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THE AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT IN VIETNAM, OPERATION CHAOS, AND WATERGATE.

Bledar Kurti*

**Departamenti i Edukimit dhe Anglishtes, Fakulteti i Shkencave Shoqërore, Albanian University*

Abstract

In the heat of the Cold War, the American secret operations in Iran and Guatemala in the 1950s seemed a great success. With a few men and a little money, the new American secret service agency established in 1947, determined the fate of governments. The operations made careers and set the image of this new agency, the CIA, as the leading edge of America's undeclared war against the spread of Soviet power. Quick, cheap, and tolerably secret, they encouraged policy-makers to believe that other operations elsewhere could be the same.

In this paper I will examine the American involvement in Vietnam, Operation Chaos and Watergate. These events fit chronologically into the period which concluded the Era of Trust and which were instrumental in introducing the Agency to a new phase in its history, an Era of Skepticism.

This paper will bring light on the matter and is based on primary sources from the memoirs of high officials, directors of the CIA, US government documents, and congressional hearings.

Keywords: *United States, President, Cold War, CIA, Vietnam, Operation Chaos, Watergate.*

PËRFSHIRJA AMERIKANE NË VIETNAM, OPERACIONI KAOS DHE WATERGATE.

Abstrakt

Në kulmin e Luftës së Ftohtë, operacionet sekrete amerikane në Iran dhe Guatemalë në vitet 1950 dukeshin një sukses i madh. Me pak njerëz dhe pak para, agjencia e re e shërbimeve sekrete amerikane e krijuar në vitin 1947, përcaktonte fatin e qeverive të huaja. Operacionet arritën rritjen në karrierë dhe e vendosën imazhin e kësaj agjencie të re, CIA-s, si avantazhin kryesor të luftës së pashpallur të Amerikës kundër përhapjes së pushtetit sovjetik. Të shpejtë, të lirë dhe shumë sekret, ata inkurajuan politikëbërësit të besonin se operacionet e tjera gjetkë mund të ishin të njëjta e me sukses të padiskutueshëm.

Në këtë punim unë do të shqyrtoj përfshirjen amerikane në Vietnam, Operacionin Kaos dhe Watergate. Këto ngjarje përshtaten kronologjikisht në periudhën e përfundimit të Epokës së Mirëbesimit dhe të cilat ishin instrumentale për futjen e Agjencisë në një fazë të re të historisë së saj, në Epokën e Skepticizmit.

Ky punim do të hedhë dritë mbi këtë çështje dhe bazohet në burime parësore nga kujtimet e zyrtarëve të

lartë, drejtorëve të CIA-s, dokumenteve të qeverisë amerikane dhe seancat dëgjimore të Kongresit.

Fjalët kyçe: *Shtetet e Bashkuara, President, Lufta e Ftohtë, CIA, Vietnam, Operacioni Kaos, Watergate.*

After the assassination of Kennedy on November 22nd, 1963, Lyndon B. Johnson took up the office of President. Johnson took an interest in Vietnam from the very beginning of his presidency. Like his predecessor, Johnson based his policy maneuvers in Vietnam on the conviction that, if Vietnam fell, the rest of Southeast Asia would inexorably succumb to Communist domination. Termed the “domino effect” by President Eisenhower in 1954, this concept was strongly in the minds of the policy-makers.

The new President, according to Christopher Andrew, was less interested in CIA intelligence on Vietnam than in its covert operations. During the first major Vietnamese crisis, the CIA was barely consulted.¹ But, according to the historian Robert D. Schulzinger, Johnson urged the CIA to move quickly to shake up the personnel in Saigon. In November 1963 the President approved NSAM –273 authorising planning for increased military activity against North Vietnam. Johnson directed the State and Defence Departments to assess the “plausible deniability” of U.S. involvement.²

The advisors whom Johnson retained from Kennedy had an interest in the success of the policy of American intervention to determine the government of South Vietnam. They believed that abandoning the U.S. commitment to Vietnam would represent a setback in the Cold War. The Gulf of Tonkin incident, where two U.S. destroyers were attacked by the North Vietnamese in connection with a covert operation (OPLAN 34-A), provided an opportunity for a congressional resolution sought for months by Johnson. The Secretary of State, McNamara, testified before Congress that both destroyers (Maddox and C. Turner Joy) had been attacked. The destroyers had approached the coast just eleven miles offshore in a surveillance operation and provoked the North Vietnamese navy to attack. McNamara clearly did not tell the truth when he assured lawmakers that the destroyers were operating in international waters and were carrying out a routine patrol.

Both houses passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, on August 6th 1964, which granted congressional support for the President to “respond instantly with the use of appropriate force to repel any unprovoked attack against the forces of the United States.” Congress also authorised, upon request from any nation in Southeast Asia, “all measures including the use of armed force to assist that nation in the defence of its political independence and territorial integrity against aggression or subversion.”³ The resolution’s extraordinarily broad grant of authority had no time limit. Later Johnson would use it to justify the greatly expanded American role in the war.

On July 28th, 1965, Johnson announced the dispatch of additional troops to Vietnam. The United States was fully at war. During 1966 and 1967 the number of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam rose from 190,000 to 535,000. During the Vietnam conflict, the CIA, according to William Colby, was ignored even though their intelligence and estimates on events were the most realistic. Colby stated that the Agency’s estimations were in great part “neither welcomed nor adopted by the policymakers,”⁴ and the CIA “had little say in the events” because most of the paramilitary operations had been turned over to the military.⁵

The impact of intelligence on the decisions to escalate America’s role in the war was slight. The Johnson administration’s resistance to the CIA’s judgement was due to the fact that senior policymakers held other views. Furthermore, the DCI’s Presidential advisory role did not extend to Vietnam, and his counsel made

1 Christopher Andrew, *For the President’s Eyes Only. Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush*. London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1995.p. 317.

2 Robert D. Schulzinger. *A Time for War. The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) pp. 127-128.

3 Ibid, pp. 151-152.

4 William Colby and Peter Forbath, *Honourable Men: My life in the CIA*. London: Hutchinson & Co, 1978.p. 226.

5 Ibid, p. 225.

little apparent impact on the President's policy decisions. President Johnson never included the DCI, John McCone, among his innermost Vietnam advisors.⁶ The DCI held different views from the President, at least in the ways and means of implementing the policy. He expressed his views thus: "I think what we are doing in starting on a track which involves ground force operations ... [will mean] an ever-increasing commitment of U.S. personnel without materially improving the chances of victory In effect, we will find ourselves mired down in combat in the jungle in a military effort that we cannot win, and from which we will have extreme difficulty in extracting ourselves."⁷

Despite the CIA's lack of impact, the Phoenix Program, mentioned earlier, indicated that the CIA was heavily involved in Vietnam. Marchetti and Marks argued that the CIA organised guerrilla raids against North Vietnam, and that its operations were massive in scale and an important part of the overall U.S. war effort.⁸

The Vietnam War illustrates that the CIA was in fact at this time an arm of the executive branch, under the authority of the President, who viewed the Agency with skepticism, despite the good intelligence it had produced. The importance of the Vietnam War was essential in bringing to an end the "era of trust" for the intelligence community. It became a conflict, which could not have been kept secret any longer, subsequently involving the public, the press and the Congress. In the Vietnam period, when there was an atmosphere of rampant cynicism and suspicion about the government, secrecy was seen not as a tool necessary for the practice of intelligence, but as a device by which intelligence could hide its bumbles and mask its wicked activities. In fact, the secrecy itself promoted this view.⁹

After public opinion turned against the U.S. participation in the war in Vietnam in the following years, Americans reflected on the decision taken in 1965. In 1971, when the New York Times published excerpts from the Pentagon's history of U.S. decision-making in Vietnam, popularly known as the Pentagon Papers, which exposed some of the CIA's covert operations, the "credibility gap" toward the CIA and the executive grew.

The "credibility gap" which had developed during the Johnson administration and was to widen under Nixon caused vast segments of the population to become suspicious of government agencies generally and spurred the Press on to a more investigative and hostile approach in their reporting of government activities. The CIA certainly was not exempt from either. Colby noted that because of the secrecy which surrounded its activities, it was a more vulnerable target than most.¹⁰

Richard Nixon entered the White House in January 1969. At Nixon's first meeting with his future national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, after his election victory, he denounced the CIA as a group of "Ivy League liberals" who "had always opposed him politically." Besides his generalised suspicion of Langley "liberals," Nixon clung to the absurd theory that the Agency had conspired to make him lose the 1960 presidential election to Kennedy. He was also convinced that "communist factors" were of great importance, and was skeptical of any intelligence estimate that reached a different conclusion.¹¹

Like Johnson, Nixon was convinced that some people and organisations were under communist influence

6 Harold P. Ford. "CIA Judgement on President Johnson's Decision to "Go Big" in Vietnam," CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes, 1962-1968. Episode 2, 1963-1965. (Center for the Study of Intelligence, March, 5, 2001.) [<http://www.odci.gov/csi/books/vietnam/epis2.html>] _

7 John McCone, 2 April 1965. Cited by Harold P. Ford. CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes, 1962-1968.

8 Marchetti and Marks, p. 119.

9 William Colby and Peter Forbath, *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974, p. 310.

10 Ibid, p. 309._

11 Christopher Andrew, pp. 350-354.

and financed by communist sources. On January 23rd, 1969, he ordered the NSC to undertake a global study of student revolt. The next day, after television reports of student demonstrations from Paris to Tokyo, he instructed: "I want to have a CIA analysis in depth of communist factors in youth disturbance."¹² Faced with the incredulity of the President, the only way that the CIA could justify that domestic dissent was not part of an international Communist plot, was by continually expanding the scope of Operation Chaos.

Operation Chaos dated back to 1967 and the Johnson Administration. At the time, President Johnson was faced with a rapidly escalating anti-war movement marked by protest demonstrations, bloody riots and a rash of bombings. Feeling himself embattled in the White House, he ordered the DCI, Richard Helms, to discover whether there was any foreign financing or manipulation behind the anti-war movement or behind any of the radical, dissident groups associated with it.¹³

'Chaos' was the code-name assigned to this project which was established to spy on American citizens. In its efforts to prove connections between U.S. dissidents and foreign agitators, the CIA compiled 13,000 files, including 7,200 upon Americans, and needed a computer system, called HYDRA, to index its enquiries into people and organisations. The project, staffed by fifty-two people, was top secret even within the Agency. Within Operation Chaos, sub-programmes MERRIMACK and RESISTANCE were created to infiltrate peace groups and activist movements and obtain information about them.¹⁴

All groups and organisations decreed to be radical or extremist were targets of investigation by the CIA. They included the People's Coalition for Peace and Justice, the National Peace Action Committee, Women's Strike for Peace, Black Panthers, White Panthers, Black Nationals and Liberation Groups, Students for a Democratic Society, Resist, and Revolutionary Union. Even the women's "lib" movements were investigated.¹⁵ By mid-1969, the CIA was under pressure far greater than it had ever known under Johnson to allay President Nixon's suspicions of them. Operation Chaos was illegal and against the Agency's charter. Section 103 d (1) stated that the Director of Central Intelligence "shall collect intelligence through human sources and by other appropriate means, except that the Agency will have no police, subpoena, or law enforcement powers or internal security functions." The illegality of what the CIA was being ordered to do was recognised within the Agency by some of the few people aware of the existence of Chaos, and protests were made. The objections were overruled. It was a presidential directive and the function of the CIA was to serve the President.¹⁶

The Church Committee criticised the Executive branch and the White House for putting pressure on the CIA to practise "internal security functions," and for not asking Congress to amend the 1947 Act, if it was considered necessary for national security: "Under White House pressure, the CIA developed its own programme – Operation Chaos – as an adjunct to the CIA's foreign counter-intelligence activities, although CIA officials recognised from the outset that it had definite domestic counter-intelligence aspects. ... At no time did the Executive branch ask Congress to amend the 1947 Act, to modify its ban against CIA exercising internal security functions. Nor was Congress asked to clarify the ambiguity of the 1947 Act about the CIA's authority to conduct clandestine activities within the United States."¹⁷

The Church Committee also criticised the DCI for not protecting the intelligence "sources and methods." "These programmes illustrated fundamental weaknesses and contradictions in the statutory definition of CIA authority in the 1947 Act. While the Director of Central Intelligence is charged with responsibility

12 Richard Nixon. Cited by Christopher Andrew. Ibid, p. 354.

13 William Colby and Peter Forbath, p. 314.

14 Brian Freemantle, CIA. London: Michael Joseph/Rainbird, 1983. p. 122.

15 Ibid, p. 123.

16 Ibid, p. 124.

17 U.S. Senate. Final Report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities. Intelligence Activities and the Rights of Americans. Book II, pp. 96-101._

to protect intelligence sources and methods, the CIA is forbidden from exercising law enforcement and police powers and internal security functions. The CIA never went to Congress for a clarification of this ambiguity, nor did it seek interpretation from the chief legal officer of the United States – the Attorney General – except on the rarest of occasions.”¹⁸

If Operation Chaos fell under the pretext of national security, the Watergate scandal exposed the White House and the CIA to an angry public and press. On June 17th, 1972, the break-in at Democratic National Committee headquarters occurred. Of the seven men involved in the Watergate break-in, five had worked for the CIA. Two of them, James McCord and Howard Hunt, were twenty-year veterans of the Agency. In addition, the Agency had supplied Hunt and his colleagues with equipment and services for earlier projects.¹⁹

Within days of the Watergate break-in, President Nixon had decided to try to use the CIA to cover up the escalating scandal, which ultimately would force his resignation. On the night of June 20th, according to H.R. Haldeman, the Chief of Staff at the White House, Nixon telephoned Haldeman to suggest raising money for the defendants and using a Cuban cover for the money. He indirectly suggested possible pressure on the CIA, that the Cubans were all from the Bay of Pigs and that the matter should therefore be treated under “national security” cover.²⁰ On June 23rd, Nixon agreed to a scheme in which the Agency was to be told to block the investigation of FBI, which had been put in charge of investigating the Watergate break-in.²¹

The DCI, Richard Helms, did all that he could to contain the investigation, but he ended up being fired by Nixon after the election and was sent off to be ambassador to Iran. According to Colby, Helms was carefully distancing the Agency from Watergate, and for that, Nixon fired him and named James Schlesinger as the Agency’s new chief.²² According to Haldeman, the CIA’s real role and motivations in Watergate remained a mystery, but they were certainly there.²³ Nixon attempted to silence the burglars by paying them off or even promising them clemency,²⁴ whereas the CIA fell under further distrust and suspicion, and reinforced the hostile questions being asked about the Agency’s good faith and its use, or abuse, of its institutionalised secrecy.²⁵

According to Samuel P. Huntington, both Johnson and Nixon had come into office with important enemies. Congress, the media, the federal bureaucracy, and the aroused protest and reform organisations of the 1960s were all enemies of the new administrations.²⁶ Haldeman wrote that the attacks on the executive came from four major power blocks in Washington: the press, the bureaucracy, the Congress, and the intelligence community. In the end, it was the press, more than the three other power blocks combined, that did the most to bring Nixon down. He had been their adversary for decades.²⁷

When Richard Nixon resigned in August 1974, the United States concluded one of the most traumatic

18 Ibid, p. 103.

19 Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Challenging the Secret Government. The Post-Watergate Investigations of the CIA and FBI*. USA: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.p. 16.

20 H.R. Haldeman and Joseph DiMona. *The Ends of Power* (London: Book Club Associates, 1978) p. 217.

21 William Colby and Peter Forbath, p. 323.

22 Ibid, p. 328.

23 H.R. Haldeman and Joseph DiMona, p. 318.

24 Melvin Small. *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1999) p. 277.

25 William Colby and Peter Forbath, p. 328.

26 Samuel P. Huntington. *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Harvard, USA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981) p. 191.

27 H.R. Haldeman, *The Ends of Power*. London: Book Club Associates, 1978. pp. 181-182.

chapters in its history. During the Watergate scandal, Americans had been shocked by the crimes of the Nixon presidency. The public's faith in government had been shaken. Yet, only four months later on December 22nd, New York Times reporter Seymour Hersh disclosed that the government's crimes went beyond Watergate. This time the adversary was the CIA.

Hersh claimed that the CIA, forbidden by law from operating in the United States, had gathered files of 10,000 American citizens and conducted illegal break-ins, wiretaps, and mail openings. This extraordinary story turned out to be the first of many. In the next eighteen days, the Times ran thirty-two CIA-related stories. Later investigations would prove that its stories were accurate.

Hersh's story resulted from a directive ordered by Schlesinger and Colby, ordering all CIA employees to report to the director any questionable activities, past or present. They were stunned by the response. The resulting 693-page list of such activities included Operation Chaos, the surveillance and bugging of American journalists, an illegal mail-opening programme, drug experiments, and assassination plots, amongst other activities. Agency employees jokingly called the list "the family jewels."²⁸

In this atmosphere, attacking the CIA for a variety of reasons became more plausible for critics and profitable for journalists. In 1973 and 1974, the Senate and House Intelligence Subcommittees had begun to take closer notice of the CIA's covert actions, particularly in Chile, which was then under enquiry by separate Senate and House foreign relations subcommittees dealing with multinational corporations and inter-American Affairs. The CIA's covert action programme in Chile in the early 1970s was undertaken under express orders from President Nixon and his National Security Assistant, Henry Kissinger. At one point, the President and Kissinger had taken matters out of the hands of the Forty Committee of the NSC and had directed the CIA, much against its officers' judgment, to try to stage a military coup, a project which never came to anything.²⁹

As if the Chile affair were not enough, Hersh's article had attracted worldwide attention. The White House, Congress and the public responded quickly to the story. President Gerald Ford asked William Colby to make a thorough investigation of the Times revelations. Soon after receiving Colby's report, Ford appointed a blue-ribbon commission headed by Vice President Nelson Rockefeller to examine the allegations further. The House and Senate, undeterred by the presidential commission, both created special investigative committees within two months. What the Times variously called "the year of intelligence" and "son of Watergate" had begun.³⁰

As we have seen in this paper dealing with an era so different from the periods described in the previous ones, the CIA tried to level itself with the KGB by using immoral and illegal methods, getting involved with projects and operations not only violating its charter but the UN charter as well. It violated human rights with its programmes on biological tests, behavioural science, spying on American citizens, and more. As mentioned earlier, the Agency did not however act on its own authority. Every operation was personally approved by the President himself, therefore the critics need to blame the presidents and the policy-makers and not the CIA, which just executed their orders. Covert action seemed economical and easy to implement and could be disavowed if discovered. These factors left the Agency vulnerable and an easy target to blame. The CIA was totally at the disposal of the Executive branch; it was partially ignored during the Vietnam War; or pushed to cover-up for the President during the Watergate scandal. However, in conclusion to this chapter, the Agency had to take part of the blame because it was impossible for the President or other high government officials to control all its activities with such a long bureaucratic chain of command in intelligence activities. Furthermore, both the Executive branch and the CIA abused the maximum flexibility given to them by Congress. These abuses were revealed by the press and increased popular scepticism.

28 Kathryn S. Olmsted, p. 30.

29 Ray S. Cline, *The CIA Under Reagan, Bush and Casey. The Evolution of the Agency from Roosevelt to Reagan*. Washington, D.C: Acropolis Books, 1981. p. 249.

30 Ibid, p. 12.

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