

INNOCENCE ABROAD: THE NEW WORLD OF SPYLESS COUPS

By **David Ignatius**

September 22, 1991

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 years 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 unthinkable had they been done in the shadows. Consider:

When Boris Yeltsin's aides 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 in their webs of secrecy, these overt operatives have been immensely successful.

There's an obvious lesson here for Gates, or whoever ends up heading the CIA. The old concept of covert action, which has gotten the agency into such trouble during the past 40 years, may be obsolete. Nowadays, sensible activities to support America's friends abroad (or undermine its enemies) are probably best done openly. That includes paramilitary operations such as supporting freedom fighters, which can be managed overtly by the Pentagon. And it includes 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 intelligence collection -- "spying," in its purest form. That part of the CIA needs to be strengthened, not cut.

What may need abolishing is the covert-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 Policy Coordination. It may be time, at last, to bid them adieu. They're obsolete. They've been privatized.

That's especially true in the realm of what used to be called "propaganda" and can now simply 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 actually 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 faxes, 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.

Weinstein's career as an overt operator dates back to 1980, when he joined Soviet dissidents in organizing a citizens' committee to monitor the Helsinki Accords on Human Rights. He quickly became connected with the network

of pro-democracy activists who were then beginning to challenge anti-democratic regimes around the world. Soon he was sponsoring conferences 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 those early days included some of the insurgents who were later to lead protest movements across Eastern Europe in 1989.

"People wander through your office," he says. "They become family."

Weinstein founded the Center for Democracy in 1984 as an umbrella for his global meddling. He dispatched election-monitoring teams to the Philippines, Panama and Nicaragua that are credited with having helped topple undemocratic regimes in those countries 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 constitution-drafters from those three countries.

Trenchcoats and tradecraft were irrelevant to these gatherings. The key man in Weinstein's overt operation was the rapporteur.

Boris Yeltsin and his aides were soon drawn into this transatlantic hospitality suite. They attended Weinstein's conferences, including one on environmental problems held in Moscow 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 enough began sending faxes to their friend, Weinstein. The first one read simply: "It is military coup. Tanks are everywhere."

Now, with the KGB in retreat from Prague to Vladivostok, Weinstein has scheduled a conference in Sofia, Bulgaria on the topic: "The Proper Role of Intelligence Agencies in a Democracy." That may be rubbing it in.

Amazingly enough, these 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 nearly 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 National Student Association. Anti-communist intellectuals in Europe were deemed worthy of aid, so the CIA subsidized the Congress for Cultural Freedom and Encounter magazine. It was decided that we should help democratic parties in Europe resist communist pressure. The CIA did it covertly.

No activity was so innocent that the CIA didn't think it could be improved by secrecy.

Even Gloria Steinem, now a feminist leader, was drawn into the CIA covert web. According to CIA historian John Ranelagh, she was involved in a CIA operation to send American students to World Youth festivals in Vienna in 1959 and Helsinki in 1962.

When these covert activities surfaced (as they inevitably did), the fallout was devastating. The CIA connection, intended to protect people and organizations from public embarrassment, had precisely the opposite effect.

"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 protection.

Allen Weinstein is just one of many overt operatives 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: William Miller of the American Committee on U.S.-Soviet Relations; financier George Soros of the Soros Foundation; John Mroz of the Center for East-West Security Studies; John Baker of the Atlantic Council; and Harriett Crosby of the Institute for Soviet-American Relations. This has truly been a revolution by committee.

The AFL-CIO also deserves 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 Adrian Karatnycky wrote in these pages two years ago, American trade unions and the U.S. Congress provided millions of dollars to the Solidarity underground.

"The money underwrote shipments of scores of printing presses, dozens of computers, hundreds of mimeograph machines, 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 operations has been the National Endowment for Democracy, a quasi-private group headed by Carl Gershman that is funded by the U.S. Congress. Through the late 1980s, it did openly what had once been unspeakably covert -- dispensing money to anti-communist forces behind the Iron Curtain.

To read through the NED's grant list (a public document) is to take a stroll down the democracy movement's memory lane: In Czechoslovakia, 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 Hungary's first independent public-opinion survey; in Romania and Bulgaria, the endowment has supported new intellectual journals and other tools of democracy. Among its many activities in Poland, the endowment has backed the Gdansk Video Center, which helped produce

and distribute pro-democracy videos throughout Eastern Europe during the 1980s. And through the Free Trade Union Institute and the Center for International Private Enterprise, the endowment helped support new unions and employers' associations across Eastern Europe -- building the infrastructure of a free economy.

The endowment has also been active inside the Soviet Union. It has given money to Soviet trade unions; to the liberal "Interregional Group" in the Congress of Peoples Deputies; to a foundation headed by Russian activist Ilya Zaslavsky; to an Oral History Project headed by Soviet historian Yuri Afanasyev; to the Ukrainian independence movement known as Rukh, and to many other projects.

Covert funding for these groups would have been the kiss of death, if discovered. Overt funding, it would seem, has been a kiss of life.