder, Peter Diamondstone, who knew Sanders well.

Sanders himself applied for conscientious objector status during the war. (“As a college student in the 1960s he was a pacifist,” his campaign spokesman Michael Briggs [told](#) ABC News in August. “[He] isn’t now.”)

Some anti-war groups of the time, including most famously the Weathermen, waged domestic terrorism in the name of ending the war. Liberty Union rejected violent tactics, a position Sanders echoed in one June 1976 public appearance — while also implying that government infiltrators might be staging bombings in order to discredit anti-war groups.

“Anybody that thinks change is going to come because of bombings or terrorist activity is either extremely stupid, crazy or an agent of the U.S. government,” Sanders said.

The party was radical in other ways. A 1971 document listing Liberty Union’s “principles” called the draft a “modern form of slavery” that produced “cannon fodder” for “the imperialist policy of the U.S.”

The principles document also called for a much smaller military. “A return to the system of local citizen

militias and Coast Guard would provide our nation with ample protection and also protect us from the imperialist impulses of our leaders,” it declared.

Sanders challenges Clinton to release Wall Street speech transcripts

By ELIZA COLLINS

Sanders left Liberty Union in 1977, calling it ineffectual.

Today, Diamondstone complains that Sanders has acquired some of the imperialist tendencies he used to denounce. He’s not alone: Sanders has angered many socialist allies since coming to Congress by backing U.S. military actions in Afghanistan and the Balkans.

Though he doesn’t remember much about Sanders’ views of the CIA, Diamondstone did recall debating the U.S. military budget with him. “We argued about, should we reduce the military budget by 50 percent — or should we get rid of it altogether? I wanted to get rid of it,” Diamondstone said.

In that argument, Sanders proved to be a relative moderate. Sanders, Diamondstone said, was content with cutting Pentagon spending by just 50 percent.

The former Sanders aide cautioned against trying to draw too many lessons from the distant past.

After all, he said, in 1964, “Hillary Clinton was a proud Barry Goldwater supporter.”

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