National Insecurity, edited by Craig Eisendrath

reviewed by James M. Wall in the July 19, 2000 issue

Veteran diplomats, former congressional staff members and journalists who specialize in intelligence coverage join forces in this collection of essays to call for a total overhaul of U.S. intelligence strategy. The cold war has been over for almost a decade-enough time for these writers to view the past with a sober and critical eye and to anticipate a future that respects human rights and international law without denying U.S. intelligence the important task of information-gathering for the protection of U.S. security. Editor Craig Eisendrath writes that the essays were motivated by a desire to find "the best possible intelligence system, one that serves the national interest and does the least possible harm here and abroad."

The ten authors assembled here examine the failures and successes of the past. They conclude that "there is no present moral or practical justification for a continuation of the extremity of illegal and nondemocratic actions that the United States practiced during the Cold War." The authors are especially harsh on covert action, which Melvin A. Goodman, former head of the Central Intelligence Agency's Soviet section, defines as "a secret operation to influence governments, events, organizations or persons in support of a foreign policy in a manner that is not attributable to the United States."

Destabilizing foreign governments, influencing elections and fermenting civil unrest are all practices not included in the National Security Act of 1947, which created the CIA, the Department of Defense and the National Security Council. But these practices nevertheless were common throughout the cold-war era. Following the end of World War II, CIA operatives provided undercover support for democratic forces in elections in Italy and France. Those early covert successes helped prevent the election of communist governments, but they also set a bad example and encouraged subsequent failed attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro, invade Cuba at the Bay of Pigs and make illegal use of federal funds in the Iran-contra scandal of the 1980s. Despite a huge intelligence budget targeted on the Soviet Union, no intelligence agency predicted the 1991 collapse of the communist empire.

Nor has the end of the cold war ended U.S. intelligence failures. Even with its budget still at a high cold-war level, U.S. intelligence failed to detect the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests, allowed UN arms inspectors in Iraq to be compromised as intelligence agents, mistakenly bombed the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade because of an outdated city map, and conveniently destroyed historical records about CIA activities in Iran during the 1950s. Defenders of covert action justify the practice as essential to U.S. security. But Goodman quotes a cogent comment by Hodding Carter III, a former State Department official: "Covert action is by definition outside the ambit of democracy."

In a chapter titled "Too Many Spies, Too Little Intelligence," Robert E. White, former ambassador to Paraguay and El Salvador, writes that "from the overthrow of the government of Guatemala to the Iran-contra fiasco of the 1980s, the CIA not only violated solemn treaties but allied us with the most violent, reactionary elements of Latin American society." This perversion of American values led to the CIA suppression of "democracy, free speech and human rights in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras and Panama. The torture and assassination of democratic leaders, including presidential candidates, journalists, priests and union officials, became commonplace."

That the security forces worked at odds with the U.S. foreign service is a constant theme in the chapters that reexamine the past. White, who arrived in El Salvador a few months before the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, is especially critical of the arrogance of CIA officials. White was forced to fire the CIA station chief when he refused to carry out the ambassador's instructions to gather information on violent right-wing officials, many of whom were actually on the U.S. payroll.

Until he was replaced by the Reagan administration, White continued to "veto all lethal military assistance until the Salvadorian army's human-rights record improved" in dealing with leftist rebels. Reagan's election halted Carter's human rights strategy, and in El Salvador led to an all-out effort to defeat the rebels.

White says "it took ten years, 75,000 murdered civilians and a million Salvadorian immigrants to pry U.S. policy loose" from the misguided attempt to put down what proved to be "one of the strongest, most resourceful guerrilla movements ever seen in Latin America." Tragic and costly mistakes came about because from the start the CIA went beyond its assignment to gather information for the president and the Congress. Instead, the agency sought to shape U.S. foreign policy by covert action in

what Eisendrath summarizes as "paramilitary operations, election rigging, misinformation, massive electronic eavesdropping, and aiding and abetting a host of the world's most undesirable characters."

President Clinton's 1996 Intelligence Oversight Board, asked to investigate the CIA's role in Guatemala, found, according to White, "that the Agency had been working at cross-purposes with the Ambassador and that CIA officers had lied to Congress about their activities." White asks: "What possible defense could be made for the CIA's backing of a campaign of torture and terror that ended up killing an estimated 200,000 Guatemalans? There was nothing at stake in Guatemala that could have possibly justified support for barbarism."

One of the recommendations made by Eisendrath is to outlaw the CIA's use of journalists, clergy and Peace Corp volunteers for intelligence-gathering purposes. These U.S. citizens on foreign soil need to be free of a suspicion that undermines their relationship with the people with whom they work. Still other foreign alliances must be curtailed. One of the book's authors, Alfred W. McCoy, "documents the Agency's support of drug traffickers from Laos to Central America." He calls for the end of the CIA's protection of foreign agents from U.S. Drug Enforcement officials. Clinton has ordered the CIA to protect American citizens from drug traffickers, but as several authors in this book point out, the CIA is hopelessly compromised by past alliances.

The book concludes with the reminder that the U.S. must continue to watch its "flanks and backside." There will continue to be powerful and unstable countries that must be watched, "international terrorists who need to be stalked; nuclear materials that need to be tracked; and chemical and biological weapons that need to be monitored." But these tasks must be carried out in full compliance with the laws of a free and open society.