Innocence Abroad: The New World of Spyless Coups

By David Ignatius

NOBODY WAS rude enough to say so during last week's confirmation hearings for Robert M. Gates to head the CIA, but the old era of covert action is dead. The world doesn't run in secret anymore. We are now living in the Age of Overt Action.

The great democratic revolution that has swept the globe over the past few decades has been a triumph of overt action. The CIA old boys spent a generation fantasizing about this sort of global anti-communist putsch. But when it finally happened, it was in the open. There were no secret paramilitary armies, and there was almost no bloodshed. The key operatives in the conspiracy turned out to be telephones, televisions and fax machines.

Working in broad daylight, the United States and its allies were able to do things that would have been unthinkably dangerous had they been done in the shadows. Consider:

When Boris Yeltsin's sides were trying to rally support for their resistance in Moscow on Aug. 19, the first day of the coup, they needed to broadcast their defiant message to Russia and the world. One of them sent a fax to Allen Weinstein, a pro-democracy activist who heads a think tank in Washington.

"Did Mr. Bush make any comments upon the situation in this country?" implored the handwritten fax message. "If he did, make it known by all means of communication to the people of this country. The Russian government has no NO ways to address the people. All radio stations are under control. The following is [Boris Yeltsin's] address to the Army. Submit it to USIA. Broadcast it over the country. Maybe 'Voice of America.' Do it! Urgent!"

And it was done, in the open.

Next, it was time for the leader of the free world to contact the Kremlin rebel who was seeking to dismantle the Soviet empire and destroy the Communist Party. And how was this contact, arguably the most sensitive and delicate in the history of the Cold War, handled? George Bush called Boris Yeltsin on the telephone. And then he went on television and described his conversation.

We didn't need the CIA to support Yeltsin's counter-coup. We just needed a telephone operator.

Preparing the ground for last month's triumph of overt action was a network of overt operatives who during the last 10 years have quietly been changing the rules of international politics. They have been doing in public what the CIA used to do in private—providing money and moral support for pro-democracy groups, training resistance fighters, working to subvert communist rule. And, in contrast to many of the CIA's superannuated Cold Warriors, who tended to get tangled

See COUPS, C4, Col. 1

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WEST-WEST SECURITY STUDIES; JOHN BAKER
of the Atlantic Council; and Harriett Crosby of the Institute for So-

viet-American Relations. This has tru-

gotten the agency on Human Rights.

beated been connected with the

network of pro-democracy activ-

ists who were then beginning to chal-

enge anti-democratic regimes around the

world. Soon he was sponsoring con-

ferences for dissidents arranging visits for them to the United States and

otherwise making trouble.

"The networking phenomenon is

one of the things we've specialized in," explains Weinstein. His visitors in

to those early days included some of the

insurgents who were later to lead pro-

test movements across Eastern Eu-

rope in 1989.

"People wander through your of-

cice," he says. "They become family."

Weinstein founded the Center for

Democracy in 1984 as an umbrella for

his global meddling. He dispatched

electronically a mission to the Philip-

pines, Panama and Nicaragua that

are credited with having helped topple

undemocratic regimes in those coun-

tries through the ballot box. By 1990,

he was hosting meetings for newly

elected Polish parliamentarians; for

legislative clerks from Czechoslovakia,

Hungary and Poland; and for consti-

tution-drafters from those three coun-

tries.

Trenchcoats and tradecraft were

irrelevant to these gatherings. The

key man in Weinstein's overt opera-

tions was the rapporteur.

Boris Yeltsin and his aides were

soon drawn into this transatlantic hospi-

tality suite. They attended

Weinstein's conferences, including one on

environmental problems held in Mos-

cow in early August, which was co-

sponsored by Weinstein's center and

the Russian republic. When the hard-

liners launched their putsch a few

days later, the Yeltsin aides naturally

earned enough sending faxes to their

friend, Weinstein. The first one read

directly: "It is military coup. Tanks are

everywhere."

Now, with the KGB in retreat from

Prague to Vladivostok, Weinstein has

scheduled a conference in Sofia, Bul-

garia on the topic: "The Proper Role

of Intelligence Agencies in a Democ-

racy." That may be rubbing it in.

Amazingly enough, those simple

pro-democracy activities were once

the exclusive province of the CIA.

Back in the heyday of the Cold War,

the wizards of Langley seemed to

think it necessary to "recruit" the

world's democrats and give them code

names.

The covert mentality penetrated

every aspect of American life. The

mandarins decided that American

students should attend international

conferences and youth festivals to

counteract Soviet propaganda. So the

CIA secretly began funding the Na-

tional Student Association. Anti-com-

munist intellectuals in Europe were

debated worthy of aid, so the CIA sub-

sidized the Congress for Cultural

Freedom and Encounter magazine.

It was decided that we should help dem-

ocratic parties in Europe resist com-

munist pressure. The CIA did it co-

vertly.

No activity was so innocent that the

CIA didn't think it could be improved

by secrecy.

Even Gloria Steinem, now a fem-

inist leader, was drawn into the CIA

cover web. According to CIA histo-

rian John Ranelagh, she was involved in a CIA operation to send American

women to World Youth festivals in

Vienna in 1959 and Helsinki in 1962.

When these covert activities surfaced

(a bit inevitably, the) fallout was devast-

ating. The CIA connection, intended to

protect people and organizations from public embarrassment,

had precisely the opposite ef-

fect.

"A lot of what we do today was
done covertly 25 years ago by the

CIA," agrees Weinstein. The biggest

difference is that when such activities

are done overtly, the flap potential is

close to zero. Openness is its own pro-

tection.

A llen Weinstein is just one of

many overt operators who

helped prepare the way for the

political miracles of the past two years

by sponsoring exchanges and other

contacts with liberal reformers from the

East. It's worth naming a few more of

them, to show the breadth of this

movement for democracy: Wil-

liam Miller of the American Commit-

tee on U.S.-Soviet Relations; financier

George Soros of the Soros Founda-

tion; John Mrocz of the Center for

PETER HOOY—THE WASHINGTON POST

in their webs of secrecy, these overt

operatives have been im-

mensely successful.

There's an obvious lesson here for

Gates, or whoever ends up heading

the CIA. The old concept of covert

activity, which has gotten the agency

into such trouble during the past 40

years, may be obsolete. Nowadays,

sensible activities to support Amer-

ica's friends abroad (or undermine

its enemies) are probably best done

openly. That includes paramilitary

operations such as supporting free-

dom fighters, which can be managed

overtly by the Pentagon. And it in-

cludes political-support operations for

pro-democracy activists, which may

be best left to the new network of

overt operators.

Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-

N.Y.) thus has it half-right when he

urges that the CIA be abolished. The

main problem, contrary to what

Moynihan says, is not with intelli-

gencc集合—’saying,” in its pur-

est form. That part of the CIA needs

to be strengthened, not cut.

What may need abolishing is the

cover-action role that was awkwardly

grafted onto the CIA's basic spying

mission when the agency was created

in 1947. The covert-action boys were

known back then as the Office of Pol-

icy Coordination. It may be time, at

last, to bid them adieu. They're ob-

solete. They've been privatized.

T

hat's especially true in the

realm of what used to be called

"propagation" and can now sim-

ply be called information. The CIA

worked hard in the old days to draw

foreign newspapers and magazines

into its web, so as to counter Soviet

disinformation. Frank Wisner, the

head of CIA covert operations during

the mid-1950s, once remarked that he

could play his media assets like a

"mighty Wurlitzer."

Today the mighty Wurlitzer actu-

ally exists. It's called CNN. But it

doesn't need playing by anybody but

the independent journalists who work

there. CNN's objective, omnipresent,

real-time coverage of the news helps

America's interests more than all the

besotted Third World "media assets"

of old could ever have imagined. And

the bar bills are less.

Allen Weinstein, the recipient of

Yeltsin's favors, is probably the dean of the

new overt operatives. Like many of

the people running the new nations of

Eastern Europe, he's an ex-

professor. He taught history at Smith

College for 15 years and even worked

for several months writing editorials

for The Washington Post.

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of the Atlantic Council; and Harriett

Crosby of the Institute for So-

viet-American Relations. This has tru-

ly been a revolution by committee.

The AFL-CIO close does deserve a

healthy pat on the back. Working

mostly in the open, it helped keep the

Polish trade union Solidarity alive in

the dark days of martial law during the

early 1980s. As the AFL-CIO's Adria-

n Karatnycky wrote in these pages two years ago, American trade

unions and the U.S. Congress provid-

ed millions of dollars to the Solidarity

underground.

"The money underwrote shipments

of scores of printing presses, dozens

of computers, hundreds of minico-

mputers, thousands of gallons of

printers' ink, hundreds of thousands

of stencils, video cameras and radio-

broadcasting equipment," according to

Karatnycky.

The sugar daddy of overt oper-

ations has been the National Endow-

ment for Democracy, a quasi-private

organization headed by Carl Gershman that is funded by the U.S. Congress.

Through the late 1980s, it did openly

what had once been unspokenly cov-

ert—funneling money to anti-commu-

nist forces in the Soviet Union.

To read through the NED's grant

list (a public document) is to take a

dolly through the democracy move-

ment's memory lane: In Czechoslo-

vakia, the endowment began aiding

democratic forces in 1984, including

support for Civic Forum; in Hungary,

the aid began in 1986 and included

election help and funding for Hungar-

y's first independent public-opinion

survey; in Romania and Bulgaria, the

endowment has supported new intel-

lectual journals and other tools of

democracy. Among its many activities in

Poland, one helped fund the

Gdansk Video Center, which

helped produce and distribute pro-de-

mocracy videos throughout Eastern

Europe during the 1980s. And

through the Free Trade Union

Institute and the Center for Interna-

tional Private Enterprise, the endow-

ment helped support new unions and

employers' associations across Eastern

Europe—building the infrastructure

of a free economy.

The endowment has also been ac-

tive inside the Soviet Union. It has

given money to Soviet trade unions;

to the liberal "Intergroupal Group" in

the Congress of Peoples Deputies; to

the foundation headed by Russian activ-

ist Ilya Zaslawsky; to an Oral History

Project headed by Soviet historian

Yuri Afanasiev; to the Ukrainian in-

dependence movement known as

Rukh, and to many other projects.

Overt funding for these groups

would have been the kiss of death, if

discovered. Overt funding, it would

seem, has been a kiss of life.