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THESIS

COVERT ACTION: A SYSTEMS APPROACH

by

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December 2014

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Covert action is a complex tool; planning and conducting effective covert operations can be a challenging process. Throughout history, covert actions have been applied with great effect in support of state policies, but also sometimes with devastating consequences for the sponsor. This thesis takes a systems approach to the study of covert action to help explain the divergence between effective and ineffective operations.

It is demonstrated that, because of the complexities inherent in this policy tool, covert action can be best understood as a system, that is, by focusing on the interactions and interplay of the system's components. Four concepts of systems are examined in relation to historic U.S. and international examples—the system diagram, system effects, feedback, and tradeoffs. This holistic view of covert action may help policymakers better assess the viability and implications of a covert strategy and allow for better integration of covert action into foreign policy. Ultimately, this thesis aims to advance discourse by developing a formal theory of covert action based on the systems approach and offers six "favoring conditions" that can assist policymakers when planning and executing covert strategies.

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COVERT ACTION: A SYSTEMS APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ANO	Abu Nidal Organization
BSC	British Security Cooperation
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
DCI	Director of Central Intelligence
DDoS	distributed denial of service
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
GPU	State Political Administration (Russia)
ICS	industrial control system
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
KGB	Committee for State Security (Soviet Union)
NSC	National Security Council
OGPU	Unified State Political Administration (Russia)
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
RFE	Radio Free Europe
SEAL	sea, air, land
SIS	Secret Intelligence Service (Britain)
USSOCOM	United States Special Operations Command
U.S.	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. INTRODUCTION

More than 13 years after the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States (U.S), all of them spent in active armed conflict, Americans are tired of war. Thousands of lives have been lost, trillions of dollars spent, and an intangible, but significant, amount of U.S. international prestige damaged for, arguably, little gain. This domestic weariness has been evident in the U.S. response to recent international crises around the world. Despite the Syrian regime launching a chemical attack against its own citizens in August of 2013, a blatant violation of both international norms and U.S. "red line"[1] deterrent threats, the majority of the American public was adamantly opposed to any kind of involvement.[2] Months later, in March of 2014, few supported either a direct or indirect military response to the Russian annexation of Crimea and its follow-on incursions into Ukraine.[3] And while the U.S. and its coalition partners have recently launched airstrikes to counter the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), public opinion has opposed any large-scale intervention to confront this new extremist threat.[4] Problematic results of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have generated in both Americans and the international community a strong aversion toward more direct military engagements.

This aversion is not new, however. There have been periods throughout American history when the U.S. has been reluctant to engage openly in the international environment. Domestic isolationist attitudes, the support of unpopular regimes, or the maintenance of a fragile peace are just a few reasons the U.S. has avoided direct involvement. These reasons, however, do not lessen the perceived need to influence the

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[1] The White House, "Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps," August 20, 2012. http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps.

[2] Scott Clement, "Most in US Oppose Syrian Strike, Post-ABC Poll Finds," *The Washington Post*, September 3, 2013.

[3] "Bipartisan Support for Increased U.S. Sanctions Against Russia: Most Oppose Military Aid to Ukraine," Pew Research, April 28, 2014. http://www.people-press.org/2014/04/28/bipartisan-support-for-increased-u-s-sanctions-against-russia/.

[4] Mark Preston, "Poll: Americans Back Airstrikes, but Oppose Use of U.S. Troops in Syria, Iraq," CNN, September 29, 2014. http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/29/politics/poll-americans-back-airstrikes/.

global community in support of U.S. interests. The Cold War is perhaps the best example where direct military intervention was seldom feasible or desirable, yet international influence was still essential. The U.S. could not risk a nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union, but neither could it risk the unchecked expansion of the communist system. To address this dilemma of influence without open intervention, covert action has often been applied.

Covert action is defined in official U.S. policy as "an activity or activities of the United States Government to influence political, economic, or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the United States Government will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly."[5] Used correctly, covert action can be a highly effective foreign policy instrument. Covert action, however, is a complex tool, and planning and conducting effective operations is a challenging process. Once executed, determining the operational effectiveness of a concept as deeply buried in secrecy as covert action can be even more difficult as assessments often devolve into emotional arguments about the quality of the policy the covert action is supporting, not of the action itself. For example, discussions about the effectiveness of the covert intervention in the Angolan Civil War in 1975 are often overshadowed by debates focused on the partnership between the U.S. and the South African apartheid regime.[6] The challenge of determining whether, when, where, and how covert actions will be most useful must be mastered, however, if this tool of statecraft is to be applied appropriately.

Because of the complexities inherent in covert action, it will be shown that an effective, but hitherto untried, method of assessing a covert action strategy is through a systems approach framework. A systems approach focuses on the "design of the whole"[7] and studies the interactions of the internal components of a system to understand how those interactions influence each other, and ultimately, the outcome. Instead of viewing components in isolation, the systems approach considers the interaction itself as the unit

[5] The National Security Act of 1947, [50 U.S.C 413b] Sec 503(e).

[6] Gregory Treverton, *Intelligence for an Age of Terror* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 212-214.

[7] Simon Ramo, *The Systems Approach: Fresh Solutions to Complex Problems Through Combining Science and Practical Common Sense* (Anaheim, CA: KNI, Inc., 1998), 16.

of analysis. Analyzing the complex interplay of the covert action's components and tradeoffs and visualizing how those elements impact overall effectiveness may ultimately lead to a better integration of covert action into U.S. foreign policy.

B. BACKGROUND

In 1961, President Kennedy summed up the prevailing attitude toward covert action when he said, "I don't care what it is, but if I need some material fast or an idea fast, the CIA is the place to go."[8] Since General Washington first dispatched a saboteur to enter England under a false passport and set fire to a naval shipyard, U.S. presidents have used covert action to defend American interests.[9] There have been many successful covert actions over the years, but just as many failures. The TPAJAX operation to remove Iranian Prime Minister Mossadeq and the PBSUCCESS operation to replace Guatemalan President Arbenz were, at least initially, considered highpoints of covert action success.[10] More recently, the Stuxnet cyber attack on Iranian nuclear centrifuges in 2010, while still officially unacknowledged, is viewed as a success by many.[11] Paralleling these achievements have been many abject failures as well, to include numerous unsuccessful attempts to overthrow Fidel Castro in Cuba,[12] a botched coup to replace President Allende in Chile,[13] and an intensive, yet ineffective, anti-Saddam campaign in Iraq.[14]

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[8] Lucien S. Vandenbroucke, *Perilous Options: Special Operations as an Instrument of U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 20.

[9] Stephen F. Knott, *Secret and Sanctioned: Covert Operations and the American Presidency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 22.

[10] Gregory Treverton, *Covert Action: The Limits of Intervention in the Post-War World* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1987), 176.

[11] While many view Stuxnet as a success, others see it as causing only temporary delay in the Iranian nuclear program as well as sparking Iranian cyber retaliation. William J. Broad, John Markoff, and David E. Sanger, "Israeli Test on Worm Called Crucial in Iran Nuclear Delay," *The New York Times*, January 11, 2011. According to *The New York Times* article "In Cyberattack on Saudi Firm, U.S. sees Iran Firing Back" (Nicole Perlroth, October 23, 2012) Iran has been linked to the Shamoon virus in "what is regarded as among the most destructive acts of computer sabotage on a company to date."

[12] John Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations from World War II through the Persian Gulf* (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1996), 194–217.

[13] Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars*, 315–321.

[14] John Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 597–605.

Covert action is often seen as a "middle option,"[15] between "doing nothing in a situation in which vital interests may be threatened and sending in military force."[16] Such a seemingly simple view of covert action can lead to a misunderstanding and misapplication of this potentially powerful tool. President Kennedy, entering the White House fresh off a campaign platform offering a more aggressive stance towards communism, felt the need to "do something" with respect to the perceived communist threat in Cuba. This need led to his willingness to execute the "on the shelf" plan to overthrow Fidel Castro that ended in the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion. Similarly, President Reagan felt the need to "do something" to assist the Contra "freedom fighters"[17] in Nicaragua. This need led to the Iran-Contra Affair and the blatant violation of U.S. laws by the National Security Council.[18]

The perceived need to "do something" coupled with the ability to "do something secretly" can elicit a strong emotional response from policymakers that has the potential to overshadow dispassionate discourse. John Nutter highlights the allure of covert action by explaining that, "across time, American presidents have found it difficult, if not impossible, to resist the call of covert action."[19] The "call" can often drown out other, less intriguing, options. Gregory Treverton explains, "perhaps because it is both secret and emotional, covert action is too seldom the subject of hard thought."[20] This lack of "hard thought," of a systemic and analytical approach to the factors influencing covert action effectiveness and how those factors may better inform decision makers, is what is most concerning. To avoid more covert action setbacks on the scale of the failed paramilitary operation at the Bay of Pigs, the assassination plots and other questionable

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[15] David Isenberg, *The Pitfalls of U.S. Covert Action* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute Policy Analysis, 1989).

[16] Mark M. Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2012), 181.

[17] Steven R. Weisman, "President Calls Nicaraguan Rebels Freedom Fighters," *The New York Times*, May 5, 1983.

[18] *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair with Supplemental, Minority, and Additional Views*, 100 Cong., (1987).

[19] John J. Nutter, *The CIA's Black Ops: Covert Action, Foreign Policy, and Democracy* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2000), 44.

[20] Treverton, *Covert Action*, 6.

activities detailed in the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) *Family Jewels* report,[21] or the mining of the Nicaraguan harbor despite the Congressional restrictions of the Boland Amendments,[22] a structured, objective, and systemic approach should be developed and applied to the study, planning, and execution of covert action.

C. RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design outlined below will be employed throughout this thesis.

1. Identify the Problem

Numerous historical studies exist that analyze why a particular covert action succeeded or failed. Unfortunately, detailed step-by-step accounts of specific covert actions may provide only limited insights for planners and decision makers. Without identifying generalizable components, tactical details of why a specific covert action succeeded in one situation or failed in another will have little merit beyond historical interest. For example, without a framework through which to view the overarching components of covert action, a thorough study of why a covert political action failed to influence the 1970 national elections in Chile[23] will likely provide little insight into how a covert political action might influence future elections in Venezuela. Covert action analysis has become more akin to post-mortem assessments of specific operations as opposed to providing "useable knowledge"[24] for future policymakers. While interesting, these stand-alone studies might be made even more relevant by the development of a formal theory of covert action.

Furthermore, covert action effectiveness is often viewed through the lens of counterfactual arguments. The effectiveness of the mission to overthrow Iranian Prime Minister Mossadeq in 1953 is the subject of this sort of debate. Some argue it was very

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[21] Central Intelligence Agency, *Family Jewels*, May 16, 1973. http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0001451843.pdf.

[22] Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars*, 411–414.

[23] Treverton, *Covert Action*, 103.

[24] Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 269.

effective because it provided a bulwark against communism in the Middle East for 25 years.[25] Others argue it was ineffective because it enabled the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini and the eventual Islamic revolution.[26] Similarly, some believe that arming the Mujahedeen in the 1980s was worth the risk because it accelerated the defeat of the Soviet military in Afghanistan; others believe that training and equipping this Islamic group was indirectly responsible for the emergence of al Qaeda and the September 11th terrorist attacks.[27] These assessments are more often based on the opinions surrounding the foreign policy being implemented, not on how effective the action was in achieving those policy objectives. Covert action is only as strong as the policy it supports and in some cases "most of the blame or credit lies with American foreign policy, not with covert action."[28]

Operational effectiveness must therefore be separated from ultimate success. Success and failure are reflections of policy, whereas effectiveness is primarily a reflection of the strategy itself. The covert operation to overthrow Guatemalan President Arbenz in 1954 is considered extremely effective by most analysts, marking an "early zenith in the Agency's long record of covert action."[29] The coup, however, replaced a democratically elected government with a military junta under the command of Colonel Castillo Armas. Castillo Armas immediately swung to the extreme right and ushered in a period of domestic upheaval in Guatemala. As Nick Cullather points out, "PBSUCCESS thwarted the long-term objective of producing a stable, non-Communist Guatemala."[30] So while the covert action in Guatemala achieved the objectives set forth and should therefore be considered effective, the foreign policy the action supported was arguably a failure. There appears to be much discussion about covert action success and failure, but

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[25] Treverton, *Covert Action*, 176.

[26] Thomas Powers, *Intelligence Wars: American Secret History from Hitler to al-Qaeda* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2002), 154.

[27] Treverton, *Intelligence for an Age of Terror*, 216.

[28] Treverton, *Intelligence for an Age of Terror*, 214.

[29] Nick Cullather, *Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of Its Operations in Guatemala 1952–1954* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 7.

[30] Cullather, *Secret History*, 117.

no clear framework has emerged, as yet, to determine covert action effectiveness. This lack of a framework for assessing covert actions and determining when and how best to implement covert strategies to support larger foreign policy efforts can lead to a misapplication of the capability.

2. Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze covert action as a system. Robert Jervis explains that "we cannot understand systems by examining only the attributes and goals of the interconnected elements"[31] but must look at how those elements affect each other. Viewing covert action as a complex system of interrelated components, versus a simple tool of non-related elements, is not groundbreaking, but as Jervis notes, "scholars and statesmen, as well as the general public are prone to think in non-systemic terms" even when dealing with known complexities.[32] Analyzing the components, interactions and tradeoffs as a system may therefore enable a better assessment of covert action as a policy option.

The analytical method employed in this thesis will be a heuristic, historical approach using conditional analysis to illustrate how systems thinking may improve understanding of covert action. The spectrum of covert action will be viewed over three historical periods and will include both U.S. and international examples: pre-World War Two, the Cold War era, and the post-Cold War period. Each time period will highlight a specific aspect of the systems approach: the system diagram, system effects, feedback, and tradeoffs. Ultimately, the goal of this thesis is to create a formal theory of covert action that will provide decision makers with a fresh perspective to assess the viability and implications of a covert action strategy.

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[31] Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 29.

[32] Jervis, *System Effects*, 295.

3. Research Questions

How do the covert action system's components, interactions and tradeoffs impact effectiveness? How can an understanding of these interactions and tradeoffs assist future planners and decision makers?

D. LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis is based in part on the existing academic literature of covert action and systems approach studies.

1. Covert Action

As stated previously, covert action has been a policy option for U.S. presidents since the foundation of the republic. Stephen Knott explains in *Secret and Sanctioned: Covert Operations and the American Presidency* that as far back as Presidents Washington and Jefferson, the U.S. government was executing covert operations. Jefferson, the classic defender of democratic ideals, "saw no contradiction between his love of democratic government and his use of surreptitious means to advance its cause."[33] Indeed, the issues decision makers face now with regard to covert action are uncannily similar to what faced early leaders: When should a covert action be undertaken in lieu of other instruments of foreign policy? What factors lead to an effective covert action? And how can policymakers better incorporate covert action into the larger national security strategy?

Despite the long historical experience the U.S. has had with covert action, there appears to be no common framework for addressing the whether, when, what, and how. In fact, the term "covert action" itself is often misunderstood. Covert is not simply "secret," it is intended to be unacknowledged. This distinction highlights the difference between secrecy for security and secrecy for deniability. Many military operations will be kept secret during the planning and execution phase to ensure operational security; however, only a covert action will be executed with the expressed intent to hide U.S. involvement after execution. Mark Lowenthal explains in his book, *Intelligence: From*

[33] Knott, *Secret and Sanctioned*, 82.

Secrets to Policy, that the term "covert action" is intentionally vague in U.S. law to cover a spectrum of activities, all with the intent to conceal the role of the U.S.[34] Lowenthal illustrates this spectrum with the "covert action ladder,"[35] graduated levels of covert options starting with propaganda and climbing through political activity, economic activity, sabotage, government coups and ultimately ending in paramilitary operations. Although this "covert action ladder" is not formally accepted doctrine, most academics and intelligence professionals agree that covert actions encompass a range of activities varying in degrees of violence and plausible deniability.[36]

What academics and intelligence professionals disagree on, however, is whether a theory of intelligence, let alone of covert action, can be developed. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence, in partnership with the RAND Corporation, held a conference in 2005 entitled "Toward a Theory of Intelligence."[37] This conference of leading policymakers, academics, and intelligence professionals showed that there is little agreement here. In fact, covert action was seen by some as "better understood as policy execution"[38] than intelligence, and not likely to be included in any overarching theory. One outcome of this conference was that "while some questioned the utility of exploring theories on intelligence, others insisted that it is possible to establish causal relationships between intelligence and certain outcomes, and felt that exploring these relationships was essential to improving intelligence."[39] It does not appear that this exploration of "causal relationships" has yet proceeded to the point of encompassing the systemic properties of covert action.

John Nutter lists six reasons, in *The CIA's Black Ops: Covert Action, Foreign Policy, and Diplomacy,* why U.S. policymakers may undertake covert action. They range

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[34] Lowenthal, *Intelligence*, 187. Note: The terms covert and clandestine are often, incorrectly, used interchangeably. "Covert" refers to visible actions whose sponsor is unknown or unacknowledged while "clandestine" refers to secret, non-visible actions.

[35] Lowenthal, *Intelligence*, 187.

[36] Lowenthal, *Intelligence*, 181.

[37] George T. Treverton et al., *Toward a Theory of Intelligence* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2006).

[38] Treverton et al., *Toward a Theory of Intelligence*, 8.

[39] Treverton et al., *Toward a Theory of Intelligence*, 30.

from avoiding open intervention or confrontation that may elicit counter-intervention to carrying out policies that, while promoting U.S. national security, may violate domestic or international law.[40] As both Nutter and Lowenthal highlight, there is much discussion in the literature about when the U.S. *could* undertake covert action but there is little discussion of when it *should* be based on a comprehensive understanding of covert action as a complex system.

There also appears to be little analysis of any themes or commonalities running through the typology of covert action and how those factors interact with each other. Nor does there seem to be any attempt to identify a generalizable set of principles about those interactions and how they might affect the outcome of an operation. Many authors and academics have explored reasons for success and failure; few have considered how effectiveness is influenced by the interaction of common components across the spectrum of covert activities.

An abundance of literature also exists detailing the historical use of covert action since World War Two.[41] These studies, however, are typically written as *ex post facto* assessments of particular cases. For example, Kermit Roosevelt's report of the CIA-sponsored overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mossadeq in *Countercoup* is an intriguing, though somewhat personally biased, account of Operation TPAJAX.[42] Similarly, Nick Cullather's book *Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of Its Operations in Guatemala 1952–1954* is an excellent review of Operation PBSUCCESS based on declassified CIA documents.[43] Failed operations garner even more attention. After the Bay of Pigs invasion, President Kennedy remarked, "victory has a hundred

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[40] Nutter, *The CIA's Black Ops*, 276.

[41] Among the lengthy list of books devoted to covert action case studies are John Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006). William Daugherty, *Executive Secrets: Covert Action and the Presidency* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004). Harry Rositzke, *The CIA's Secret Operations: Espionage, Counterespionage, and Covert Action* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988). Jay Peterzell, *Reagan's Secret Wars* (Washington, DC: The Center for National Security Studies, 1984).

[42] Kermit Roosevelt, *Countercoup* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981).

[43] Cullather, *Secret History*.

fathers and defeat is an orphan."[44] Defeat may be an orphan but it has plenty of biographers. Scores of studies are published on failed covert operations throughout U.S. history. Illustrative of this trend, John Prados' book of covert action case studies *Presidents' Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations from World War II Through the Persian Gulf* is a thorough account of U.S. covert actions from the late 1940s to the late 1980s. Many of the cases he highlights are considered failures.[45] While these accounts offer insightful analyses of the tactical events that led to the outcome, most do not extrapolate beyond the confines of the particular operation being considered.

Overall, most covert action literature focuses on one of four areas: typology, time period, case study, or process. No study has yet merged these areas to develop a systems understanding of covert action. To fill this gap, this thesis will integrate these common approaches to develop a theory of covert action effectiveness based on the systems approach.

2. A Systems Approach

Ludwig von Bertalannfy's general systems theory provides the basis of the systems approach. This theory was developed in the mid-twentieth century to expand scientific thinking beyond the reductionist focus that had become commonplace with the scientific method.[46] The systems approach uses the foundation of general systems theory to posit that complex issues can be better understood not by breaking down a system to its component parts but instead by looking at the system as a whole and focusing on the interactions and interplay of those elements.

David Easton, in *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*,[47] and Robert Jervis, in *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life*, use the systems approach to analyze broad, macro-level political systems. Easton looks at how inputs, outputs, stress,

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[44] John F. Kennedy, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/JFK-Quotations.aspx.

[45] Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars.*

[46] Ludwig von Bertalanffy, "An Outline of General Systems Theory," *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 1, no. 2 (August 1950): 134–136.

[47] David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1965).

environment, and feedback impact the "open and adaptive"[48] political system of a state. Jervis retracts the lens even farther to consider how international relations can be better understood by studying emergent behavior, system effects, and feedback, concluding that commonly applied linear thinking is inappropriate to understanding complex international political systems. Both Easton and Jervis remain at the macro-level of analysis and rarely drop down to the "middle range"[49] theories that are more applicable to policy execution.

C. West Churchman, in his book *The Systems Approach*,[50] applies this method to more practical matters of daily life as opposed to the broad theoretical studies of Easton and Jervis. Doing so, he also details the need to view complex problems as a system: "the ultimate aim of component thinking is to discover those components whose measures of performance are truly related to the measure of performance of the overall system."[51] While Churchman is discussing management science, this theme can be applied to covert action. To paraphrase, the aim of a systems approach to covert action is to discover what factors significantly impact the overall effectiveness of operations across the spectrum of activities. But simply discovering those components is not enough; one must understand the interactions amongst the components. System outcome are not linearly related; A plus B does not necessarily equal C. Instead, because components within systems are interconnected so that changes in one element produce changes in other elements to where "systemic outcomes are the product of the interaction of multiple factors,"[52] the influence of the interactions must be considered. All components that affect a covert action must be taken into account in relation to each other, not simply in relation to the desired outcome. In other words, the whole is different than the sum of its parts.

Despite the potentially useful insights a systems approach may provide, covert action has yet to be analyzed from this perspective. The failure to view complex issues as

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[48] Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, 17.

[49] George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, 266.

[50] C. West Churchman, *The Systems Approach* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1983).

[51] Churchman, *The Systems Approach*, 43.

[52] Jervis, *System Effects*, 79.

integrated systems, however, is not unusual. As Jervis explains, "Although we all know that social life and politics constitute systems and that many outcomes are the unintended consequence of complex interactions, the basic ideas of systems do not come readily to mind and so often are ignored."[53] Ignoring complex interactions can have devastating effects, especially when those effects resonate throughout the international community.

E. METHODOLOGY

This study will use a heuristic approach to analyze covert action as a system in order to determine how internal components and tradeoffs impact overall system effectiveness. The focus will be on covert actions conducted during periods of "peace." Peacetime is an admittedly vague concept; for the purpose of this thesis, "peacetime" is understood to mean the absence of active armed conflict by conventional armed forces. Politically, covert action has much more value in a peacetime environment; the need to, and the benefits of, keeping the government's role unacknowledged are much greater during a time of peace than during a time of open conflict. For this reason, covert actions mounted during both world wars, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, Desert Storm, and the most recent Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts will not be addressed. U.S. and international experiences will be divided into seven separate types of covert action over three periods: pre-World War Two, the Cold War era, and the post-Cold War period. Each period will then be used to highlight a specific concept of the systems approach: the system diagram, system effects, feedback, and tradeoffs. Table 1 provides examples of the type of covert action conducted over these timeframes. These cases, among others, will be the focus of the analysis conducted throughout this study.

[53] Jervis, *System Effects*, 3.

Covert Action Typology and Timeframes

	1776–1941 Pre-World War Two		1946–1989 Cold War	1990–Pres Post-Cold War	International Community
Propaganda	Lincoln: Union Support in Europe	1941–1945: ACTIVE ARMED CONFLICT	Radio Free Europe Dr Zhivago Publication	Cuba	USSR: Origins of AIDS Virus
Political Action	Grant: Annexation of Dominican Rep		Italian Elections Guiana Elections	Iraq Dissident Groups	Russia: Operation Trust
Economic Action	Lincoln: Anti-South Support in Europe		Chile Trucker Strike Saudi Oil Production	Abu Nidal Organization	China: Economic Espionage
Sabotage	Washington: English Naval Yard Attack		Nicaragua Harbor Mines Siberian Gas Pipeline	Stuxnet (cybotage)	Russia: DDoS Cyber Attacks
Gov't Coup	Jefferson: Removal of Tripoli pasha		Chile - TRACK 2 Indonesia – PERMESTA	Libya	Germany: Lenin Oct Revolution
Paramilitary Operations	T. Roosevelt: Creation of state of Panama		Angola - FEATURE Tibet – CIRCUS	Syria	UK: Yemen Civil War
Assassination	Aguinaldo: Philippines		Fidel Castro (Attempted) Patrice Lumumba (Alleged)	Saddam Hussein (Attempted)	Israel: Iranian Nuclear Scientists

Table 1. Covert action typology, timeframe, and associated examples.

Chapter II will first discuss the systems approach, introduce the system diagram, and briefly explain the concepts of system effects, feedback, and tradeoffs. Chapter III will then apply the system diagram to four pre-World War Two examples to demonstrate how a dynamic concept can be visualized through a simple diagram without eliminating the complex interactions that define systems. Chapter IV will focus on Jervis's "system effects" that are common to most social systems by using Cold War cases to illustrate how these emergent properties influence the outcome of covert actions. Chapter V will then consider the concept of feedback and tradeoffs within the system by concentrating on post-Cold War vignettes.

Finally, it is important to "bridge the gap"[54] between theory and practice by transitioning this systems analytic approach into a relevant tool for policymakers. Chapter

[54] George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, 275.

VI will make this leap. The key, as Alexander George states, is that "theory and generic knowledge are best understood as a source of inputs to policy analysis of specific problems within the government. They are an *aid, not a substitute for policy analysis and for judgments that decision makers make when choosing a policy."*[55] Viewing covert action as a system will not provide an exact model that can prescribe the correct course of action for policymakers. Instead, it will offer a "general logic associated with successful use of a policy tool."[56] Understanding the logic of the system may give policymakers insight into the potential outcomes of their decisions and perhaps help them better determine when a covert action is a viable policy option and when other instruments of statecraft should be considered.

[55] George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, 276.

[56] George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, 270.

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II. THE COVERT ACTION SYSTEM

A. SYSTEMS—DEFINED AND EXPLAINED

A system is a simple concept with complex implications. Systems are found in all aspects of life, ranging from natural organisms to manmade organizations, and from physical entities to vague concepts. Donella Meadows defines a system as an "interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something."[57] She further describes the system by explaining that it "must consist of three kinds of things: elements, interconnections, and a function or purpose."[58] A system is not simply a collection of parts. It is the interconnection of those parts, either natural or manmade, for a purpose that differentiates a system from an aggregation.

Before examining the "three kinds of things" that make up a system, it is necessary to understand a system's structure because "structure is key to understanding not just *what* is happening, but *why*."[59] The system's structure is its overall organization, incorporating the system's boundaries, the placement of its components, and the interactions amongst those components. Nearly all systems are "open systems,"[60] that is, they interact with their environment making them subsystems of larger, more complex systems. This layered, interconnected view of the world can make the analytic task overwhelming if structure and boundaries are not first clearly defined. To avoid unnecessary complexity, one must seek out the "deep structure"[61] that drives the system, distinguishing from the external environment those particular components and interactions that specifically impact the function and purpose. There are rarely physical boundaries that separate deep structure from the external environment. It is purely

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[57] Donella Meadows, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2008), 12.

[58] Meadows, *Thinking in Systems*, 12.

[59] Meadows, *Thinking in Systems*, 89.

[60] Robert Edson, *System Thinking. Applied. A Primer* (Applied Systems Thinking Institute: Analytic Services, Inc., 2008), 49.

[61] Nancy Roberts, "Tackling Wicked Problems with Systems Thinking," (lecture, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, 5 May 2014).

dependent on the needs of the study, which makes delineating the system structure a subjective yet critical step to take before further inquiry can progress.

Once structure is defined, determining the system's components and interactions is the next step toward understanding. However, choosing which components to examine can often be just as difficult as outlining the structure. The key components are those that directly affect the overall function of the system. Once again, it is a subjective exercise with no clear distinction between critical and peripheral components. A study should only focus on "those components whose measures of performance are truly related to the measure of performance of the overall system."[62] Focusing on parts that have little analytical value to the study of the whole can quickly make analysis overly complicated. It is therefore important to refine the approach to consider only the critical elements as determined by the needs of the study. The second part of the system, its interactions, is the driving force behind the system; without interactions, a group of parts is simply a collection of pieces, not a true system. Interactions occur through "the transmission and return of information,"[63] and it is this feedback that is the catalyst for change in system behavior.[64] It is important to clearly distinguish between interactions and feedback. Interactions are relationships while feedback is information. Interactions between components create feedback; feedback then influences future interactions. Finally, all systems must have a function or purpose. Whether natural or manmade, without a continuing purpose, the system would cease to exist.

Systems behave in ways that cannot be understood by simply analyzing their separate components. It is the relationship amongst these parts that creates emergent properties, "a characteristic that could not possibly have been deduced from the nature of its components; it is a new characteristic that is attributable only to the structural organization…of its component parts (and which can be called) 'emergent'."[65]

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[62] Churchman, *The Systems Approach,* 43.

[63] Virginia Anderson and Lauren Johnson, *Systems Thinking Basics: From Concepts to Causal Loops* (Waltham, MA: Pegasus Communications, Inc., 1997), 4.

[64] Anderson and Johnson, *Systems Thinking Basics*, 4.

[65] Reuben Albowitz, as quoted in Jervis, *System Effects,* 16.

Reductionist thinking, breaking a complex problem down to its basic components in an attempt to understand the overall issue, does not account for the emergent properties of systems. For example, having a complete understanding of automobiles, freeways, highway patrols, drivers, and rest stops does not provide a comprehensive understanding of the U.S. interstate system; it is the interaction and interrelation of these components that creates the emergent properties that characterize this efficient transportation system.

B. THE SYSTEMS APPROACH AND SYSTEMS THINKING

C. West Churchman traces the systems approach back over 4,000 years to the Chinese *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*, a manuscript that he describes as "an amazingly astute systems management document."[66] It was not until the mid-twentieth century, however, when Austrian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy developed general systems theory in an attempt to unify the various scientific disciplines with an overarching theory of systems behavior. Bertalanffy denounced reductionist thinking, believing instead that the world could be better understood by discerning how component organization and interactions impact the whole as opposed to the linear type of thinking that was the foundation of the classic scientific approach.[67] While general systems theory attempts to discover the laws of behavior inherent in all systems through formal mathematical modeling, the systems approach is a much more user-friendly "application of logic and common sense resting on a sound foundation"[68] of Bertalanffy's theory. The systems approach remained in the "hard science" disciplines until the 1960s when Churchman pioneered its potential for tackling social issues like world hunger and poverty. No longer was the systems approach confined to the physical world of science and engineering; it was now being applied to increasingly complex social problems.

A systems approach is simply a way of "looking at a problem in its entirety, taking into account all the facets, all the intertwined parameters. It seeks to understand

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[66] While Churchman considers *I Ching* to be an early systems management document, it should be noted that it is primarily a divination text that uses symbols and numbers to illustrate the interconnections of the universe. Thus, the *I Ching* employs a "systems approach." C. West Churchman, *The Systems Approach and Its Enemies* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1979), 32.

[67] Bertalanffy, "An Outline of General Systems Theory," 134–136.

[68] Ramo, *The Systems Approach*, 16–17.

how they interact with one another and how they can be brought into proper relationship for the optimum solution of the problem."[69] Instead of using reductionist thinking to attempt to understand complexities, a systems approach focuses on the interactions and relationships of the parts. As Figure 1 illustrates, the systems approach retracts the lens to consider not just what A, B, and C are, but how A, B, and C interact and interrelate to affect the whole.

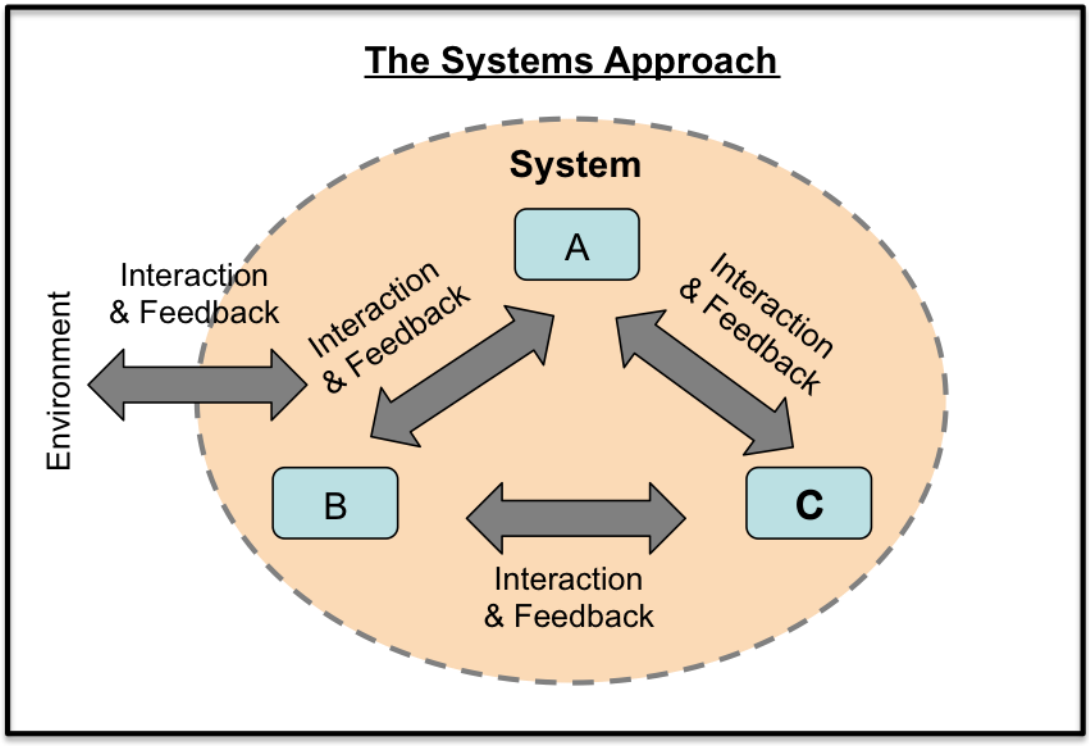

Figure 1. The systems approach.
The systems approach focuses on the interactions amongst components and between the system and its environment to better understand system behavior and outcomes.

From the systems approach emerges systems thinking. John Boardman and Brian Sauser explain two sides of systems thinking: thinking *about* systems and thinking *from* systems.[70] Thinking about systems entails using "the tools we have acquired for

[69] Ramo, *The Systems Approach*, 16.

[70] John Boardman and Brian Sauser, *Systems Thinking: Coping With 21st Century Problems* (Boca Rotan, FL: CRC Press, 2008), xix.

cognizing, analyzing, and synthesizing to ruminate on the systems that confront us"[71] in order to understand how and why things operate the way they do. Once systems are understood, one can think *from* that system, using "systems, captured in diagrammatic form…to focus our thinking on the very issues that gave rise to our need to think, and subsequently, to act."[72] This dual approach will be taken with the covert action system. First, an understanding of what the covert action system is and why it operates the way it does will be established; from that understanding, policymakers can better comprehend the implications of a covert action policy and perhaps offer more informed recommendations to decision makers.

A similar way to think about the systems approach is to compare event thinking with structural thinking. Anderson and Johnson argue that humans live in an "event-focused society,"[73] viewing specific occurrences in a vacuum and ignoring the causal web of events; but "by uncovering the elusive systemic structure that drives events, you can begin identifying higher-leverage actions."[74] Structural thinking, or systems thinking, widens the analyst's perspective to view the entire structure surrounding an event, not simply the event itself, ultimately providing a deeper understanding of the issue.

In the world of covert action, event thinking focuses on the visible, immediate result, while system thinking takes into account all stakeholders, factors, interactions, and outcomes that led to and resulted from that action. For example, an event thinking approach to the alleged Israeli-sponsored assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists beginning in 2007 would focus on the killing of the scientists in the streets of Tehran.[75] Conversely, a structural thinking approach would consider the complete system that surrounded the event: who gave the approval, how the decision was made, why those particular scientists were targeted, why assassination was chosen, how the cover story

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[71] Boardman and Sauser, *Systems Thinking*, xix.

[72] Boardman and Sauser, *Systems Thinking*, xix.

[73] Anderson and Johnson, *Systems Thinking Basics*, 6.

[74] Anderson and Johnson, *Systems Thinking Basics*, 6.

[75] David Raviv, "U.S. Pushing Israel to Stop Assassinating Iranian Nuclear Scientists," *CBS News*, March 1, 2014. http://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-pushing-israel-to-stop-assassinating-iranian-nuclear-scientists/.

was developed and maintained, and, most importantly, the relationship between these components and their influence on each other. The systems approach moves beyond the explosion in the streets of Tehran and looks at the entire covert action system to gain a more thorough understanding of the interactions at play.

C. THE COVERT ACTION SYSTEM

In a system, components interact toward a purpose. The purpose of the covert action system is simple: to allow a sponsor to address an issue without acknowledged involvement. Covert action components and interactions do not always align in easily predictable ways, however, and while the purpose may be clear, the outcome may be far from expected. To better understand the ramifications of a covert action strategy, policymakers should strive for an understanding of four key aspects of the covert action system as shown in Figure 2: the diagram, system effects, feedback, and tradeoffs. The system diagram is the foundation of the systems approach and offers a visual representation of the system and its interactions. The diagram's depiction of the whole provides a point of departure to help policymakers better anticipate potential system effects and emergent behaviors, understand the implications of feedback, and make more informed tradeoff decisions.

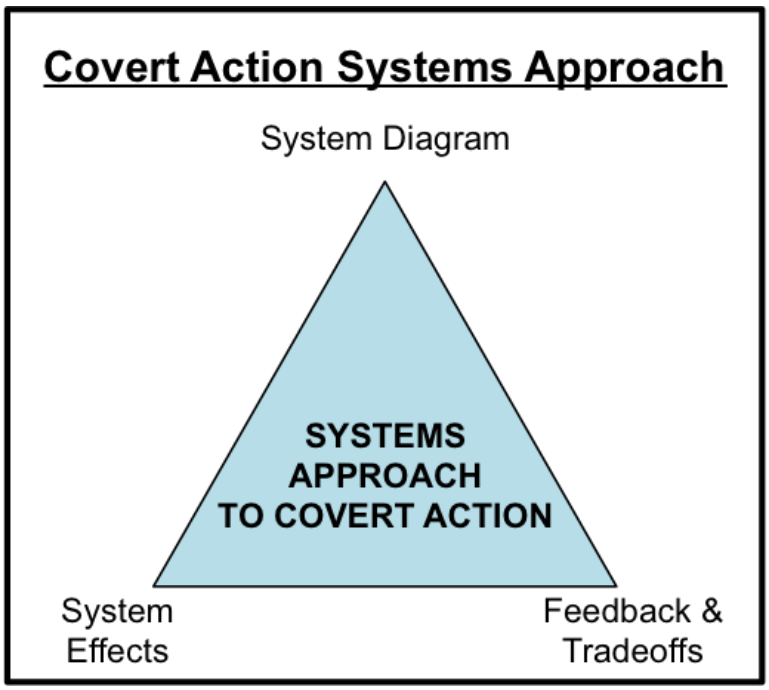

Figure 2. Covert action systems approach.
The systems approach to covert action considers the concepts of the system diagram, system effects, feedback, and tradeoffs.

1. The System Diagram

Figure 3 below represents the "deep structure"[76] of the covert action system. This diagram is an illustration of the "whole;"[77] it goes beyond the single event that is typically considered a "covert action" and focuses on the comprehensive, holistic system within which the visible actions are nested. The system diagram consists of one external factor that initiates the system, the issue, and eight internal components, the decision maker's risk attitude, operational constraints, objectives, type of action and tool, target characteristics (both assessed and actual), event, deniability, and effectiveness.

[76] Roberts, lecture, May 5, 2014.

[77] Ramo, *The Systems Approach*, 16.

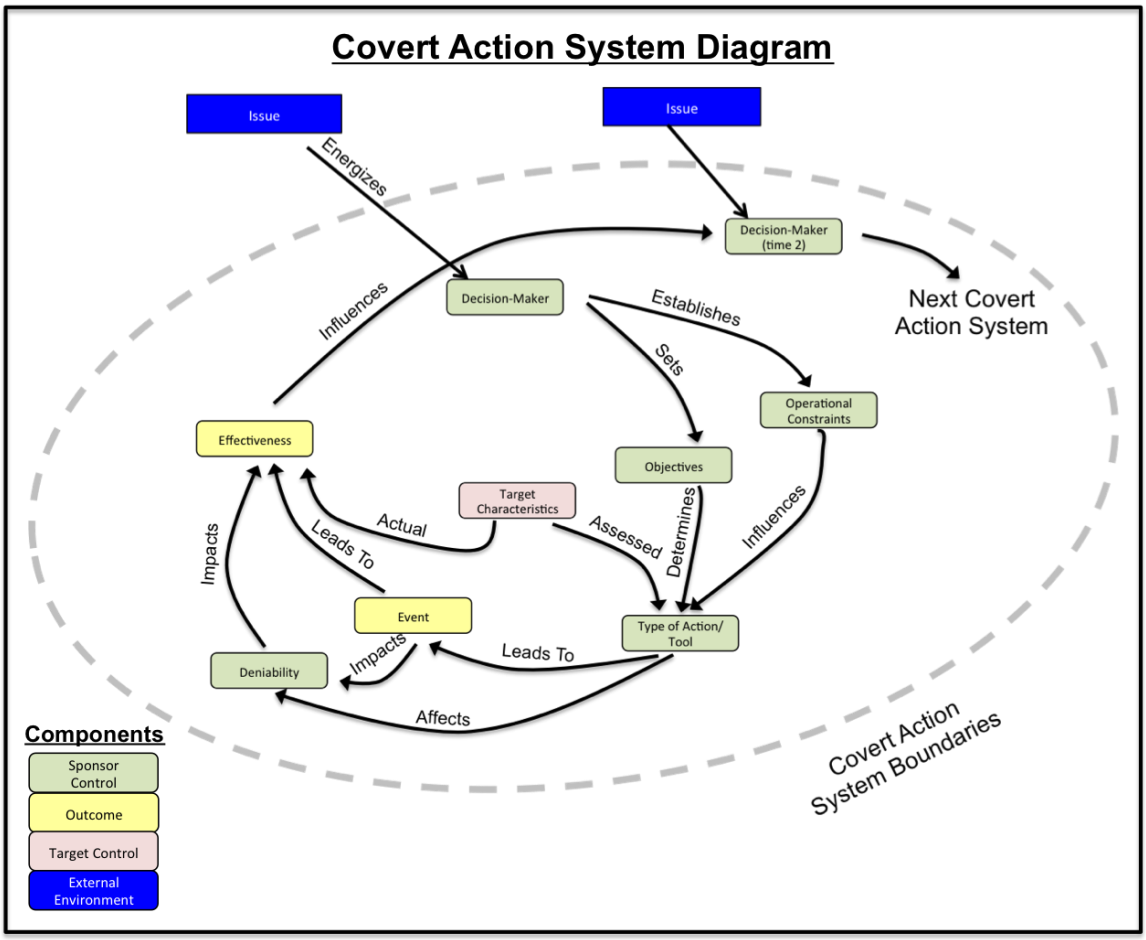

Figure 3. Covert action system diagram.
The covert action system diagram depicts the relationships and interactions between the key components.

The system diagram is a cycle that starts with a foreign policy issue energizing the system. Facing an issue, the decision maker will decide to address it through either overt or covert means, or, as is most often the case, a combination of the two. Once the choice is made to proceed with a covert action, the decision maker's attitude toward risk will influence both the operational constraints and the objectives. Both of these components, in conjunction with the assessed target characteristics, will determine the type of action chosen as well as the specific tool to be employed. The type of action and tool will eventually lead to an event; both will also affect the deniability of the overall system. The level of deniability, the event, and the actual target characteristics will all factor into the level of effectiveness based on the stated objectives. To complete the cycle, the level of

effectiveness will then feed back to the decision maker, affecting his attitude toward risk when considering covert action strategies in the future.

Looking at the diagram, one will immediately notice that nodes are not included for either a covert unit or an intelligence assessment. This is not to imply that the inputs and characteristics of these components fail to affect the whole; on the contrary, their impacts are integral to the outcome of the system. Those inputs, however, are captured in other components, which allows the diagram to avoid unnecessary complexity. The role of the covert unit conducting the action is reflected within the event component while the input of the intelligence assessment is reflected in both the decision maker's risk attitude as well as the relationship between the assessed target characteristics and the type of action. How the unit is organized, trained, equipped, commanded, controlled, and ultimately carries out the mission is less important than the actual outcome of the event. Similarly, the collection, analysis, and internal deliberations that go into the intelligence assessment are not part of this level of analysis; the focus here is on how that intelligence assessment influences both the decision maker and the type of action chosen. In an attempt to capture the "deep structure" and "simple elegance"[78] that delivers the streamlined clarity of the system diagram, the impact of the covert unit and intelligence assessment is incorporated in other components.

a. External System Component

There will necessarily be factors that play important roles in system behavior, yet are external to the artificial borders because "boundaries are in the analyst's judgment"[79] and purely based on subjective requirements of the study. This system diagram includes one externality, the foreign policy issue.

(1) Issue

The foreign policy issue acts as the driving force that initiates the system while sitting outside the system's structure. Not all issues lead to covert actions. There are a

[78] Roberts, lecture, May 5, 2014.

[79] Peter Checkland, *Systems Thinking, Systems Practice* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1981), 174.

multitude of issues; only a few of which are candidates for covert operations. The decisional process for addressing an issue is simplified in Figure 4 below.[80] While the graphic makes a sharp distinction between overt and covert approaches, these strategies are typically not mutually exclusive. Covert actions are merely subsystems of a larger foreign policy system and overt and covert strategies are often integrated to accomplish an overall policy objective. It is important to note, too, that while the overt policy options are simplified as diplomatic, informational, military, and economic, these instruments of power also define the covert options. For example, propaganda is a type of informational strategy while paramilitary operation, whether conducted by the CIA or the Pentagon, is a military campaign. However, for diagrammatical clarity, the range of overt options is not exhaustive while the generic "covert action ladder"[81] is used to illustrate the covert options.

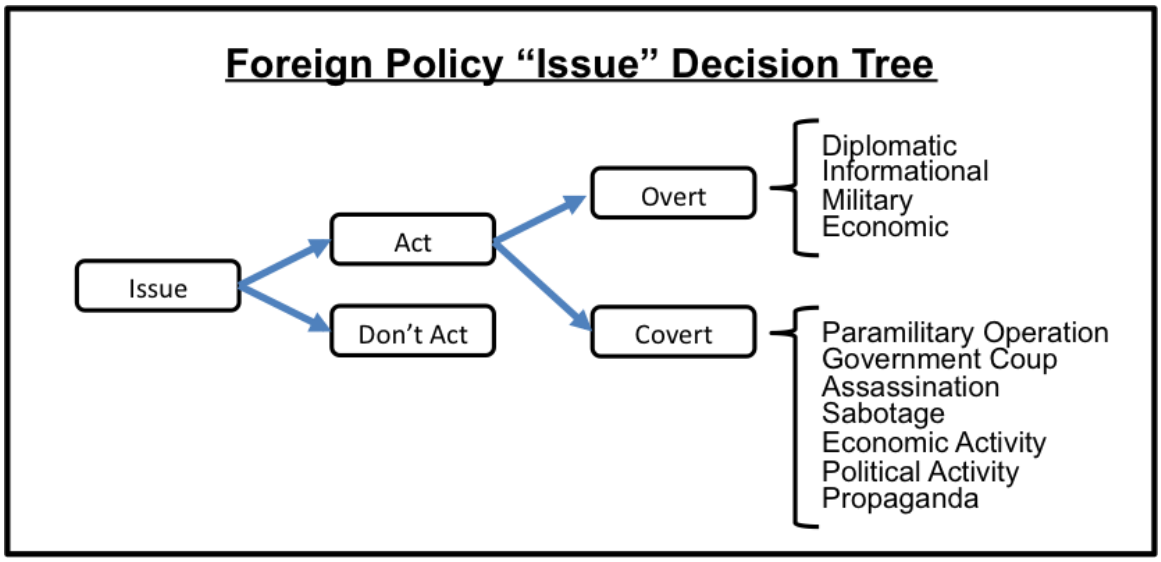

Figure 4. Foreign policy "issue" decision tree.
The stakes of the situation will be weighed against the risk and reward of available courses of action to help determine the strategy.[82]

[80] John Arquilla, personal communication, May 30, 2014.

[81] Lowenthal, *Intelligence*, 187.

[82] Arquilla, personal communication, May 30, 2014.

Within this simple diagram is a complex decision process weighing the national interest at stake against the risks and rewards of addressing that issue through overt or covert means. A low stakes issue may not elicit any action, whereas an issue of extremely high stakes may lead to a large, overt response. As the stakes increase, the pressing need to address the situation also increases. However, heightened stakes do not necessarily correlate to increased overt approaches. There are various reasons to pursue a covert strategy to address a high stakes problem. Covert action avoids open warfare and can circumvent the sensitivities that may arise through overt support of a cause. Avoiding open confrontation was the primary reason for the increased use of covert actions during the Cold War. Both the U.S. and the Soviet Union viewed the stakes of the other's expanding spheres of influence as high enough to warrant a response, yet neither was willing to back the other into a corner by openly challenging them through overt means and perhaps risking nuclear escalation. Covert actions were, therefore, the weapon of choice. Both sides exerted significant influence and even showed signs of cooperation in the overt international arena, yet because of the high stakes of allowing the other to gain an advantage weighed against the extant risk of a nuclear confrontation, most conflict simmered at the covert level.

Open support to a party can also delegitimize a cause if the sponsor is seen as a "puppet master." Support via more surreptitious means avoids this. For example, U.S. backing of the Christian Democratic Party during the Italian national elections in 1948 was conducted covertly because of the need to conceal the U.S. involvement. The stakes of the Italian Communist Party gaining a victory at the polls were deemed high enough to necessitate a response; President Truman, however, wanted to avoid the perception of manipulating a foreign government's electoral process. A covert political action was therefore considered the best approach to ensure a non-Communist party win in one of the first democratic elections of the Cold War.[83]

Democratically elected leaders will also consider the domestic advantages of employing a covert policy. Because of the secrecy inherent in covert actions, they often

[83] James E. Miller, "Taking the Gloves Off: The United States and the Italian Elections of 1948," *Diplomatic History* 7, no. 1 (January 1983): 35–37.

appear attractive when objectives conflict with stated policy, or if the proposed action is either morally or normatively prohibited. In an environment dominated by realpolitik motives with neo-liberal overtones, covert action can be used as a means to accomplish objectives that may be considered unsavory.

Once the decision maker has progressed through this decision process in relation to the interest at stake and determines that the best approach to a problem is through covert means, the system is initiated.

b. Internal System Components

Eight internal components comprise the covert action system. The interplay of these components amongst each other and with the external environment determines the outcome of the action.

(1) Decision Maker Risk Attitude

The decision maker, that individual who is responsible for initiating and, if necessary, terminating the covert action system, is the first component within the system. The decision maker's attitude toward risk is instrumental in the operation. Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky's prospect theory shows that a decision maker's attitude toward risk will fluctuate between aversion and acceptance based on the stakes of the situation and whether he is in the "domain of gains" or the "domain of losses."[84] A decision maker will likely be more risk averse if he feels he is in the "domain of gains" and likely more risk acceptant if he feels he is in the "domain of losses." Assessing the attitude toward risk is not a value judgment, but rather an acknowledgement that few, if any, decisions are based on purely rational cost-benefit analyses. Those making policy and political decisions will always incorporate multiple factors into the process, ranging from the national interest at stake, to domestic political considerations, to the international environment, to personal experience, to a whole host of other elements that determine the decision maker's utility function and ultimately, his approach to covert action.

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[84] Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk," *Econometrica* 47, no. 2 (March 1979): 263–264.

(2) Objectives

The objectives specifically state what is to be accomplished by the system. The issue at stake must be transitioned from vague policy goals to precise objectives in order to support proper planning and evaluation. The stated objectives help catalyze the system from an ambiguous concept into concrete, achievable ends. Objectives and effectiveness maintain a direct relationship: as objectives are achieved, effectiveness is reached. Establishing measurable goals and linking effectiveness to the accomplishment of those goals helps to better determine system status as opposed to the more subjective view of basing effectiveness on larger foreign policy success and failure.

(3) Operational Constraints

The operational constraints are those rules and restrictions established by the decision maker that restrict freedom of action within the system. These constraints can range from being very tactical, such as prohibiting U.S. trainers from accompanying the Bolivian 2nd Ranger Battalion on their hunt for Che Guevera in 1967,[85] to very strategic, such as initially restricting the arms provided to the Afghan mujahedeen to foreign-made weapons in the early 1980s.[86] The Afghanistan example illustrates, as well, that operational constraints can change as conditions change; "direct infusions of advanced U.S. military technology into Afghanistan" was authorized with the signing of NSDD-166 in 1985, significantly escalating the covert war against the Soviet Union.[87]

(4) Type of Action / Tool Used

The type of covert action executed is distinct from the tool used to accomplish that action. This thesis will use Lowenthal's covert action ladder to distinguish between the various types of covert action as depicted in Figure 5: propaganda, political activity,

[85] U.S. Army, "Memorandum of Understanding Concerning the Activation, Organization, and Training of the 2d Ranger Battalion - Bolivian Army," *The National Security Archive: The George Washington University*. http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB5/docs/doc14.pdf.

[86] Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars*, 362.

[87] Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, From the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 125–126.

economic activity, sabotage, government coup, and paramilitary activity.[88] It is interesting to note that Lowenthal did not include assassinations in his ladder, perhaps because President Ford, through Executive Order 11905 in 1976, banned the use of political assassination by U.S. agencies.[89] Assassinations, however, have a long and storied history that cannot be ignored. To ensure this important variant of covert action is not overlooked, assassination will be added as a level between sabotage and government coup.

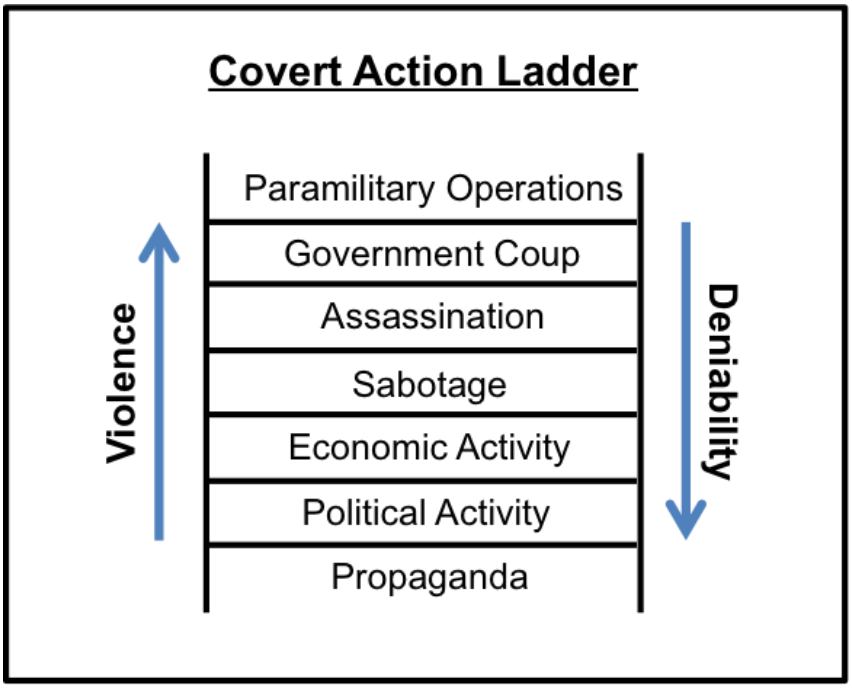

Figure 5. Lowenthal's covert action ladder.[90]
As the level of violence of the action increases, the level of deniability increases.

Distinct from the type of action, the tool is the means used to accomplish the mission. Sabotage, a type of action, can be conducted via multiple tools: special operations team, demolition specialists, or cyber warfare experts. Similarly assassination can be, and has been, carried out through different techniques: improvised explosive

[88] Lowenthal, *Intelligence*, 187.

[89] Michael Warner, ed., *Central Intelligence: Origin and Evolution* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2001), 9.

[90] Lowenthal, *Intelligence*, 187.

devices, gunmen, or lethal poison. Each type of covert action and associated tool has its merits and drawbacks; these should be closely aligned with the stakes at risk as well as the desired time of effects as shown in Figure 6. The relationship between stakes and instrument is the subject of the first tradeoff within the system and will be addressed later.

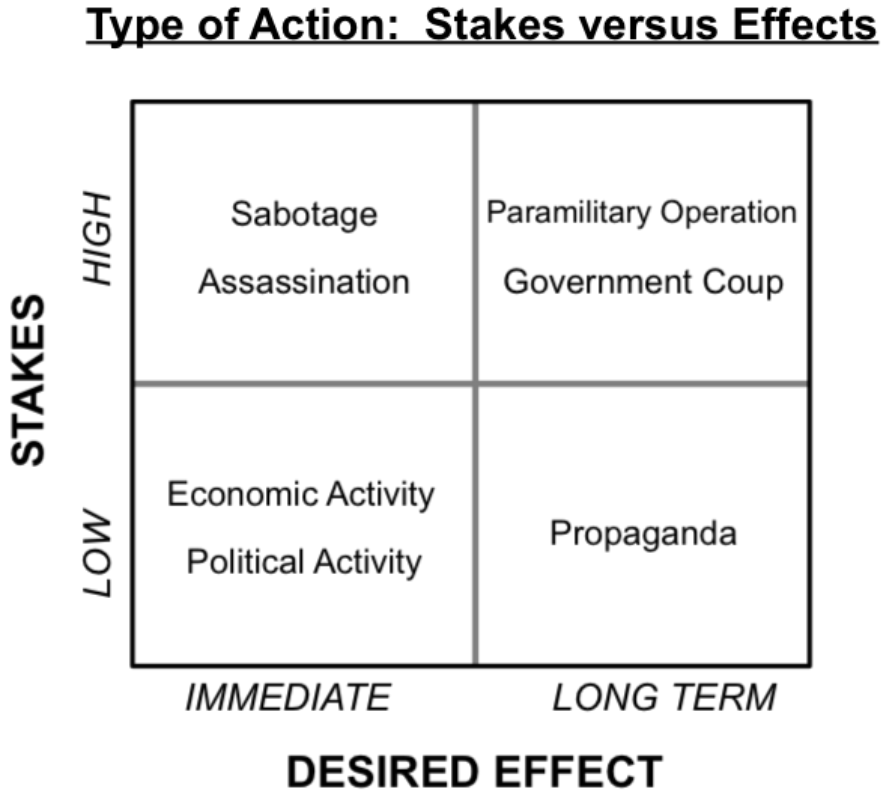

Figure 6. Type of action: Stakes versus effects.
Type of covert action selected should reconcile the stakes at risk with the timeframe of desired effects.

(5) Target Characteristics

Systems thinking suggests that the placement of the components within the system diagram provides insight into the operation of the system; it is therefore no coincidence that the target characteristics component sits squarely in the center. As depicted, the entire system revolves around the target. Target characteristics incorporate both the assessed and actual strengths and vulnerabilities. Assessed characteristics play

into the decision of what type of action to conduct, while actual characteristics directly affect the outcome of the action. As witnessed throughout history, target assessments and reality can differ drastically. During the Bay of Pigs invasion, intelligence estimates assessed that 3,000–5,000 Cuban guerrillas were prepared to support the invasion once American-backed forces landed. This turned out to be grossly inaccurate and resulted in the capture and death of almost the entire paramilitary force.[91] The perceived target characteristics of the Cuban state contributed to the decision to execute a paramilitary operation; but the real vulnerability was far less than expected and instrumental in the abject failure of that operation.

Three types of target characteristics must be considered: physical, political, and informational. Physical characteristics are the actual defenses surrounding a target and can range from a personal security detail protecting a head of state to an intrusion detection system guarding a command post or a firewall securing a computer network. The political characteristics relate to the overall stability of the target's political system. If a target is very stable, it will be less susceptible to a political action or a government coup. Note that stability and strength are not synonymous. A state may be strong based on a single leader with imposing physical defenses yet unstable if the overall political system is unable to respond to adverse input from internal or external sources. Finally, informational characteristics refer to how susceptible the target is to an information operation campaign. As illustrated with Russian cyber attacks in Estonia, Georgia, and Ukraine,[92] information vulnerabilities can be present in even very stable states and provide exploitable opportunities that only a few years ago did not exist.

(6) Event

The event component describes the physical result of the action and is nearly always visible while, ideally, the sponsor behind the action remains unseen. Events can

[91] Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars*, 205–207.

[92] Carol Matlack, "Cyberwar in Ukraine Falls Far Short of Russia's Full Powers," *Businessweek*, March 10, 2014. http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2014-03-10/cyberwar-in-ukraine-falls-far-short-of-russias-full-powers.

be very passive such as the broadcast of black propaganda through Radio Free Europe[93] to very aggressive such as the joint U.S.-British campaign to unseat the Albanian government in the early days of the Cold War.[94] Because of the human tendency to focus on event thinking vice systems thinking, the physical outcome is typically the emphasis of most covert action studies. In this study, however, it is only one of many factors considered.

(7) Deniability

By definition, a covert action influences a target while keeping the sponsor's role unacknowledged. Without an attempt at deniability, a covert action would simply be another overt, though perhaps still secret, activity. The level of deniability encompasses various factors including the strength of the cover story, the control the sponsor exerts on the operation, and the type of action conducted.

Christopher Felix succinctly sums up the importance of the cover story when he explains that "as open warfare depends upon weapons, so does the secret war depend upon cover."[95] The action itself is typically quite visible and the cover story is used to "explain the visible evidences"[96] of that action. Even if an action does not initially accomplish the objectives, as long as the sponsor's role remains hidden and plausible deniability remains intact, the plan can either be reattempted or shelved with little adverse impact.

Deniability is also affected by the level of control the perpetrator maintains over the outcome of the event. As the sponsor's level of control increases, the ability to deny its involvement decreases. In most cases, a sponsor cannot expect to maintain tight control of the outcome and remain anonymous. When a sponsor employs a third party in the form of a foreign media outlet, a human asset, or a surrogate force, they must be aware that those parties may have different motives and exerting excess control on these

93 Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars*, 34.

94 Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars*, 49–50.

95 Christopher Felix, *A Short Course in the Secret War* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 2001), 65.

96 Felix, *A Short Course in the Secret War*, 67.

actors can lead to increased visibility. Covert actions conducted through organic forces, whether air breathing or cyber, is one of the few exceptions to the indirect relationship between control and deniability. This is not to imply that a sponsor should relinquish all control once an action is initiated, only that policymakers must understand that third party actors can have differing goals and be aware of the relationship increased control has with the overall deniability of an action.

(8) Effectiveness

Effectiveness is based on the outcome of the event as it aligns with the system's objectives. If objectives are met, the operation is effective. Linking effectiveness to objectives as opposed to linking effectiveness to deniability reiterates the importance of treating covert action as a policy tool, not an end in itself. Deniability is a supporting condition to achieve objectives in an acceptable manner; not a necessary or sufficient condition to effectiveness. The complex relationship between deniability, time, and effectiveness is the focus of the second tradeoff in the covert action system and will be explored later.

The overall effectiveness of the system will also influence the decision maker's risk attitude as he addresses future foreign policy issues. Multiple factors influence a decision maker's choice to employ a covert action, not least of which is personal experience and knowledge of past covert actions. As Figure 7 illustrates, the effectiveness of the present cycle will ultimately shape the decision maker's assessments of future covert action cycles.

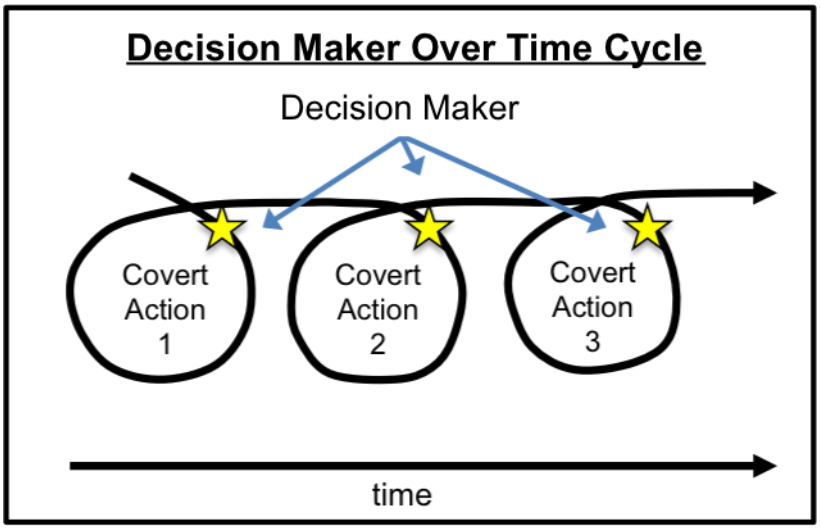

Figure 7. Decision maker over time cycle.
The output of each covert action becomes input into the next covert action cycle, influencing the decision maker's future assessments on the viability of its use.

2. System Effects

The system diagram described above establishes a baseline from which further analysis can proceed. Without this basic understanding of the key components and interactions within the system, it would be much more difficult to understand and appreciate the complexities that emerge from the system. Jervis uses the term "system effects"[97] to describe the resultant emergent properties that are produced by these interconnections. While Jervis focuses on system effects within international politics, they are also manifest in smaller systems such as covert action. Table 2 outlines Jervis's four system effects and corresponding covert action examples.

[97] Jervis, *System Effects*, 3.

SYSTEM EFFECTS		
Effect	**Description**	**Example**
Interactions, not "additivity"	Systemic interactions produce emergent behavior that cannot be understood by simply summing the components.	Bay of Pigs invasion (1961)
Indirect and delayed effects	Complex interactions produce delayed results that can have far more impact on the long-term system than the immediate results of those interactions.	Paramilitary support to Tibetan rebels (1956-72)
Relations are often not bilaterally determined	Interactions between two components will resonate with other components both internal and external to the system.	Political activity in British Guiana (1961-62)
Outcomes do not necessarily follow from intentions	Unintended consequences are common in systems. Complexity creates outcomes that can be difficult to predict.	Propaganda to spread Khruschev's anti-Stalin speech (1956)

Table 2. System effects.
Jervis's four system effects and related covert actions.[98]

By appreciating how systemic interactions produce outcomes that may diverge sharply from neatly designed plans, policymakers can gain a deeper understanding of the complex nature of covert actions and perhaps better apply the system to foreign policy issues. It may not be possible to control or precisely predict system behavior, but policymakers must at least be aware of the existence of system effects in order to make informed decisions regarding the merits of a covert action policy.

3. Feedback

Understanding feedback is central to understanding system behavior. Feedback is the looping concept that distinguishes systems from linear cause-and-effect events.[99] As Figure 8 illustrates, interactions create feedback, which then returns to the system; outputs become inputs that causes the original system to "change, learn, and evolve over

[98] Jervis, *System Effects*, 202.

[99] George P. Richardson, *Feedback Thought in Social Science and Systems Theory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 2.

time."[100] The system a policymaker deals with today is not the same they will see tomorrow. In fact, because of this natural tendency to learn and evolve, George Richardson considers "feedback and circular causality…one of the most profound and most penetrating fundamentals in all social science."[101]

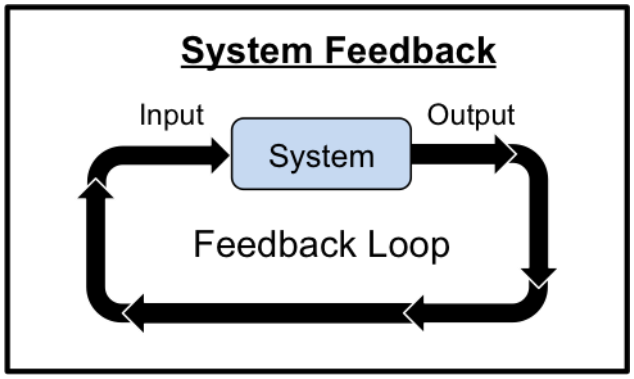

Figure 8. System feedback.
System output becomes input in a continuous feedback loop.

Feedback is "essential to reliable policy analysis"[102] because it provides the information policymakers need to assess the system's status, understand how close the system is to achieving its purpose, and if required, manipulate the components to achieve a different outcome. Without a firm understanding of these interactions and the feedback they produce, policymakers cannot hope to properly evaluate the system. But because feedback is simply information, mechanisms must be in place to capture system feedback. Systems communicate through feedback, but without the means to listen and respond, the opportunity to adjust the system's behavior will be lost.

4. Tradeoffs

There are two major tradeoffs within the covert action system: stakes versus innovation and deniability over time as it relates to effectiveness. Comprehending the

[100] Richardson, *Feedback Thought in Social Science and Systems Theory*, 338.

[101] Richardson, *Feedback Thought in Social Science and Systems Theory*, 319.

[102] Richardson, *Feedback Thought in Social Science and Systems Theory*, 4.

input decision makers have on these tradeoffs and how those inputs impact effectiveness can lead to the development of more sound covert action policies.

a. Stake Versus Innovation

The first tradeoff, depicted in Figure 9, is that of the national interest at stake versus the innovation of the tool applied. Put simply, a state should keep its most innovative tools in reserve until a threat presents itself that warrants revealing that tool because once used, a tool's effectiveness begins to drop as technology is diffused and adversaries develop countermeasures. The stakes versus innovation decision will not always be a straight, direct relationship as there may be situations when a low stakes issue will be addressed with a highly innovative tool. However, as a generality, highly innovative tools should be reserved for high stakes.

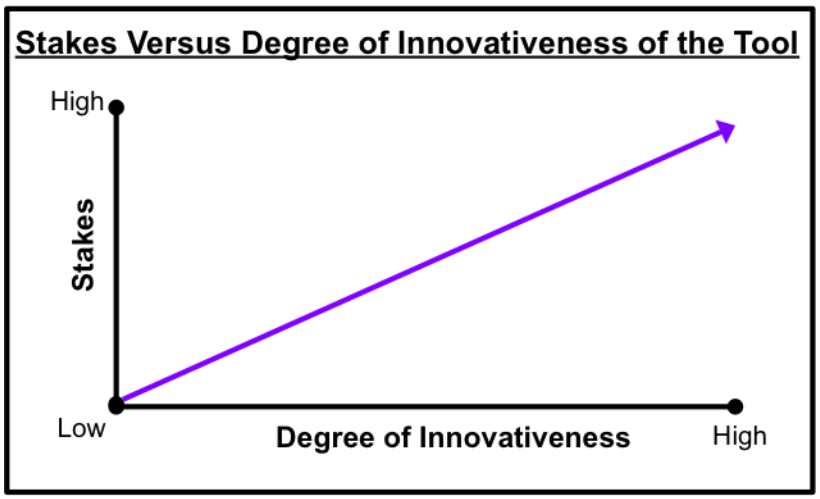

Figure 9. Tradeoff #1: Stakes versus degree of innovativeness of the tool. Tradeoff depicting the need to align the innovation of the tool with the level of the stakes.

It is important for decision makers to acknowledge this tradeoff exists even if there is no correct answer. Electing to withhold the use of an innovative tool in anticipation of a situation where stakes merit its use may provide the target ample time to develop defenses against it through standard technological research and development. On the other hand, deploying an innovative tool against a stake that does not meet a self-imposed threshold may be a waste of a capability. Decision makers face an age-old

dilemma: withhold a capability in anticipation of future dangers or burn a tool in order to neutralize a present day threat. This tradeoff does not exist solely in the realm of covert action, but with the recent technological advances in cyber technology, it is becoming more imperative for decision makers to consider the ramifications of this tradeoff before employing new, innovative technology in a covert capacity.

b. Deniability Over Time

The second tradeoff in the covert action system, depicted in Figure 10, is the interaction between deniability and time as it relates to effectiveness. Covert action effectiveness is determined by objectives met, not by whether an action remains unattributed or unacknowledged. Deniability, however, is a critical supporting factor to effectiveness. The more deniable an operation, the longer a sponsor's role will remain hidden, the more time available to achieve the objectives covertly.

A decision is required when the action is nearing exposure. When exposure becomes imminent, decision makers should decide whether to shut down the operation, proceed in an "overt-covert" manner, or transition to an overt action. This decision should be based off an analysis of the objectives at stake weighed against the expected fallout of exposure. Again, there is no correct answer to this tradeoff. Some stakes will be deemed high enough to warrant proceeding under "overt-covert" or purely overt conditions whereas some may be low enough to justify aborting the action. Decision makers must simply be prepared to address this decision when the time comes by understanding the future repercussions their choices will have.

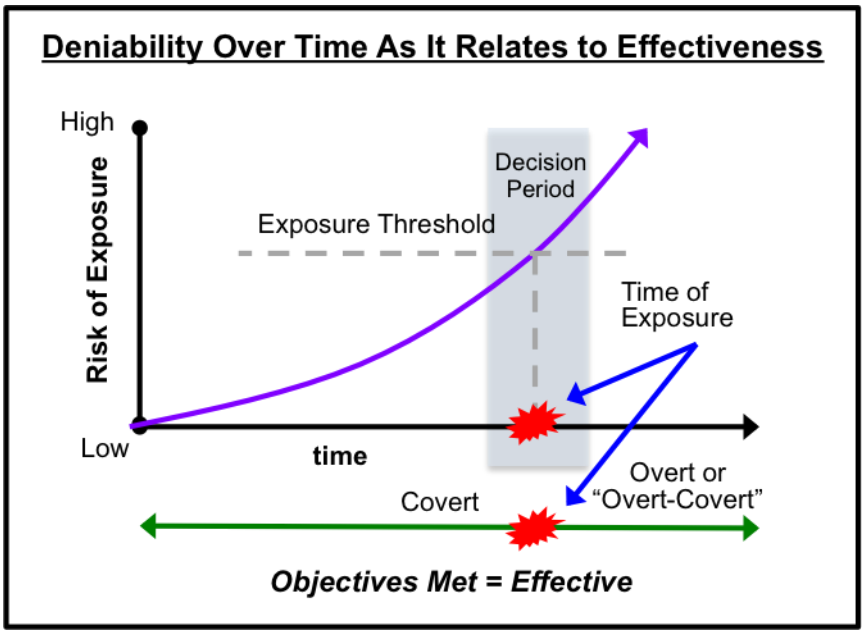

Figure 10. Tradeoff #2: Deniability over time as it relates to effectiveness. Tradeoff depicting the relationship between deniability, effectiveness, and time.

D. CONCLUSION

The systems approach is "an intellectual discipline…to attack complex, large-scale problems in an objective, logical, complete, and thoroughly professional way."[103] Covert action is nothing if not complex and viewing this dynamic policy instrument through a systems lens may allow for better assessments of the advantages and disadvantages of a covert policy. The following chapters will examine a range of historical vignettes to highlight the systems approach concepts of the system diagram, system effects, feedback, and tradeoffs in order to illustrate how this analytic method can provide useful insight to policymakers.

[103] Ramo, *The Systems Approach*, 1.

III. CASES FROM THE PRE-WORLD WAR II PERIOD

A. INTRODUCTION

Covert action came into practice long before the end of World War Two and the beginning of the more nuanced hostilities that defined the Cold War. In fact, the United States has a rich history of covert operations dating as far back as General Washington's arms procurement efforts via the Secret Committee in 1775.[104] Every president since has used some form of covert response to address a foreign policy concern and many other countries have engaged in covert action over long periods. While the issues, tools, and approaches have evolved over the past 200 years, the fundamental core of the covert action system has remained largely unchanged.

This chapter will first provide a brief overview of covert action during the pre-World War Two timeframe. The system diagram introduced in Chapter II will then be used to examine four covert actions representative of those that were executed during this early period: President Jefferson's sponsorship of a coup to overthrow the pasha of Tripoli during the Barbary War, President Lincoln's propaganda campaign to dissuade European support for the Confederacy during the American Civil War, President Theodore Roosevelt's paramilitary operation to establish the state of Panama thus enabling the construction of the Panama Canal, and Vladimir Lenin's political activities to destroy the counterrevolutionary forces after the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. Each vignette will highlight specific interactions within the system to demonstrate how the diagram can enhance understanding by providing a visual depiction of the system's complexity.

B. PRE-WORLD WAR TWO OVERVIEW

With the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783, the American Revolution came to an end. However, the challenges this new nation would face were only just beginning. From 1783 to the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, America's political leaders would

[104] Knott, *Secret and Sanctioned*, 14.

use covert action to cope with three main issues: economic and military insecurity, geographic growth, and eventually, the quest for international prestige.

Security was the first hurdle the newly formed government faced. The departure of British troops from American soil left the United States with a glaring existential problem: how, with limited economic and military strength, was the U.S. to protect itself from internal and external threats? The executive branch turned to covert action as one avenue to confront this dilemma. Perhaps the best-known early use of covert action in response to a security threat during this time was the aborted attempt to overthrow the Tripoli government in retaliation for its harassment of U.S. merchant shipping. Covert actions to enhance security were not limited solely to overseas adversaries, though; they were also used to counter the dangers posed by the native tribes along the frontier during America's expansion westward. While these internal operations accounted for little more than bribing tribal elders, the use of a "cutout" to execute the bribe, thus ensuring plausible deniability, is an early example of a covert economic activity.[105] By far the most extreme security threat the nation faced during this period was the American Civil War. No doubt the battles at Shiloh, Antietam, Gettysburg, and Vicksburg were instrumental factors in the Union's victory, but the secret war Lincoln waged in Europe for the support of France and Britain was crucial to the outcome as well. Through a covert campaign of sabotage, propaganda, and economic activities, Lincoln denied the Confederacy the support it so desperately needed.

The nation's basic need for security ran in tandem with a desire for geographic growth. The term "Manifest Destiny" would not be coined until 1845,[106] yet westward and southern expansion was firmly embedded in the psyche of the American citizen since the early days of the country. Henry Adams believed that Jefferson's "greed for land equaled that of any settler on the border"[107] and he went to great lengths to expand the territory through both overt and covert means. Jefferson's territorial acquisition was

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[105] John J. Carter, *Covert Operations as a Tool of Presidential Policy in American History from 1800–1920* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000), 21.

[106] Independence Hall Association, "Pre-Columbian to the New Millennium: Manifest Destiny," *US History.Org*. http://www.ushistory.org/us/29.asp.

[107] Knott, *Secret and Sanctioned*, 66.

followed by President Madison's attempt in 1810 and 1811 to acquire West and East Florida from Spain by exploiting existing tensions in order to ignite a rebellion, thereby justifying American intervention and annexation. This tactic succeeded in West Florida but failed in East Florida (incidentally, a rebellion incited to justify intervention served as the basis of President Theodore Roosevelt's covert action to create the state of Panama almost a century later). Decades after Madison, President Grant, driven by both economic and military interests, began a campaign to seize the Hawaiian Islands. President Harrison would continue this process and sponsor a coup to annex what would eventually become the fiftieth U.S. state.[108]

During this period, there were few moral qualms about using covert action to target American citizens. President Tyler, in 1841, pursued a protracted propaganda and disinformation campaign against the residents of Maine to settle a dispute with Britain over the northern border, going so far as to fabricate a "lost map" that had been recently "discovered" amongst Benjamin Franklin's papers.[109] This forged document convinced the residents to accept a compromise before the British also "discovered" the artifact and laid greater claim to the northern border. From Maine to Florida to Hawaii, the U.S. borders today are due in part to the successful use of covert operations.

The desire to establish the U.S. as a world power was another reason to resort to covert actions. Even before the official announcement of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, the U.S. was focused on displacing European influence in the western hemisphere. As early as 1810, President Madison authorized an "agent of influence" to "create and direct political movements…pledged to the adoption of the American model of government and hostile to European interests"[110] in various countries in Central and South America. Despite the lack of economic and military strength, the U.S. was still able to enforce the "hands off" policy that the Monroe Doctrine established through these "agents of influence." This quest for international prestige was realized with President Theodore

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[108] Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq* (New York: Time Books, 2006), 13.

[109] Carter, *Covert Operations*, 75.

[110] Knott, *Secret and Sanctioned*, 108.

Roosevelt's successful completion of a trans-isthmian canal in 1913, an endeavor of which many European nations had dreamed. "The greatest engineering work of all time"[111] would have been further delayed were it not for the paramilitary operation that established the state of Panama.

This study focuses heavily on the American experience with covert action, yet one cannot overlook the historic international use of this policy tool. If spying is the world's second oldest profession, covert action was likely one of the spy's first missions. Even Christianity's Book of Genesis opens with perhaps the best known covert action in the Western world: a snake, with the intent to hide its true origin, convinces Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, thus condemning mankind to a life outside the Garden of Eden. More pertinent to this discussion, many of the great powers participated in covert operations prior to World War Two to further their national causes. During the French occupation of Prussia in the early nineteenth century, the British Foreign Office heavily subsidized covert operations against Napoleon in the form of propaganda and paramilitary support.[112] Underground "fraternal orders" were supported to help "rid Germany of Napoleon and his 'Latin hordes.'"[113] These "secret societies" were beginning to emerge throughout Europe to support political progress and independent rule. Sects such as the Carbonari of Italy, the Associated Patriots of France, and the Communeros of Spain[114] were secretly dedicated to "unity, liberty, and independence"[115] and considered a "menace"[116] to the existing ruling structure. Actions ranging from innocuous propaganda efforts directed against the Spanish regime to fomenting radical revolution in Paris were, as Thomas Frost claimed in 1876, "reckoned among the forces which have produced the

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[111] David McCullough, *The Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal 1870–1914* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), 590.

[112] Otto W. Johnson, "British Espionage and Prussian Politics in the Age of Napoleon," *Intelligence and National Security* 2, no. 2 (1987): 238.

[113] Johnson, "British Espionage and Prussian Politics in the Age of Napoleon," 241.

[114] See Thomas Frost, *The Secret Societies of the European Revolution, 1776–1876* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1876).

[115] R. John Rath, "The Carbonari: Their Origins, Initiation Rites, and Aims," *The American Historical Review* 69, no. 2 (January 1964): 370.

[116] Rath, "The Carbonari," 366.

European revolution."[117] Years later, after the Bolshevik Revolution, Russia would begin establishing "trade organizations" in major international cities to influence local governments and populations. In fact, one of the most successful Russian covert campaigns, Operation Trust, was based on a front organization known as the Monarchist Organization of Central Russia that passed itself off as an anti-Bolshevik underground force to target the White Russian émigré groups.[118]

Covert action was not restricted to adversaries countering adversaries. The British conducted a massive covert campaign against the U.S. in the immediate build-up to World War Two through the British Security Cooperation (BSC). The BSC, based out of the Rockefeller Center in New York City was established to develop a cooperative relationship with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); covertly, its mission was to "do all that was not being done and could not be done by overt means to assure sufficient aid for Britain and eventually to bring America into the war."[119] The BSC undertook what some consider "the largest covert operation in UK history,"[120] by "attacking the isolationism and fostering interventionism" in the American population.[121] Anti-German, anti-Japanese, and pro-British articles were published through such pillars of the American media as *The New York Times*, *The New York Herald*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Baltimore Sun*. Pro-British and pro-interventionist political organizations were also subsidized and isolationist groups such as America First Committee became the target of directed counter-propaganda and low-scale sabotage campaigns. A short wave radio station with a large international audience, WRUL, unwittingly became a conduit of BSC propaganda when a network of cut-outs and intermediaries suddenly took great interest in their content.[122] The surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 made BSC's

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[117] Frost, *The Secret Societies of the European Revolution*, xii.

[118] Brian Champion, "Spies (Look) Like Us: The Early Use of Business and Civilian Covers in Covert Operations," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 21 (2008): 552. Operation Trust, and a sister campaign, Syndicate, will be examined in greater detail below.

[119] William Stephenson, *British Security Coordination: The Secret History of British Intelligence in the Americas, 1940–1945* (New York: First Fromm International Edition, 1999), xxvii.

[120] William Boyd, "The Secret Persuaders," *The Guardian*, August 19, 2006.

[121] Stephenson, *British Security Cooperation*, 55.

[122] Stephenson, *British Security Cooperation*, 56–69.

campaign to shift American attitudes toward intervention moot and the propaganda efforts were largely abandoned to be replaced by more open cooperation and partnership with the nascent U.S. intelligence entities to support the overall Allied war effort.

From time immemorial, states have resorted to covert operations to influence adversaries and allies alike. Regardless of the specific state which conducted the covert action or the particular time period in which it was executed, it can be seen that the core of the covert action system diagram has remained essentially unchanged. Generally speaking, pre-World War Two covert operations were much more ad-hoc and informal with significantly less oversight than those conducted today, however, the basic systemic logic that defines covert action has remained much the same. Tools, techniques, practices, and statutes have all evolved over the years, but the underlying structure has changed little.

C. JEFFERSON AND THE TRIPOLI COUP

President Jefferson's attempt to overthrow the government of Tripoli, later aborted, to address one of the nation's first international crises is analyzed below. The system diagram depicting this covert action is shown in Figure 11.

1. The System

Immediately upon taking office President Jefferson was faced with a major foreign policy crisis, harassment of U.S. merchant shipping by the Barbary States. The purpose in responding to the Barbary aggression was two-sided: protect the fledgling merchant fleet and establish the precedent that American assets would be defended. Jefferson was determined to fight an inexpensive war—the only kind he could afford—and therefore resorted to tactics ranging from diplomatic measures to naval action to the sponsorship of a coup.[123] It was determined that the best option to secure shipping

[123] Jefferson was not supportive of diplomatic measures through Congressionally supported "tribute obligations" and instead advocated naval action. He understood, however, that it was the Constitutional power of Congress to declare war. This issue became "one of the earliest tests of what would be debated down the years as the restrictions on the power of the president in time of emergency." A.B.C. Whipple, *To the Shores of Tripoli: The Birth of the U.S. Navy and Marines* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), 63–64.

through the Mediterranean was to "pressure the reigning sovereign to sue for peace on American terms."[124] To that end, a proposal was hatched to overthrow the pasha of Tripoli with American support through "artillery, arms, ammunition, some marines, and $40,000."[125] It is unclear exactly what operational constraints were established, however, it is worth noting that while the "overall effort was sanctioned at the highest levels, certain operational details were conveniently left to the discretion of those in the field"[126] leading one to believe that, in fact, few operational constraints were in place. Through Secretary of State James Madison, the American consul in Tunis William Eaton was directed to contact the pasha of Tripoli's brother, Hamet Karamanli, to discuss a potential covert partnership with the Americans. Eaton's verbal orders were to convince Hamet to "cooperate with the naval force…against the usurper, his brother and for re-establishing him in the regency of Tripoli."[127] Eaton's meeting with Hamet coupled with the intelligence he collected in the region led him to assess that "Bahaw Yusuf had become such a hated tyrant that many thousands of his subjects were only waiting for an excuse to rally to Hamet."[128]

Based on Eaton's assessment of the situation, as well as the continuing harassment of merchant shipping, Jefferson authorized a small U.S. contingent to support a coup in the spring of 1804. Eaton contacted Hamet in Egypt and with a force of nearly 400 of Hamet's supporters accompanied by a small contingent of U.S. Marines[129] began a march from Egypt to Tripoli with the intent to overthrow the pasha. During this march across the desert, the pasha faced increasing pressure and quickly sued for peace. With the cessation of hostilities, the U.S. extracted Eaton, Hamet, and the Marines while the remaining men were left to fend for themselves. The Arab force was to give the appearance of an indigenous uprising, yet it was a poorly kept secret that the U.S. had

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[124] Knott, *Secret and Sanctioned*, 74.

[125] Whipple, *To the Shores of Tripoli*, 184.

[126] Knott, *Secret and Sanctioned*, 77.

[127] Whipple, *To the Shores of Tripoli*, 186.

[128] William Eaton, as quoted in Whipple, *To the Shores of Tripoli*, 180.

[129] Knott, *Secret and Sanctioned*, 76.

sponsored the action. Regardless of the low level of deniability, the operation still achieved the desired result: compelling the pasha to sue for peace.

The "success" of this operation, as it relates to foreign policy, is debatable. The final agreement with Tripoli "set off a firestorm in Congress" and led to "public outcry against selling out to Tripoli."[130] When the treaty was ratified by Congress in April of 1806, "it proved to be one of the most unpopular treaties in U.S. history."[131] It should be noted that Jefferson's treaty with the pasha of Tripoli did not solve the Barbary pirate issue, but it did provide some reprieve. While the success of the policy may still be in question, the effectiveness of the covert action is undeniable. Hamet's march across Africa convinced the pasha to sue for peace—the original objective. This first U.S. intervention in the internal affairs of a foreign nation was highly effective in the near term and arguably laid a foundation for the nation's future relationship with covert action.

[130] Whipple, *To the Shores of Tripoli*, 264.

[131] Whipple, *To the Shores of Tripoli*, 264.

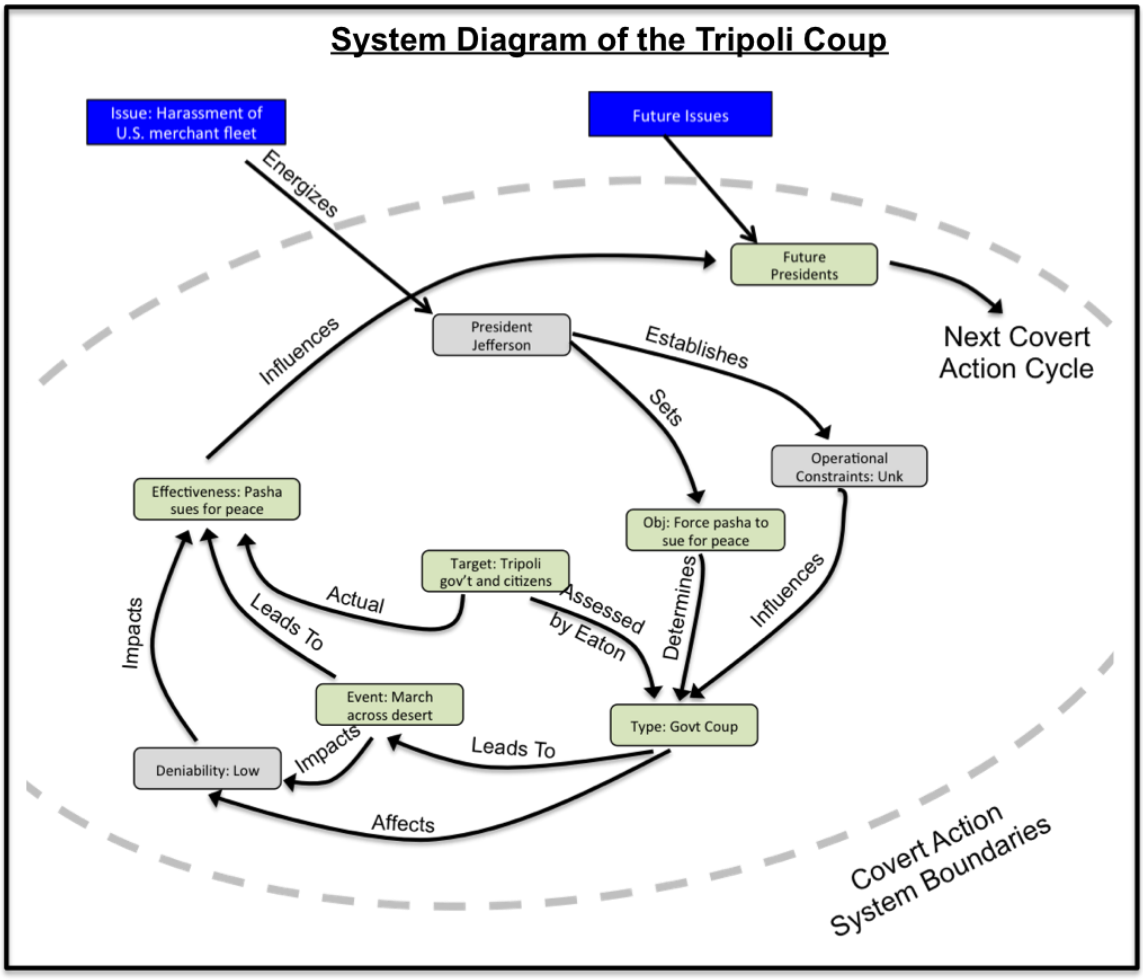

Figure 11. System diagram of Tripoli coup.
The system diagram depicts President Jefferson's coup to overthrow the pasha of Tripoli. The components in green will be the focus of the below analysis.

2. Highlights of the System

Overlaying the system diagram on the covert action allows one to better grasp the internal relationships between components. The following interactions are the focus of the below analysis: 1) the relationship between the objectives, target characteristics, type of action, and effectiveness; and 2) the interaction between the current cycle and future decision makers. This example also highlights the fact that most covert actions are rarely stand-alone affairs; instead they are typically nested within larger foreign policy initiatives.

A decision maker sets the "objectives" which determines the "type and tool" of the action. It is critical to note that the primary objective of this operation was not to dethrone the sitting pasha of Tripoli. Instead, it was clearly stated by Jefferson that the desired end state was peace and protection of the shipping assets "with or without"[132] a regime change. Removing the pasha was a means to Jefferson's desire for peace, not an end in itself. Secretary of the Navy Robert Smith reiterated this objective in a letter to a subordinate tasked to negotiate with Tripoli, "in adjusting the terms of Peace with the Dey of Tripoli, whatever regard may be had to the situation of his Brother, it is not to be considered by you of sufficient magnitude to prevent or even to retard a final settlement with the Dey."[133] Because the goal was to force the pasha to sue for peace, there was little hesitation to use Hamet as a mere "instrument"[134] of U.S. foreign policy. It is unclear whether this bargaining tactic was communicated to Hamet, but, moral and ethical considerations aside, it provided U.S. agents great flexibility.

The assessment of the "target characteristics" also helped determined the "type and tool." The "type and tool" led to the "event," which, in conjunction with the "actual target characteristics" led to "effectiveness." Eaton's assessment that the physical security and political instability of Tripoli made it ripe for a coup was instrumental in the decision to authorize this covert action. He reported that the Tripolitans were tired of war and "would rise en masse to receive" their "rightful sovereign."[135] This assessment convinced Jefferson that sponsoring a coup would either replace a tiresome adversary with an ally or frighten him into signing a peace treaty; regardless of which of the two outcomes occurred, the objective would be met. Hamet's march across the desert concerned the pasha enough that he signed a treaty in June 1805, promising protection of the U.S. merchant fleet. While the coup itself was aborted, the overall operation was effective and shipping was, at least initially, protected through a signed treaty with

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[132] The Jefferson Monticello Research and Collections, "The First Barbary War," *Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia*. http://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/first-barbary-war.

[133] The Jefferson Monticello, "The First Barbary War," *Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia*.

[134] Knott, *Secret and Sanctioned*, 74.

[135] Eaton, as cited in Knott, *Secret and Sanctioned*, 73.

Tripoli.[136] This illustrates the obvious, yet often ignored, principle that a covert action is a tool and should not be seen as an end in itself. Eaton, as the tactician on the ground, was understandably upset when the mission was cancelled and his men were pulled out. It took a strategic view removed from the emotion of the operation to understand the coup was simply a supporting operation to achieve the objective.

The second relationship that this vignette illustrates is the interaction between the "effectiveness" of the current cycle and "future decision makers." It was Jefferson who truly established the precedent of covert action as a means to support the nation's interests. It is a wasted academic exercise to debate how history may have changed had this first attempt at meddling in the domestic affairs of another nation failed, but it is evident that the effectiveness influenced not only Jefferson but later administrations as well. Subsequent presidents were emboldened by Jefferson's use of covert activities and it was only a few years later when Madison sought to acquire both West and East Florida through covert means. For over two centuries, the U.S. has been secretly interfering in the affairs of other states, and it all started with Jefferson in Tripoli.

Finally, this example highlights the notion that covert actions are often subsystems of larger foreign policy meta-systems. They are rarely successful on their own and should be used as a part of a comprehensive approach to an issue. Jefferson did not rely solely on Eaton and Hamet to persuade the pasha to negotiate a treaty, instead, the coup was one of many initiatives underway to protect U.S. shipping. A very overt war was being waged on the Mediterranean with the U.S. navy blockading the Tripoli ports while planning for a full-scale ground invasion. It is impossible to determine whether the pasha would have accepted the American terms if not for the U.S. frigates in his waters, however, the fact remains that the administration did not take that chance. Instead, the coup was conducted in tandem with other forms of influence to persuade the government of Tripoli to succumb.

[136] Like many examples that will be cited in this study, the Tripoli coup reiterates the distinction between effective and successful. The coup initiated and then aborted by Jefferson was effective because it achieved the stated objectives – a signed treaty. However, the treaty was soon violated and the U.S. navy had to return to the region to protect American interests through an overt action. Simply because a covert action is effective in the near term does not constitute overall policy success.

This first major covert action conducted by the U.S. highlights a few of the interactions within the system. The objectives established by Jefferson in conjunction with the assessed target characteristics of the region led him to authorize a coup. The approval of the coup led Eaton, Hamet, and a sizeable force to march on Tripoli with the intent of overthrowing the government. That action, embedded with other tools of influence, caused the pasha to sue for peace, effectively achieving the original objectives. Most importantly, the effectiveness of this action set the precedent for the use of covert action by future administrations.

D. LINCOLN AND THE THREAT OF EUROPEAN INTERVENTION IN THE CIVIL WAR

President Lincoln's use propaganda to discourage European intervention on behalf of the Confederacy during the American Civil War is the subject of the below analysis. The system diagram depicting this covert action is shown in Figure 12.

1. The System

The scope of this thesis covers covert action during times of peace, so it may appear contradictory to include an example that was conducted by the Union during the American Civil War—one of the bloodiest wars on record. This covert action was not executed on American soil but instead in the heart of Europe and therefore still falls within the "peacetime" scope of this study. As the Civil War raged in America, President Lincoln understood the potential impact of European intervention on the outcome and through a covert campaign took the offensive to counter that possibility. The issue at stake was nothing less than European public, diplomatic, economic, and materiel support, support that could potentially shift the course of the war in favor of the Confederacy. Lincoln entrusted his Secretary of State William Seward to engage his ambassador to Belgium, Henry Shelton Sanford, to help in this effort. Lincoln's guidance to Seward and Sanford was clear but not specific, "to nullify the efforts of their Confederate counterparts."[137] Few operational constraints were placed on Sanford; Seward, who echoed Lincoln, wrote to his ambassador that "you need not consider yourself as being

[137] Abraham Lincoln, as cited in Knott, *Secret and Sanctioned*, 141.

restricted…from repairing at any to points in Europe which you may deem your presence necessary, or likely to conduce to the public interest."[138]

To this end, Sanford directed multiple covert activities throughout Europe, ranging from economic activities that secretly purchased supplies needed by the Confederacy[139] to sabotage missions that offered to scuttle Confederate ships before leaving England to simply bribing ship captains to sail Confederacy-destined supplies to Union ports.[140] Even amid such a varied covert campaign, Sanford's propaganda program was seen as one of his most ambitious efforts.[141] The program targeted foreign newspapers by "subsidizing" key media outlets.[142] The level of both deniability and effectiveness of this operation is evident in a letter sent by a Confederate agent operating in Europe who wrote "*L'independence belge* (a Belgium newspaper)…is under a peculiar influence in its violent hostility to the Confederate States."[143] Support in the European media was swinging to the Union, yet it was not entirely clear why. The success of these early covert efforts subsequently led Sanford to plan and execute more complex actions, including the use of American clergymen to sway their European counterparts, covert agents to inspire "spontaneous"[144] rallies at British trade union gatherings, and other operations that wreaked havoc on the South's attempt to curry favor in Europe.

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[138] William Seward, as quoted in Knott, *Secret and Sanctioned*, 140.

[139] Carter, *Covert Operations*, 97.

[140] Knott, *Secret and Sanctioned*, 141.

[141] Knott, *Secret and Sanctioned*, 142.

[142] Knott, *Secret and Sanctioned*, 142.

[143] Knott, *Secret and Sanctioned*, 143.

[144] Knott, *Secret and Sanctioned*, 144.

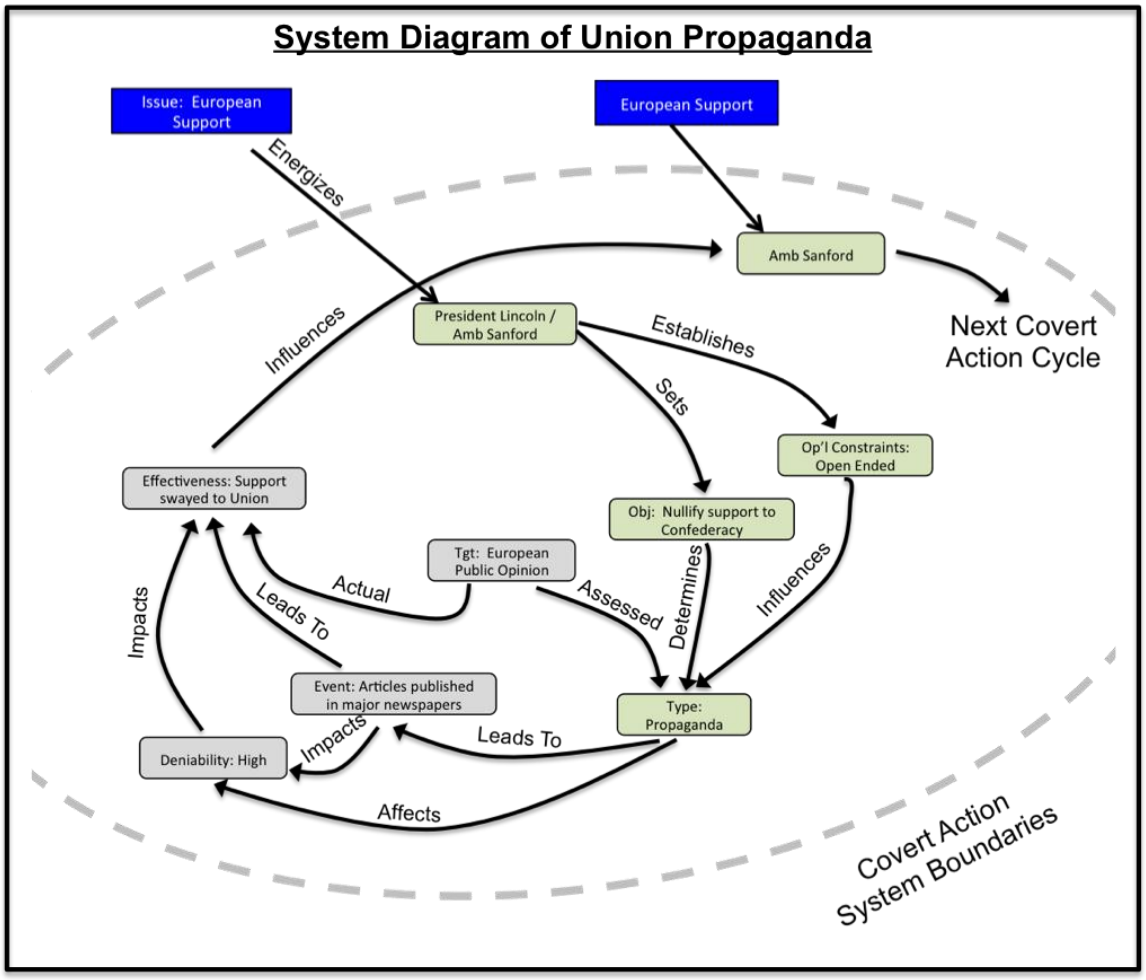

Figure 12. System diagram of Union propaganda.
The system diagram depicts President Lincoln's covert propaganda efforts to deny European support for the Confederacy. The components in green will be the focus of the below analysis.

2. Highlights of the System

This vignette highlights the relationship between the decision maker, the objectives, the operational constraints, and the type of action. The "decision maker" sets the "objectives" and establishes the "operational constraints," both of which influence the "type and tool." During the Civil War, the initial structure of American intelligence was in development and covert actions began to transition from informal, ad hoc operations to

more formal affairs,[145] yet the president was still not firmly entrenched in the decision-making process. Lincoln made it clear that he wanted to deny support to the Confederacy and prevent access to European markets, but it does not appear he participated in the detailed decisions of how that would be accomplished. Once Lincoln established the larger objectives, Sanford was given the authorization, flexibility, and resources to determine on his own how to move forward. This is not to imply that Lincoln was unaware or unwitting in the covert campaign, only that no formal process was yet established to necessitate his full involvement. He established the strategic goal and then removed himself from the system, at which point Sanford became the "decision maker," determining what type of covert actions to conduct and subsequently influenced by the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of those events when planning future operations.

In Lincoln's era, the "decision maker" could be delegated down to much lower levels as seen with Sanford's control of the covert campaign in Europe. Due to various American covert action scandals over the years, both Congress and the executive branch have established very strict lines of reporting. This vignette illustrates, however, that the system diagram is general enough to be applied beyond current U.S. processes and can provide insight when less formal planning and execution mechanisms are used. Historical and international use of covert action will not mirror the current U.S. approach, but the system diagram can still assist in visualizing even less formal covert action processes.

E. ROOSEVELT AND THE CREATION OF THE STATE OF PANAMA

President Theodore Roosevelt's paramilitary operation to create the state of Panama and garner a favorable canal treaty is analyzed below. The system diagram depicting this covert action is shown in Figure 13.

1. The System

President Roosevelt's foreign policy revolved around two complementary goals: "gaining recognition of the U.S. as a world power and the acceptance by the other world

[145] John D. Stempel, "Covert Action and Diplomacy," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 20, no. 1 (2007): 123.

powers of the essential premise of the Monroe Doctrine."[146] The construction of the Panama Canal, something that had been dreamed of since Balboa crossed the isthmus in 1513, nested neatly within these two aims. When negotiations with Colombia broke down over the terms of a canal treaty, Roosevelt saw two alternatives, "(1) to take up Nicaragua; or (2) in some shape or way to interfere when it becomes necessary so as to secure the Panama route without further dealing with the foolish and homicidal corruptionists in Bogota."[147] For multiple reasons including a strong lobbying effort by private businesses, Roosevelt chose the second alternative and began to consider a covert action to support rebels within the Colombian province of Panama. The objective was relatively simple: support the creation of an independent state of Panama in exchange for a canal treaty beneficial to the U.S. Again, as has been shown to be typical of this period, it is unclear what, if any, formal operational constraints were established. Two officials were dispatched to Panama to assess the stability of the region and reported back that the "conditions were ripe for rebellion" and the rebel group's "cadre was well organized and positioned to quickly seize control of the province once hostilities started."[148] This assessment led Roosevelt to authorize a paramilitary operation in support of an existing Panamanian revolutionary group. $100,000 was deposited into a bank account belonging to the group and promises were made to provide American diplomatic and military support in the event of an uprising.[149]

On November 3, 1903, shortly before conflict broke out, the U.S. deployed three gunboats to the area to "prevent the landing of any armed force 'either government or insurgent'" and to ensure "free and uninterrupted transit on the railroad." [150] This thinly veiled attempt at neutrality had the desired effect, the menacing shadow of U.S. gunboats and active involvement of U.S. naval officers prevented Colombian reinforcements from either landing ashore or transiting from Colon to Panama City. The junta declared

[146] Carter, *Covert Operations*, 172.

[147] Theodore Roosevelt, as quoted in Kinzer, *Overthrow*, 61.

[148] Carter, *Covert Operations*, 179.

[149] Carter, *Covert Operations*, 179.

[150] McCullough, *The Path Between the Seas*, 378.

themselves a sovereign state and within 48 hours the U.S. extended diplomatic recognition. Roosevelt was severely criticized domestically yet adamantly denied any involvement with the rebel group, maintaining that "no one connected with this Government had any part in preparing, inciting, or encouraging the late revolution on the Isthmus of Panama."[151] Despite Roosevelt's assertions, the Attorney General still produced an *ex post facto* legal argument to justify his actions but when Panama offered a treaty so overwhelmingly beneficial to U.S. interests, Congress quickly dropped its opposition.[152] The Hay—Bunau-Varilla Treaty was ratified on February 23, 1904 and 10 years later, after a massive feat of engineering, the first ship passed from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean through the Panama Canal.

[151] Roosevelt eventually admitted U.S. government involvement years later when, in a speech at University of California-Berkeley, he declared that "the Panama Canal would not have been started if I had not taken hold of it." Later in the speech he admitted, "I took the Isthmus, started the canal and then left Congress not to debate the canal, but to debate me." Roosevelt, as cited in McCullough, *The Path Between the Seas*, 382–383.

[152] Kinzer, *Overthrow*, 62.

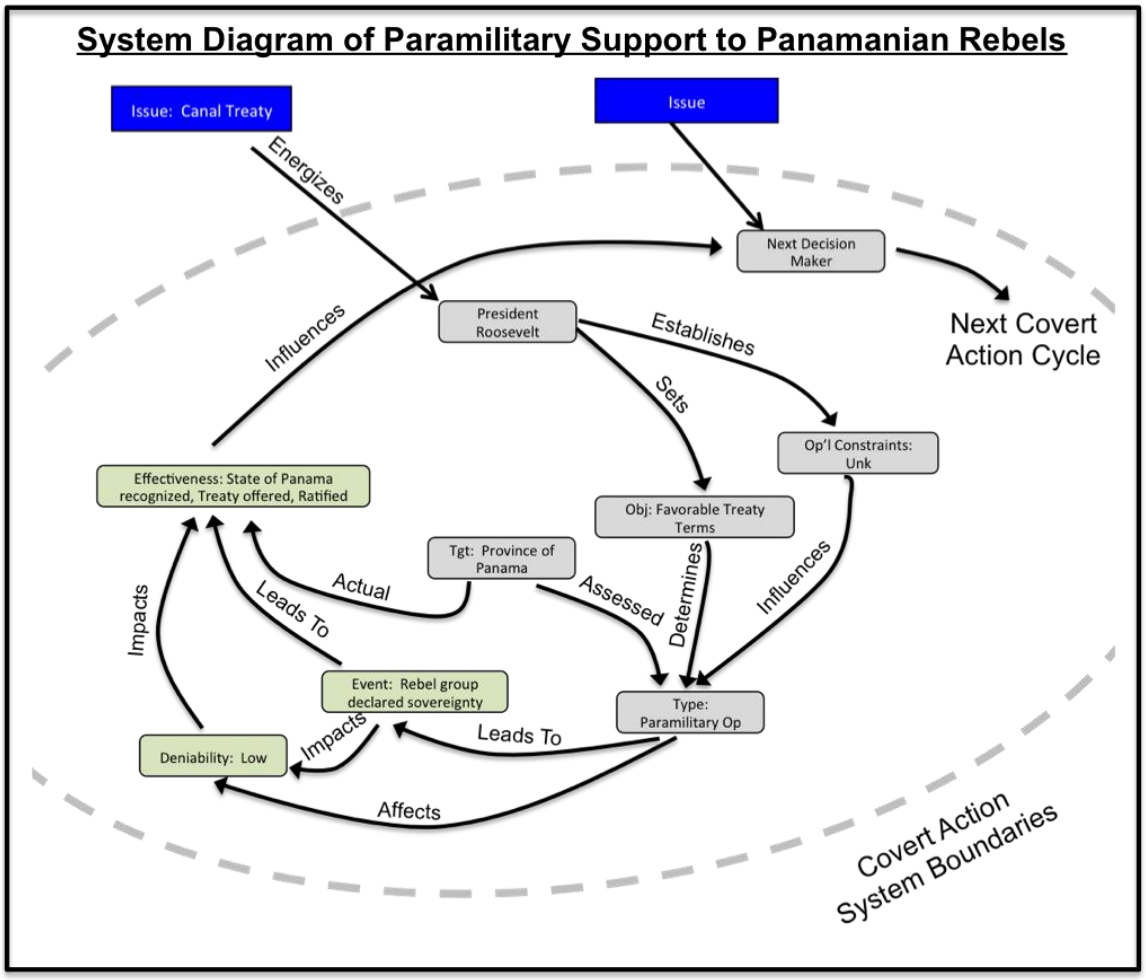

Figure 13. System diagram of Panamanian paramilitary support. The system diagram depicts President Theodore Roosevelt's paramilitary operation to create the state of Panama. The components in green will be the focus of the below analysis.

2. Highlights of the System

Roosevelt's paramilitary operation illustrates the relationship between the event, deniability, and effectiveness. The level of "deniability" as well as "effectiveness" are both influenced by the outcome of the "event." An "event" will determine the "effectiveness" of the action; the event's signature will also affect "deniability." Recall that the effectiveness of covert actions should be measured by the degree to which the event meets the objectives, not by the level of deniability maintained. Delinking deniability from effectiveness begs the question of the importance of deniability.

Churchman recommends that a systems study focus only on "those components whose measures of performance are truly related to the measure of performance of the overall system."[153] If deniability does not directly impact effectiveness, why consider it a key component in the covert action system? Put simply, deniability buys time for an operation to covertly achieve the objectives; when deniability is lost, a decision must be made quickly on whether the stakes are worth the expected fallout of exposure. Deniability may not be directly related to effectiveness, it is, however, a critical component to the dynamic interactions that determine effectiveness.

Roosevelt viewed the creation of Panama as a high-stakes issue. Here was an opportunity to achieve two of his foreign policy goals at once: recognition of the U.S. as a world power and supplanting European influence in the region. There was not a great need for a high level of deniability; Roosevelt simply needed to buy enough time to allow the rebels to seize control of the province at which point the U.S. could justify overt intervention, extend diplomatic recognition and in return, garner a favorable canal treaty. Deniability was limited by two primary factors: previous official statements and the level of control exerted on the outcome. Roosevelt had made it clear that he wanted to finalize a canal treaty during his presidential term, declaring to Congress that "no single great material work which remains to be undertaken on this continent is of such consequence to the American people."[154] He also exerted a significant level of control over the event by immediately deploying gunboats to the port which ensured that Colombian forces would be unable to quell the rebellion. However, the low level of deniability did not negatively impact the effectiveness of the operation; again, Roosevelt only needed to maintain deniability long enough and to such a degree as to allow the rebels to declare independence at which point he could justify U.S. overt intervention to "prevent the landing of any armed force 'either government or insurgent'"[155] in a show of neutrality. The rebellion and diplomatic recognition eventually led to the accomplishment of the

[153] Churchman, *The Systems Approach*, 43.

[154] Roosevelt, as cited in McCullough, *The Path Between the Seas*, 249.

[155] McCullough, *The Path Between the Seas*, 378.

objectives, a favorable canal treaty, and therefore an effective action despite the limited deniability.

F. LENIN AND HIS EFFORT TO DESTROY THE ANTI-BOLSHEVIKS

Vladimir Lenin's use of covert political activities to shore up support for his Bolshevik government and address the threat of counterrevolutionary forces is looked at in closer detail below. The system diagram depicting this covert action is shown in Figure 14.

1. The System

In March 1917, Russian Czar Nicholas II was deposed and the long-ruling Romanov dynasty came to an end. Following the news of the overthrow, Vladimir Lenin, leader of the Bolshevik party in exile in Switzerland at the time, was anxious to return to Russia to lead the nascent revolution. Between Lenin and St. Petersburg, however, were the battlefields of World War I and Russia's "hated enemy,"[156] Germany. The German government, in a bitter struggle with Russia on its Eastern Front, saw Lenin as an opportunity. By throwing its full support behind the "extremist revolutionary movement" and secretly assisting Lenin's return, it could "create the greatest possible degree of chaos in Russia."[157] With this aim in mind, an agreement was reached to allow a diplomatically "sealed train" to travel through Germany carrying Lenin and his fellow revolutionists. For the Germans, this was an opportunity to "export its most devastating weapon of war to St Petersburg: Lenin in a sealed train;"[158] for Lenin, this offered the plausible deniability he needed so as not to be considered a "traitor" for consorting with the German enemy. Lenin returned to Russia in April to a hero's welcome but fled in July when details of his "secret deal" with the Germans were released by the provisional government.[159]

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[156] Michael Pearson, *The Sealed Train* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1975), 53.

[157] Pearson, *The Sealed Train*, 64.

[158] William S. Lind, "Defending Western Culture," *Foreign Policy* 84 (Autumn 1991): 44

[159] Helen Rappaport, *Conspirator: Lenin in Exile* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 303.

Lenin, in exile again, called for an armed revolution to remove the "liberal and bourgeois"[160] provisional government. He returned in October and took control in a relatively bloodless coup.[161] As the Bolsheviks were attempting to consolidate power, a civil war erupted between the new Russian state and anti-Bolshevik forces. After intense fighting, the counterrevolutionary forces were defeated in 1920 and most czarist and provisional government supporters had fled to Western Europe. The world's first Marxist state was officially founded.

Soon after the initial overthrow of the provisional government and well before the outbreak of the civil war, Lenin understood the dangers posed by anti-Bolshevik forces and a counterrevolutionary movement. To address these threats, he established the Extraordinary Commission to Combat Counterrevolution and Sabotage, known simply as the *Cheka*.[162] The *Cheka's* mission was, as its founding father and "patron saint of the KGB"[163] Felix Dzerzhinsky declared, "to save the revolution" and to do so "we must first destroy the counter-revolutionaries."[164] An estimated one to two million Russians had fled during the two-year civil war and there was a rising concern of a growing dissident movement in Western Europe.[165] To the Bolsheviks, "the émigrés appeared to be organized for some kind of effective action, but in reality they floundered."[166] Reality, however, did not assuage Lenin's fears and the *Checka* "gave first priority to an attempt to penetrate all White Russian groups in and outside of Russia."[167]

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[160] Graham Yost, *The KGB: The Russian Secret Police from the Days of the Czars to the Present* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1989), 8.

[161] Yost, *The KGB*, 8.

[162] The *Cheka* would transition into the State Political Administration (GPU) in 1922 and into the Unified State Political Administration (OGPU) in 1923. The *Cheka* and OGPU are considered the forerunner to the KGB. Yost, *The KGB*, 23, 36–38.

[163] Christopher Andrew, "KGB Foreign Intelligence from Brezhnev to the Coup," *Intelligence and National Security* 8 (1993): 59.

[164] Yost, *The KGB*, 27.

[165] Central Intelligence Agency, "The Trust," *The Security and Intelligence Foundation* (1989): 2. "The Trust" was originally prepared by the Central Intelligence Agency and released for public distribution under the Freedom of Information Act.

[166] CIA, "The Trust," 3.

[167] CIA, "The Trust," 3.

To this end, the *Cheka* established The Trust. Known today as Operation Trust,[168] this covert political activity became "the most successful Soviet intelligence operation of the 1920s."[169] The Trust was formed under the guise of a highly secretive, anti-Bolshevik underground named the Monarchist Association of Central Russia whose "members" (in reality *Cheka*, and later, GPU agents) would regularly travel from Russia to Western Europe to make contact with White Russian leadership. The Trust was to supposedly garner support for the eventual overthrow of the Bolshevik government; its actual mission was to ferret out internal and external counterrevolutionary forces. Trust succeeded by making contact with émigré leadership, reporting on their activities, and in some cases, convincing them to return to Russia to meet with "local underground forces." Once they were across the border, state security would either arrest them or conduct surveillance if they were suspected of having legitimate counterrevolutionary contacts within Russia. Trust not only completely infiltrated many White Russian organizations but also penetrated the foreign intelligence services of Britain, France, Poland, and Finland.[170] It was such a well-run *dezinformatsiya* campaign that even the British "master spy," Sidney Reilly, fell victim to its deception and was arrested and executed through a Trust operation.[171]

A similar covert political action, Operation Syndicate,[172] was executed around the same time and based on the Trust design. Boris Savinkov was the target of Syndicate, a "former Social Revolutionary terrorist" whom Winston Churchill once referred to as a man who "gave more, dared more, and suffered more for the Russian people" than few

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[168] Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 33. Operation Trust is sometimes referred to as Operation Trest.

[169] Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB: The Inside Story of Its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 85.

[170] Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield*, 35.

[171] Andrew and Gordievsky, *KGB*, 99–101. The Russians believed Reilly to be a "master spy" and considered their capture of him as "the Trust's most spectacular coup." However, British SIS began to distance themselves from Reilly well before his capture based on his "erratic" behavior and "declining hold on reality." British SIS claimed that his return to Russia prior to his capture was entirely of his own accord and in no way associated with his prior employment in SIS.

[172] Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield*, 33. Similar to Operation Trust and Trest, Operation Syndicate is sometimes referred to as Operation Sindikat.

others.[173] Savinkov had founded "The People's Association for the Defense of the Motherland and Freedom" in Poland and was thus considered a high priority to "neutralize."[174] A bogus Liberal Democratic underground organization was formed and its members, again *Cheka* agents, reached out to Savinkov. Playing to his ego, they convinced him to return to Russia with the plea that their organization needed his leadership "lest the whole movement fall apart."[175] Savinkov fell for the ruse and, once in Russian territory, he was arrested, forced to confess, and eventually executed.[176]

[173] Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield*, 33.

[174] CIA, "The Trust," 6.

[175] CIA, "The Trust," 8.

[176] The KGB has no official record of Savinkov's death. Some unofficial reports claim that he "fell or jumped" from an upper-story window, however, others claim that he was likely pushed by a GPU agent. Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield*, 34.

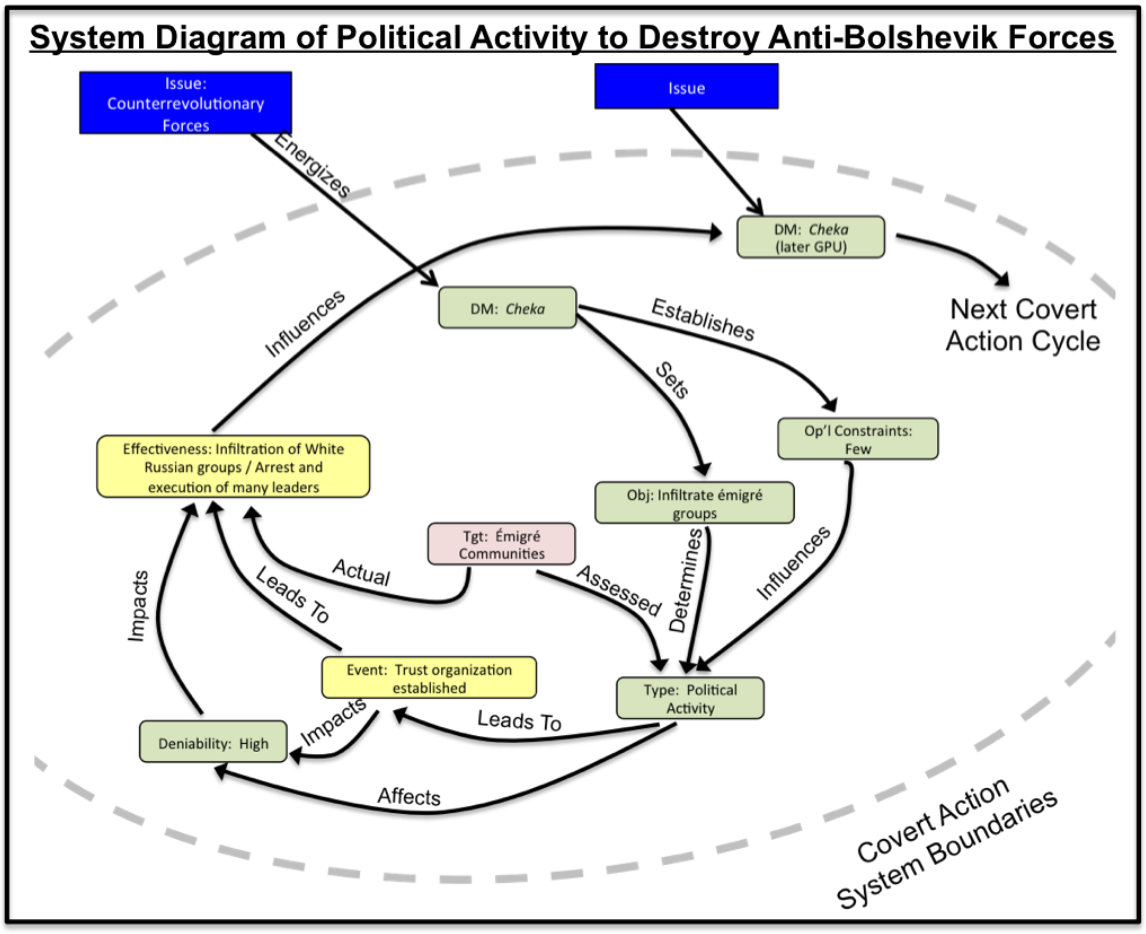

Figure 14. System diagram of anti-Bolshevik political activity. The system diagram depicts Vladimir Lenin's covert political activities to defeat the counterrevolutionary forces. This diagram illustrates the generalizability of the system diagram beyond American examples.

2. Highlights of the System

As the below analysis will show, this example of early Soviet use of covert action illustrates the universality of the system diagram. Not only does the diagram provide insight into American covert operations but international experiences as well. The components within the diagram are intentionally generic to allow the diagram to be applied to both U.S. and foreign operations.

The primary issue for Lenin's newly founded Marxist state was internal and external security from counterrevolutionaries. The *Cheka*, and later the GPU, was designated as the decision maker and given the freedom to address this issue. The

objective was to infiltrate the White Russian émigré population. To accomplish this, the *Cheka* determined that the type and tool most appropriate would be a covert political activity to organize "pretend White Guard associations."[177] Few operational constraints were established and the agents were given significant leeway when interacting with the White Russians through these organizations. The target, the counterrevolutionaries, was assessed as disorganized, weak, and prone to dissension. The assessed and actual characteristics of the émigré groups diverged little which led to the event: the underground Trust "impressed émigré circles by its use of resources indicating real power" and led to the complete infiltration of their communities.[178]

It is worth noting that the deniability of the operation should have been low. The apparent ease in which Trust members crossed the Russian border, travelled freely throughout Western Europe, and appeared to communicate unhindered amongst themselves while in Russia should have sparked suspicion within the White Russian groups. However, "the émigrés believed what they wanted to believe, and they accepted the Trust at its face value. The Russian émigrés were…ready to follow anyone who promised them a way out" and a way back to their homeland.[179] Despite what should have been an operation of low deniability, Trust maintained its cover as a viable underground organization for almost five years. Before Trust was exposed, it

> gained a clear picture of White émigré organizations, their character, membership and objectives; it was able to deepened the antagonism existing in these organizations and discredit various groups inside the USSR; it succeeded in duping foreign intelligence services, particularly the Poles, Estonians, and Finns. Its most striking and lasting success was psychological; the GPU found, by means of the Trust operation, that it possessed tradecraft equal not only to security demands at home, but also, with some modifications, commensurate with the requirements of psychological operations abroad. From this point on, Russian intelligence became a force to be reckoned with worldwide.[180]

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[177] Felix Dzerzhinsky, as cited in Andrew and Gordievsky, *KGB*, 94.

[178] CIA, "The Trust," 15.

[179] CIA, "The Trust," 15.

[180] CIA, "The Trust," 15.

The effectiveness of Trust was high, as reported in 1990 "the KGB still numbers among its greatest past triumphs the deception operations against the White Guards after the Civil War."[181]

Covert actions are not solely a tool of American power, neither is the efficacy of viewing covert action as a system limited to American policymakers. The internal logic of the system diagram generally holds true regardless of the state accomplishing the covert action and by maintaining its generalizability, the system diagram can be applied to both U.S. and international examples.

G. CONCLUSION

Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Lenin were all ardent supporters of covert action and were responsible for embedding this form of statecraft into international strategic history. This chapter has explored these early examples of covert action and illustrated the universality of the system diagram to visualize the complex interactions within the covert action system. While the vignettes explored here occurred well before the current era, policymakers today can apply this same diagram to gain a better understanding of how the interactions amongst the system components will influence the others and ultimately, the outcome. The next chapter will explore how these systemic relationships create emergent properties and system effects.

[181] Andrew and Gordievsky, *KGB*, 94.

IV. SYSTEM EFFECTS AND COVERT ACTION DURING THE COLD WAR

A. INTRODUCTION

The possibility of nuclear war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union was an omnipresent specter hanging over the international community throughout the Cold War. Two lumbering superpowers teetered on the edge of Schelling's cliff,[182] each mindful of the dangers of falling over yet determined to win the ideological battle that was being waged between capitalism and communism. While both sides felt a need to counter the other's actions and expand their own spheres of influence, neither side was willing to risk turning the Cold War completely hot through overt aggression. Because covert actions appeared to offer a relatively safe form of attack, the Cold War was a watershed period for covert action. The 41 years between the Berlin Airlift and the fall of the Berlin Wall have essentially defined this tool for policymakers and public alike. Spanning from Radio Free Europe's propaganda efforts to support anti-communist dissidents to the paramilitary operation against the Soviet Army in Afghanistan, Cold War cases encompass the entire spectrum of covert action. Indeed, the Cold War dominates covert action literature, but studying these events in isolation yields only a surface level understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of a covert action policy; a systems approach focusing on system effects, on the other hand, provides a much deeper appreciation of the emergent properties and unintended consequences that are created by complex interactions.

This chapter will use the Cold War as a backdrop to explore Robert Jervis's concept of system effects. First, a brief overview of the period will be provided for historical reference. The four types of system effects will then be examined: results are better explained via interactions, not "additivity;" indirect and delayed effects can be more important than direct; relations are rarely bilateral; and outcomes do not always

[182] Nobel laureate Thomas Schelling often used the analogy of "dancing at the edge of the cliff" in talks and lectures to illustrate the concepts of nuclear deterrence, manipulation of risk, and the rational use of irrationality. This concept was further explained in *Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

follow from intentions.[183] A closer look at the complex interactions amongst the system components will also be provided. Jervis identifies three types of interactions most often seen in systems and contends that because interactions shape the system, analysis could be further advanced by making "the interaction itself the unit of analysis."[184]

B. COLD WAR OVERVIEW

Perhaps the single greatest event to define the twentieth century was not the assault on Normandy Beach in 1944 but the Soviet detonation of an atomic bomb in 1949. Suddenly America was no longer the sole member of the nuclear club and foreign policies on both sides of the Atlantic were adjusted to account for the destructive power of this new weapon. The emerging conflict started as an ideological battle for Europe but with the invasion of Korea in 1950, the "Cold War"[185] suddenly went global. The U.S. recognized that it now faced an expansionist enemy, one whose foreign policy and national identity were defined by "secretiveness, the lack of frankness, the duplicity, the wary suspiciousness and the basic unfriendliness of purpose."[186] International relations during this period were overwhelmingly focused on the Soviet threat and the challenges of how to confront, contain, and rollback communist expansion without pitching the world into a nuclear holocaust. For almost 50 years, covert actions met this challenge, offering both sides an effective counter to perceived aggression while providing the requisite deniability that the nuclear environment demanded.

The Soviet threat required that America's institutional framework for conducting covert action mature quickly. Prior to the war there was no formal national intelligence infrastructure and little covert action continuity. The Office of Strategic Services (OSS) was established to support U.S. intelligence requirements during World War Two but fell victim to the massive disarmament that followed the war's end. President Truman did not dissolve the OSS out of short-sightedness, however; instead, he sought to "create a more

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[183] Jervis, *System Effects*, 29–61.

[184] Jervis, *System Effects*, 39.

[185] The term "cold war" was coined by Bernard Baruch, a presidential adviser and political financier, during a speech to the South Carolina House of Representatives in April, 1947.

[186] George F. Kennan (writing as "X"), "Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs* 25 (1947).

efficient intelligence apparatus than the one that had sufficed in wartime."[187] The National Security Act of 1947 was signed in July, formalizing a framework for an organization based on the OSS model, but one with more authorization and centralization than that which the OSS provided.

The newly established CIA conducted its first official covert action in 1948 to influence the Italian national elections. Italy was a "microcosm of the wider Cold War conflict,"[188] deemed an area of "enormous strategic value"[189] in the upcoming battle against communism; therefore, it was imperative that these first democratic elections following World War Two not result in communist victories. Through various front companies and private citizens, funds and resources were funneled to the Christian Democratic Party, enabling them to defeat the Soviet-supported People's Bloc at the polls. Just as important as securing this region for the West, the political action in Italy proved to America's political leadership the efficacy of covert action and established a precedent for future use.[190] The operation in Italy was quickly followed by successful coups in both Iran and Guatemala and by 1955, the U.S. was enjoying the "golden age"[191] of covert action.

This honeymoon period did not last. The initial windfall of success was paralleled by equally dismal, yet less documented, failures in Albania, Ukraine, and China. The Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961 placed the concept of covert action squarely in the sights of government officials, and further botched operations in Indonesia, Congo, Chile, and Angola soured the American public and political leadership on the utility of this tool. Support later flatlined when Seymour Hersh published a front-page *New York Times* article declaring "Huge CIA Operation Reported in U.S. Against Anti-War Forces, Other

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[187] James Callanan, *Covert Action in the Cold War: U.S. Policy, Intelligence, and CIA Operations* (New York: I.B. Tauris and Co., 2010), 16.

[188] Callanan, *Covert Action in the Cold War,* 24.

[189] Callanan, *Covert Action in the Cold War,* 24.

[190] Callanan, *Covert Action in the Cold War*, 43.

[191] Callanan, *Covert Action in the Cold War*, 5.

Dissidents in Nixon Years."[192] CIA intelligence agents had turned their attention to the domestic front and the fears that the agency would become a type of secret police appeared to have come to fruition. The "Family Jewels," an in-house classified report detailing illegal and often immoral CIA activities of assassination, domestic surveillance, mail fraud, and human drug experimentation[193] was submitted to the executive branch and a series of Congressional and Executive committees were convened in an attempt to regain a modicum of credibility. The organization that once enjoyed carte blanche support was now perceived as a "rogue elephant."[194]

The fall from grace of covert action is highlighted in the disparate conclusions of three prominent investigative commissions. In 1954, after successful coups in both Iran and Guatemala, President Eisenhower commissioned Lieutenant General James Doolittle to review the CIA's performance. Doolittle's report, known as the Doolittle Commission, concluded,

> if the United States is to survive, long-standing American concepts of 'fair play' must be reconsidered. We must develop effective espionage and counterespionage services and must learn to subvert, sabotage, and destroy our enemies by more clever, more sophisticated, and more effective methods than those used against us.[195]

Only 20 years later, after the devastating *New York Times* article and the Family Jewels report, Representative James Johnson (R-CO) of the Pike Committee declared the CIA "the enemy"[196] and the Church Committee "gave serious consideration to proposing

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[192] Seymour Hersh, "Huge CIA Operation Reported in U.S. Against Antiwar Forces, Other Dissidents in Nixon Years," *The New York Times*, December 22, 1974.

[193] Central Intelligence Agency, *Family Jewels*, May 16, 1973, http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0001451843.pdf

[194] Senator Frank Church (D-ID) commented during the Church Committee hearings in 1975 that the CIA had become a "rogue elephant run rampant."

[195] Harold M. Greenberg, "The Doolittle Commission of 1954," *Intelligence and National Security* 20 (2005): 690.

[196] Gerald K. Haines, "The Pike Committee Investigations and the CIA," *Studies in Intelligence* 42 (1998/99): 81–92.

a total ban on *all* forms of covert action" (emphasis in original).[197] By the late 1970s, covert action "had every indication of a dying art form."[198]

U.S. attitudes toward covert action leveled out and even began to rebound in the 1980s thanks to the efforts of President Reagan and his focus on confronting the "evil empire" by "unleashing the CIA."[199] This, coupled with a reformed congressional oversight process, salvaged America's covert capabilities. Operations were again being approved around the globe, culminating with the successful paramilitary campaign in Afghanistan that contributed to the downfall of the Soviet empire. Covert action blunders still occurred, but as the fallout from the Iran-Contra Affair suggests, they were now attributed more to shortcomings of political leadership and oversight instead of inherent weaknesses of the covert concept.

"Covert action" is a uniquely American term but it is far from a uniquely American concept. While the U.S. was secretly conducting its shadow war against communism, the Soviet Union was responding in kind. The USSR's "active measures" to confront U.S. global influence included "manipulation and media control, written and oral disinformation, use of foreign communist parties and front organizations, clandestine radio broadcasting, manipulation of the economy, kidnappings, paramilitary operations, and support of guerrilla groups and terrorist organizations."[200] Other states also incorporated covert action into their respective foreign policies during this time. The United Kingdom not only furthered their "special relationship" with the U.S. by building a strong partnership between MI6 and CIA but also conducted unilateral operations in support of British global interests, most notably their covert involvement in the Yemen

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[197] *Final Report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with respect to Intelligence Activities, U.S. Senate*, 94th Cong., (1976).

[198] Roy Godson, "Covert Action: An Introduction," in *Intelligence Requirements for the 1980's: Covert Action*, ed. Roy Godson (Washington, DC: National Strategy Information Center, Inc., 1985), 1.

[199] John J. Carter, *Covert Action as a Tool of Presidential Foreign Policy: From the Bay of Pigs to Iran-Contra* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 202

[200] Thomas Boghardt, "Operation INFEKTION: Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS disinformation Campaign," *Studies in Intelligence* 53, no. 4 (December 2009): 1.

Civil War.[201] Israel has also long considered covert activities a foundational pillar of their national security strategy; one of their more spectacular operations, the "Wrath of God" campaign in response to the Munich Olympics terrorist attacks in 1972, used compartmented assassination teams to kill anyone directly or indirectly involved in the Black September terrorist organization.[202]

The range of effectiveness during these five decades was extreme, oscillating between resounding successes such as the Italian election support and the Afghanistan paramilitary campaign to dismal failures like the Bay of Pigs fiasco. International outcomes were just as varied, success on the level of the Soviet Union's disinformation campaign linking the AIDS epidemic to the CIA ran parallel to utter failures such as the massive human rights violations institutionalized by Operation Condor in South America. Most of these outcomes cannot be explained by one thing, instead, a combination of both internal and external factors led to the result. A more thorough understanding of these systemic factors could have facilitated better decision-making prior to covert action approval, but even if policymakers and covert operators possessed complete understanding of the system's elements, without an appreciation of how interactions can lead to system effects, many of the outcomes would still not have been anticipated and the ill-conceived actions would still have been executed. The potentialities of system effects must be acknowledged if this tool is to be used correctly.

C. SYSTEM EFFECTS

Component interactions create emergent properties, "a characteristic that could not possibly have been deduced from the nature of its components"[203] and it is these emergent properties that comprise system effects. Jervis highlights four system effects common to many social systems: interactions, not "additivity" better explain system output; indirect and delayed effects can be more significant than direct effects; relations

[201] See Clive Jones, " 'Among Ministers, Mavericks, and Mandarins': Britain, Covert Action, and the Yemen Civil War, 1962–1964," *Middle East Studies* 40, no. 1 (January 2004).

[202] See Dan Raviv, *Every Spy a Prince* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1990) or Simon Reeve, *One Day in September: The Full Story of the 1972 Munich Olympics Massacre and the Israeli Revenge Operation "Wrath of God"* (New York: Arcade, 2000).

[203] Jervis, *System Effects*, 16.

are rarely bilateral; and intentions and outcomes do not always align.[204] These four effects may seem apparent at first. Indeed, academically, it does not take a significant leap to recognize the presence of system effects in everyday life, however, intuitively "the basic ideas of systems do not come readily to mind and so often are ignored."[205]

The study of systems effects and emergent behavior is well suited to Cold War covert action analysis. Because most covert actions during this time were global struggles conducted largely through local actors, many interactions and outcomes were difficult, if not impossible, to predict. As system effects imply, complex relationships at the local level creates behavior not anticipated at the grand strategic level; seemingly small inputs and interactions often had quite large repercussions. System effects were made even more difficult to predict when policymakers did not have visibility of all of the components. Compartmentalization, common in covert action, can lead to reductionist thinking: viewing separate components in isolation without considering the "interconnectedness"[206] of those parts can result in a one-dimensional understanding of the system. When policymakers or planners do not have visibility over the entire system, it is nearly impossible to ascertain if components are in proper alignment or if unanticipated emergent behavior will occur. A systems approach to understanding requires that the policymaker sees the entire system, when a portion of the system is shrouded in secrecy, anticipating and responding to system effects becomes increasingly difficult.

1. Interactions, not "Additivity"

The first and arguably most important system effect reiterates the concept of emergent properties: interactions amongst components, more so than the qualities of those components, determine the system output. Linear models do not apply because one "cannot understand systems by summing up the characteristics of the parts."[207] In a

[204] Jervis, *System Effects*, 29.

[205] Jervis, *System Effects*, 3.

[206] Jervis, *System Effects*, 17.

[207] Jervis, *System Effects*, 34.

system, A plus B does not lead to C. Instead, A's interaction with B and subsequent interaction with C can very well lead to Z. Jervis lists three types of interactions most common in systems and suggests that because systems are defined by their interactions, using the interaction itself as the unit of analysis can further advance understanding.[208]

Interaction #1—Results Cannot Be Predicted from Separate Actions:[209] Covert action outcomes cannot be predicted from any individual component within the system. No component in isolation will determine an outcome; it is the interactions of components with each other that will lead to a particular effect. For example, target characteristics alone will not determine the effectiveness of a covert action. A weak target will not automatically result in an effective action just as a secure target will not automatically lead to an ineffective action. Instead, the interaction of the various system components on that target will ultimately determine the level of effectiveness. Noting that "the effect of one variable frequently depends on the state of another"[210] may appear to be a truism but evidence suggests that despite most understanding this idea at the conceptual level, many do not always transition it to practice. Too often the interaction amongst the variables within the system are ignored in favor of only considering the components themselves.

The Bay of Pigs fiasco is perhaps the best example of this type of tunnel vision. In retrospect, it is clear that the operation should never have proceeded the way it did. Intelligence estimates assumed that the Castro regime was weak and unprepared for an assault, the type of action had escalated from a low-level propaganda effort to an expansive paramilitary campaign, and the thin cover story was unable to account for the many overt signals. Viewing these factors in isolation led to a belief that the deficiencies of the plan could be overcome. Viewing these factors as interrelated components, however, would have shown that the Bay of Pigs operation was destined to fail. The faulty intelligence assessment that Castro's regime was weak and that 3,000–5,000

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[208] Jervis, *System Effects*, 39.

[209] Jervis, *System Effects*, 39.

[210] Jervis, *System Effects*, 39

guerrillas stood ready to support Brigade 2506 once it landed[211] led decision makers to transition the type of action to something more closely resembling a "large-scale amphibious landing."[212] The increase in the size of the invasion force then required a larger and more visible training and staging area in Guatemala; the size of the camp coupled with the already weak cover story led to premature exposure of the plan and allowed Castro to prepare his forces and successfully defend his island. Individually, the limitations of each component could have been overcome; as a system, the interactions exacerbated their effects and eventually led to disaster. These interactions should have informed policy makers that the plan as written was doomed to failure. Unfortunately they did not. Three days after the invasion, only 26 members of Brigade 2506 had avoided being captured or killed[213] and America was left reeling from an international embarrassment.

The Bay of Pigs also illustrates the point that too much of a good thing can be problematic. Because the system operates in a non-linear way, more of the same element does not produce more of the same result. If A leads to B, twice of A does not necessarily lead to twice of B. In fact, because the aim of a covert action is for the sponsor to remain hidden, sometimes the increase in one element is actually detrimental to the system's effectiveness. Operation PLUTO initially called for a small band of guerrilla exiles supported by a propaganda campaign to undermine Castro's popular support. Quickly, however, the CIA realized the original plan would not work and expanded the exile force to 1,400 personnel and the concept of operation to a paramilitary amphibious assault.[214] If a small band of guerrillas can produce X results, doubling the size of the force does not produce 2X results. Rarely does basic algebra work in policy formulation.

Interaction #2—Strategies Depend on the Strategies of Others [215] Covert actions are not conducted with or against inanimate actors. Instead, they are often executed in

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[211] Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars,* 205–207.

[212] Vandenbroucke, *Perilous Options*, 17.

[213] Vandenbroucke, *Perilous Options*, 28.

[214] Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars,* 182.

[215] Jervis, *System Effects*, 44.

partnership with a friendly element against an adversarial target; these actors can understandably have separate goals and ambitions that do not align neatly with U.S. objectives. The Church Committee correctly deduced that a "covert action can be a success when the objective of the project is to support an individual, a party, or a government in doing what that individual, party, or government wants to do—and when it has the will and capacity to do it."[216] When the objective requires convincing an individual, party or government in doing something they do not have the desire, will or capacity to do, "success" becomes more challenging.

The impact of this interaction can be seen in the U.S. relationship with Chile. In 1970, the Chilean citizens elected Salvador Allende in a democratic presidential election. Unfortunately for Allende, he leaned to the left and President Richard Nixon was determined to keep him out of the presidential palace despite his democratic victory. Nixon told CIA Director Richard Helms "in no uncertain terms to foment a preventive coup."[217] CIA officials saw little possibility of success and were hesitant to construct a government takeover. President Frei, the sitting president, General Schneider, the Chilean chief of staff, and the majority of the military were staunch supporters of both the constitution and the democratic process and therefore loath to block Allende's ascension to power.[218] Despite these obstacles, Track II was set in motion. Brigadier General Viaux was eventually vetted by the CIA to lead the coup but the prospects of success remained "bleak."[219] The CIA temporarily withdrew support for Viaux after reviewing his plan and determining that a coup "cannot succeed."[220] Viaux had his own ambitions, however, and proceeded with an overly complicated plot to kidnap Schneider, force Frei to flee the country, install a military junta, dissolve the Congress, and govern the country until a more suitable replacement could be found. The CIA's prediction about the odds of success was spot on; Schneider was shot in the bungled kidnapping attempt which

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[216] *Final Report*, 94th Cong.

[217] Jack Devine, "What Really Happened in Chile: The CIA, the Coup Against Allende, and the Rise of Pinochet," *Foreign Affairs* 93 (2014): 30.

[218] Treverton, *Covert Action*, 127.

[219] Treverton, *Covert Action*, 128.

[220] Treverton, *Covert Action*, 129.

"rallied the Army firmly behind the flag of constitutionalism."[221] Allende was confirmed as president on October 24.

CIA officers were never confident in the abilities of Viaux and were more supportive of Track I, the covert program to subtlety back political opposition and foment economic troubles. Despite these misgivings, however, Track I did not receive priority and instead Nixon pushed for a poorly conceived coup and solicited a partner whose "will and capacity" did not coincide with the U.S. objectives. Once again America was seen as meddling, poorly, in the internal affairs of another state. A successful coup was executed three years later when Allende was shot on the steps of the capital and General Pinochet began a reign of "brutality and repression"[222] that would last 17 years. While there is still much debate about the level of CIA involvement in this second coup, because of the 1970 attempt the U.S. will likely be forever considered guilty by historical association. Counterfactual debates are often subjective and arbitrary, but it is interesting to consider how different Chile's history would be had Track I's more subtle approach to countering Allende's leftist party been given priority instead of focusing on Track II's coup attempt via a partner whose ambitions were not in alignment with U.S. objectives.

Interaction #3—Behavior Changes the Environment:[223] The third interaction contends that behavior within the system changes the environment outside the system. Nothing occurs in isolation. Viewing Cold War history from a 21st-century perspective, many consider the communist threat as "overhyped."[224] In the Congo, for example, the CIA executed one of the largest covert campaigns of the time with the intent of keeping Soviet influence out of the region.[225] The long-running operation eventually resulted in

[221] Treverton, *Covert Action*, 131.

[222] Devine, "What Really Happened in Chile," 34.

[223] Jervis, *System Effects*, 48.

[224] Stephen R. Weissman, "What Really Happened in Congo: The CIA, the Murder of Lumumba, and the Rise of Mobutu," *Foreign Affairs* 93 (2014): 23.

[225] Weissman, "What Really Happened in Congo," 16.

the assassination of President Patrice Lumumba[226] and the installment of a military dictatorship under Joseph Mobutu. But "Congo scholars have long been skeptical of the notion that had Lumumba stayed in power, his government would have fallen under the sway of the Soviet Union or China."[227] This skepticism ignores system interactions, specifically, that the communist threat in the Congo may have been insignificant precisely because the U.S. operated there. U.S. behavior in the region changed the environment. The communist threat may have appeared overestimated because American involvement made a Soviet play for influence not worth the effort. Every action has an effect, not only on the system itself but also on the larger environment.

2. Indirect and Delayed Results

The second system effect suggests that complex interactions can create "indirect, mediated, and delayed"[228] results. A small change in one part of the system can have significant, though perhaps not immediate, effects on the rest of the system. Covert actions by their nature often take an indirect approach to problem sets and low scale covert actions such as propaganda and economic activities often depend on indirect and delayed effects. Recently declassified documents detailing AEDINOSAUR, a CIA-MI6 partnership to smuggle copies of Boris Pasternak's banned novel *Doctor Zhivago* into the Soviet Union and satellite states, illustrates this point. The goal of DINOSAUR and the larger "covert literature campaign" was to "subtly undermine the Soviet system by—as the CIA put it—'reinforcing predispositions towards cultural and intellectual freedom, and dissatisfaction with its absence'."[229] By 1991, the program had smuggled over 10 million books and periodicals through the Iron Curtain.[230] The effort was considered by

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[226] There is still debate on the level of CIA participation in the assassination of President Lumumba. The Church committee investigated various failed plots to assassinate Lumumba but his actual death reportedly came at the hands of a rival group. The involvement of the CIA with this rival group is unclear yet most accept that the CIA was at least complicit in the assassination.

[227] Weissman, "What Really Happened in Congo," 23.

[228] Jervis, *System Effects*, 29

[229] Luke Harding, "How MI6 Helped CIA to Bring Doctor Zhivago in From Cold for Russians," *The Guardian*, June 10, 2014.

[230] Peter Finn and Petra Couvee, *The Zhivago Affair: The Kremlin, the CIA, and the Battle Over a Forbidden Book* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2014), 263–264.

the agency to be "demonstrably effective…and can inferentially be said to influence attitudes and reinforce predispositions toward intellectual and cultural freedom, and dissatisfaction with its absence."[231] It was understood that cultural and propaganda campaigns could not directly combat Soviet expansion. Instead, effectiveness relied on the indirect and delayed results that would emerge from introducing pro-Western and anti-Soviet films, books, and magazines into Eastern-controlled territory.

Unfortunately, if not managed correctly, indirect and delayed effects can sometimes lead to disastrous results. As the Church Committee reported, covert actions have often created states with "debilitating dependence on the U.S."[232] It has been argued that the CIA's constant involvement in the internal affairs of the Congo in the 1960s stunted the natural growth of domestic political institutions that indirectly led to the state's complete implosion in 1997 and a decade of conflict in which at least 5 million have died.[233] From the moment Congolese gained its independence from Belgium, the CIA successfully persuaded the regime to eschew communist support, yet the constant manipulation of the Congo government through covert activities "discouraged Congolese politicians from building genuine bases of support and adopting responsible policies."[234] This lack of political growth eventually led to an environment "characterized by corruption, political turmoil, and dependence on Western military intervention."[235] The Congo collapsed in 1997 because of a variety of factors but the legacy of CIA dependence that began in the 1960s undoubtedly contributed to its downfall.

The Congo example leads to a second point, that "indirect effects may be more important than direct ones."[236] Debates on the importance of indirect versus direct effects abound when discussing covert actions; in fact, it is hard to review the 1953 Iranian coup or the 1989 Afghanistan paramilitary campaign without confronting these types of

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[231] Finn and Couvee, *The Zhivago Affair*, 263.

[232] *Final Report,* 94th Cong.

[233] Weissman, "What Really Happened in Congo," 16.

[234] Weissman, "What Really Happened in Congo," 16.

[235] Weissman, "What Really Happened in Congo," 16.

[236] Jervis, *System Effects,* 29

rhetorical arguments. Was the 1979 Iranian revolution an indirect result of the 1953 coup and was this more important than 25 years of stability in the region during the height of the Cold War? Was the founding of al Qaeda an indirect result of the paramilitary operation in Afghanistan and was this more important than defeating the Soviet Army? This line of discussion has likely been taken to its conclusion and further analysis of Iran or Afghanistan activities adds little to the existing understanding.

A less well-known example highlighting the importance of indirect over direct effects is that of STCIRCUS, the paramilitary operation to support the Tibetan rebels that began in 1956. Spanning nearly two decades, the CIRCUS operation trained and equipped Tibetan rebels to harass China's People's Liberation Army. The CIA was unable to instigate the massive popular resistance movement that it desired but the operation did achieve at least one major intelligence victory when documents detailing failures in the "Great Leap Forward" were captured in a raid. The indirect effect of CIRCUS was much more significant. Although the program was considered "one of the more profitable operations"[237] run by the CIA, it was abruptly cancelled in 1972, shortly before President Nixon met with Chairman Mao Zedong.[238] It is not a stretch of the imagination to believe that the Nixon administration used the CIRCUS operation as a bargaining chip to begin negotiations with China. Directly, CIRCUS had little more than a peripheral impact on Red China. Indirectly, however, it may have helped open the door for Nixon to enter China and provided the U.S. with a diplomatic victory.[239]

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[237] Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars*, 154.

[238] Jonathan Mirsky, "Tibet: The CIA's Cancelled War," *The New York Review of Books*, April 9, 2013.

[239] As with many historical accounts of covert actions, there is little agreement about whether the shutdown of CIRCUS was on the table during negotiations prior to the Nixon-Mao engagements. Jonathan Kenneth Knauss in "Official Policies and Covert Programs: The U.S. State Department, the CIA, and the Tibetan Resistance" acknowledges that it is "conventional wisdom" that the U.S. withdrew support in response to Chinese requests but he refutes this claim by pointing out that "the record does not bear this out." Briefing papers, notes, and memoranda detailing negotiations prior to Nixon's visit "makes no mention of Tibet by either party." However, according to Tim Weiner in *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* (New York: Anchor Books, 2007) Kissinger was quoted as saying to Chinese Prime Minister Chou En-lai prior to Nixon's trip that "we are conscious of what is at stake in our relationship, and we will not let one organization carry out petty operations that could hinder this course" (p. 350).

The KGB's *dezinformatsiya* campaigns were also dependent on indirect effects. The KGB took a "total approach to influence and deception operations" and KGB officers were expected to spend at least 25% of their time planning and executing disinformation campaigns.[240] Examples of USSR disinformation include their effort to link the FBI to the Kennedy assassination, West German politicians to Nazi supporters, and the CIA to the Jonestown Massacre in Guiana.[241]

One of the more successful disinformation operations that is still adversely impacting U.S. relations in Africa today was Operation Infektion, an intense propaganda campaign "proving" that the AIDS virus was artificially created at Fort Detrick, MD and intentionally spread by American agents. In 1983, KGB's Service A, the organization responsible for active measures, published an "anonymous" letter in the Indian newspaper *Patriot* entitled "AIDS May Invade India: Mystery Disease Caused by U.S. Experiments."[242] The article did not gain much traction and the campaign was shelved for two years until it was picked up by East German scientist Dr. Jakob Segal. KGB agents reportedly met with Segal, provided him with "evidence" as to the origin of the AIDS virus, and requested that he "look into the matter."[243] Segal soon became a zealot of the cause, publishing multiple "scientific" papers and embarking on numerous speaking tours to espouse his belief that AIDS was a CIA plot. Through KGB support the conspiracy quickly gained momentum and by 1987 Segel's "findings" were being circulated in 80 countries, 200 periodicals, and 25 languages.[244]

The idea that the U.S. would intentionally spread a deadly disease seems ludicrous. However, a CIA report claimed that "even though reliable statistics are hard to come by, it seems reasonable to conclude that many Africans believe the claim" that AIDS was an American invention.[245] As a response to Western protests and the "new

[240] Boghardt, "Operation INFEKTION," 1-2.

[241] Boghardt, "Operation INFEKTION," 2.

[242] Boghardt, "Operation INFEKTION," 4.

[243] Boghardt, "Operation INFEKTION," 9.

[244] Boghardt, "Operation INFEKTION," 14.

[245] Boghardt, "Operation INFEKTION," 19.

thinking" foreign policy reforms instituted by Secretary Gorbachev, the Soviet Union officially disavowed the idea that AIDS was an American experiment and shutdown the operation in October 1987.[246] The damage was done, however, and an official statement in Moscow did little to convince those around the world of the real origin of the deadly disease. American aid and influence efforts in the African region were hampered. In fact, the effects can still be felt today. A Liberian newspaper published an article in September 2014 claiming the recent Ebola outbreak is a U.S. plot to depopulate the planet and Internet stories have surfaced claiming that the Center for Disease Control has patented the virus to cash in on a vaccine.[247] While conspiracy theories are not uncommon, the fact that the CIA was so publicly blamed for the spread of AIDS for years makes other conspiracies that much easier to catch fire. Long after the fall of the Soviet Union, their *dezinformatsiya* campaigns can still undermine the U.S. efforts throughout the world.

Indirect and delayed effects are common to systems but they are hard to predict. It is important to understand that the covert action system diagram and system thinking are not predictive tools. While policymakers should think through this model and anticipate indirect results, they must be careful planning entire policies off "expected" indirect effects. Small changes in one element can produce great, but often unanticipated, changes in another and the complexity inherent in the system's interactions can wreak havoc on policy prediction. Just as it is difficult to anticipate the butterfly that flaps its wings in Asia will create a hurricane in Florida, it would have been hard to predict that the Tibetan rebel who trained in the mountains of Colorado may contribute to Nixon and Mao sitting down at the table in Beijing, or that an "anonymous letter" published in an obscure Indian newspaper would adversely affect U.S. efforts in the African region 30 years later.

3. Relations Are Often Not Bilaterally Determined

Eisenhower noted that "anyone who becomes immersed in international affairs soon realizes that no important issue exists in isolation; rarely is it only bilateral."[248] This

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[246] Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield*, 245.

[247] Alan Feuer, "The Ebola Conspiracy Theories," *The New York Times*, October 18, 2014.

[248] As cited in Jervis, *System Effects*, 32.

maxim of international relations was even more pronounced during the Cold War. Most of the covert activities the U.S. conducted around the globe indirectly targeted the Soviet Union through third world countries, non-aligned states, or third parties. The propaganda campaign, covert political support, and labor strikes that the U.S. sponsored in British Guiana in the early 1960s likely had little to do with U.S. concern for the Guianese citizens. Instead, they were intended to prevent another Soviet foothold from being established in the Western hemisphere. Similarly, the 1961 covert economic activity in support of labor unions in Venezuela was arguably not motivated by empathy for the Venezuelan worker; instead, it was used to counter a Cuban-backed insurrection in the country.[249] Throughout the Cold War, the U.S. use of covert actions within developing states was rarely intended solely for the targeted state; they were nearly always executed to counter the seemingly omnipresent threat of communist expansion.

As the U.S. directed much of its covert energy toward the USSR through third parties, the Soviet Union was doing the same in response. Soviet defector Anatoli Golitsyn confirmed in 1959 that the KGB's primary mission had become "covert statecraft: the use of agents and other mechanisms to achieve the USSR's geopolitical goals"[250] by countering their "main adversary,"[251] the United States. Elections in Western Europe and third world countries were often seen as "nothing more than hidden struggles between the CIA and KGB to secure the government for their respective countries."[252] On the other end of the covert action ladder, each state waged a proxy war against the other. The CIA's support of paramilitary organizations throughout Africa, South America, and Asia is well documented and "the KGB, almost without exception, supported proxy armies in the same areas opposed to those the CIA supported."[253] Few areas around the globe were untouched by the overarching conflict between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Both states established relationships with other countries but those

[249] Callanan, *Covert Action in the Cold War*, 181.

[250] Kevin A. O'Brien, "Interfering With Civil Society: CIA and KGB Covert Political Action During the Cold War," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 8, no. 4 (1995): 435.

[251] O'Brien, "Interfering With Civil Society," 434.

[252] O'Brien, "Interfering With Civil Society," 436.

[253] O'Brien, "Interfering With Civil Society," 446.

relationships were far from bilateral. Instead, they were often indirect multilateral relationships intended as another avenue of confrontation between the two superpowers.

The importance of multilateral relationships is also apparent within the covert action system itself. It is important when dealing with covert actions to understand that few things internal to the system are affected by only one interaction and resist the temptation to oversimplify outcomes. Kennedy stated after the Bay of Pigs disaster that the "the chief apparent causes of failure were gaps in our intelligence."[254] While it is true there were gaping holes in the intelligence picture prior to the assault, this was only one of many failures and arguably not "the chief apparent cause." The failure in Cuba was the result of a multitude of interrelated factors, boiling down the cause to only a few issues is an attempt to impose a linear model on a non-linear system. Similarly, the KGBs successful use of *provokatisya*, the art of "taking control of your enemies in secret and encouraging them to do things that discredit them and help you,"[255] was not simply the result of the interaction between the tool, *provokatisya*, and the target, the individual. *Provokatisya* operations succeeded because of the complex interactions between the target, the tool, the level of deniability, and the environmental context. The outcomes of covert actions, both as a whole and within the system itself, cannot be boiled down to simple bilateral cause-and-effect explanations. Attempting to oversimplify relationships can lead to a misunderstanding of the system's behavior.

4. Outcomes Do Not Necessarily Follow From Intentions

Jervis's key system effect finding is that "outcomes do not follow from intentions."[256] Cold War history is replete with cases of good intentions leading to bad outcomes. Before proceeding, though, it must be noted that the study of covert action pays "disproportionate attention"[257] to those situations when outcomes did not follow from intentions. When intentions and outcomes align, little concern is paid; yet when

[254] Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars*, 207.

[255] O'Brien, "Interfering With Civil Society," 442.

[256] Jervis, *System Effects*, 61.

[257] Jervis, *System Effects*, 68.

they diverge sharply, policymakers and the public often "call out for explanation."[258] It is possible that a higher proportion of covert actions are considered failures because some successful activities may either still remain secret or do not elicit the attention that "failed" operations receive. Regardless of success or failure, however, the existence of complex interactions means that "you can never do just one thing."[259] Any single act causes ripples throughout the system making it nearly impossible to isolate direct cause-and-effect relationships, therefore making it extremely difficult to align intentions and outcomes. Despite how well-built a plan is, results are hard to anticipate and the outcome can be far removed from the original intent.

The discrepancy between outcome and intentions was vividly illustrated in 1956. In what some consider an "unprecedented intelligence coup,"[260] the CIA obtained the transcript of an inflammatory speech given by Secretary Khrushchev to the Soviet Communist Party in which he denounced Stalin's rule as an "inhuman and unnecessary oppression of the Soviet people and the peoples of satellite states."[261] Eisenhower elected to use Radio Free Europe's (RFE) covert communication networks and release the speech in its entirety to increase pressure on the Soviet Union. What followed was far from what was intended. RFE's implicit message of U.S. support to any state that broke free from Soviet control bolstered the confidence of dissident groups and persuaded a Hungarian organization led by Imre Nagy to seize control of the government and declare that Hungary would remove itself from the Warsaw Pact.[262] The Soviet Union quickly responded by crushing the resistance through an overt military invasion. Despite the intention simply to increase pressure on the Soviet Union and offer economic assistance to resistance groups, the release of the speech indirectly led to Soviet tanks rolling across the border, a situation the U.S. was not prepared to address with a commensurate military

[258] Jervis, *System Effects*, 68.

[259] Jervis, *System Effects*, 65.

[260] Carter, *Covert Action as a Tool*, 42.

[261] Carter, *Covert Action as a Tool*, 42.

[262] Carter, *Covert Action as a Tool*, 43.

response. Furthermore, other dissident groups "lost confidence in American promises of aid and support"[263] making it increasingly difficult to confront ongoing Soviet aggression in Eastern Europe.

Similarly, President Reagan's intent to bypass statutory regulations and support the Nicaraguan Contras while negotiating for the release of American hostages in an intricate "arms-for-hostage" deal also resulted in an outcome far from what was intended. The National Security Council's (NSC) complex and convoluted plan created a situation in which any small change in one portion of the system created repercussions throughout. The NSC's house of cards collapsed when a Southern Air Transport aircraft crashed in Honduras and the pilot, Eugene Hasenfus, was detained at the same time an article detailing the arms-for-hostage deal was published in Lebanon. The exposure of the Iran-Contra Affair was not caused solely by Hasenfus's admission of working for the CIA, nor was it caused by the Lebanese article outlining the hostage recovery attempts; it was the result of intertwined connections and interactions that linked the Nicaraguan Contras to Iranian moderates to a Lebanese terrorist group to a Swiss bank account to a CIA-sponsored air transport company to Reagan's national security team. The system created to secretly negotiate for the release of hostages while arming a group of "freedom fighters"[264] by selling weapons to a country that had cut diplomatic ties was so complex that one small tweak resonated across the system, leading to outcomes that greatly diverged from intentions.

In both situations, the outcomes were not the result of direct cause and effect relationships but of complex interactions within the system. The release of the Khrushchev speech did not cause the Hungarian invasion. Similarly, the detained pilot did not expose the Iran-Contra Affair. Despite the best-laid plans, interactions can sometimes create echo chambers that exacerbate small changes and lead to very different results than what was originally intended. Within systems, "interconnections and interactions create sufficient complexity so that it would be surprising if the results

[263] Carter, *Covert Action as a Tool*, 43.

[264] Steven R. Weisman, "President Calls Nicaraguan Rebels Freedom Fighters," *The New York Times,* May 5, 1983.

conformed to statesmen's anticipations."[265] Acknowledging that outcomes do not necessarily follow from intentions is not to offer an apologist's view of history. Instead, it is to reiterate that plans do not always unfold exactly as expected and unintended consequences are likely to occur.

Operation Condor is a valuable lesson of what can happen when good intentions go bad. While it may appear almost morally dismissive to discuss Operation Condor under the heading that "outcomes do not always follow from intentions," it is illustrative of the potentially dangerous relationship that can develop between intentions and outcomes. Operation Condor was established in 1975 to support anti-communist efforts throughout South America. It was to be a sophisticated military network between Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Brazil that involved a "system of command, control, intelligence, exchange of prisoners, and combined operations."[266] The intention, as referenced in official documentation, was quite innocuous: establish a formal military network of partner countries to share information and capabilities to support anti-communist efforts, something akin to a "regional Interpol."[267] The outcome, however, was quite different. Condor turned into a campaign of "death squad operations"[268] whose primary objective was to "disappear" subversives who were "classified and targeted based on their political ideas rather than illegal acts."[269] In 1992, the "Archive of Terror" was discovered in Paraguay which detailed many of Condor's human rights violations to include kidnapping, torture, assassinations, and disappearances. Most alarming was Condor's "Phase 3" which called for "the formation of special teams from member countries assigned to travel anywhere in the world to nonmember countries to carry out sanctions—including assassinations—against Condor enemies."[270] It is unclear the level

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[265] Jervis, *System Effects*, 65.

[266] J. Patrice McSherry, "Operation Condor: Clandestine Inter-American System," *Social Justice* 26, no. 4 (1999): 149.

[267] Keith M. Slack, "Operation Condor and Human Rights: A Report from Paraguay's Archive of Terror," *Human Rights Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1996): 502.

[268] McSherry, "Operation Condor," 156.

[269] McSherry, "Operation Condor," 150.

[270] Slack, "Operation Condor and Human Rights," 495.

of direct involvement the U.S. had with Operation Condor, however, evidence has emerged to show the U.S. was at least knowledgeable of and complicit in the activities. CIA and FBI documents refer to Condor activities and Henry Kissinger supposedly assured South American governments of the Ford administration's support.[271] The intention of Operation Condor may have been just; in the global context of a heightened fear of the spread of communism, an information-sharing and operational support network between allies to help combat a common enemy was a legitimate endeavor. The outcome, however, was far from morally, ethically, or legally acceptable.

Covert actions are powerful because of their ability to deny state involvement, but this ability to operate secretly should not be considered a green light to bypass the protection of basic human rights. Secrecy for influence is necessary in international relations, but secrecy to cover for immoral acts such as kidnapping, torture, and assassination of political opponents is not. Intentions and outcomes can naturally diverge because of complex systemic interactions. However, they should not be intentionally distanced in order to provide plausible deniability between the concept of an operation and the practice of that operation. In this case, the concept of forming a "regional Interpol" was intentionally distanced from the practice of a complex network facilitating the kidnapping and torture of political prisoners. Secrecy is a powerful enabler, policymakers cannot allow the comforting blanket of secrecy be an excuse to travel down the slippery slope of human rights abuses.

A detailed exploration of the ethical and moral considerations covert action requires is outside the scope of this thesis. However, it is incumbent upon those policymakers involved to ensure that intentions and outcomes do not diverge so sharply as to be classified as morally and ethically repugnant. The Doolittle Commission asserted that in order to survive against a subversive enemy, "long-standing American concepts of 'fair play' must be reconsidered."[272] There is a vast difference between giving up the notion of fair play and completely jettisoning American values.

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[271] McSherry, "Operation Condor," 145–146.

[272] Greenberg, "The Doolittle Commission of 1954," 690.

D. CONCLUSION

Covert actions are complex. Rarely does any one factor within the covert action system determine the outcome of the action; instead, dynamic interactions amongst the components lead to system effects. As evidenced by various Cold War examples, system effects can manifest throughout the range of covert activities. Without an understanding and appreciation of system effects and interactions, the power of this tool can be misunderstood. A balance needs to be struck between considering the potential for system effects, however, and being caught in a "paralysis by system effects analysis"[273] spiral. While it is imperative that policymakers think through the various permutations a plan may take, they cannot become immobilized by the thought of unintended consequences.

System effects are an inevitable byproduct of a covert action policy. As policymakers are tracking the effectiveness of an action, they must also be cognizant of the derivative effects that action is having within and on the larger system. To recognize these effects, policymakers must be alert to system feedback. The next chapter will discuss feedback and tradeoffs and demonstrate how understanding these concepts can enhance the policymaker's awareness of system effects and allow for the adjustment of the system's behavior accordingly.

[273] John Arquilla, personal communication, 15 August 2014.

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V. FEEDBACK, TRADEOFFS, AND POST-COLD WAR COVERT ACTION

A. INTRODUCTION

On November 9, 1989, the free world received some amazing images from behind the Iron Curtain. Citizens of East Germany flooded through checkpoints into West Germany and soon residents of both sides stood atop the Berlin Wall with pickaxes and hammers. Those who had been pinned under the yoke of communism took the opportunity to send a clear message about being masters of their own fate. Within a year Germany was reunified and on December 26, 1991 the Soviet Union itself ceased to exist. The Cold War was over. But instead of ushering in an era of peace and tranquility, this new period became one of uncertainty and ambiguity. Communism was largely defeated yet the world soon appeared even more unstable and insecure than ever. For nearly 50 years covert action had been a relatively safe way for the nuclear superpowers to confront one another; this tool would now prove its versatility by being applied against the new, emerging threats to the international community: "rogue states"[274] and violent non-state actors.

This chapter will explore the concepts of system feedback and tradeoffs by examining covert actions mounted during the post-Cold War timeframe. First, the evolution of covert action from the end of the Cold War through the uncertainty of the post-Cold War period will be quickly reviewed. Key ideas about feedback will be explained using vignettes from both the domestic and international environments. Two examples from the cyber realm will then be explored to show how recent advances in cyber technology have allowed for feedback to be incorporated directly into the covert action tool. Finally, the two major tradeoffs inherent in the covert action system will be studied. Feedback and tradeoffs are basic yet central features of the systems approach. Understanding and appreciating these concepts will allow policymakers to apply the covert action system more effectively; misunderstanding or ignoring either feedback or

[274] Anthony Lake, as quoted by Thomas Friedman, "U.S. Vision of Foreign Policy Reversed," *The New York Times*, September 22, 1993.

tradeoffs can lead to, at best, an inefficient use of the tool, but at worst, a counterproductive and potentially destructive policy.

Before proceeding, it is important to note an inevitable analytic bias that is present when studying this most recent period of covert action. While there are many examples of both acknowledged and exposed covert actions available for review, this may be a skewed proportion of the total number executed. It is possible that other covert actions have been conducted recently, or are currently underway, whose full impact on the international community remains hidden. Despite the understandable security restrictions that surround the current period, however, sufficient examples of both effective and ineffective operations have emerged to allow for a survey of system feedback and tradeoffs.

B. POST-COLD WAR OVERVIEW

A shift of focus within the national security consciousness was beginning to take place even before the Soviet Union collapsed. While the covert war in Afghanistan was being waged, some U.S. intelligence professionals saw the next threats looming on the horizon: international terrorism, rogue states, and violent non-state actors. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, some pundits began to talk of "a new world order"[275] and the "end of history;"[276] however, former Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) James Woolsey saw the security environment quite differently. He testified before Congress, "We have slain a large dragon. But we live now in a jungle filled with a bewildering variety of poisonous snakes. And in many ways, the dragon was easier to keep track of."[277] Woolsey went on to further identify these snakes as "the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles to carry them; ethnic and national hatreds that can metastasize across large portions of the globe; the international narcotics trade; terrorism; the dangers inherent in the West's dependence on Middle East oil; new

[275] George Bush, "Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the Persian Gulf Crisis and the Federal Budget Deficit," September 11, 1990. http://millercenter.org/president/bush/speeches/speech-3425.

[276] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

[277] *Nomination of James R. Woolsey to be Director of Central Intelligence*, 103rd Cong., (1993) (statement by James Woolsey).

economic and environmental challenges."[278] The dragon was gone but in its place was a whole array of threats for the Intelligence Community to confront.

Despite this foreshadowing by the then-DCI, the CIA faced the same "peace dividend" cutbacks that many other security and defense organizations were experiencing. Shortly after the end of the Cold War, Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Dennis DeConcini (D-AZ) recommended "alarming and unprecedented"[279] budget cuts and significant reductions in Agency personnel while a premium was placed on modernization and efficiency. Budgetary programs were reprioritized as the Clinton administration felt the nation "could get by with fewer spies"[280] by investing more heavily in the technical means of intelligence. There was also a rush to reform as six separate panels were convened to study the U.S. intelligence effort and recommend reforms.[281] This collection of reform committees eventually culminated with the Intelligence Renewal and Reform Act of 1996 which increased the DCI's control over budget and senior level manning but did little to streamline interagency coordination to better deal with post-Cold War challenges.

During this period of bureaucratic turmoil, the threats many intelligence analysts had foreseen were beginning to surface. In 1993, a Pakistani shot and killed two CIA employees at the Agency's Dolley Madison gate. Less than two months later a truck bomb exploded underneath the World Trade Center. In 1996, Osama bin Laden, then a little known Saudi millionaire, issued his first fatwa against the U.S., a "Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places."[282] Two years later, he issued a second fatwa declaring an "individual duty for every Muslim"[283] to kill Americans and their allies. Shortly thereafter, the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and

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[278] Woolsey, *Nomination of James R. Woolsey*.

[279] Richard Sale, *Clinton's Secret Wars: The Evolution of a Commander in Chief* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009), 122.

[280] Sale, *Clinton's Secret Wars*, 123.

[281] Warner, *Central Intelligence*, 13.

[282] Council on Foreign Relations, "Declaration of War by Osama bin Laden, 1996." http://www.cfr.org/terrorist-leaders/declaration-war-osama-bin-laden-1996/p13174.

[283] Osama bin Laden, as quoted in Bernard Lewis, "License to Kill: Usama bin Ladin's Declaration of Jihad," *Foreign Affairs* 77 (1998).

Dar es Salaam, Tanzania were bombed killing over 200 and injuring almost 5,000.[284] As the Intelligence Community was dealing with these terrorist attacks, presidential findings were published to authorize covert actions against Slobodan Milosevic in Bosnia and Saddam Hussein in Iraq. The already trimmed-down community was forced to spread itself even thinner.

The terrorist attacks that rocked the nation on September 11, 2001 and the subsequent reforms that were implemented shortly thereafter significantly reshaped the intelligence bureaucracy. The recommendations published in *The 9/11 Commission Report*[285] and enacted in the Intelligence Reform Act of 2004 are well documented and beyond the scope of this thesis. What is less well known, however, is the impact the period immediately following September 11th had on covert action. As a result of the military's necessary reliance on the CIA during the initial stages of the conflict in Afghanistan, then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld "became determined to build up the Pentagon's special operations capabilities to eliminate any future dependence on the CIA."[286] Rumsfeld successfully pushed through an amendment to the defense authorization bill that "granted [SOCOM] the authority, for the first time, to spend money to pay informants, recruit foreign paramilitary fighters, and purchase equipment or other items from foreigners."[287] The Pentagon's new covert authorities and capabilities would help shape the upcoming Global War on Terror and the role of covert action in U.S. national security.

A revolutionary change in information technology was also underway during this period. As a result of advances in cyber technology, the possibility of cyberwar[288] and the potential of weaponizing the Internet emerged. Russia's distributed denial of service

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284 "Fast Facts: The Embassy Bombings in Kenya and Tanzania," CNN, October 6, 2013. http://www.cnn.com/2013/10/06/world/africa/africa-embassy-bombings-fast-facts/.

285 The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004).

286 Jennifer D. Kibbe, "Covert Action and the Pentagon," *Intelligence and National Security* 22 (2007): 60.

287 Kibbe, "Covert Action and the Pentagon," 61.

288 John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, "Cyberwar is Coming!" *Comparative Strategy* 12, no. 2 (1993): 141.

(DDoS) attacks in Estonia in 2007 followed by a second round targeting Georgia in 2008, as well as the alleged joint U.S.-Israeli sponsorship of the 2010 Stuxnet worm that targeted Iranian centrifuges ushered in a new era of covert action: state-sponsored cyber attacks. The impacts and implications of a "cybotage"[289] capability are only beginning to take shape, yet they already show considerable promise for the covert action system.

Once the Iron Curtain fell, only a few called for the complete abolition of covert action.[290] Based on the central role covert action played in Cold War politics, it would not have been unreasonable to assume that its prominence in international relations would at least diminish. To the contrary, covert action appears to be still firmly embedded in the foreign policies of many states. Iran has allegedly sponsored the Shamoon cyber attack on the oil giant Saudi Aramco that led to "among the most destructive acts of computer sabotage on a company to date."[291] China has recently been linked to the DDoS attacks on websites supporting the democratic protests in Hong Kong;[292] they have also been accused of developing fake mobile apps that promote the Occupy Central movement in order to monitor and disrupt the demonstrations.[293] Russia now appears to be reverting to a Cold War mind frame with its increased use of covert operations against its neighbors in Estonia, Georgia, and Ukraine as well as the recent breech of the White House unclassified computer system.[294] Covert action still provides states with something they cannot get from any other policy tool: influence with deniability. Far from going out of style, covert action seems to be experiencing a reemergence worldwide.

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[289] John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, *The Advent of Netwar* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1996), 69.

[290] Roger Hilsman, "Does the CIA Still Have a Role?" *Foreign Affairs* 74 (1995). Hilsman asserts that with the breakup of the Soviet Union, "the United State should get out of the business of both espionage and covert political action." He believes the CIA should revert to an "independent research and analysis organization."

[291] Nicole Perlroth, "In Cyberattack on Saudi Firm, U.S. Sees Iran Firing Back," *The New York Times*, October 23, 2012.

[292] Harichandan Arakali, "Cyberforensics Firm Traces Cyberattacks on Hong Kong Protesters to China," *International Business Times*, November 4, 2014.

[293] Paul Mozur, "Protesters in Hong Kong are Targets of Scrutiny Through Their Phones," *The New York Times*, Oct 1, 2014.

[294] David E. Sanger and Nicole Perlroth, "New Russian Boldness Revives a Cold War Tradition: Testing the Other Side," *The New York Times*, October 30, 2014.

C. SYSTEM FEEDBACK

Like many other aspects of the systems approach, feedback is a simple concept with powerful implications. Defined simply as the "return of information,"[295] feedback refers to the "circular causality"[296] process that distinguishes systems from linear models. Information is created by the interaction amongst components, that information is then returned to the system through feedback. As shown in Figure 15, outputs become inputs as the information flows back into the system in a continuous feedback loop.

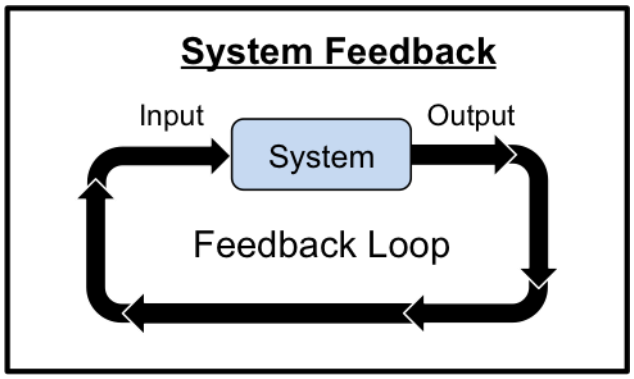

Figure 15. System feedback diagram.
The system's output becomes input in a continuous feedback loop.

Feedback is present in nearly all aspects of life. The automobile system provides feedback to the driver by illuminating a warning light when the engine is overheating. The immune system provides feedback to the body by increasing its core temperature when it is battling an illness. Even the U.S. governmental system is founded on the principle of feedback; feedback through checks and balances prevents any one branch of government from becoming too powerful. Feedback not only communicates the status of the system, it also changes the original system as the feedback is incorporated. The driver stops the automobile until the problem is fixed, the body sleeps more until the illness is defeated, and the legislative and executive branches adjust their relationships.

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[295] Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, 366.

[296] George Richardson, *Feedback Thought in Social Science and Systems Theory* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 1.

Feedback is so prevalent in everyday life that the effects are often overlooked. Unfortunately, because "feedback and circular causality are not well understood" the "applicability and explanatory power are seen to be limited."[297] An appreciation of feedback, however, can lead to a better understanding of the system's behavior and direction. Whether the system is out of synch or running smoothly, feedback will convey the message; but this message is lost if feedback is ignored. Feedback leads to an evolution of the system and if the "looping"[298] effects are not taken into account, the system may appear to be changing inexplicably. Covert actions have far too much potential to support or harm national security to ignore these key components of system behavior.

Feedback manifests in two forms, represented in Figure 16: internal and external. Internal feedback is created by the interactions amongst components which in turn influences and changes those components. These interactions also create external feedback, information that is released to the environment in the form of operational signature.

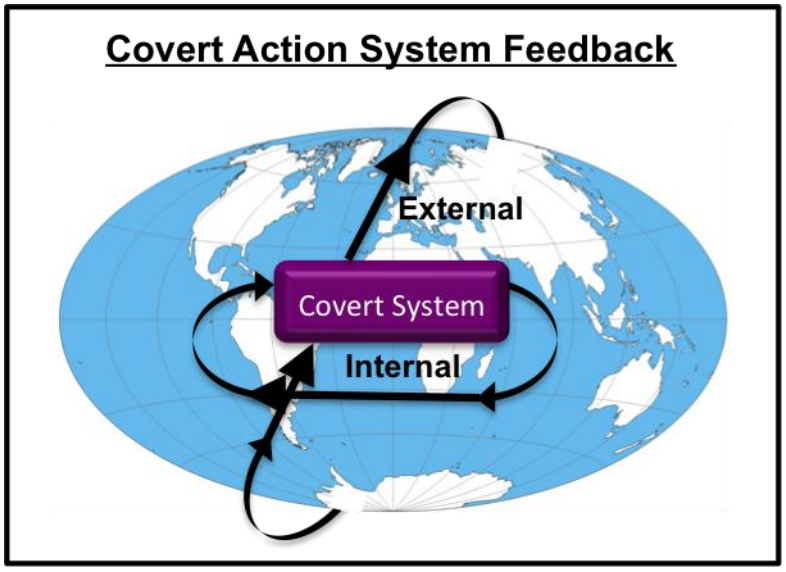

Figure 16. Covert action system feedback.
There are two types of covert action feedback: internal and external.

[297] Richardson, *Feedback Thought in Social Science and Systems Theory*, 1–3.

[298] Richardson, *Feedback Thought in Social Science and Systems Theory*, 2.

Perhaps the most visible display of internal feedback is the way in which the function of the system influences the decision maker. Figure 17 portrays how the output of a covert action cycle flows back to the decision maker, altering his outlook, affecting his experience and influencing his attitude toward risk in future iterations.

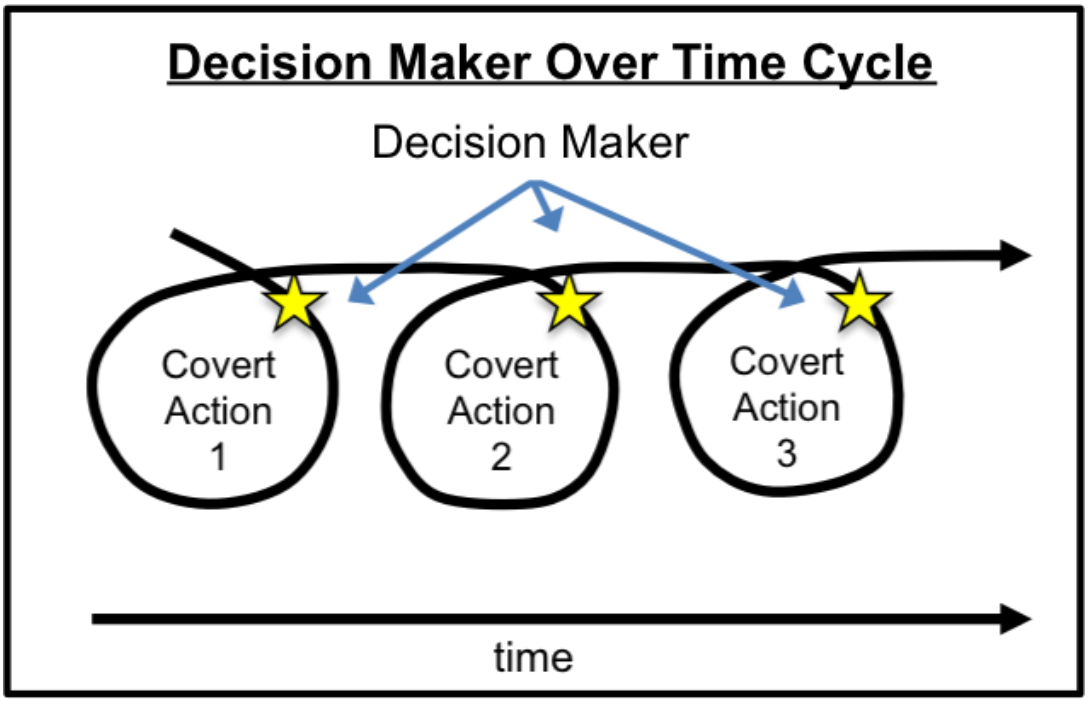

Figure 17. Decision maker over time cycle.
The output of each covert action becomes input into the next covert action cycle, influencing the decision maker's future assessments on the viability of its use.

Bill Clinton's presidency is an example of this effect. Upon taking office, President Clinton, in DCI Woolsey's words, was "entirely uninterested in foreign affairs."[299] The DCI's access to the president nearly disappeared and it was rumored that, "Clinton never really liked the CIA."[300] However, over time his foreign policy became heavily dependent on covert operations. An administration that initially came to the White House with a reluctance to use covert means eventually published multiple presidential findings for operations in Iraq, Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo. From Clinton's

[299] As quoted in Sale, *Clinton's Secret Wars*, 33.

[300] Sale, *Clinton's Secret Wars*, 123.

perspective, feedback conveyed that covert action was an effective means of conducting foreign policy, and the system began to evolve into more aggressive and intensive operations. In Iraq for example, Clinton initially saw the President George H. W. Bush-approved finding to remove Saddam Hussein as "too fat"[301] and attempted to cut the program's budget by an estimated 50 percent.[302] The budget cut did not happen, however, and Clinton soon saw the benefits of a covert policy in that region, over time approving a range of covert actions to support opposition programs. What began as a "general, broad based propaganda effort"[303] against Saddam eventually evolved into DBACHILLES, a series of operations providing paramilitary support to various dissident groups from 1994–1996.[304]

This example also highlights that feedback "applies only to information,"[305] and therefore is open to interpretation by key actors. Feedback is not the physical manifestation of the interactions within the system but rather the information resulting from those. Just as the system will evolve differently if the driver choses to disregard a check engine light or a person ignores his body's warning signs, the decision maker's interpretation of the feedback will ultimately determine how the system progresses. The coup attempts in Iraq were often reported to be plagued by internal strife, mismanaged programs, and overzealous opposition leaders, yet the message the Clinton administration interpreted from the system was that the program was at least effective enough to continue. Feedback is subjective, it is the decision maker's interpretation of the information the system conveys that matters. Whether the operations in Iraq were truly successful or not was largely irrelevant, it only mattered that Clinton and his key advisors interpreted the feedback to indicate they were more effective than other proposed policy options, leading to an inclination to approve additional covert actions.

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[301] R. Jeffrey Smith and David B. Ottaway, "Anti-Saddam Operation Cost CIA $100 Million," *The Washington Post*, September 15, 1996.

[302] Smith and Ottaway, "Anti-Saddam Operation Cost CIA $100 Million."

[303] Sale, *Clinton's Secret Wars*, 184.

[304] Sale, *Clinton's Secret Wars*, 200, 209.

[305] Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, 366.

There are generally two types of feedback, positive and negative. The terms "positive" and "negative" are not value judgments, they simply refer to changes in direction and can also be thought of as "same" and "opposite" feedback. Jervis best explains the difference:

> Feedback is positive or self-amplifying (and destabilizing) when a change in one direction sets in motion reinforcing pressures that produce further change in the same direction; negative or dampening (and stabilizing) when the change triggers forces that counteract the initial change and return the system to something like its original position.[306]

Figure 18 portrays the two types of feedback. Positive feedback creates a spiraling loop as change in one direction produces change in the same direction. Negative feedback creates a balancing, or stabilizing loop, as change in one direction produces change in the opposite direction.

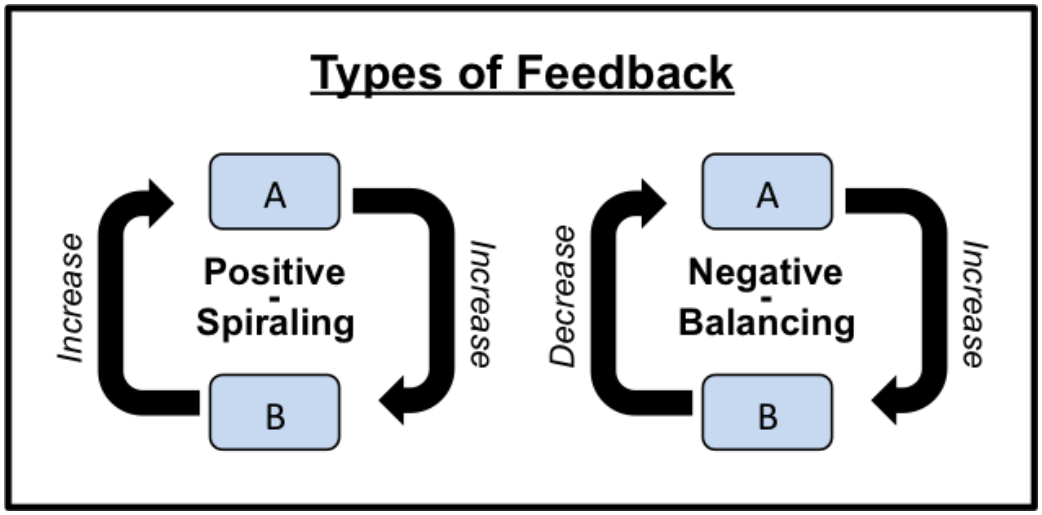

Figure 18. Types of feedback.
Positive and negative feedback loops.

Left unchecked, effective covert actions can produce positive feedback, leading to an increase in their use. As depicted in Figure 19, the more effective a tool is seen to be, the more apt a decision maker is to use it. Russian President Vladimir Putin may be experiencing the phenomena of positive feedback in Ukraine today. After months of civil

[306] Jervis, *System Effects*, 125.

unrest in Kiev, then-President Viktor Yanukovych fled the country while the turmoil spread to Crimea and eastern Ukraine. At the same time, Putin launched a covert campaign to annex Crimea. As Russian leaders vowed to support a Crimean referendum to break away from Ukraine and join the Russian Federation, armed men in military-style uniforms with no insignia appeared in Crimea fostering separatist aggression within the pro-Russian movement.[307] Although Putin claimed that "Russian soldiers have not occupied government buildings and surrounded Ukrainian military bases on the Crimean Peninsula" and instead asserted that the men were "local self-defense forces,"[308] evidence seemed to show otherwise. Internet images surfaced appearing to identify Russian soldiers in Georgia in 2008 as the same individuals in Crimea sans military insignia.[309] Despite the international outcry denouncing Russia's intervention in the sovereign affairs of Ukraine, the covert invasion worked. Russia annexed Crimea without the use of overt military forces.

Putin then turned his attention to eastern Ukraine and appeared to utilize the same tactics: Pro-Russian separatists were joined by armed groups who only superficially hid their ties to the Russian military.[310] Russia's covert paramilitary campaign to provide arms, training, and materiel support to the pro-Russian movement in eastern Ukraine caused little more than strongly worded denunciations from the international community. Even after the tragic shoot-down of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 and the death of all 298 individuals on board in July of 2014, little response from the international community surfaced to cause Putin to curb his behavior. Starting with the initial covert incursions into Crimea, Putin appeared to be operating in a positive feedback loop: he considered the covert actions effective, which led to more intensive covert actions. Positive feedback is not necessarily the same as positive results and operating in a positive feedback loop does not eliminate, and may in fact enhance, the potential for negative consequences. The

[307] Steven Lee Myers, David M. Herszenhorn, and Rick Gladstone, "For First Time, Kremlin Signals It Is Prepared to Annex Crimea," *The New York Times*, March 7, 2014.

[308] Bill Chappell and Mark Memmott, "Putin Says Those Aren't Russian Forces in Crimea," *National Public Radio*, March 4, 2014.

[309] Andrew Higgins, Michael R. Gordon, and Andrew Kramer, "Photos Link Masked Men in East Ukraine to Russia," *The New York Times*, April 20, 2014.

[310] Higgins, Gordon, and Kramer, "Photos Link Masked Men in East Ukraine to Russia."

recent election of a pro-Western legislation in Kiev was likely a result of Putin's continued aggression in the eastern regions of Ukraine.[311] A positive feedback loop simply means input in one element produces the same directional input in another element; an increase in perceived covert action effectiveness may lead to an increase in covert action usage.

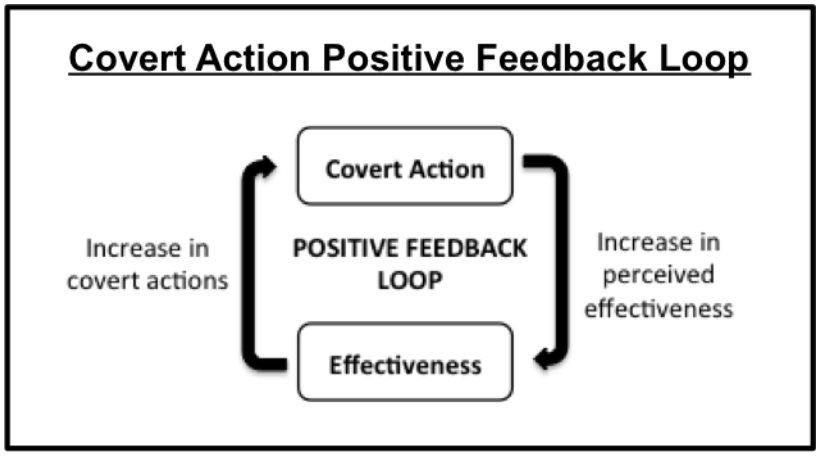

Figure 19. Covert action positive feedback loop.
An increase in the perceived effectiveness may lead to an increase in the use of covert action.

Positive feedback loops in covert action can be the result of a type of capability creep. When covert actions are viewed as effective, as in Putin's case, the inclination can be strong to use them more often. Negative feedback loops can emerge if an increase in effectiveness causes decision makers to resist the urge to transition the covert action to address other issues, and instead leads to a decrease in the use of the tool. By themselves, neither positive nor negative loops are good or bad. Policymakers must simply be aware of how the emerging feedback is influencing their decisional patterns and understand the implications of these feedback loops on future covert actions assessments.

As feedback is affecting the decision maker within the system, it is also being expelled into the environment in the form of external feedback. The covert action

[311] David M. Herszenhorn, "Ukraine President Claims Win for Pro-West Parties," *The New York Times*, October 26, 2014.

signature, the level of deniability a sponsor enjoys, is a reflection of feedback to the international system. External feedback ties the sponsoring agency to the visible action; some actions provide high levels of feedback to the environment while others provide very little. Russia's covert excursions into Crimea and Ukraine resulted in significant levels of external feedback to the international community, it has been widely accepted that Russian forces were operating in eastern Ukraine despite Putin's denials. Similarly, Israel's assassination campaign targeting at least five Iranian nuclear scientists on the streets of Tehran since 2007 is a poorly kept secret.[312] The U.S. and other nations have condemned the attacks but "the official reaction in Israel appeared to be more cryptic."[313]

In comparison to the signature recent Russian and Israeli operations have created, the covert action to take down the Abu Nidal Organization (ANO) in the 1980s emitted very little environmental feedback. In this extremely effective counterterrorist covert operation, the ANO network was destroyed from within through a deception campaign that made Abu Nidal believe that "hundreds of his network members were cheating both him and the cause, so he rubbed them out."[314] So little feedback has emerged from this operation that almost a quarter-century later there are still only vague references to it in open source literature.

A review of environmental feedback requires a quick discussion of the paradox of "overt-covert"[315] operations. Covert action is, by definition, an activity designed to influence a target while the sponsor remains unknown or unacknowledged. However, a state may try to use external feedback to its advantage by intentionally exposing an ongoing covert action for psychological impact. According to a former CIA official, some of the operations targeting Saddam Hussein during the mid-1990s were "sort of a

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[312] Raviv, "U.S. Pushing Israel to Stop Assassinating Iranian Nuclear Scientists."

[313] Alan Cowell and Rick Gladstone, "Iran Reports Killing of Nuclear Scientist in 'Terrorist' Blast," *The New York Times*, January 11, 2012.

[314] John Arquilla, *The Reagan Imprint: Ideas in American Foreign Policy from the Collapse of Communism to the War on Terror* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 184.

[315] Gregory F. Treverton, "Covert Action: From 'Covert' to Overt," *Daedalus* 116, no. 2 (Spring 1987): 95.

covert op done in public."[316] The U.S. was not overly concerned about Iraqi double agents penetrating exile groups because, "we wanted Saddam to know we were doing these things."[317] The Israel assassination campaign referenced above may also intentionally be partly overt to send a message to the Iranian government. This tactic can be effective if the feedback to the international system is deliberate and controlled. However, unintentional "overt-covert" operations are counterproductive, defeating the purpose of the covert action. It remains to be seen whether the recent admission by "government sources familiar with the matter" of CIA support to both Syrian rebels[318] and Libyan militias[319] was the result of a deliberate "overt-covert" tactic or an oversight regarding the factors requisite to successful deniability. Sometimes controlled leaks are effective; but to be effective it must be conscious and deliberate. Policymakers must be aware of the feedback a covert action is releasing to the international community. If external feedback is increasing unintentionally, adjustments should be made to the internal components of the system.

Feedback allows policymakers within the system "to adjust future conduct by past performances"[320] and provides a state

> some idea of how close it [the system] has come to its objectives and, if it desires to achieve a better approximation and has the capabilities for doing so, [the state] is in a position to seek to modify [the system's] behavior with this end in view.[321]

Through an understanding of feedback, actors are able to manipulate certain components of the system to attain a different result. If deniability is plummeting, actors can strengthen the cover story; if an objective is not being met, actors can change the type of action or reduce the operational constraints. But policymakers cannot properly adjust

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316 Sale, *Clinton's Secret Wars*, 185.

317 Sale, *Clinton's Secret Wars*, 185.

318 Mark Hosenball, "Exclusive: Obama Authorizes Secret U.S. Support for Syrian Rebels," Reuters, August 1, 2012.

319 Mark Hosenball, "Exclusive: Obama Authorizes Secret Help for Libya Rebels," Reuters, March 30, 2011.

320 Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, 368.

321 Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, 369.

the system without being alert to what the system is saying. It is imperative that system feedback is captured and addressed so that adjustments can be made as needed.

Feedback can be captured through various means to include technical capabilities, human assets, and open source media. Open source, in the form of social media and mobile technology, has recently created an environment where the signature of a covert action is much easier to gauge but also where deniability is much more difficult to maintain. Few could have predicted the feedback role social media would play during the secret raid into Abbottabad, Pakistan on the night of May 1, 2011. As the SEAL raid was commencing, Sohaib Athar tweeted "Helicopters hovering above Abbottabad at 1AM (is rare event)."[322] Over the next few hours, Athar and his followers discussed in 140 characters what had taken place until, in realization, Athar tweeted "Uh oh, now I'm the guy who liveblogged the Osama raid without knowing it."[323] All this occurred almost two hours before President Obama announced to the world that Osama bin Laden was dead.[324] Although the bin Laden raid was not a covert action since there was no intention of keeping the U.S. role unacknowledged, this raid does highlight the power that social media and mobile technology have on the signature of an operation. Policymakers need to be alert to the feedback an action is producing and ensure that measures are in place to capture and act on that feedback. Otherwise, the power of feedback is lost.

D. CYBER—EMBRACING THE POWER OF FEEDBACK

Recent advances in cyber technology have allowed planners to incorporate feedback directly into the covert action tool. The Stuxnet worm, deployed in the late-2000s against Iran's nuclear infrastructure, was a highly effective operation that highlights how feedback can be an active component of a covert action plan.[325] After

[322] Parmy Olson, "Man Inadvertently Live Tweets Osama Bin Laden Raid," *Forbes*, May 2, 2011.

[323] Olson, "Man Inadvertently Live Tweets Osama Bin Laden Raid."

[324] The White House, "Remarks by the President on Osama bin Laden," May 2, 2011. http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/05/02/osama-bin-laden-dead.

[325] Stuxnet is another example of the distinction between effectiveness and success. This covert action should be considered effective based on the immediate degradation of the Iranian centrifuges. However, the long-term value of the operation is still to be determined pending resolution of the Iranian proliferation crisis. Therefore, the "success" of Stuxnet remains debatable.

years of failed diplomatic efforts to address Iran's nuclear aspirations, the potential for a military strike was being hotly debated;[326] before kinetic strikes could be launched, however, "a sophisticated half-megabyte of computer code apparently accomplished what a half-decade of United Nations Security Council resolutions could not."[327] While the exact damage caused by the worm is unclear, some estimates claim it caused at least a 23 percent reduction in the number of working centrifuges at the Natanz nuclear facility.[328] Stuxnet succeeded by employing feedback in three distinct ways, depicted in Figure 20 below: manipulating the feedback seen by the Iranian officials, communicating feedback on the status to the sponsor, and controlling the external feedback to the international environment.

Once inserted into the Iranian system, Stuxnet targeted the industrial control systems (ICS) that were designed to monitor and control physical operations at Natanz.[329] The worm caused the centrifuges to drastically fluctuate spin rates at a level that would cause severe damage. This sophisticated computer code did not simply degrade the nuclear facilities; it did so while manipulating the feedback the facility controllers were receiving so they were unaware an attack was taking place. While causing the centrifuges to spin out of control, Stuxnet intercepted the warning signals the ICS was sounding and instead provided the controllers "deceptive feedback" that operations were commencing normally when the centrifuges were actually destroying themselves.[330] In classic Hollywood-heist style, Stuxnet replaced the real surveillance video with "pre-recorded fake input signals."[331]

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[326] James P. Farwell and Rafal Rohozinski, "Stuxnet and the Future of Cyber War," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 53 (2011): 28.

[327] Richard A. Falkenwrath, "From Bullets to Megabytes," *The New York Times*, January 26, 2011.

[328] Farwell and Rohozinski, "Stuxnet and the Future of Cyber War," 29.

[329] Sean Collins and Stephen McCombie, "Stuxnet: The Emergence of a New Cyber Weapon and Its Implications," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence, and Counter Terrorism* 7, no. 1 (2012): 84.

[330] Jon R. Lindsay, "Stuxnet and the Limits of Cyber Warfare," *Security Studies* 22, no. 3 (2013): 384.

[331] Thomas Rid and Peter McBurney, "Cyber-Weapons," *The RUSI Journal* 157, no. 1 (2012): 9.

Stuxnet also communicated with its sponsor while the mission was underway. It was "instructed to upload reports describing the machines it infected"[332] in order to allow the sponsor to track its progress, similar to how "a commando team radios situation reports back to base."[333] While sponsors were able to track the worm's progress, they were not able to control it sufficiently once it was released into the Iranian server. Communication with the worm did not equate to control of the worm and, unlike a commando team, there was no abort code. In fact, a primary reason the worm was exposed was that it spread well beyond the initial boundaries and caused collateral damage to surrounding systems. This internal feedback loop was incomplete, Stuxnet fed information back to the sponsor but was unable to receive information in return.

Finally, even after Stuxnet spread to other systems, it initially emitted very little external feedback. One of the benefits of cyber weapons is their inherent non-attributability. Early indications were simply that the "technology industry is being rattled by a quiet and sophisticated malicious software program"[334] and security experts were at first unclear as to who or what was responsible and even what the intended target was. Based on the sophistication of the worm, it was quickly assumed to have originated from a government entity and after crowdsourcing a fix, the weapon was isolated and disarmed; but the damage had been done. Even with the most sophisticated cyber weapons, some feedback will inevitably enter the environment. However, as seen with Stuxnet, identifying the source and impact of an attack can be a lengthy process.

Former CIA Director Michael Hayden claimed that Stuxnet was "the first attack of a major nature in which a cyberattack was used to effect physical destruction."[335] Stuxnet may not have been sufficiently controllable once it was released, it may have been effectively disarmed once discovered, but, based on its deniability and destructive

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[332] Lindsay, "Stuxnet and the Limits of Cyber Warfare," 382.

[333] Lindsay, "Stuxnet and the Limits of Cyber Warfare," 382.

[334] Riva Richmond, "Malware Hits Computerized Industrial Equipment," *The New York Times*, September 24, 2010.

[335] Michael Hayden, as quoted in James P. Farwell and Rafal Rohozinski "The New Reality of Cyber War," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 54, no. 4 (2012): 111.

power, it may also be a glimpse of the potential cyber technology has to offer covert actions.

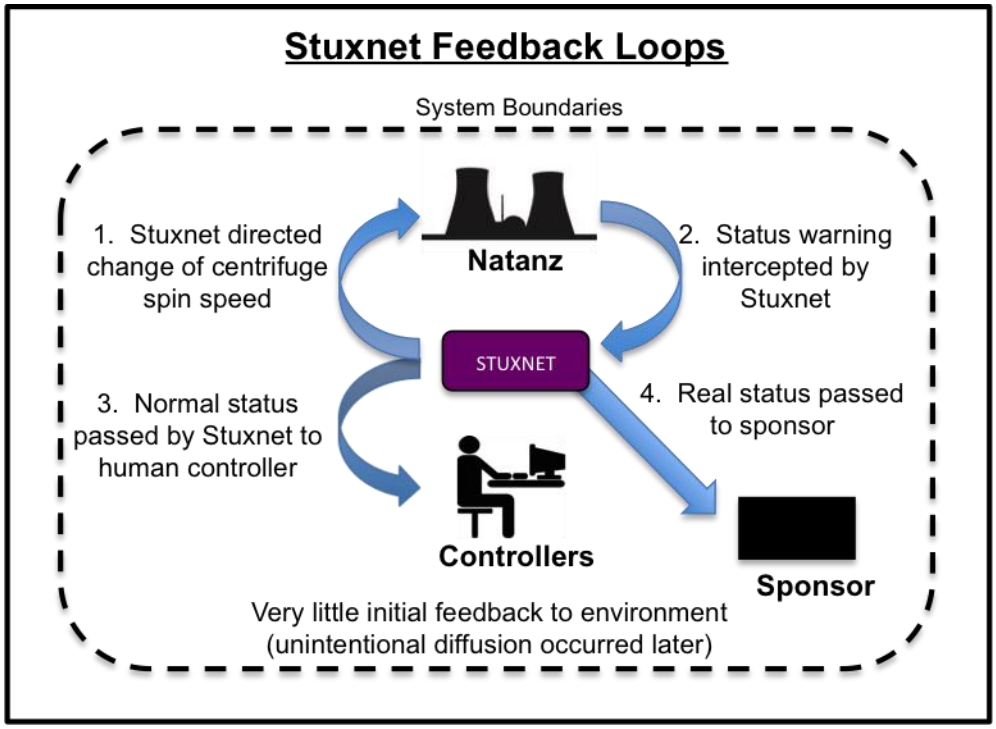

Figure 20. Stuxnet feedback loops.
Stuxnet feedback loops were established between the cyber code and the facility, the code and the controller, and the code and the sponsor. Note the feedback loop between the worm and the sponsor is incomplete.

Cyber technology's active use of feedback is not limited to "cybotage" operations. It has also been used in directed propaganda campaigns. In 2007, U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) developed the *Iraqi Hero* gaming program to target young Middle Eastern males. *Iraqi Hero* was a first-person shooter game based on the popular *Call of Duty* series; the objective of the game was to navigate through Baghdad while trying to thwart insurgent attacks. Players "won" if they were able to make it to police headquarters with attack plans stolen from the terrorist headquarters. The game was often given away at local bazaars on USB drives and was designed to influence the attitudes and opinions of a key demographic group in the region, military-aged males, to sway them away from supporting the insurgency. It also allowed USSOCOM to monitor who

and how many were downloading the games.[336] *Iraqi Hero* and later spinoffs provided feedback to the player in the form of a video game while simultaneously providing feedback to the sponsor on how far and to whom the program was spreading. Like Stuxnet, the feedback loops in *Iraqi Hero*, shown in Figure 21, were incomplete as the sponsor was unable to adjust the code once it was downloaded; it is possible, however, that next generation games may complete the loop, providing more control with less attribution.

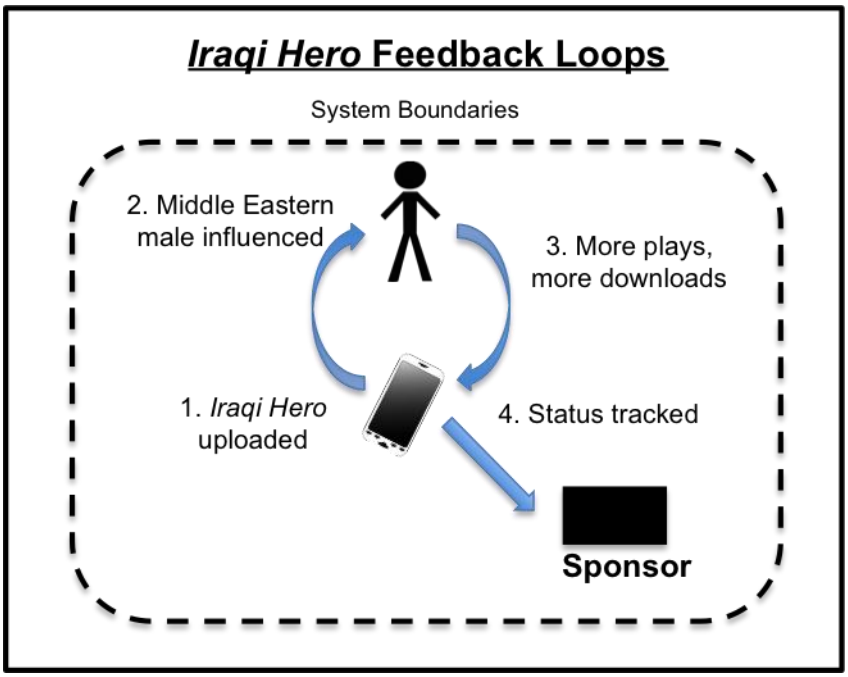

Figure 21. *Iraqi Hero* feedback loops.
Iraqi Hero established feedback between the game and the player. Again note the feedback loop between the game and the sponsor is incomplete.

Stuxnet and *Iraqi Hero* highlight how cyber technology can incorporate feedback directly into the covert tool. In both cases, the computer code created a feedback loop with the target and limited the attributable feedback being expelled to the external environment, all while passing status back to the sponsoring agency. The feedback loops to the sponsors were incomplete, the sponsors were able to receive information but were

[336] Mazzetti, *The Way of the Knife*, 187.

unable to control the programs once they had been downloaded. Future iterations of these types of covert actions could foreseeably complete this loop, enhancing the sponsor's ability to control and adjust the code while the covert action is underway.

E. TRADEOFFS

While feedback is the system's output looping back as input, the two major tradeoffs, stakes versus innovation and deniability over time as it relates to effectiveness, are policy inputs that can create significantly different outputs. Feedback and tradeoffs may manifest in opposite ends of the system, but they are intricately linked through the covert action cycle. The tradeoff decision will influence the system's interactions; feedback from those interactions will then return to the system, further changing the system and providing policymakers additional information on the overall status. These effects may also have considerable repercussions on not just the current covert action cycle but on future iterations as well. Because tradeoff decisions deal with innovative technology, national interests, and international credibility, they have the potential to resonate for years.

1. Stakes Versus Innovation

The first tradeoff in the covert action system is that of stakes versus innovation. The level of innovation of the tool used to conduct the operation should be commensurate with the stakes at risk because of the phenomena of innovation diffusion. A high stakes situation will warrant the use of an innovative tool; a low stakes situation typically should not. Once innovative technology is made public, it will start to diffuse and adversaries can begin to develop countermeasures, thereby reducing future effectiveness. But, on the other hand, electing not to employ a piece of innovative technology and withholding it until the "perfect time" arises can also reduce effectiveness since adversaries, through standard research and development processes, may create defenses against it. While this tradeoff does not solely apply to technology, the advances in cyber capabilities and their subsequent impact on covert actions makes understanding and acknowledging this tradeoff crucial to planning effective operations. There is no correct answer to this

dilemma; policymakers must strike a balance between the need to address today's threats against maintaining a capability to counter tomorrow's challenges.

A comparison of the Stuxnet in 2010 with the Russian-backed DDoS attacks in 2007 and 2008 illustrates this tradeoff and is highlighted in Figure 22. The employment of Stuxnet, very innovative at the time, was justified because of the perceived threat of a nuclear-armed Iran. The stakes were high; therefore, the use of a highly innovative tool was warranted. The persistence of Stuxnet's code for future situations was low, however, because once used, the technology diffused allowing defenses to be designed to counter it. Granted the Stuxnet code was never intended to enter the public domain and was inadvertently released onto the Internet, however, it is likely that Stuxnet's sponsors understood that once deployed, the worm would eventually be discovered and reverse engineered. As evidence of technology diffusion, Iran has reportedly "beefed up its own cyber capabilities"[337] following the attack. They have also been implicated by U.S. intelligence officials in the Shamoon cyber attacks on Saudi Aramco in 2012, presumably conducted in retaliation for Natanz.[338] Despite these repercussions, the national interest at stake, specifically the threat of the Iranian nuclear program, justified the use of this highly innovative tool even though, in its current state, it would likely be a one-and-done weapon.[339]

In comparison, Russia's DDoS attacks in 2007[340] and 2008[341] are an example of relatively routine technology used to address a low stakes issues. Estonia and Georgia represented a minimal threat to Russia. Russia was by far the militarily superior power and neither Estonia nor Georgia could mount an effective counter against Russian aggression. Russia enhanced its military effectiveness by employing DDoS attacks in a combined-arms technique; however, in 2007, DDoS was already a relatively routine

337 Andrea Shalal-Esa, "Iran Strengthened Cyber Capabilities After Stuxnet: U.S. General," Reuters, January 17, 2013.

338 Perlroth, "In Cyberattack on Saudi Firm, U.S. Sees Iran Firing Back."

339 Broad, Markoff, and Sanger, "Israeli Test on Worm Called Crucial in Iran Nuclear Delay."

340 Ian Traynor, "Russia Accused of Unleashing Cyberwar to Disable Estonia," *The Guardian*, May 16, 2007.

341 John Markoff, "Before the Gunfire, Cyberattacks," *The New York Times*, August 12, 2008.

capability and little advantage would have been gained by withholding its use.[342] Russia likely possessed other, more innovative cyber weapons at the time, yet the stakes of the campaigns against Estonia and Georgia were at such a low level that there was no reason to publicize a more technologically advanced tool.

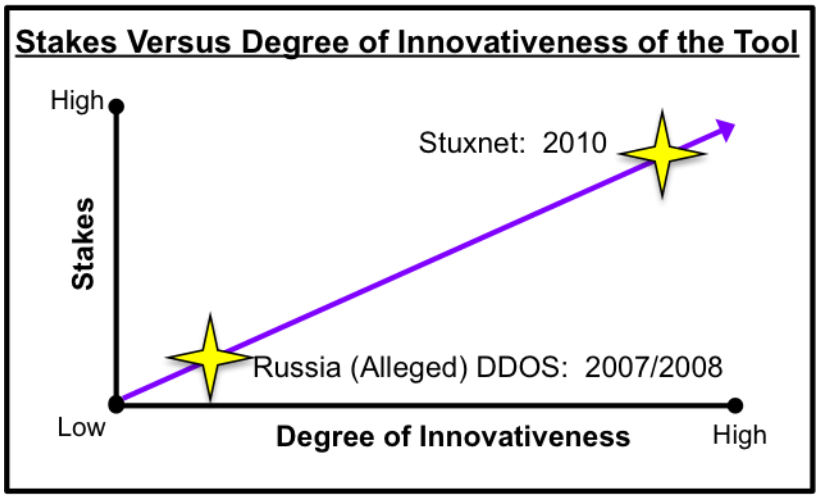

Figure 22. Tradeoff #1: Stakes versus degree of innovativeness of the tool. Tradeoff depicting the need to align the innovation of the tool with the level of the stakes.

2. Deniability Over Time

Most covert actions will, over time, be exposed. Some are outed through solid investigative journalism, some through a lack of understanding of the factors impacting deniability, and some are simply declassified once the need to maintain the cover is no longer necessary. Regardless of the reason, the risk of exposure over time generally increases. Each covert action has a particular exposure threshold that will fluctuate based on the level of deniability; this threshold designates when a sponsor can no longer credibly deny attribution. As per Figure 23 below, the time of exposure is determined by the point the exposure threshold is crossed. The higher the exposure threshold, the more

[342] Molly Sauter traces the first significant use of DDoS attacks to the World Trade Organization riots in November, 1999 in Seattle, WA. A British group known as the *electrohippies* waged a five-day disruption campaign on the WTO servers. The DDoS technology used in these attacks was based on a 1998 open-source Javascript tool. Molly Sauter, *The Coming Swarm: DDOS Actions, Hacktivism, and Civil Disobedience on the Internet* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 30–32.

time a sponsor has to operate covertly; the lower the threshold, the less time. Deniability buys time; time provides freedom to operate.

When exposure appears imminent, the decision maker has a choice. He can either shelve the operation to preserve the capability or cover; raise the exposure threshold by adjusting the deniability component to buy more time; continue under an "overt-covert" status where the state does not acknowledge sponsorship yet most parties tacitly accept the sponsor's involvement; or lift the cover story and proceed overtly. Shutting down the operation will leave the objectives unmet yet deniability intact. Continuing in an "overt-covert" or overt manner may still achieve the objectives but may negatively impact a state's domestic or international credibility and prompt international condemnations, sanctions, or, worst case, aggressive retaliation. The way-ahead should be based on the objectives weighed against the expected blowback that will occur if a state proceeds under either an "overt-covert" or a purely overt status.

There are situations when the reward of achieving the objectives will outweigh the risk of fallout. President Obama's admission in May 2013 that "the United States has taken lethal, targeted action against al Qaeda and its associated forces, including with remotely piloted aircraft commonly referred to as drones" is such a case.[343] The U.S. could no longer credibly deny the operations were conducted by U.S. forces; however, the advantages of continuing an armed campaign against al Qaeda outweighed the disadvantages of discontinuing the operation. Closely monitoring external feedback will help policymakers determine when this decision should be made based on exposure appearing imminent, it will also provide insight to the potential fall out of continuing the operation under other-than-covert circumstances.

[343] The White House, "Remarks by the President at the National Defense University," May 23, 2013. http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university.

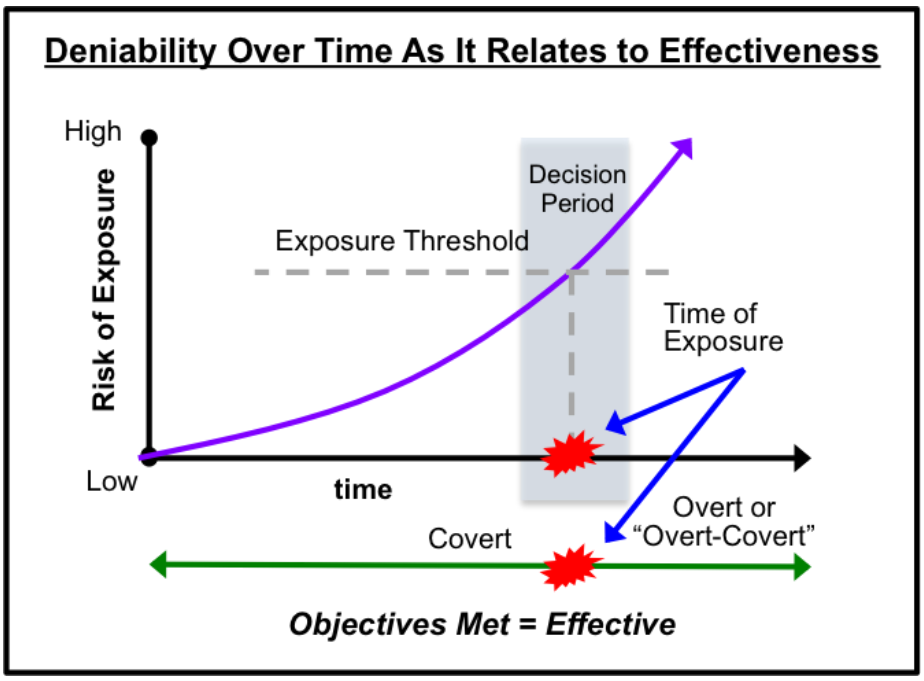

Figure 23. Tradeoff #2: Deniability over time as it relates to effectiveness. Tradeoff depicting the relationship between deniability, effectiveness, and time.

Regardless of a decision to proceed overtly, if the objectives are achieved, the action is effective. Exposure, intentional or not, does not necessarily equate to ineffective actions. There are many examples of effective operations despite thin or non-existent covers. The arming of the mujahedeen was a thinly veiled covert action yet still effective based on the accomplishment of the particular objective: forcing the Soviet military from Afghanistan. More recently, throughout much of 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin denied direct involvement in Crimea and Ukraine despite evidence that appeared to prove a large Russian military presence. While Russian deniability was low, the covert action was still highly effective. Despite the international community's certainty that Russian forces were operating in Crimea, Putin's denials bought enough time and provided enough plausible deniability to successfully annex the territory of a sovereign state. Putin likely understood the ramifications of his actions and when exposure of his forces was pending, he elected to proceed under an "overt-covert" umbrella. Evidently, the reward of Crimea was considered worth the risk of the international response. Interestingly, this example also illustrates the difference between effectiveness and success. Putin's Ukraine campaign may have been effective, but based on the economic sanctions that have been

leveled against Russia as well as the recent elections in Kiev of a pro-Western legislature, the "success" of this policy is still undetermined.

Both tradeoffs discussed above require input from decision makers and the choices made here can significantly impact the effectiveness of the current system as well as covert actions conducted in the future. There are no right answers to either tradeoff, only considerations to bear in mind as policymakers weigh all sides of the issue. Introducing new technology, assessing the relative importance of the objectives, affecting international credibility, and inviting international response or retaliation are all factors that will influence the decision maker. Only through a thorough comprehension of tradeoffs can policymakers understand the full advantages and disadvantages of the various courses of action available.

F. CONCLUSION

Understanding feedback and tradeoffs is essential to correctly applying covert action today. Feedback allows an actor to determine what has gone wrong, what has gone right, and how to adjust the system from there. Tradeoffs provide decision makers the opportunity to influence the direction of the current covert action system but also the potential to affect the system in the future. Covert actions are far too powerful to be fire-and-forget weapons; it takes a keen, honest assessment of the feedback that is returning to the system and the tradeoff decisions required by the system to ensure the proper use of this complex tool.

The transition from a bipolar world, accompanied by the advent of cyber technology, has arguably changed the role of covert action in many states national security strategies. While states no longer have the luxury of focusing on one main enemy, they now have a whole spectrum of new weapons to employ in the form of cyber capabilities against the range of enemies they face. Few other covert action tools are able to incorporate feedback quite like cyber technology and the potential of this emerging weapon is only beginning to be realized.

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VI. BRIDGING THE GAP—FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

A. INTRODUCTION

The systems approach to covert action can provide useful insights to policymakers; but these insights may be lost unless the abstract concept is converted to real-world application. Just as theories of international relations are not foreign policies, the systems approach is not in itself a strategy. This thesis has aimed to provide a new way to think about covert action; but to realize the full potential of this approach it must now be transitioned from theory to practice.

Alexander George speaks of "bridging the gap"[344] between scholars and policymakers to reduce the gulf that separates theory from praxis and conceptual models from practical solutions. This chapter will use George's step-down format to illustrate how the abstract covert action systems approach can be converted to a relevant covert strategy. First, the "gap" will be explained and the "three types of knowledge" needed to bridge it will be introduced: conceptual, general, and specific.[345] Next, the systems model that has been developed throughout this study will be reviewed, focusing on the covert action system diagram, system effects, feedback, and tradeoffs. This abstract concept will then be transitioned to the general knowledge required to apply the model and six "favoring conditions"[346] will be proposed. To complete the bridge, a few points to consider when using these "favoring conditions" to develop a situation-specific strategy will be briefly discussed. Finally, recommendations for additional areas of study will be suggested. Scholarship can only be "an aid, not a substitute" for policy development,[347] but as states will likely continue to employ covert action in their national security strategies, increasing the scholarly understanding of this complex and dynamic tool may lead to more effective application.

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[344] Alexander L. George, *Bridging the Gap: Theory & Practice in Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1993), xiii.

[345] George, *Bridging the Gap*, xvii.

[346] George, *Bridging the Gap*, 122.

[347] George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, 276.

B. BRIDGING THE GAP

According to George, a gap exists between scholars and policymakers. Scholars are seen by some as "too academic, all too often prone to abstraction and jargon" while policymakers are "too haphazard and ad hoc in their approaches and too ready to apply pat formulas or supposed lessons of history in uncritical ways."[348] This disconnect constrains effective communication between the two communities and inhibits the development of foreign policy based in sound theory. The gulf between abstract, conceptual models developed by scholars and the specific policy-relevant information required by policymakers can be wide, but to further the pursuit of effective foreign policy, it must be bridged.

George proposes that the best way to link these two communities is to focus on the relationship between knowledge and action. The gap between theory and practice is a gap between knowledge and action. At the risk of oversimplification, academics create knowledge and policymakers take action. Unfortunately, the knowledge created by some scholars "offers little insight into how decision makers can choose policy instruments to influence outcomes."[349] To solve this dilemma, theoretical concepts must be "stepped-down" to policy-relevant strategies. Three types of knowledge can assist policymakers here: conceptual understanding of abstract theories; general ideas of the "favoring conditions"[350] that, when followed, typically lead to successful outcomes; and situation-specific, real-world information.[351] If a policymaker starts with a broad appreciation of the conceptual theory an issue demands, understands the general knowledge associated with that theory, and incorporates specific, timely information, a more effective strategy can be formed.

Conceptual understanding of an abstract theory is the first step in policy development. The abstract model provides a "basic framework" and identifies the

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[348] Samuel W. Lewis, as cited in George, *Bridging the Gap*, ix.

[349] George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, 265.

[350] George, *Bridging the Gap*, 122.

[351] George refers to actor-specific behavior models as his third type of knowledge. He discusses the requirement of a "correct image" in understanding one's adversary before proceeding. This thesis broadens that concept to refer to situation-specific knowledge in general.

"general logic"[352] of a policy instrument but its usefulness to real-world application is, by itself, limited. Broad theories are explanatory at a grand scale and help frame the issue to focus the thinker but they provide little additional guidance beyond general abstraction. For example, deterrence theory is not a strategy; it merely explains the "general logic"[353] of this type of international influence. To deter aggression by an adversary, the abstract concept of deterrence provides a useful starting point; to be applicable, however, statesmen must convert the theory into a specific policy. The distinction may appear minor at first, but a look at the theoretical concepts outlined in Thomas Schelling's *The Strategy of Conflict* or Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*[354] will quickly illustrate the limited use of broad theory for daily national security considerations.

"Conditional generalizations" and "favoring conditions"[355] help link abstract theories to "useable knowledge"[356] by outlining generalities that have been discovered through historical analysis. Within the complex, systemic world of international relations, success is rarely determined by one causal factor; instead, positive outcomes are the product of the interaction of certain conditions. Historical study can help identify these "favoring conditions"[357] that, when present, typically lead to successful strategic outcomes. These conditions are neither deterministic nor probabilistic and should not be thought of as necessary or sufficient for success, but they do provide guidelines for policymakers to follow when formulating sound policy. Returning to the deterrence theory example, the general knowledge associated with deterrence, developed through years of historical study, includes such "conditional generalizations" as the need to establish credibility, the requirement of a second-strike capability, the means to

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[352] George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, 270.

[353] George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, 270.

[354] Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960) and Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979).

[355] George, *Bridging the Gap*, 120.

[356] George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, 269.

[357] George, *Bridging the Gap*, 122.

communicate threats, and the value of reputation.[358] These simple guidelines neither guarantee success nor provide policymakers with a specific strategy; they merely offer points to consider that have proven historically effective.

The final type of knowledge required to complete the transition from theory to practice is that information which is specific to the situation. There is no formatted approach to security issues and despite similar looking circumstances policymakers must avoid the temptation to apply carbon-copy solutions. Academia can assist in the development of policy-relevant theories but it is the practitioner that has the "difficult task of adapting the available general knowledge about a given strategy or a foreign policy undertaking to the particular case at hand."[359] Creating situation-specific strategies based on a theoretical foundation while incorporating historically-proven guidelines is not a simple task, but the risks in not utilizing all available scholarship when formulating policy are too great.

C. THE COVERT ACTION SYSTEM AS A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The covert action systems approach is a "middle-range" conceptual model that is "narrower in scope" than highly general theories "but closer to types and forms of knowledge needed in policymaking."[360] It is focused exclusively on providing a different way to think about this very specific form of statecraft. By looking at the covert action system diagram, system effects, feedback, and tradeoffs, this model offers a holistic perspective that emphasizes the interactions and interplay of the whole as opposed to an isolated concentration on the individual components. Further, it urges analysts to consider how the various elements interact and influence each other in dynamic ways to create emergent, complex behavior that cannot be understood through basic linear thinking. A covert action is much more than simply "method" plus "cover story" aimed at "target;" this type of reductionist thinking can lead to misunderstanding and misapplication. In

[358] Conditional generalizations and favoring conditions are not always universally accepted facts. While many see reputation as key to a strong deterrence posture, Jonathan Mercer in *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996) questions the idea that reputation plays a crucial role in international relations.

[359] George, *Bridging the Gap*, 116.

[360] George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, 266.

reality, the "method" used to conduct a covert action will affect the plausibility of the "cover story" which may in turn change the behavior of the "target;" the subsequent reaction from the "target" may require a reconsideration of the "method" employed which will further affect the plausibility of the "cover story." In other words, the relationships within the system are much more complex than A plus B and the outcome of those relationships can often be far different than C.

A systems approach, by definition, requires seeing the entire system; therefore, unnecessary compartmentalization is anathema to this type of analysis. Within the intelligence field, some compartmentalization is understandably required due to security requirements but over-compartmentalization can be problematic. Compartmentalization leads to reductionist thinking; reductionist thinking leads to simplification; simplification may lead to misapplication. Policymakers need to be aware that critical insights can be lost if one is unable to view the whole structure and should strive for a balance between security restrictions and system oversight.

1. System Diagram

The system diagram is a simple illustration of complexity. It allows policymakers to visualize the critical components and comprehend the internal interactions within the system without resorting to reductionist thinking. Jervis points out that, while most people understand the world is not determined by mere cause and effect relationships, there is a tendency to simplify complex interactions for ease of understanding.[361] Unfortunately, oversimplification of complexity leads to an underestimation of the power of interactions. By providing a visual representation of the interactions of the components, the diagram helps policymakers avoid overgeneralization and instead captures the system's complex nature while eliminating the chaff that could derail focused analysis.

It is important to note that the system diagram is not a map and should not be viewed as a formulaic policy tool. One cannot take the system diagram, fill in the blanks, and follow it to a successful outcome. It is, instead, intended solely to provide a

[361] Jervis, *System Effects*, 3.

conceptual understanding of the interactions occurring within the system. Systems behavior is dynamic and rarely can precise determination be expected. But a visual picture of the complexity of the system will offer a better idea of how component interplay influences effectiveness.

2. System Effects

The interactions depicted by the system diagram create emergent properties, "a characteristic that could not possibly have been deduced from the nature of its components."[362] One cannot simply add internal components together to determine the result; component interactions change the inherent structure and dynamic characteristics of the system and therefore, "the whole is different from, not greater than, the sum of the parts."[363] Jervis identifies four system effects that characterize these complex interactions: many effects are delayed and indirect; relations are often not bilateral; interactions are not additive; and outcomes do not always align with intentions.[364]

Understanding these system effects can help policymakers better appreciate the potential for unintended consequences. It may not be possible to control or precisely predict system effects, but acknowledging that systems can behave in ways that drastically diverge from expectations may help policymakers determine when a covert policy is warranted or when other forms of influence would yield a more desired result. Knowledge of system effects also allows for better assessment of risks and stakes and will assist policymakers in reaching an equilibrium between the two. Finally, an awareness of the type of effects that may manifest from the system's interactions will help policymakers remain cognizant of the potential for external changes produced by the system and adjust the strategy accordingly.

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[362] Jervis, *System Effects*, 16.

[363] Jervis, *System Effects*, 13.

[364] Jervis, *System Effects*, 29.

3. Feedback

Feedback is one of the most basic yet central features to the systems approach. Feedback is the driving force of the system, the "return of information"[365] that changes the system's direction, environment, and overall structure. Covert action system feedback takes two forms: internal and external. Internal feedback allows policymakers to ascertain how close the system is to achieving the stated objectives and adjust as required. External feedback, on the other hand, transmits information to the environment in the form of operational signature and allows the policymaker to determine the system's level of deniability. Both types of feedback alert users to the system's status and provide the opportunity to adjust behavior while the system is in execution. If policymakers do not closely monitor feedback, however, the opportunity to manipulate the system to achieve a different result will be lost. Systems communicate, it is up to policymakers to listen and act.

4. Tradeoffs

The final concept to consider is the effect that tradeoff decisions have on the outcome. This study introduced two tradeoffs that require inputs from decision makers that may have far-reaching effects: stakes versus innovation; and deniability over time as it relates to effectiveness. The first tradeoff, stakes versus innovation, highlights the idea that innovation of the instrument applied should be commensurate with the national interest at stake. Technology will quickly diffuse after it is used. Therefore, states should reserve their most innovative capabilities until the stakes warrant its use.

The second tradeoff, deniability over time as it relates to effectiveness, illustrates that the level of deniability an action maintains determines the time available to conduct that action covertly. It also reiterates the notion that covert action effectiveness is based on achieving the stated objectives; as long as the objectives are met, the action is effective. However, that does not imply that deniability is an insignificant factor. When exposure appears imminent, policymakers must determine whether accomplishing the objective is worth the risk of the blowback that will occur upon exposure.

[365] Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, 366.

Both tradeoffs provide the opportunity to redirect the system and the choices made here can resonate for years. Decisions that affect the diffusion of innovative technology, the achievement of objectives deemed essential to national security, and the extent of blowback resulting from an operation can have significant impact on the uses of covert action in the future. Policymakers and decision makers should be aware of how their decisions will influence not only the present covert action system but future systems as well.

All four of these concepts—the system diagram, system effects, feedback, and tradeoffs—provide a level of abstract understanding of the covert action system. By expanding the focus from an isolated, event-centric view to a holistic, structure-centric perspective, policymakers can garner a better appreciation of the nuances associated with covert action. But in order to move beyond appreciation of subtleties to a better employment of the tool, the broad conceptual model must be transitioned to more general "useable knowledge."[366]

D. GENERAL KNOWLEDGE OF COVERT ACTION SYSTEMS

This two-century survey of covert action via a "systems lens" helps highlight certain "favoring conditions"[367] that have historically enabled effective covert policies. These conditions provide guidance for policymaker and offer handholds to grasp when formulating strategy. Guidelines cannot be confused with guarantees, however. Even though "the more favoring conditions in a case, the more likely is success,"[368] George notes that simply following these guidelines does not guarantee effectiveness. Complexity within the system can never be completely eliminated; but if a strategy is developed with the following conditions in mind, the chances of success will increase. Conversely, if an ad hoc approach is taken with little regard to theoretical foundations or historical experience, the result could be far from desired—even disastrous.

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[366] George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, 269.

[367] George, *Bridging the Gap*, 122.

[368] George, *Bridging the Gap*, 122.

1. Nest within Existing Foreign Policy

The first condition that supports strategic success is nesting a covert strategy within existing policy. The covert action system is one of many that make up the foreign policy meta-system; to gain the most out of these various systems, all should be in harmony. If one is churning against the rest or operating in isolation, the meta-system will not be performing to its maximum potential. This need for unity of effort can be illustrated by comparing the foreign policy system to a collegiate crew team: if seven rowers are moving together and the eighth is rowing in the opposite direction, the boat's momentum will be slowed. Similarly, if only one rower on the team is performing while the other seven are at a standstill, the boat will be moving at only a fraction of its potential speed. If diplomatic, economic, and informational efforts are all pushing a state's policy in one direction while a covert action is working in the opposite direction, little success can be expected. Similarly, if the only effort a state is exerting is through a covert program, movement will be slow. Policy and strategy integration is key; history has shown that a foreign policy goal is more likely to be accomplished if the covert action is embedded within the larger foreign policy system.

To truly enhance national security, effective covert operations should operate as a supporting effort to other policy tools. It should be noted that this has not, and will not, always be the case. During the "golden age"[369] of U.S. covert action immediately following World War Two, covert actions were sometimes successful as the main effort. The coup in Iran is perhaps the best-known case of a stand-alone covert action leading to strategic success. As the keystone to U.S. foreign policy in that country, the coup opened the door for the application of other tools of influence to further American interests in the region for 25 years. Today, however, covert actions on such a grand scale will be rare. Stuxnet and the Abu Nidal Organization takedown are more likely representative of the future of covert action: nested programs within larger foreign policy initiatives. As stand-alone operations, they were effective, that is, they met the system's objectives; as part of

[369] Callanan, *Covert Action in the Cold War*, 10.

larger programs and in concert with other efforts, they also supported strategic counter-proliferation and counterterrorism policy goals.

Covert actions can have very expansive, far-reaching effects; they do not, as some have argued, need to be limited in their objectives.[370] The victory of the Christian Democratic Party in the Italian national elections in 1948 and the success of the mujahedeen against the Soviet Army in Afghanistan in the 1980s illustrate that covert strategies can be very effective in supporting broad foreign policy goals. But these initiatives alone did not achieve the objectives; both operations were subsets of larger policies. The Italian election operation was conducted under the umbrella of the Marshall Plan and the mujahedeen support was a blatant "overt-covert" action that paralleled the internal decay of the Soviet state. Both of these operations are common examples of "successful" covert operations but it is important to remember that they were executed in concert with other U.S. efforts. The intrigue surrounding covert action often overshadows the reality: that covert actions used in conjunction with other policy tools can be more effective than if used in isolation. When used alone, the results are often limited; but when they are in support of larger foreign policy initiatives, the effects can be far-reaching.

2. Deliberate Use

Covert action should be deliberately applied to a foreign policy issue, not used as a default or "last resort" strategy simply because more overt measures are deemed too difficult or problematic. The burden-of-proof of a proposed covert approach should be on "why covert" instead of "why not." First answering the question "Why covert?" will help policymakers positively identify the benefits they hope to gain from a covert strategy and perhaps highlight other tools of influence and potential overt strategies that may have been overlooked. If an objective can be achieved overtly with acceptable consequences, then an overt approach should be considered. Even if overt means are available, covert action may still be a preferred method for a variety of reasons. Stuxnet, for example, was

[370] Treverton notes that "with the passage of time, however, a little money here, a few weapons there became less likely to achieve grand foreign policy purposes." This thesis argues that grand foreign policy purposes can be achieved as long as the action is nested. Treverton, *Intelligence for an Age of Terror,* 217.

preferred over a kinetic military strike. Stuxnet, therefore, adequately addressed the burden-of-proof requirement. Conversely, it is unclear if arming the Syrian and Libyan rebels via a presidential finding can adequately answer the "Why Covert?" question or if other avenues of support are available to further U.S. interests in these regions. Covert action can be a powerful option to address foreign policy issues, but it should only be employed when the situation demands, not because it is seen as an easy answer or because the mechanisms are in place.

Policymakers must avoid the temptation to unnecessarily resort to covert policies. The Bay of Pigs debacle is a perfect example of policymakers' overreliance on covert means. The operation was, by the time it launched, much closer to an overt amphibious invasion than a covert paramilitary operation. Battalions of dissidents supported by a rebel air force to invade a sovereign nation with the expressed intent to overthrow the existing government should never have proceeded under the conditions that it did. Unfortunately, misplaced optimism in the idea of "covertness," and an overreliance on an unrelated, yet successful, historical experience, were both factors in President Kennedy's approval of the ill-fated mission.[371] A "covert" invasion of Cuba was an "easy answer" that led to devastating results, yet in retrospect, the internal logic of the covert decision does not hold up to scrutiny. If policymakers cannot adequately answer why an operation should be conducted via covert means, as it would have been difficult to in the Bay of Pigs scenario, then they may be in danger of abusing the capability.

3. Capture Feedback and Adjust

Systems communicate through feedback and that feedback must be monitored. By ensuring mechanisms are in place to capture both internal and external feedback, policymakers can more closely track the status of the system. Mechanisms to capture feedback can be as sophisticated as observing the measures and systems intelligence

[371] President Kennedy asked Director of Central Intelligence Allen Dulles for advice on the conflicting Bay of Pigs assessments. DCI Dulles alluded to his experience with President Eisenhower prior to PBSUCCESS and remarked "I stood at this very desk and said to President Eisenhower about a similar operation in Guatemala 'I believe it will work' and I say to you now, Mr. President, that the prospects for this plan are even better than our prospects were in Guatemala." In retrospect, the two operations had little in common. Vandenbroucke, *Perilous Options,* 36.

emanating from a facility to as simple as monitoring a Twitter account. Regardless of the level of sophistication, feedback can be a covert action game-changer since it allows for the adjustment of the system while in execution. If that feedback is not captured, however, the opportunity is lost and the system may evolve in a direction that is undesired or unanticipated. Therefore, it is imperative that the means to capture feedback are incorporated in the planning phase of any action.

The Stuxnet cyber worm is an example of how current technology can integrate both internal and external feedback directly into the covert tool. Stuxnet worked by directing a change in the spin rate of the nuclear centrifuges. It then manipulated the status that was being communicated to the Iranian nuclear scientists while simultaneously providing accurate updates to the sponsor. As technology innovations continue, cyber weapons will likely become more common. A capability that allows direct and immediate two-way communication between a cyber "actor," a sponsor, and a target with minimal risk of interception has the potential to transform the covert world. Regardless of the level of technology a covert tool encompasses, however, the critical importance of capturing and responding to feedback will continue to be a core component to covert action effectiveness.

4. Maintain Organizational Control

Maintaining tight control over those organizations tasked with carrying out covert operations is crucial to preserving the integrity of the capability. While it is feasible that organizations outside the CIA could execute covert policy, this must be a careful, deliberate decision by those with the experience and knowledge to understand the benefits and drawbacks of venturing outside the established covert structure. The CIA has almost seven decades of experience with covert action—not all of it good—in which it has developed the requisite institutional experience, culture, infrastructure, and processes necessary to plan and conduct effective operations.

The experience of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and their failed ZunZuneo project in Cuba highlights the problems of a half-cocked operation conducted by an inexperienced organization not designed to operate in the shadows.

ZunZuneo was a failed attempt to build a Twitter-like social media site in Cuba to encourage open communication amongst Cubans that, as reported by the Associated Press, could eventually lead to the creation of "smart mobs" to foment political unrest.[372] Despite an internal contractor memo that directed "there will be absolutely no mention of United States government involvement," government spokesmen deny ZunZuneo was a covert operation and instead claim it was simply "discreet."[373] Definitional technicalities aside, it appears that ZunZuneo was a tepid attempt to reap the benefits of a covert approach without truly comprehending the inherent complexities involved. As James Lewis of the Center for Strategic and International Studies claimed, it was "amateur-hour covertness, which is to say that it wasn't very covert."[374] ZunZuneo was "amateur-hour" precisely because it was conducted by amateurs. Granted, the "professionals" in the nation's covert agencies have a long record of covert action blunders as well, but these professional likely have a deeper understanding of the capability than those in USAID and therefore could have avoided some of the pitfalls into which USAID fell. Based on media reports, it does not appear that there were any casualties beyond U.S. reputation through embarrassing exposure. However, it is not inconceivable to fear that the Cuban regime may have had a much sharper response to those who were unwittingly involved in the program.

Much has also been written recently about the Pentagon's increased role in covert action. Outside of the declared theater of active armed conflict, Pentagon involvement in covert operations should be very carefully considered. Various ethical, moral, and legal restrictions surround the use of military personnel in covert activities, not least of which is potential violation of the Geneva Convention. Perhaps the biggest concern of the expansion of the Pentagon's covert capability, from an organizational perspective, is the seeming ability to bypass established approval processes. Pentagon covert activities are

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[372] Desmond Butler, Jack Gillum, and Alberto Arce, "US Secretly Created 'Cuban Twitter' to Stir Unrest," *Associated Press*, April 4, 2014.

[373] Butler, Gillum, and Arce, "US Secretly Created 'Cuban Twitter'."

[374] James Lewis, as quoted in, David E. Sanger, "U.S. Says It Tried to Build a Social Media Site in Cuba, but Failed," *The New York Times*, April 3, 2014.

often conducted under a broad definition of "traditional military activities"[375] which effectively bypasses the statutory processes established by the 1974 Hughes-Ryan Amendment. Decision makers need to treat this with extreme care. The current authorization and approval processes are in place because of serious blowback that occurred due, in some parts, to lack of oversight; circumventing this process through a flexible definition of what constitutes "traditional military activities" could result in more covert fallout.[376]

Admittedly, "cybotage" missions offer a new twist to organizational responsibility. Stuxnet was a watershed moment for international conflict, ushering in an era when an undetected computer code can now impart physical damage to existing infrastructure. With the advent of cyber technology, organizations conducting covert action will likely expand beyond a CIA monopoly to more cyber-centric units. Further research into the implications of both the Pentagon's use of covert action and changes the cyber era may bring to the covert system is beyond the scope of this thesis, but the foundation of the system should remain essentially unchanged regardless of the organization conducting the operation. Covert actions, whether conducted by the CIA or any other state organization, should follow the same approval and authorization processes to ensure that the tool is being applied correctly. The capability has far too much potential to end in disaster for tight organizational control not to be maintained.

5. Expect Exposure

At some point, almost all covert activities will be exposed; therefore, policymakers need to plan for this eventuality. Treverton speaks of the "*New York Times* test"[377] and recommends that before taking action, policymakers should consider the fallout that will occur when, not if, the covert action is above the fold of the morning newspaper. In a world of instant communications and 24-hour media outlets, external feedback is becoming much more difficult to control and exposure is almost guaranteed.

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[375] Kibbe, "Covert Action and the Pentagon," 64–65.

[376] For more information regarding the authorities and approval of Pentagon covert action, see Kibbe, "Covert Actions and the Pentagon."

[377] Treverton, *Intelligence for an Age of Terror*, 223.

As demonstrated by the man who live-tweeted the bin Laden raid, even the most secretive operations can be quickly exposed by a single individual with a smartphone.

Expecting exposure reiterates the requirement for covert actions to be nested. If a covert operation is nested in existing overt foreign policy, exposure will be more acceptable. It is when a covert action is in conflict with existing policy and statutes, as was the Iran-Contra Affair when Reagan's National Security Council supported the Nicaraguan Contras by selling arms to Iran, that exposure leads to serious breaches of public trust. There are many legitimate reasons for a state to enact a covert strategy, but operating covertly simply to avoid difficult public debate is likely a recipe for disaster. Expecting exposure and planning for that eventuality before it occurs can help policymakers confirm the covert activity is in line with state policies. If it is not, intentional or otherwise, policymakers should either reconsider the strategy or ensure the decision maker is prepared for the eventual exposure.

6. Understand Tradeoffs

Finally, it is important for planners to understand the two main tradeoffs in the covert action system. An appreciation of the tradeoff of stakes versus innovation and the tradeoff of exposure over time as it relates to effectiveness will help practitioners make more informed planning decisions. Without an understanding of these tradeoffs, policymakers cannot hope to best utilize the system to its greatest potential.

The Stuxnet case illustrates the first tradeoff between stakes and innovation. The stakes of a nuclear-armed Iran were deemed high enough to warrant the use of this highly innovative, highly sophisticated computer worm. After it infected the Iranian systems, however, it was inadvertently released onto the open Internet which allowed cyber specialists to reverse-engineer the technology in an open forum, providing adversaries the information needed to develop defenses. The tool worked, but in its present state, it will unlikely work to such effect a second time. If retarding the Iranian nuclear program had not been deemed critical enough to warrant the use of the code, the sponsor would likely have refrained from using it; however, holding the code in reserve could have allowed

adversary states time to naturally develop countermeasures against it, essentially defeating it before it could be deployed.

Putin's actions in eastern Ukraine are a timely illustration of the second tradeoff between time, deniability, and effectiveness. As the annexation of Crimea shows, even thinly veiled covert activities can still be highly effective.[378] Policymakers need to understand what factors impact deniability and how deniability subsequently determines the time available for freedom of movement. Furthermore, once an operation is nearing exposure, decision makers should make a conscious choice to shut down the operation, continue as an "overt covert" operation as Russia did in Ukraine,[379] or proceed overtly as the U.S. has done with the drone program against al Qaeda.[380] Effectiveness can still be achieved after an operation is uncovered but the blowback of proceeding overtly must be weighed against the drawbacks of shutting down the operation without achieving the objectives.

Both tradeoffs require a balance between the risk and rewards of the objective and the decision can only be made on a case-by-case basis. There are no correct answers to covert action tradeoff decisions, only considerations to bear in mind as policymakers are determining a course of action.

These six conditions outlined above do not guarantee either success or effectiveness; they simply provide a type of "checklist"[381] to ensure policy is being formulated in a deliberate manner. Because of the complex nature of systems, rarely will universal conditions be present that determine if A then B. Instead, these "conditional generalizations" provide policymakers an idea of the more important factors to consider

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[378] Will Englund, "Kremlin Says Crimea is Now Officially Part of Russia After Treaty Signing, Putin Speech," *The Washington Post*, March 21, 2014. This annexation came after Putin repeatedly denied Russian forces were in Crimea. Bill Chappell and Mark Memmott, "Putin Says Those Aren't Russian Forces in Crimea," *National Public Radio*, March 4, 2014.

[379] Michael R. Gordon, "Russia Displays a New Military Prowess in Ukraine's East," *The New York Times*, April 21, 2014.

[380] President Obama announced in a speech at the National Defense University that "the United States has taken lethal, targeted action against al Qaeda and its associated forces, including with remotely piloted aircraft commonly referred to as drones." This program was previously unacknowledged by government officials. The White House, "Remarks by the President at the National Defense University," May 23, 2013.

[381] George, *Bridging the Gap*, 125.

when constructing a covert action strategy. If some or all of these favoring conditions cannot be incorporated into situation-specific strategies, decision makers may be better served recommending a different approach.

E. SITUATION-SPECIFIC POLICY DEVELOPMENT

The conceptual framework and general knowledge outlined above offer policymakers a foundation upon which to build a situation-specific strategy. It is up to them to integrate this knowledge with the details of the case at hand. Scholarship can help expand the knowledge base of a concept but it is the policymaker who must take the final, and arguably most difficult, step: strategy development. Theory and knowledge can only provide guidance and insight, it cannot replace real-time information or personal judgment.

Every policy decision is, of course, based on much more than strategic rationality; political concerns will nearly always be present in a decision process and the "best" strategy may be rejected due to considerations far outside the boundaries of the covert action system. Increasing the knowledge base of policymakers, however, can limit some of the more dangerous political inputs. As George notes, "when policy-relevant knowledge is available, it can discipline and constrain the unfettered play of political factors in policymaking."[382] Politics will rarely be eliminated in any policy decision but enhancing the education of those tasked with formulating policy can perhaps limit the negative influence political factors may have on the final product.

F. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL STUDY

Covert actions will likely remain a core component of many states foreign policies. Those wishing to develop "policy-applicable theory"[383] should continue to build upon the foundation required to better apply this tool. The primary focus of this thesis was on George's first two types of knowledge, conceptual and general, while the details of policy development were only briefly discussed. Now that the conceptual and general

[382] George, *Bridging the Gap,* 20.

[383] George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, 269.

frameworks have been advanced, a closer look at the specifics of formuluating covert action strategy could further enhance the applicability of this model.

Further exploration of international use covert action is also needed. The few examples that were examined suggest that the lessons of the systems approach is generalizable across international boundaries but it is so far unclear how close other states follow the conceptual model set forth or if other actors have developed a significantly different approach to covert action. This study has focused exclusively on the use of covert action by nation-states, bypassing those cases of covert operations executed by networks and non-states actors. A closer look at covert actions by non-states could yield insights not yet realized. The impact of cyber technology on the covert system can also be further studied. Cyber will likely have a revolutionary impact on inter-state relations and focusing on cyber integration into the existing covert structure could advance understanding into how this new technology could better support foreign policy. Finally, a closer look at the emerging use of covert action by organizations outside the CIA could help highlight areas of overlap, redundancy and possible integration.

This thesis was only the starting point of a systems approach to covert action. While it provided useful insights by synchronizing and integrating previous approaches into a comprehensive model, there is still much room for additional study.

G. CONCLUSION

As nation-states continue to address varied threats to their national security, covert action will likely continue to be integrated into their respective foreign policies. This thesis aimed to provide a fresh perspective—the systems approach—when considering covert activities in response to security concerns. By helping policymakers become more aware of the complexities of the covert action system and encouraging them to expand their thinking from isolated events to holistic structures, this powerful tool of statecraft may be better applied against, and with greater effects upon, those who pose threats to peace and security.

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