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THE CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

Government spying on foreigners is a very old activity. Since World War II it has become big business.

There has been a major change in the US. Back in 1929 the Secretary of State, Henry Stimson, was horrified to find out that the US had been listening to the conversations between British, French, Italian and Japanese officials in readiness for some international law negotiations. "Gentlemen do not read each other's mail", he said. He then stopped the State Department's funding of the code-breaking project. This helps explain why the US was unprepared for the surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour on December 7 1941.

The most well known US foreign intelligence agency is the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), created in 1947. The Cold War had just begun and so the US needed an extensive intelligence system to defeat the communists.

The CIA has two main strands: collecting and analysing information and being involved in operations. The first strand meant that the CIA was to be the main central source of secret intelligence going to the president. This was supposed to simplify all of the information gathering, so that the president would have only one adviser on intelligence.

In fact, this system has never worked. There are at least 13 US secret services scattered around Washington DC. They often duplicate the work of others.

The second strand is that of actually running the operations, such as having their own agents involved in conflicts. This was how the CIA began, with the creation in 1942 of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). The OSS placed agents in occupied Europe to help organize resistance groups in readiness for the Allied invasion. The OSS was dissolved once the war was won. When the CIA was created, it was also given scope to take on "other functions and duties" and this has provided the opportunity for the CIA to be involved in a more hands-on way in running operations.

The CIA has had three main lots of problems. The first is that it has been right – but ignored by the policy makers. For example, it decided in the early 1960s that the US could not win the Vietnam war. It was getting information from its agents in the field that the Viet Cong/ National Liberation Front were stronger than the US military were estimating and the US military were over-estimating the effectiveness of both themselves and their South Vietnamese allies.

This was not the information that President Johnson wanted to hear. As the secret reports moved up the line from the CIA agents in South Vietnam towards the White House, so the reports were altered to give a more optimistic impression of how the war was going. Thus, the president heard what he wanted to hear – and not what he needed to know.

Another example comes from the CIA's research into the increasing weakness of the Soviet Union throughout the 1980s. In 1985, President Reagan met the new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. This was to be the first meeting he had with any Soviet leader.

Just before leaving for the historic Geneva conference, the president was briefed by Kay Oliver, a CIA Soviet specialist. She spoke about the domestic stresses on the Soviet system: corruption, economic stagnation, decline of popular confidence in the Soviet system, inefficiency, ethnic unrest, alcoholism and drug abuse. The system was collapsing from within.

It is not true that the CIA failed to predict the collapse of the Soviet Union. Rather, that the collapse came a lot quicker than the CIA researchers had expected. But they had at least detected the seeds of decline.

As with the impending defeat in Vietnam, the CIA was providing information that did not fit in with the views of the American leaders. The American leaders were preparing to fight a limited nuclear war. They did not want to hear that the Soviet Union was collapsing from within. That did not fit their own view of the situation.

Therefore, the US was taken by surprise when Gorbachev unilaterally pulled out of the arms race. He did this partly to save money to finance his domestic reforms. But the collapse went ahead despite his efforts. Unfortunately, the US did not have contingency plans for a Soviet surrender and so could not make the most of its Cold War victory.

The second lot of problems is when the CIA produces the wrong intelligence. The fall of the Shah of Iran is an example. During the 1970s, the Shah introduced extensive economic and social reforms, such as the education of girls, while maintaining tight political control over the country, not least through the extensive use of his intelligence agency to punish anyone critical of his regime.

These reforms angered the conservative Islamic clerics, who did not approve of the increased status of women. They also angered people at the other end of the political spectrum, who were being punished for campaigning for political freedom. Thus there was unrest from both ends of the politics. The CIA failed to understand just how angry were the clerics and the other political leaders.

In 1979 the Shah was forced suddenly into exile. The clerics took over and they turned on both the Shah's supporters and his left wing critics. They also took on the US for siding with the Shah by seizing the US Embassy in Tehran and holding the staff as hostage for about a year.

Finally, the CIA's third set of problems have come from the CIA's involvement in hands-on operations. One example comes from Cuba in 1961. Fidel Castro came to power in Cuba in the late 1950s and introduced a communist regime. The CIA trained 1,400 Cuban exiles for them to attack Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. The operation was a complete failure and a great embarrassment to the CIA.

The CIA later made several attempts (including hiring the Mafia) to assassinate President Castro. The president survived all these attacks and he is now one of the world's longest serving heads of government. He is a hero to some people in Latin America as a person who has beaten the CIA.

A final example concerns Afghanistan. When the Soviet Union invaded that country in 1979, the CIA responded by arming the opponents of the regime, some of whom were volunteers from other Islamic countries. The CIA thought that the militant Islamic fundamentalists could be used both to push the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan and then to destabilize the southern Soviet Union's extensive Islamic tribes. The Soviet Union was driven out of the country in 1989 and this contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The Afghanistan campaign was seen at the time as a great victory for the CIA.

But instead of going home to their former farming or other occupations, some of the Islamic guerrillas decided that Afghanistan should be the platform to "liberate" all of the Islamic world from what they saw as the evils of both communism and capitalism.

One of the young volunteers who went from Saudi Arabia to Afghanistan ran an organization called "The Base", better known in Arabic as "Al-Qaeda". There is a continuing controversy over the CIA's precise links with Osama bin Laden in the 1970s. But this episode is a warning that what might be seen as a CIA success in one decade may come back to haunt the CIA later.

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