

The CIA's Holy War

No espionage operation or covert action was deemed too extreme by a CIA that saw only friends or enemies
By Stephen Kinzer

As the Cold War entered its hottest phase in the early 1950s, a hard-line CIA officer named Harry Rositzke was given one of America's most urgent jobs. From a base in Munich he coordinated a staggering array of covert operations aimed at weakening the Soviet Union. He ran spies, directed sabotage operations, and sent many operatives to their deaths on missions behind the Iron Curtain. It was the hardest and most brutal kind of work, but Rositzke, his superiors, and their bosses in the White House believed it was urgently necessary to prevent the very extermination of the United States.

Decades later, looking back over his career, Rositzke concluded that it had all been pointless and even counter-productive. The central effort in CIA history—the secret war against the Soviet Union—was motivated not by reality, he wrote in a memoir, but by “hysteria and paranoia.”

“The Cold War became a holy war against the infidels, a defense of free God-fearing men against the atheistic Communist sys-

tem,” he recalled. “As it turned out, the image was an illusion. The specter of a powerful Russia was remote from the reality of a country weakened by war, with a shattered economy, an overtaxed civilian and military bureaucracy, and large areas of civil unrest. The illusory image was at least partly due to a failure of intelligence.”

American covert operations during the Cold War, run mainly by the Central Intelligence Agency, were breathtaking in scope and ambition. They aimed not only to bleed the Soviet Union, but also to impose governments subservient to the United States wherever possible, overthrow defiant ones, and punish anyone in the world who questioned America's foreign policy. Even more astonishing is how misbegotten most of these operations look from the perspective of history. They not only devastated many of the target countries, but also spread anti-American passion, weakening the national security of the United States. Their origin lay not in sober assessments of the world, but in what



PHOTO BY JAMES WHITMORE/THE LIFE IMAGES COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES



Hurrah for Shah
Iranians cheer the Shah's return to Tehran in August 1953 after a CIA-backed coup took down freely elected Prime Minister Mossadegh.



Global Ambition

Allen Dulles, in his CIA office in 1954, served in the OSS in World War II and was CIA chief from 1953 to 1961.

Rositzke called “emotional excitability” and “systematic delusions of persecution.”

America’s approach to intelligence after World War II was shaped by two coinciding realities. First was the excruciating boredom that spread through the corps of former spies and covert operatives who had served in the wartime Office of Strategic Services, America’s first true intelligence agency. After years of death-defying derring-do, running operations against Axis powers that placed them and their agents on the edge of death every day, they found themselves back in their jobs as Wall Street lawyers, stockbrokers and investment bankers. Many of them—including Allen Dulles, who had been chief of the OSS station in Switzerland during the war—spent long hours reminiscing about their adventures and dreaming of ways to return to the cloak-and-dagger world.

The second reality that shaped American intelligence in the post-war era was the emergence of a hostile Soviet Union. It quickly came to be seen not simply as a rival or adversary, but a barbaric and evil force bent on destroying the United States and free life everywhere. Against such an enemy, any and all forms of resistance seemed justified. This gave OSS veterans their chance to return to the field of battle they so deeply missed.

In 1947 Dulles helped draft the National Security Act, which created the Central Intelligence Agency. This CIA was radically different from other Western secret services, especially those of Great Britain, widely considered the world’s best. Those services were shaped around the principle that intelligence gathering and analysis must be kept strictly separate from covert action, to avoid the temptation of skewing intelligence reports so they would lead to the conclusion that covert action was necessary. The CIA was created without this firewall. Indeed, Dulles conceived it as an agency designed not to help American leaders understand the world, but to help them change it—by any means necessary.

Soon after his inauguration in 1953, President Dwight Eisenhower named Dulles to direct the agency he had helped create. This guaranteed that the CIA would behave much

as the OSS had during wartime—engaged not simply in espionage but also subversion, bribery, intimidation, sabotage, violence and “regime change.” The appointment of Dulles was also ominous in another way. Eisenhower had appointed John Foster Dulles, Allen’s older brother, as Secretary of State. This was the only time in history that siblings directed the overt and covert sides of American foreign policy. Under other circumstances, the State Department might have served as a check on the CIA’s wildest impulses. Instead, for most of the 1950s the Dulles brothers forged them into a single blunt instrument.

Although the two brothers saw the world in precisely the same way and worked intimately together, all who knew them remarked on how different they were in personality. The elder, John Foster, was solitary, imperious, dour, unfriendly, self-righteous and socially awkward. Allen was the opposite: a sparkling personality and charming storyteller who had dozens of mistresses ranging from Clare Booth Luce to Queen Frederika of Greece. The brothers lived profoundly different lives while working together to shape the world.

Communism was the Dulles brothers’ central enemy, but directly attacking its main centers—the Soviet Union and “Red China”—was out of the question. Recognizing that fact, the CIA sought other enemies. It found them in countries that proclaimed themselves neutrals in the Cold War.

“America’s policy is global,” Secretary of State Dulles told President Sukarno of Indonesia, one of the neutralist leaders he and his brother abhorred. “You must be on one side or another. Neutralism is immoral.”

Two perceptions shaped the Dulles brothers’ approach to the world. First, they considered neutralist leaders to be enemies who were secretly in league with the Kremlin. Second, they believed that the Soviet threat—and by extension the threat from neutralist countries—was so great that it justified any counter-operations, no matter how violent or extreme.

“It is now clear that we are facing an implacable enemy whose avowed objective is world domination by whatever means and at whatever cost,” General James Doolittle wrote in a secret 1954 report to President Eisenhower. “If the United States is to survive, longstanding concepts of ‘fair play’ must be reconsidered...It may be necessary



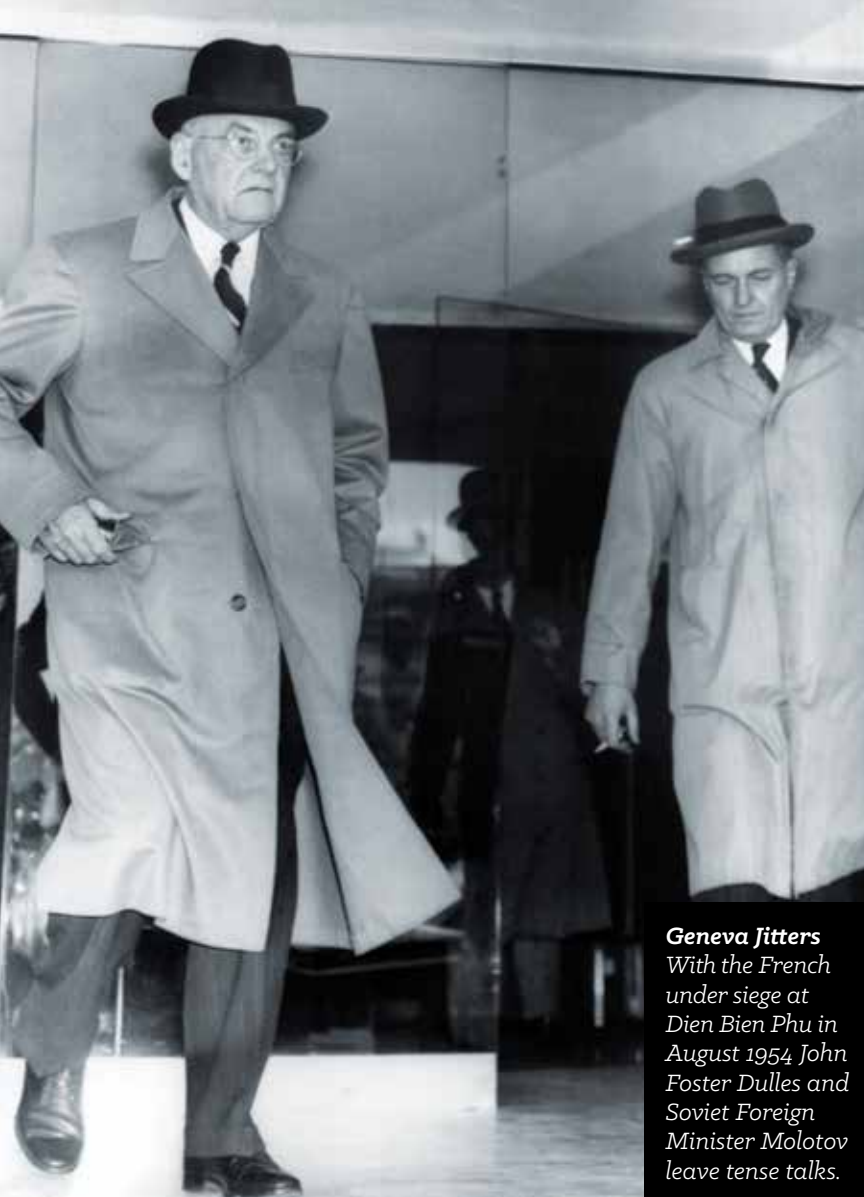
Diem Dilemma
President Diem of South Vietnam meets Ike and John Foster Dulles in 1957. In 1963 Diem died in a CIA-backed coup.



Sukarno No!
Indonesia's Sukarno, feted at the White House in 1956, fell out of favor for dealing with Soviet leader Khrushchev.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: ASSOCIATED PRESS; DAVID HUBERT COLLECTION/HISTORICAL ALAMY
STOCK PHOTO; TIME/ASSOCIATED PRESS; ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



Geneva Jitters
With the French under siege at Dien Bien Phu in August 1954 John Foster Dulles and Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov leave tense talks.

Do You Read?
The Delco 5300 was a small but powerful radio preferred by the CIA for covert operations in the 1960s and '70s.



that the American people be made acquainted with, understand and support this fundamentally repugnant philosophy.”

Eisenhower agreed. “I have come to the conclusion that some of our traditional ideas of international sportsmanship are scarcely applicable in the morass in which the world now flounders,” he wrote.

No one knew it at the time, but Eisenhower was an enthusiastic supporter of the CIA's most radical schemes. Like the Dulles brothers, he had been shaped by his World War II experience. He saw covert action as a kind of peace project—a way the United States could work, short of war, its will in the world.

President Truman used the CIA for covert action, including against Communist labor unions in France and influencing Italy's 1948 election. He refused, however, to approve any proposal aimed at overthrowing a government. Eisenhower had no such scruple.

The first two foreign leaders the CIA set out to overthrow after Eisenhower's inauguration had both tormented the Dulles brothers when they were lawyers at the legendary firm of Sullivan & Cromwell. The first, Prime Mohammad Mossadegh of Iran, had been instrumental in killing a huge contract Allen Dulles had negotiated between Iran and one of his clients, an engineering consortium called Overseas Consultants Inc. After that, Mossadegh had nationalized his country's oil industry, which had been owned by the British government and used another Sullivan & Cromwell client, the Schroeder Bank, as its financial agent. In just a few weeks during the summer of 1953, the CIA threw Iran into chaos, promoted a military coup, pushed Mossadegh from power, and placed the Shah back on his Peacock Throne. That led to 25 years of royal dictatorship, followed by a revolution and the emergence of a violently anti-American regime.

Less than a year later, the Dulles brothers struck against President Jacobo Arbenz of Guatemala. His sins were equivalent to Mossadegh's. He was promoting land reform that affected the interests of a longtime Sullivan & Cromwell client, United Fruit, and seemed too friendly with Communists. The CIA organized a motley band of exiles into a bogus invasion force, bombed targets inside Guatemala, flooded the country with anti-Arbenz propaganda, and pushed military officers to stage a coup. Arbenz was overthrown in June 1954. That set off a 30-year civil war in

which an estimated 200,000 people were killed. Guatemala has never recovered.

Eisenhower and the Dulles brothers believed Mossadegh and Arbenz posed political as well as economic challenges to the United States. Both leaders were neutralists who refused to take sides in the Cold War. By deposing them, the United States sent a message: it would consider all countries not fully pro-American as enemies.

Over the next few years, the CIA set out to destabilize governments in neutralist countries from Costa Rica to Egypt to Cambodia. One of its largest-scale efforts was in Indonesia, where President Sukarno had emerged as a hero of the emerging “third world.” In 1956 the CIA began promoting a civil war aimed at destroying Sukarno’s government or, if that failed, splitting the country so that part of it would secede and become actively pro-American. It encouraged dissident officers to rebel, sent them large amounts of weaponry, and used its own planes to bomb military bases and other targets. The operation fell apart when one of the planes was shot down. Its American pilot was captured, and was found to be carrying dozens of documents that revealed the extent of CIA involvement in Indonesia’s “civil war.”

The most far-reaching misjudgment the Dulles brothers made—with Eisenhower’s full approval—was their decision to fight the Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh. In 1954, after Ho’s nationalist/Communist army dealt French occupiers a devastating defeat at Dien Bien Phu, world leaders met in Geneva to decide how to shape a new Indochina. All major participants agreed that Ho had earned the right to rule at least a portion of his country—except Secretary of State Dulles. Rather than accept the reality of Ho’s power and popularity, Dulles walked out of the Geneva conference. It is the only time an American secretary of state abandoned a major diplomatic conference in midstream.

Immediately after returning to Washington, Dulles directed his brother to begin covert warfare against Ho. It began quickly and soon grew into a massive operation. If that one man, John Foster Dulles, had not made that single decision and issued that single order—if he had agreed with the French and British that Ho could not be defeated—the entire American involvement in Vietnam might have been avoided. It is difficult even to imagine how different American, Vietnamese and world history would have been if Eisenhower and the Dulles brothers had not made such a disastrous miscalculation.

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that, so far as is known, no other president has ever done: order the assassination of a foreign leader. His first target was Fidel Castro, whose revolutionary government in Cuba had put a decisive end to the influence of American politicians, businessmen and gangsters in his country. After a briefing from Allen Dulles on May 13, Eisenhower ordered Castro “sawed off.” Three months later he approved plans to assassinate another leader he believed threatened American interests, Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba of the Congo.

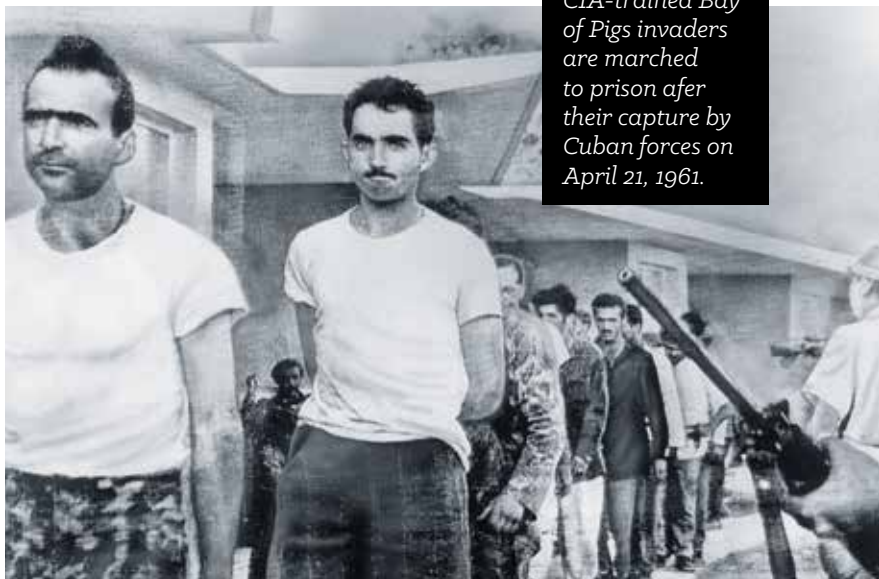
“Eisenhower was a tough man behind that smile,” the CIA officer assigned to oversee these plots, Richard Bissell, testified years later.

To kill Castro, the CIA came up with a bizarre plan that involved Mafia assassins.

Allen Dulles ordered the CIA’s top-secret “health alteration committee” to make poison pills that were to be passed to agents thought to have access to Castro’s food. The same “health alteration committee” compounded poison toothpaste to be given to Lumumba, and Allen Dulles sent one of his top operatives to deliver it to the CIA station chief in the Congo. Miraculously—or because of sophisticated security measures—Castro survived murder plots and lived into old age. Lumumba was not so lucky. The CIA and its partners from Belgium, the Congo’s former colonial ruler, succeeded in overthrowing Lumumba, capturing him, and then, on January 17, 1961, executing him.

Having failed to kill Castro, Eisenhower directed the CIA to find a way to depose him. Allen Dulles presented him with a plan for an invasion staged by Cuban exiles. Eisenhower liked the idea, but the invasion could not be

Captured
CIA-trained Bay of Pigs invaders are marched to prison after their capture by Cuban forces on April 21, 1961.



launched before he left office. His successor, John F. Kennedy, retained Allen Dulles as CIA director and was persuaded to proceed with the invasion. This led to the CIA's most public defeat. Exiles landed at the Bay of Pigs on April 17, 1961, but were quickly defeated by Castro's army.

"How could I have been so stupid?" Kennedy wondered aloud after the debacle. Later he cursed "CIA bastards" and said he wished he could "splinter the CIA into a thousand pieces and scatter it into the winds." After a decent interval of a few months, he fired Allen Dulles.

The CIA was never scattered into the winds. After Kennedy's assassination it resumed its worldwide campaign. Perhaps its best-known operation was the overthrow of President Salvador Allende of Chile in 1973. The most damning aspect of that operation was the sending—in a diplomatic pouch—of weapons and ammunition to plotters who wished to assassinate the commander of the Chilean army, General Rene Schneider. His crime was belief in a principle that is central to any democracy: civilian control of the military. General Schneider refused to participate in action against Allende. Officers recruited by the CIA shot him dead on October 25, 1970. Three years of intense CIA pressure on Allende—orchestrated by President Richard Nixon and national security adviser, Henry Kissinger—ultimately led to a coup and Allende's death.

Many CIA operations are chilling in retrospect, but the

agency never acted on its own. Presidents approved all of its major projects. It was never an uncontrolled "rogue elephant." Its errors, many of them staggering in scope and effect, were errors of policy, not simply execution.

Key failures of perception led to these errors. First was a vast over-estimate of Soviet capabilities in the 1950s, the product of an almost complete lack of intelligence about the true state of the Soviet Union. Second was considering neutralist leaders, many of whom sympathized with American values, as implacable enemies. Third was greatly underestimating the power of nationalism in the emerging nations of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Finally, Eisenhower, the Dulles brothers nor their successors imagined that CIA operations—even those that seemed successful—would set off devastating "blowback" that ended up decisively weakening America's reputation, power and security.

The CIA officer Harry Rostizke, who spent years fighting Soviet power, concluded at the end of his life that the campaign had been an "almost uniform failure." The central problem was not, he wrote, that particular operations failed. It was that American leaders misunderstood the world, shaping it to fit their own preconceptions rather than appreciating its complexity. "The Cold War prism created in the minds of diplomatic and military strategists a clear-cut world of black and white," he lamented. "There were no grays." ★

Stephen Kinzer was a longtime New York Times correspondent and bureau chief in Berlin and Istanbul, and is the author of The Brothers, John Foster Dulles, Allen Dulles and Their Secret World War.

THE CIA'S GREATEST HITS

To counter Soviet influence and kill nationalist movements that might hurt U.S. economic interests, the CIA put many leaders in their cross hairs



**PRIME MINISTER
MOHAMMAD MOSSADEGH
IRAN**

WHY TARGETED:
Ran afoul of British and American interests, and nationalized oil industry.

CIA ACTION: Overthrown by CIA-backed military coup, 1953. Restored the Peacock Throne of the Shah that lasted until 1978.



**PRESIDENT
JACOBO ARBENZ
GUATEMALA**

WHY TARGETED:
Left-leaning land and labor reforms hurt interests of American company United Fruit.

CIA ACTION: CIA instigated an uprising and military coup overthrowing Arbenz in 1954. Led to 30 years of civil war.

Iran Remix

The 1978 Iranian revolution saw the U.S.-backed Shah deposed and the Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini come to power.



PRESIDENT SUKARNO INDONESIA

WHY TARGETED:

The first president of Indonesia promoted non alignment of the emerging Third World. CIA ACTION: In 1956 the agency began a decade-long civil war that culminated in the overthrow and arrest of Sukarno in 1966.



HO CHI MINH DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM

WHY TARGETED:

The Communist leader of North Vietnam led the defeat of French colonialists in 1954 and sought North-South reunification. CIA ACTION: CIA began covert campaign to undermine unification of Vietnam.



FIDEL CASTRO CUBA

WHY TARGETED:

The revolutionary leader ended U.S. influence, aligned with the Soviet Union and supported worldwide revolutionary movements. CIA ACTION: Since 1960 the CIA made several efforts to assassinate and overthrow Castro.



PRIME MINISTER PATRICE LUMUMBA, CONGO

WHY TARGETED:

In 1960 the independence leader became the first democratically-elected prime minister, and he sought aid from the Soviet Union. CIA ACTION: Deposed in CIA-backed coup, executed by firing squad in 1961.



PRESIDENT SALVADOR ALLENDE, CHILE

WHY TARGETED:

In 1970 he became the first Marxist freely elected to lead a Latin American country, and he initiated the nationalization of industries. CIA ACTION: Supported a military coup in 1973 that ushered in the 17-year dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet.