

# Covert Action and Unintended Consequences

**by John G. Breen**

## **Introduction: The Cold War, Water Boarding, and ISIS**

In the middle of the CIA's 1954 covert overthrow of the democratically-elected government of Guatemala, with waning rebel force momentum and facing calls to increase support to the insurgents with unmarked surplus WWII bombers, President Eisenhower turned to his CIA Director and asked what the chances of success would be without the additional aid. Allen Dulles responded, "About zero." When asked what the chances would be with the bombers, Dulles responded, "About 20 percent." This was a strikingly honest calculation of risk in a political environment that most would suspect was rife with yes-men. Eisenhower appreciated Dulles's rather bleak assessment: "It showed me you had thought this matter through realistically. If you had told me the chance would be 90 percent, I would have had a much more difficult decision."<sup>1</sup> The President ordered the planes delivered, and the coup, code-named PBSUCCESS, was, at least in the short-term, a success.

This concept of covert-action success is operationally elusive and certainly ill-defined. Some programs are easily recognized as failures—the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba is a commonly cited example—though it may represent more of an overt invasion rather than a more classic example of covert action. By definition, covert programs should comprise a subversive-influence act or acts undertaken secretly or with misdirection so as to remain not attributable to the U.S. Some longer-term, institutionalized programs, such as MKULTRA (the Cold War-era effort to use mind-altering drugs to sap an individual's free will, perhaps useful to create an assassin or to fully interrogate a detainee), were not only operational failures, but also seemingly undertaken with little to no moral or ethical considerations.

Other historical, covert-action programs are less easily characterized. Did operation TPAJAX, the overthrow of the democratically-elected government of Iran in 1953, provide 26 years of

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relative stability and free-flowing oil? Or did it ultimately contribute to the disastrous events of 1979, with subsequent decades of instability, support to Israeli and Western-directed terrorist groups, and the pursuit of an Iranian offensive nuclear capability? Did the optimistically named PBSUCCESS operation prevent a communist takeover of Guatemala or lead to years of human rights abuse by a repressive regime? Did CIA support to the Afghan Mujahidin in the 1980s block Soviet aggression or incubate the progenitor planners and perpetrators of 9/11? Could it have resulted in both seemingly diametrically opposed outcomes?

The CIA's systematic detention and enhanced interrogation of prisoners is a more recent example of a covert-action program resulting in inconclusive operational success, with at least questionable attention to ethical/moral considerations and leading to years of Congressional inquiry and known and unknown second- and third-order unintended consequences. Was the use of the water board an effective technique to locate Osama bin Laden, or did public revelations motivate the next generation of devoted terrorists? Part of the problem is perhaps the program's revelation to the public, but a larger issue is certainly the ethical/moral nature of the activities themselves. What seemed lost in the debate was not so much if waterboarding worked, but if it was right that it was utilized in the first place.<sup>2</sup>

Given recent and anticipated future interest in covert-action programs, to include possible kinetic-lethal operations, it seems appropriate to ask if these efforts have a detectably positive impact on U.S. strategic foreign policy goals. An important consideration, as well, is if "success" can be something accurately assessed in the short and/or long term. Indeed, over time even successful short-term programs can give rise to a spectrum of minor to significant, deleterious, unintended consequences, such as Afghanistan covert support in the 1980s and

potential connections to Al-Qaeda in 2001 or in the Middle East, with the subsequent rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Despite these challenges, Presidents continue to view covert-action programs as valuable opportunities to influence international events in the murky space between diplomacy and overt military intervention. And at a time when near-peer rivals seem poised to expand their spheres of influence into previously U.S.-dominated arenas (whether that be geographic, economic, and/or cyber), it may be that Presidentially-directed covert action becomes more and more attractive to deter but also prevent all out conflagration, much as it was during the Cold War. How do we focus these efforts on what works best and avoid the mistakes of the past?

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### **Second- and Third-Order Effects: Ripples in the Pond**

A review of the CIA's various covert-action programs since 1947, at least those automatically or voluntarily declassified, revealed in the press, and/or following Congressional inquiry, illustrates how unforeseen, unanticipated, or, perhaps, unappreciated consequences impact the following:

- Traditional espionage operations. The vital but characteristically low-probability effort to convince a prospective agent that a CIA case officer can keep him safe is made even more challenging when confronted with a front-page article on the latest lethal covert-action operation blown to the press.
- The international security strategy of an

administration. The rapid and relatively inexpensive, short-term success of CIA's interventions in Iran and then Guatemala in the early 1950s may have influenced decades of overconfident Presidential attempts at a repeat performance. In fact, Richard Bissell, the CIA's Deputy Director of Plans, in charge of covert action during much of the Cold War, questioned in his memoirs if a victory at the Bay of Pigs might have allowed President Kennedy to either avoid Vietnam altogether, or if it would have further emboldened him to become even more engaged.<sup>3</sup>

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- The public's trust in their intelligence systems. The CIA's experimentations with LSD and mind alteration, along with assassination plots, U.S. letter-opening campaigns, and infiltration of student groups in the 1950s and 1960s almost destroyed the Agency in the 1970s, when the Church Committee hearings laid bare these activities to a public still reeling from Nixon's Watergate scandal. A decade or so later, Reagan's denials that he knew about Iran-Contra suggested that either his national security apparatus was out of control, or he was simply unaware or incurious about major aspects of his administration's efforts on the international stage—either interpretation lending credence to press narrative skepticism about his suitability.

It may be simply impossible to forecast the potential unintended consequences of covert action beyond the very short term; things can spin out of control in ways unimagined and be

connected to issues with unanticipated linkage.

These unintended or unanticipated consequences resulting from ill-conceived (or perhaps also well-conceived) covert operations are often called “blowback.” In his memoir, Bissell devotes a chapter to his philosophy of covert action, touching on exactly this issue. He seems a particularly relevant source of insight, given his role in such pivotal covert-action programs as the U-2 spy plane incident and the Bay of Pigs invasion.

Bissell infamously told President Eisenhower that the chances of a U-2 pilot surviving a shoot down over Soviet sovereign territory was one in a million. The disastrous shoot-down and capture of U-2 pilot Gary Powers (who survived the crash), along with the botched cover story and subsequently bungled public affairs effort, wrecked the Four Powers Paris Summit Conference of May 1960, and as Stephen Ambrose described, “made [President Eisenhower] look indecisive, foolish, and not in control of his own government.” With an unnerving link to CIA Director Tenet's decades-later “slam dunk” comment, Bissell code-named this last U-2 flight Operation Grand Slam—making the case that less-optimistic codenames should forever be adopted.<sup>4,5</sup>

The Bay of Pigs fiasco speaks for itself, but it was again Bissell who brought to the 5412 Committee the plans for the invasion and set in motion the preparation and staging of the exile insurgent troops. This 5412 Committee or “Special Group” was the President's executive body established to appraise and approve CIA covert-action programs.<sup>6</sup> Resulting from these episodes, particularly following the Bay of Pigs, 5412 oversight was modified. And in 1962, an embarrassed President Kennedy fired Dulles and asked Bissell to move along to another job at the CIA as the director of a new science and technology department. Seeing the job as a step down, Bissell declined and moved on.<sup>7</sup>

According to Bissell, it seems revelations

in the press and their negative effect on CIA planners are the main problem: “Not everything a government is doing, or even just thinking about and discussing, should be disclosed—that would be the end of the skillful, subtly designed action. Publicity is the enemy of intellectual honesty, objectivity, and decisiveness.”<sup>8</sup>

Remember that the CIA conducts both covert action and clandestine activity; these are not the same thing. The former is expected to hide (or at least obscure) U.S. involvement, to be unacknowledged but to have an observable/measurable effect, i.e., a kinetic strike, a coup, or even a covert influence campaign designed to affect the outcome of an election. In contrast, if the activity is truly clandestine, i.e., the recruitment and handling of a strategic human asset with access to vital secrets, this too is expected to hide U.S. involvement (at least to other than the recruited agent) and be unacknowledged, but no effect should be observed (other than perhaps well-informed U.S. policymakers). With the employment of rigorous assessment and tradecraft, recruitments of this sort can remain truly secret forever.

Bissell contends that in the planning stages, CIA covert-action programs should adequately address the potential for blowback, i.e., an assessment of the CIA’s ability to keep a program truly not attributable to the U.S. He points out that if more objective assessments had been communicated (presumably to the 5412 Committee), many plans might have been rejected and, therefore, the number of compromised programs greatly reduced. Unfortunately, Bissell also concludes antithetically that if questionable covert actions from the Cold War had not been revealed publicly, the “cost of most of the failures would have been reported as negligible.”<sup>9</sup>

This may be true but, perhaps, also misses the larger counterpoint that if they had remained secret and the impact of these failed programs had been considered negligible, it would have

also possibly made it easier for subsequent presidential administrations to keep doing the same types of questionable things. Remember in this Cold War context that Bissell is talking about assassination, the illegal opening of U.S. mail, and wiretapping American citizens. Bissell seems to presume that negative effects follow solely from public revelation. But it must be said that ill-conceived and/or unethical programs, even if kept secret forever, appear to have an inherent potential for the proliferation of visible and wicked, unintended outcomes.

**“Publicity is the enemy of intellectual honesty, objectivity, and decisiveness.”**

Paramilitary covert action, especially when it involves work with larger, indigenous military units, seems to greatly concern Bissell:

Most large operations cannot be truly secret: if they involve many people (as in paramilitary activities) or a lot of money (as in political subsidies) or significant hardware development and employment (as in reconnaissance), the activities are simply too massive to be unobservable.<sup>10</sup>

Where does tradecraft fall into this mix, particularly with paramilitary activities? Bissell states that while it may prevent clear-cut evidence of U.S. involvement, it will always remain more of a fig leaf, with the assumption of U.S. involvement accepted as a constant risk. Revelations of this sort result in those aggrieved able to link their grievances back to the U.S. and, rightly or wrongly, seek retribution.

### **Covert-Action Success: Where’s Bin Laden?**

As a first step, might we be able to lessen the impact, if not the frequency, of unintended consequences by ensuring the efficacy of the

programs themselves? David Robarge, the CIA's chief historian, believes determination of covert-action success depends on whether or not it accomplished the policy objectives it was intended to help implement.<sup>11</sup> In a November 2014 presentation at the School for Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Robarge commented that these programs were historically a small share of the CIA's budget, but also politically sensitive and potentially embarrassing, misunderstood, and misused.<sup>12</sup> Given these challenges, both CIA planners and policymakers must understand those elements of historic, covert-action programs that led to success and those that led to failure. Robarge evaluated the CIA's historical, covert-action programs and offered such an evaluation. Perhaps adopting these operational elements can enhance the odds of program success.

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Robarge's subjective evaluation of historical, declassified, covert-action programs found they were most effective when they were:

- Strategically conceived as part of an overall policy.
- Implemented early in the policy initiative.
- Had small footprints and used flexible methods.
- Allowed field officers wide latitude to adapt to changes.
- Exploited preexisting views and trends and did not try to create attitudes or magnify fringe elements.

- Gave locals the prerogative to choose outcomes.
- Were based on sound counterintelligence, reliable current intelligence, and extensive knowledge of the target.

Conversely, these programs were least effective when they were:

- Not coordinated with overt policies.
- Started late in the policy initiative.
- Were heavily managed from CIA Headquarters.
- Put many officers in the target country.
- Did not fit the target's political culture.
- Employed proxies seen as illegitimate.
- Used when the target government had popular support and/or kept control with a security service, or to salvage an otherwise failing U.S. foreign policy.<sup>13</sup>

The impact of this evaluative framework can be significant. President Obama commented in 2014 that he "actually asked the C.I.A. to analyze examples of America financing and supplying arms to an insurgency in a country that actually worked out well. And they couldn't come up with much." Later in this same interview, President Obama emphasized the importance of planning when he suggested:

We have to be able to distinguish between these problems analytically, so that we're not using a pliers where we need a hammer, or we're not using a battalion when what we should be doing is partnering with the local government to train their police force more effectively, improve their intelligence capacities.<sup>14</sup>

A more rigorously empirical determination of whether covert interventions have a chance to

be truly effective, thus, has deep implications for leadership decision making and formulation and implementation of U.S. foreign policy.

To formulate effective strategy, policymakers need the most realistic assessment they can obtain from intelligence professionals about the cost/benefit of these programs. Their policy decisions have strategic implications, short and long term, and future presidents will undoubtedly look to the CIA and other organizations to develop programs that incorporate deeper insight into their potential for success and for blowback. The CIA's ability/inability to communicate chances of covert-action success, as well as the ripples in the pond that seem to flow from these programs, will be important to their continuing utility.

Nobel Prize winning economist Daniel Kahneman in *Thinking, Fast and Slow* discusses some of the characteristic problems with planning and forecasting and offers important insights applicable to the CIA's covert-action, campaign-planning challenges. The first and perhaps most important hurdle seems to be getting past overly-optimistic intuition about how things should be or how they should proceed. He calls this element of an individual's thinking "System 1." These rapid evaluations are quite sensitive to the negative influences of many pernicious biases and are, thus, highly unreliable. Think President Bush's comments about making decisions with his gut versus Obama's more scholarly exploration of the issues. The latter would be more akin to what Kahneman calls "System 2" thinking. At its best, System 2 is a more rigorous, cognitive (and slower) approach to decision-making. While "System 1" will save your life in the split-second, "System 2" could save your life in the long run. Exploitation of "System 2" thinking and avoiding the pitfalls of "System 1" may lead to better covert-action campaign planning.

Kahneman's WYSIATI concept (What You See Is All There Is) states that even if you know the information you are receiving about a

decision is skewed or even wrong, your "System 1" will process it as meaningful, and your lazy "System 2" will tend to endorse it. Crucially, it does not necessarily matter if the information you receive is complete. If the narrative sounds good, i.e., it is consistent with, for example, previously held beliefs, you will overconfidently buy it. "Indeed, you will often find that knowing little makes it easier to fit everything you know into a coherent pattern."<sup>15</sup> Kahneman's practical examples relate everyday scenarios, but in an intelligence context, one can imagine the pitfalls of analysts and covert-action campaign planners

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buying into their intuitions too comfortably. Not accounting for what Donald Rumsfeld famously called "unknown unknowns," those issues that will inevitably arise out of (most often) bad luck and/or poor foresight, can cause the best plans to fail and estimates of campaign success to fall well short.

Planners and policymakers may be overly focused on the individual case in front of them. They likely do not understand or appreciate the success/failure statistics of the category to which the case belongs, i.e., the proposal in front of them versus base rates of success for historical covert-action programs of the same type. As a result, they may become overly optimistic about successful outcomes, something Kahneman might call the "inside view." Using the statistics of case-similar, covert-action program success should, therefore, permit more accurate assessments of risk/gain by providing what Kahneman calls the "outside view" or reference-class forecasting. This evaluation



would importantly also allow for more accurate and objective communication with policymakers. Whether the policymakers incorporate this assessment into their decision making is another matter.

An example detailed in Tetlock and Gardner's *Superforecasting* is illustrative. As President Obama faced the difficult decision whether to launch the raid that ultimately killed Osama bin Laden, he was provided a wide range of success estimates from his intelligence community and national security representatives.

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Though the numbers varied widely, using a rough calculation, Tetlock and Gardner estimate that taken together they came out to a “wisdom of the group” 70 percent chance that bin Laden was in the Abbottabad compound. Despite this, Obama complained that he was actually faced with a 50 percent chance, or as he reportedly called it “a coin-toss.”<sup>16</sup> *Superforecasting* details many of the thought-process challenges Obama faced in finally giving these estimates their due respect and making the right call. But it seems there was, perhaps, some poor risk communication on the part of his national security team. WYSIATI, and some significant “System 1” thinking, at least initially, was getting in the way of appreciating the value of his advisors’ true risk calculations. What would this President have done if faced with Eisenhower’s dilemma—offered only a 20 percent chance by CIA Director Dulles that the Guatemalan PBSUCCESS coup in 1954 would be successful?

## **Reference Class Forecasting: Limiting the Ripples in the Pond**

“Planning fallacy” is a term used to describe overly-optimistic estimates of a plan’s success.<sup>17</sup> In the case of covert-action programs, succumbing to planning fallacy means CIA planners would be susceptible to grounding decisions on delusional optimism rather than on a rational consideration of risk. This tendency leads to overestimating gains and chances of success, while underestimating odds of failure and, perhaps, the long-term threat from ripples in the pond. To guard against and perhaps defeat these decision-making biases, Kahneman offers a step-wise, reference-class, forecasting technique.<sup>18</sup>

- 1. Identify a historical base rate for the class of issue at hand.** In this case, we are talking, in general, about covert action, but this can be broken down to paramilitary, political, or covert influence; additional categorizations and variables of covert-action type could be accounted for and perhaps add to the specificity of the assessment.
- 2. Make an intuitive prediction for success of the new covert-action campaign based on what is known so far of the case-specific challenges and opportunities.** Making the prediction in this order suggests the planner might find his or her “intuitive” assessment is driven closer to the base rate, an example of using anchoring bias to the conservative advantage.
- 3. If there is no useful data on which to support or question the chances of success, the planners should stick with the historic baseline success rate.** It is usually not the case that planners in this situation would be able to easily admit that there was simply no data or useful intelligence insight into a particular program. The challenge would be in identifying information that truly was

a causative factor (not just correlative) in predicting success or failure.

- 4. If the planners do feel they have strong data in support of this new program, they can move their predicted chances of success toward their intuitive, likely, more optimistic, risk assessment, but only after a rigorous review of their supporting intelligence.** Of note, Robarge's elements of successful or failed covert action may be considered one good starting point for the "supporting intelligence" on which to further evaluate an intuitive sense of chances for the plan's success.

Using declassified, historical data evaluated subjectively by CIA historian David Robarge, the base rates of success/failure of different types of covert-action programs (paramilitary, propaganda, or political) can be calculated (See Table 1, page 114).<sup>19</sup> From the CIA's efforts in Italy in 1948 to the most recent, declassified efforts in Afghanistan, Robarge scored 49 covert-action programs as either success, mixed, or failure (with the long-term success of the take-down of the UBL compound in Abbottabad marked as "undetermined"). Overall, Robarge's recently-updated evaluation of the programs indicates 53 percent were short-term or mixed successes, or just a bit better than a coin toss. In the long-term however, his data suggests that only about 41 percent were either successful or of mixed success—roughly 50/50 short term and 40/60 long term.

One should probably not make too much of statistics in such a subjective evaluation. A quick look at the data highlights some important issues with their interpretation. First, this is admittedly the assessment of a single historian, albeit the CIA's historian. If anything, his own unconscious bias might be to favor outcomes; therefore, even the relatively coin-toss nature of the results might suggest an overestimate of success. The true success rate, even in the short

term, may be less than the coin-toss, if the listing of programs is subjected to more of a "wisdom of the crowd" evaluation.

Most programs evaluated also took place before 1980, likely owing to declassification timelines; therefore, the base rate of success data represents programs that were designed and implemented during the Cold War, early in the CIA's history, which also accounts for the anti-communist focus of about 70 percent of the programs. About 50 percent of the programs included some potentially-lethal or violent component, to include paramilitary activity, assassination plots, and/or coup. The remaining 50 percent were solely political and/or propaganda programs without an acknowledged lethal aspect.

Some have suggested that the CIA has become more focused on paramilitary activities

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in response to 9/11, but the table of declassified programs reveals that the CIA's focus on lethal or at least potentially-lethal covert action is nothing new. It may simply be that we go to what we know best in a time of crisis (or what is most instinctive and prone to bias—"System 1"); Communism and the threat of nuclear annihilation or 9/11 terrorism that kills thousands influences our decision making to respond decisively. When the grass rustled on the Serengeti some thousands of years ago, did we sit and wait to see if it was a lion? Or did we throw our spear, even it was just the wind or our buddy (unluckily) making his way through the tall grass.

## **Iran as a Case Study**

How does Kahneman's step-wise, reference-class evaluation combined with Robarge's



Country/Region	Start Date	End Date	CA Type	Short-term Success	Long-term Success
Italy	1948	1976	Political	success	success
Albania	1949	1954	Paramilitary	failure	failure
Soviet Union	1949	1959	Paramilitary	failure	failure
France	late 1940s	late 1950s	Political	success	success
Western Europe	1950s	1960s	Propaganda, political	success	success
Philippines 1	early 1950s	early 1950s	Paramilitary, Political	success	success
North Korea	1950	1953	Paramilitary	failure	n/a
China 1	1951	1956	Paramilitary	failure	failure
Tibet	1951	1972	Political, Paramilitary	failure	failure
East Asia	1951	1967	Propaganda, political	mixed	failure
Soviet Bloc 1	1951	1972	Propaganda	success	success
Iran	1953	1953	Political, Paramilitary	success	failure
Guatemala	1954	1954	Paramilitary	success	failure
Vietnam 1	1954	1956	Political	success	failure
Indonesia 1	1955	1958	Propaganda, Paramilitary	failure	failure
Soviet Bloc 2	1956	1991	Propaganda	success	success
Japan	1958	1968	Political, Propaganda	success	success
Cuba 1	1960	1963	Assassinations plots, Paramilitary	failure	failure
Congo	1960	1968	Political, Assassination plot	failure	mixed
Dominican Republic 1 and 2	1960	1971	Political, Assassination plot	failure	success
Laos	1960	1973	Paramilitary	success	failure
Vietnam 2	1961	1973	Political, Paramilitary	failure	failure
Cuba 2	1961	1965	Political, Propaganda, Paramilitary	failure	failure
British Guyana	1962	1971	Political	success	mixed
Chile	1964	1973	Political, Military Coup	mixed	failure

**Table 1. Covert Action Program Evaluation**

*Source: CIA historian David Robarge, subjective evaluation using declassified historical data.*

elements of successful covert-action programs stand up to historical case studies? One should see at least a subjective correlation between Robarge's evaluations and his determination of success/fail covert action attributes. Iran may serve as a useful case study. From the Table, one can see that the CIA's intervention in Iran in 1953 (Operation TPAJAX) was categorized by Robarge as a short-term success but an internal, political, long-term failure.

Following the end of World War II, the British economy was struggling to recover and close to bankruptcy. By 1951, Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh had nationalized the profitable, but UK-dominated, Anglo-Iranian Oil Company venture (which supplied 90 percent of European petroleum). While President Truman did not support military action, once Eisenhower became president,

the UK focused its influence operation on convincing the U.S. that the overthrow of the Mossadegh government was about fighting communism vice UK economic concerns.<sup>20,21,22,23</sup> With Churchill back in power in Britain and Eisenhower in the U.S., fear of communism won the day, and Eisenhower approved a covert CIA operation to overthrow Mossadegh.

The coup itself does seem to meet Robarge's first and second elements of a successful covert action—strategically conceived as part of an overall policy and implemented early in the policy initiative. Thus, other elements of U.S. power were brought to bear, and covert action was not an afterthought. There were some signs that the Iranian nationalist government had strengthened its relationship with the Soviet Union (the Soviets had entered into financial and trade negotiations with the Iranians), and the

Country/Region	Start Date	End Date	CA Type	Short-term Success	Long-term Success
Indonesia 2	1964	1965	Political	mixed	n/a
Haiti	1965	1969	Political, Propaganda	failure	failure
Thailand	1965	1968	Political	success	success
Colombia	1967	1970	Paramilitary, Political	success	failure
Bolivia 1	1967	1967	Paramilitary	success	success
China 2	1969	1972	Propaganda	failure	failure
Cuba 3	1968	1974, 80s	Propaganda	failure	failure
Angola 1	1971	1976	Paramilitary	failure	failure
Bolivia 2	1971	1971	Political, Propaganda	n/a	n/a
Iraq	1972	1975	Paramilitary	failure	failure
Portugal	1974	1976	Political	success	success
Afghanistan 1	1979	1987	Paramilitary	success	mixed
Nicaragua	1980s	1980s	Paramilitary, Political	success	success
Afghanistan 2	2001		Paramilitary	success	mixed
Phillippines 2	1965	1968	Political	mixed	success
Greece	1967	1967	Political	n/a	n/a
Soviet Bloc 3	1969	1970	Political, Propaganda	failure	success
Libya	1973	1974	Political	failure	failure
Angola 2	1977	1980	Propaganda	failure	failure
Grenada	1979	1983	Political	n/a	n/a
Ethiopia	1980s	1980s	Political, Propaganda	n/a	n/a
Yemen	1980s	1980s	Propaganda, Paramilitary	success	failure
International (RDI)	2002	2009	Paramilitary	mixed	mixed
Pakistan	2011	2011	Paramilitary	success	mixed (undetermined)

**Table 1. Covert Action Program Evaluation (continued)**

Source: CIA historian David Robarge, subjective evaluation using declassified historical data.

communist Tudeh Party had aligned itself with Mossadegh, at the expense of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi.<sup>24</sup> U.S. strategic policy at the time was clearly focused on stopping the spread of communism, and Iran's petroleum reserves and strategic location made it a key buffer state against Soviet expansion. The linkage between an overthrow, keeping the Shah in power while dumping his Prime Minister, and resistance to communism does mesh with overall U.S. policy at the time. That it was justified due to an aggressive Soviet threat is less clear. After the Shah fled Iran in late February 1953, when Mossadegh first got wind of a potential coup:

No one seemed to notice that throughout this crisis, in which the stakes were nothing less than one of the world's greatest oil pools, the Russians were content to stand

aside. Nor did anyone in the West ever point out that Mossadegh had not appealed to his northern neighbor for help.<sup>25</sup>

An overt military takeover of all or some subset of Iranian oil fields, let alone of Iran itself, risked a conflagration that would destabilize the region. Not to mention, the UK was in no economic shape to invade, and the U.S. had been tied up on the Korean peninsula. Diplomatic efforts to seek some compromise had largely failed by August 1953. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had ominously warned Eisenhower in a March National Security Council meeting that the Communist takeover of Iran would result in significant loss:

Not only would the free world be deprived of the enormous assets represented by Iranian oil production and reserves, but

the Russians would secure these assets and thus henceforth be free of any anxiety about their petroleum situation. Worse still, Mr. Dulles pointed out, if Iran succumbed to the Communists there was little doubt that in short order the other areas of the Middle East, with some 60% of the world's oil reserves, would fall into Communist control.<sup>26</sup>

The third and fourth of Robarge's elements also seem to have been met—the action had small footprints and used flexible methods—allowing field officers wide latitude to adapt to changes. Two of the main characters involved in the coup were famously H. Norman Schwarzkopf and Kim Roosevelt. The latter, grandson of President Teddy Roosevelt, and the former, father of Desert Storm's "Stormin Norman." The senior Schwarzkopf, who had been chief of the New Jersey State Police and involved in the handling of the Lindbergh kidnapping case, had between 1942 and 1948 trained the Imperial Iranian Gendarmerie and the Iranian Savak, the brutal internal intelligence and security service.<sup>27</sup> He reemerged in Iran during the coup in 1953 with "millions of dollars."<sup>28</sup>

**...money can be an influential component of a covert-action campaign.**

In the right hands and then passed along to the right hands, money can be an influential component of a covert-action campaign. But it takes someone with the operational judgement and freedom to act for it to be effective. Kim Roosevelt seems to have been the right person at the right time, influencing military units to revolt, manipulating interim leadership, and, at least on the surface, seeming to make it up as he went along. Robarge himself, writing a review of Stephen Kinzer's *All the Shah's Men* notes that:

The [operational] design that looked good on paper, failed on its first try...and succeeded largely through happenstance and Roosevelt's nimble improvisations. No matter how meticulously scripted a covert action may be, the "fog of war" affects it as readily as military forces on a battlefield.<sup>29</sup>

Did Operation TPAJAX exploit preexisting views and trends and not try to create attitudes or magnify fringe elements and give locals the prerogative to choose outcomes? By the time Truman was out of the picture and the British found a more supportive Eisenhower in office, there was already growing dissatisfaction in Iran among those who preferred to see a return of the Shah.<sup>30</sup> Mossadegh's apparent indecision in the face of crises and his troubled relationship with the Majlis were significant factors in the political situation prior to the coup.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, discontent was already there, waiting for someone to exploit it, in this case with cash and propaganda. As Roosevelt saw the final act of the coup unfolding, with Iranian military units, police, and rural tribesman ostensibly under his control, he reportedly was asked by a colleague if "the time [had] come to turn General Zahedi loose to lead the crowd?"<sup>32,33</sup> He did so, and a two-hour battle raged outside Mossadegh's home, with Royalist troops succeeding in taking the objective by the next day; indications that Roosevelt rode into the fray on an Iranian tank seem apocryphal. Zahedi, of note, had been chosen by the Shah (not by any outside force) to replace Mossadegh, much to the consternation of the British, who acquiesced in the face of limited options.<sup>34</sup> In the end, and it seems reasonable to say these elements of successful covert action were met, the coup was the lucky orchestration of riots by locals and an internal, Iranian military struggle that ended happily in Mossadegh's overthrow, again at the hands of his own countrymen.

Lastly, Robarge notes that successful covert action should be based on sound

counterintelligence, reliable current intelligence, and extensive knowledge of the target. The British had decades of experience in the country, at least in the oil fields, but had been officially kicked out of the country by Mossadegh. Despite this, they apparently did have an indigenous agent who retained solid bona fides with the Shah. The small number of British regional experts and a shortage of personnel dedicated specifically to Iran were cited as challenges in a CIA report following the coup.<sup>35,36,37</sup> The U.S. did have a Station operating, with agents recruited over a considerable amount of time and ideologically motivated.<sup>38</sup> CIA agents were also present inside the military in Tehran, able to ensure military cooperation and presumably report on any counterintelligence challenges.<sup>39</sup> Kim Roosevelt, himself an OSS Mideastern expert during WWII, had interviewed the Shah in 1947 in support of a book he was authoring, giving him good insight and early appreciation perhaps for the Shah and the region.<sup>40</sup> Lastly, it appears that contemporary planners understood the requirement for extensive knowledge of the target; in their once classified operational plan they noted: “The preceding material represents a Western-type plan offered for execution by Orientals. However, it was drafted by authors with an intensive knowledge of the country and its people who endeavored to examine and evaluate all the details from the Iranian point of view.”<sup>41</sup> Of course, it goes on right afterward in a decidedly xenophobic manner to suggest:

Given the recognized incapacity of Iranians to plan or act in a thoroughly logical manner, we would never expect such a plan to be re-studied and executed in the local atmosphere like a Western staff operation.

Security among all local elements involved is a serious weakness inherent in the Persian character. We must be aware of the fact that security breaches might lead to repressive measures by Mossadeq.<sup>42</sup>

It was around this same timeframe, of course, in which British spy Kim Philby and the Cambridge spy ring was providing damaging information to the Soviets, and Cold War secrets flowed freely from the American nuclear program to the Russians. Western character was equally flawed, and self-awareness was one of the planners’ apparent weaknesses. Despite their ethnocentrism, it seems they at least understood the counterintelligence challenges and were attempting to mitigate risks with adequate planning.

### **Did Iran 1953 lead to Iran 1979 to Iran 2016 to...?**

The themes of public compromise, ethics and morality, and unconscious bias—the dangers of the planning fallacy—can be seen throughout the preceding discussion. Bissell proposed that successful covert action planning would need to include short- and long-term risk assessment and an appreciation for the potential that any compromise would impair CIA capabilities. He further argued that only short-term results in an operation are important, and that the CIA cannot be expected to be responsible for the long-term significance or outcome of a complicated situation:

Most covert-action operations (like military operations) are directed at short-term objectives. Their success or failure must be judged by the degree to which these objectives are achieved. Their *effectiveness* must be measured by the degree to which achievement of the short-term objectives will contribute to the national interest. It can be argued that, although few uncompromised operations actually failed, the successful achievement of their short-term results made only a limited contribution to the national interest.<sup>43</sup>

His pessimism and parochialism aside, Bissell seems clear in his belief that long-term

impacts are not the CIA's responsibility.

It has been said many times, at least in the aftermath of failed U.S. interventions, that there is no such thing as a policy failure, only intelligence failure. The CIA tends to accept this criticism as a normal cost of doing business. Operation TPAJAX was most clearly a short-term success, and unlike Robarge, I believe it was also a relatively, long-term, covert-action success. The coup took place in 1953, and the Shah was not overthrown until 1979. In the interim, it seems overall U.S. foreign policy was more to blame in leading to or, at least, not preventing the Shah's eventual downfall. Covert action is normally thought to give time and space for military or foreign policy interventions; 26 years seems more than enough time and space.

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Robert Jervis touches on this issue in *Why Intelligence Fails* and suggests that the Shah's liberalization program, overtly supported by the U.S., was at least partially to blame. While last minute CIA covert action was, of course, not going to fix years of poor governance, it may in fairness have been at least a failure of intelligence analysis:

This question [the problem of liberalizing a repressive regime] was of obvious importance after the fall of 1977 when the Shah started to liberalize and when the USG [U.S. government] had to decide how much to push the Shah to liberalize, but at no time in the succeeding year was there a [CIA] discussion that was more than a few sentences long.<sup>44</sup>

One also cannot completely ignore the

negative, long-term, unintended consequences of the 1953 coup, the ripples in the pond decades later. Noting in the same vein as Bissell the impact of public compromise, Jervis suggests the American role in Operation TPAJAX was probably known in an exaggerated version by all Iranians in the late 1970s. They would attribute American meddling to daily events and struggles, and this contributed to the view that the Shah was an American puppet. Knowledge of the U.S. role in the coup delegitimized the Shah's rule and perhaps shored up Nationalist support (in addition to religious support) for Khomeini.<sup>45</sup> But again, it is not at all clear the compromise and knowledge of it was causative or merely correlative.

So, the Iran case study itself is problematic in that the assessment of its success/failure is certainly subjective and possibly incomplete, as ripples still emanate. For example, as of this writing, the effects of the 1953 coup and of the 1979 overthrow seem to impact negatively on U.S./Iran diplomatic efforts and any possibility of a reframing of the relationship on the world stage. Americans of a certain age can still easily recall the painful events of 1979, watching the American hostages on TV night after night. With understandable historic bias, Iranians still believe the CIA is actively trying to undermine their country. During the 2016 election cycle, the two main candidates argued both sides of recent nuclear agreement negotiations, but neither was calling for any sort of a true reset.

### **Conclusions: Policymakers Need to Know If We Are Simply Guessing**

As President Eisenhower, an aggressive proponent of covert action, famously said "plans are useless but planning is indispensable." Robarge's assessment of historical programs and his identified elements of covert-action success/failure provide the practitioner with a base rate for use in reference-class forecasting and guidelines, albeit subjective, for covert-



action, operational planning. To extend the potential value of this work, it might be useful for more than one historian to evaluate all 49 declassified, covert-actions programs using Robarge's elements, with each element assessed with a numerical score (1–5) to see if they stand up to this empirical evaluation. Like the eponymous checklist used to rapidly evaluate newborns, we would have a checklist for covert-action campaign plans, an Apgar score for covert action.<sup>46</sup> If such a simple checklist could be validated, it might serve as, at least, a quick heuristic for future covert-action planners and those communicating risk to policymakers. Low scores would mean your program is not healthy and help avoid the delusion of skill in the CIA's ability to make forecasts of covert-action success.

Even using reference class forecasting and a covert-action Apgar score, it seems that unintended consequences of tactical covert actions and certainly of longer-term, covert-action campaigns simply cannot be predicted past a very short time horizon. With greater time, size, and complexity, the drip-drip of relatively low-impact ripples can suddenly and without warning, become a tidal wave of consequence. Perhaps more troubling for planners and policymakers, it is not at all certain that unintended consequences emanate uniquely from failed programs.

The original plan for Operation TPAJAX—a short-term and at least “longish”-term success example—offered an overly-broad risk assessment of a “reasonable chance of success,” but at least it did address the risks of failure—if only in the short term. It did not consider any long-term negative effects that might emanate from even a successful coup.<sup>47</sup> These types of consequence assessments (both from failed and successful covert intervention) should be worked into formal CIA planning and assessments, as well as verbal briefings and other personal engagements with policymakers.

It seems other elements of planning should be added to Robarge's elements of covert-action success. In a previously published article, I argued that a Just Theory of Espionage derived from the Just Theory of War framework could have been used during the CIA's campaign planning to mitigate the negative consequences of the Rendition, Detention, and Interrogation (RDI) program. Perhaps now I would suggest choosing not to pursue it in the first place would have been the better course.<sup>48</sup> One can see the potential utility in serious consideration of ethics and morality during covert-action planning, especially if we define success in a broader fashion, including the mitigation of downstream, unintended, negative consequences.

**Perhaps more troubling for planners and policymakers, it is not at all certain that unintended consequences emanate uniquely from failed programs.**

So, these plans, particularly the more strategic, never survive first contact with the enemy, are close to useless as forecasting tools beyond an acute time horizon, and should be flexible to allow for adaptive leaders on the ground to adjust fire. I would also contend that the mere act of planning seems to result in greater connectivity between headquarters and the field, greater inherent consideration of ethics and morality, an enhanced sense of accountability for success or failure, and a potentially greater ability to anticipate catastrophic, unintended consequences, what Nassim Nicholas Taleb might call “black swan” events (rare but highly impactful).

In *Antifragile: Things that Gain from Disorder*, Taleb argues, by way of example, that instead of nuclear energy firms predicting the probabilities of disaster, they should instead focus on limiting exposure to failure (redundant

safety measures), which would make prediction or non-prediction of failure beside the point. In many ways, Robarge's elements of covert-action success, along with my suggested addition of ethical/moral considerations are these redundant safety measures.

As a practitioner, I appreciate Taleb's focus on the value of trial and error: "We can, from the trial that fails to deliver, figure out progressively where to go."<sup>49</sup> This sort of trial and error-based tinkering has certainly been going on with CIA covert-action planning over the years. Though the term "tinkering" gives the method a seemingly less-than-serious note, this sort of learning can be effective, especially when early covert-action programs (perhaps simply from good luck) provided some positive examples from which to learn valuable lessons applicable to subsequent campaigns. As a colleague of mine joked: "The CIA has a two-step planning process. We are told what to do, and then we do it." Though an exaggeration, the comment does capture the less doctrinaire nature of historical CIA planning, especially when comparing it to the more mature military decision making process (MDMP), operational art, or operational design. Robarge's covert-action success base rates, therefore, might be thought to represent the results of an anti-fragile discovery process based on CIA tinkering (good and bad) since 1947. With a gradual increase in military presence and influence at CIA since 9/11, there has also likely been an equal or at least detectable increase in military-planning expertise buoying this historical tinkering. Perhaps a study done by a future CIA historian will show the covert-action success rate following this enhanced collaboration moving up into ever more satisfying percentages.

Finally, I suspect that the relationship between the final cost of covert-action failure and either public compromise or lack of ethical consideration is non-linear. The damage caused when these programs are inappropriately revealed to the public or when ethics is not considered during planning is much greater than one would intuitively expect, greater than 1-1. Taleb might say covert-action programs are extremely fragile to compromise and immorality. The onus, therefore, is on the CIA to ensure these elements are deeply explored during the covert-action planning process and communicated accurately. Public compromise makes the programs attributable; lack of moral standards makes the CIA and policymakers culpable. **IAJ**

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