



To Mock a Killingbird

The CIA owns everyone of any significance in the major media.

Former CIA Director William Colby

ASK AN AVERAGE AMERICAN WHAT they know about **Operation Mockingbird**, and you will likely be met with a blank stare.

Ironically, this could be seen as a sign of the project's success: Mockingbird was the code name for a \$1 billion covert CIA program which spread anti-Communist propaganda via U.S. media outlets throughout the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s.

An estimated 3,000 CIA operatives, 400 journalists and 25 news organizations participated in the operation, including *CBS*, *Time/Life*, *Newsweek*, and most notably, the venerable *New York Times*. According to whistle-blowers, virtually every story they ran was controlled by the CIA, before the scheme was exposed in the early 1970s.

It would be tempting to write off the CIA as the cuckoo's nest of the spy world, a secret, inflated bureaucracy hampered by lack of oversight and a staff of overpaid spooks with too much time on their hands.

After all, the agency was responsible for such feather-brained schemes as **Project Bluebird**—a series of experiments in 1951 utilizing LSD, hypnosis, and psychological warfare on its own agents, and **Operation Mongoose**—a 1961 plan to assassinate Fidel Castro by, among hundreds of other methods, poisoning his personal cigar stash.

Lest the CIA take its odd preference for naming its operations after birds too far, how about a program utilizing their age-old nemesis?...**Acoustic Kitty** was a \$20 million plan in 1967 to release housecats with microphones implanted in their tails to collect intelligence outside the Russian embassy.

(Fortunately for the cats, the operation was abandoned after the first hapless feline snoop deployed was promptly run over by a taxi.)

Avian absurdities aside, a more thorough, bird's-eye perspective of the CIA reveals a much less comical picture: a landscape of routine kidnappings, torture, and murder—often including training and equipping 'death squads' to crack down on the traditional enemies of dictators and Big Business: peasants, labor unions, political opponents, and advocates of democracy.

Although created in 1947 by President Truman, the CIA had its golden age under his successor, Dwight D. Eisenhower. A rabid anti-communist, 'Ike' relied on covert action to avoid having to take public responsibility for controversial interventions.

The CIA's first major 'success' was a joint effort with Britain's spy agency MI6 to ouster Iran's prime minister, Mohammed Mossadeq, after he had the audacity to nationalize Iran's oil industry in 1951. In the wake of the resulting coup, the Shah of Iran established dictatorial control over the country, jailing thousands of dissidents and setting up a secret police force.

Following its success in Iran, the CIA took to interfering in other foreign countries like a duck to water, helping to overthrow populist, democratically elected regimes in at least twenty foreign countries, ranging from Guatemala in 1954 to Haiti in 1990.

Many of the CIA's interventions had repercussions far beyond the boundaries of the targeted countries: Years of failed CIA attempts to prop up its puppet regime in South Vietnam led to the Vietnam War, during which the CIA's **Phoenix Program** (birds again!) kidnapped, tortured and murdered at least 20,000 civilians suspected of having contacts with the Viet Cong.

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the CIA secretly trained the rebel faction known as the Mujahideen, and armed them with sophisticated weapons. The program would grow into the biggest CIA operation of all time, both in terms of cost (\$6 billion) and personnel involved.

But the scheme came back to haunt the U.S. when Mujahideen veterans and orphaned children were radicalized, forming the backbone of Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. (Much of the money spent simply wound up in private bank accounts, feathering the nests of politicians and co-conspirators.)

Even some of the CIA's seemingly benign bird-brained ideas have ultimately had dire consequences. Project Bluebird led directly to **Project MKUltra**, the infamous series of mind control experiments run from the 1950s through the 1970s, intended to determine if unwitting subjects could be made to conduct assassinations. (The brainwashing technique was the basis for the bestselling 1959 novel and later film, *The Manchurian Candidate*.)

Operation Mongoose was an outgrowth of JFK's infamous Bay of Pigs invasion in 1960 and a precursor to **Operation Northwoods**, a series of proposed 'false flag' incidents intended to justify a U.S. invasion of Cuba. Both failed CIA schemes played a significant role in antagonizing Castro and ultimately bringing the world to the brink of nuclear war during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

In 1987, an organization composed of dissenting former CIA agents estimated that at least *six million* people had died as a result of CIA covert operations, a human tragedy that one former State Department official called an 'American Holocaust.' But like many similar attempts to rein in the power of the CIA, such revelations have thus far run like water off a duck's back. ■