SECRET INTELLIGENCE, COVERT ACTION AND CLANDESTINE DIPLOMACY

LEN SCOTT

‘The essential skill of a secret service is to get things done secretly and deniably.’

(John Bruce Lockhart, former Deputy Chief of SIS)\(^1\)

Much contemporary study of intelligence concerns how knowledge is acquired, generated and used. This article provides a different focus that treats secrecy, rather than knowledge, as an organising theme. Instead of scrutinising the process of gathering, analysing and exploiting intelligence, it examines other activities of secret intelligence services, often termed covert action. This broader framework draws upon both pre-modern ‘Secret Service’ activities that predated modern intelligence organisations,\(^2\) as well as many Cold War studies. It resonates with the perspective of Richard Aldrich that secret service activity includes ‘operations to influence the world by unseen means – the hidden hand’.\(^3\) Exploration of secret intervention illuminates important themes and issues in the study of intelligence, and identifies challenges and opportunities for enquiry, particularly in the context of the British experience. One further aspect is examined and developed – the role of secret intelligence services in conducting clandestine diplomacy, a neglected yet intriguing dimension that also provides insights into the study of intelligence.

Many intelligence services perform tasks other than gathering secret intelligence. Conversely, intelligence activities are conducted by organisations other than secret intelligence services. The relationship between organisation and function varies over time and place. In wartime Britain, for example, the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) conducted espionage and the Special Operations Executive (SOE) was responsible for special operations.\(^4\) While the CIA conducted much US Cold War propaganda, in Britain the
Information Research Department was part of the Foreign Office. In the United States, covert paramilitary action has long been undertaken by the Department of Defense, while there is a veritable plethora of US government agencies with intelligence gathering capabilities. And in the wake of September 11 the CIA has expanded its paramilitary capabilities (evident in Afghanistan) while the Pentagon appears committed to developing Special Forces able to conduct their own intelligence gathering. Notwithstanding the fact that different tasks are performed by different organisations, since 1945 Western intelligence services have nevertheless used the same organisations and the same groups of people to perform different tasks.

For many observers, and especially for many critics, secret intervention is synonymous with intelligence and loomed large in Cold War debates about the legitimacy and morality of intelligence organisations and their activities. Since September 11, Washington’s agenda for taking the offensive to the United States’ enemies has rekindled such arguments. To exclude such activities from discussion about intelligence and intelligence services raises questions about the political agendas of those seeking to delineate and circumscribe the focus of enquiry. For many writers, for example, on British intelligence, special operations are integral to the study of the subject. But for others they are not. So, do those who marginalise or downplay covert action do so as part of an agenda to legitimise intelligence gathering? Do those who focus on covert action do so to undermine the legitimacy of intelligence (or the state in general or in particular)? Or are these unintended consequences reflecting unconscious biases? Or legitimate choices of emphasis and focus?

Among the obvious and critical questions about secret interventions are: how do we know about them? And how do we interpret and evaluate them? Many of the terms used – ‘covert action’, ‘special operation’, ‘special activities’ and ‘disruptive action’ are used interchangeably though there are also important terminological differences. The Soviet term ‘active measures’ (aktivnyye meropriatia) embraced overt and covert actions to exercise influence in foreign countries, whereas most other terms focus exclusively on the covert. Critics and sceptics often use the more generic description of ‘dirty tricks’.

The more prominent definitions of covert action are American, dating back to the celebrated 1948 National Security directive 10/2 which authorised the CIA to engage in:

- propaganda; economic warfare; preventive direct action, including sabotage, anti-sabotage, demolition and evacuation measures; subversion against hostile states, including assistance to underground resistance movements, guerrillas and refugee liberation groups, and
support of indigenous anti-Communist elements in threatened countries of the free world.  

More recent US government statements cover most of these activities though some of the language has altered (notably the demise of ‘subversion’). In US law covert action became defined 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 [government] will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly, but does not include ... traditional counter-intelligence ... diplomatic ... military ... [or] law enforcement activities.  

Whether phrases such as ‘regime change’ that have emerged in public debate over Iraq will enter the covert lexicon remains to be seen.

One commonly accepted aspect of these definitions is that they refer to actions abroad. In the United States this reflects the legal status of the US intelligence services. Elsewhere, the distinction between home and abroad may be less clear. Some governments practice at home what they undertake abroad. Oleg Kalugin has recounted how the KGB conducted active measures against one of its leading dissidents, Alexander Solzhenitsin, culminating in attempts to poison him. Various British government activities in Northern Ireland, for example, appear to fall within otherwise accepted definitions of covert action.

British terminology has moved from ‘special operations’ to ‘special political action’ to ‘disruptive action’. These semantic changes reflect broader shifts in policy. The ‘special political action’ of the 1950s, for example, was synonymous with intervention aimed at overthrowing governments and in some cases assassinating leaders. Since then, changes in the scope and nature of operations have reflected the priorities and perspectives of governments and of SIS itself. Although the Intelligence Services Act 1994 makes clear that SIS’s mandate is to engage in ‘other tasks’ beside espionage, the scope and nature of these other tasks is unclear. ‘Disruptive action’ is nowhere officially defined, though there are some official references to the term. What is involved is unclear from official references. It may be unwise to infer that disruptive activity is exclusively clandestine. Some activities might involve passing information to other states and agencies to enable them to act against arms dealers or terrorists, and would fall within the ambit of intelligence liaison. How far, and in what ways, actions are undertaken without knowledge or permission of the host nations or organisations are the more controversial questions. David Shayler, the former MI5 officer, has revealed or alleged that SIS supported groups
seeking to overthrow and assassinate the Libyan leader, Colonel Ghaddafi, in 1995/96, and what appears to be SIS documentation has been posted on the internet providing apparent corroboration. The SIS ‘whistleblower’, Richard Tomlinson, has indicated that SIS is required to ‘maintain a capability to plan and mount “Special Operations” of a quasimilitary nature’ which are ‘executed by specially trained officers and men from the three branches of the armed forces’. He also provides examples of disruptive action, discussed below. Lack of clarity about the term disruptive action reflects the determination of the British government to avoid disclosure of the activities involved.

Elizabeth Anderson has argued that ‘the specific subject of covert action as an element of intelligence has suffered a deficiency of serious study’; she notes a failure to generate the theoretical concepts to explain other instruments of foreign policy such as trade, force and diplomacy. Nevertheless, the American literature provides typologies that distinguish between political action, economic action, propaganda and paramilitary activities. The nature and scope of these activities differs across time, place and context. How far these categories reflect the distillation of American experience and reflection is one question to ask. Yet whatever the theory and practice in other states, American debates about whether covert action should be viewed as a routine instrument of statecraft, a weapon of last resort or the subversion of democratic values will presumably be familiar to many of those contemplating such options.

KNOWLEDGE AND TRUST

This leads to the second general consideration: the problem of knowledge. For scholars and citizens alike, knowledge of secret intervention is crucial to understanding and evaluation. How far this is a problem is a matter of debate. Stephen Dorril, for example, has argued that in the British context there is far more in the public domain than anyone has realised and that ‘the reality [is] that secrets are increasingly difficult to protect, and it would not be a great exaggeration to suggest that there are no real secrets any more’. In contrast, Roy Godson argued in 1995 that our knowledge of covert action (and counter-intelligence) is ‘sketchy at best’, and this in a book that drew heavily upon both US and pre-Cold War historiography. Since Godson published that view there have been significant developments in the declassification of US archival records on Cold War covert actions. And since September 11 we have learned of specific covert actions including those planned and authorised by the Clinton administration. How far this information was provided to protect Clinton administration officials and/or CIA officers against accusations that they were supine in the face of the
terrorist threat is one question. Such revelations also reflect a Washington culture where the willingness of individuals and agencies to provide information to journalists presents incentives for others to preserve or enhance their individual and organisational reputations.

We know about covert action in the same ways that we learn about other intelligence activities – through authorised and unauthorised disclosure: memoirs, journalism, defectors, archives, whistle-blowers and judicial investigation. The veracity and integrity of these sources may differ, though there are generic questions to be posed about the agendas and intentions of those who provide us with information about covert action, as about intelligence in general. How we assess what we are told reflects our values and assumptions. Our understanding of KGB active measures, for example, has been greatly informed by the revelations of defectors whose accounts have been sanctioned by the intelligence services with whom they worked. For critical commentators who believe official sources are by definition tainted sources, any public disclosure of an adversary’s activities is synonymous with disinformation and the manipulation of public opinion. Accounts written by retired Soviet intelligence officials raise different, though no less intriguing, questions about the veracity of the material disclosed. Pavel Sudoplatov’s memoir of his work for Stalin’s NKVD generated much controversy with its strongly disputed claims that leading atomic scientists on the Manhattan Project provided crucial intelligence to the Soviets. Yet the book contains material about active measures and assassinations conducted by Soviet intelligence during the Stalin era that has not been denounced.

The study of intelligence (as with the practice of intelligence) requires consideration of the motives and agendas of sources and how far they can be dissociated from the substance of what they provide. In some ways this goes to the heart of the study of the subject. On what basis, for example, do we believe or not believe Richard Tomlinson when he recounts that SIS engaged in assassination planning against the Serbian President, Slobodan Milosevic, that it endeavoured to disrupt the Iranian chemical warfare programme, and that it acted as an instrument of the CIA in defaming the UN Secretary-General, Dr Bhoutrous Bhoutrous Ghali? For some, the account of the whistleblower or the defector is inherently reliable. For others, the motives of betrayal and exposure cast doubt on reliability or judgement. Does Pavel Sudoplatov’s role in Stalin’s assassination policy, and the fact that he remained ‘a Stalinist with few regrets’, lend credence to his testimony or does it render his concern for the truth as incredible as his claims about Oppenheimer, Bohr, Fermi and Szilard? How far pre-existing assumptions inform how we assess individuals and their motives is important to consider. ‘If we trust the motive, we trust the man. Then we trust his material’, opines a British intelligence officer in John Le Carré’s The Russia House. Trust and
judgement are as essential to the academic enterprise as they are to the professional intelligence officer. And like the professional intelligence officer judgements on veracity require corroboration and evaluation of all available sources.

One interesting response to this problem has been collaboration between insiders and outsiders. Joint endeavours between journalists and former intelligence officers have provided a variety of intriguing texts and valuable accounts. Western academics have also helped pioneer exploitation of Soviet intelligence archives, most notably Fursenko and Naftali’s work (see below). In Britain the pattern of these collaborations ranges across various kinds of relationship. Gordon Brook-Shepherd was allowed access to SIS archival records for his study of Western intelligence and the Bolshevik revolution where *inter alia* he traced SIS involvement in the plot to overthrow and assassinate Lenin. Tom Bower completed a biography of Sir Dick White, begun by Andrew Boyle, which drew upon extensive recollections and testimony of the man who led both the Security Service and the Secret Intelligence Service, and which contains much material not only on Cold War but on colonial and post-colonial operations. Other writers have enjoyed more opaque relationships with officialdom while some have clearly been used by individuals to disseminate particular perspectives or grievances. More recently SIS enabled Christopher Andrew to collaborate with the KGB defectors Oleg Gordievsky and Vassili Mitrokhin in a new form of relationship, which yielded new public insights into KGB practices both in peacetime and in preparation for war.

One question is whether we know more about covert action than intelligence gathering and analysis. A second is whether we know more about certain kinds of covert actions than others – especially the more dramatic. Some covert operations have been easier to discover because they fail. We know about the targeting in 1985 of the Greenpeace protest ship, *Rainbow Warrior*, because the operation went wrong, and because officers of the French foreign intelligence service, the *Direction Generale de la Securite Exterieure*, were caught and tried by the New Zealand authorities. It can also be argued that by definition the most successful covert actions are those that no-one knows has ever been conducted: the analogy with the perfect crime. A different definition of success is that while knowledge of them may leak out (or may be impossible to conceal), the identity of those engaging in them remains secret. For many governments the concept of plausible deniability has been integral to the activity. So among the obvious questions: do we learn more about unsuccessful operations than successful ones? Among the more perplexing questions: when we think we are learning of secret intervention are we in fact the target of covert action and the recipient of disinformation or propaganda?
Understanding the limits of knowledge is important. If we know more about secret intervention than intelligence gathering we may draw distorted conclusions about the priorities of the organisations involved. Moreover, if our knowledge of the phenomenon is drawn from a particular period of history and politics and from particular states in that period, then how useful a guide is our knowledge for understanding the world we now inhabit? Much of our understanding of the phenomenon is drawn from particular phases of the Cold War. So do we make assumptions about how states behave on the basis of generalisations drawn from atypical examples? Most specifically do our examples and our categories of analysis reflect US assumptions and experiences? Notwithstanding the observations of Roy Godson, the study of covert action in the United States has generated a considerable and sophisticated literature based on extensive US experience, and a body of scholarship that notably extends to ethical debate about covert actions.\(^3\) Public and political accountability of covert action has also made a significant contribution to that knowledge and understanding, though it underlines a distinctive (and hitherto frequently unique) US approach to public knowledge of the secret world.

One reason for exploring these questions is that these activities loom large in public perceptions of intelligence services, both nationally and internationally. The image of the CIA, for example, has been coloured at home and especially abroad by what has been learned of its activities in places like Cuba, Guatemala, Iran and Chile.\(^3\) Whether these activities buttressed democracy in the Cold War or undermined the moral authority of the United States in the ‘Third World’ are essential questions for scholars interested in the role of intelligence in world politics.\(^3\)

**INTERPRETATION**

The interpretation and evaluation of covert action should extend beyond utility into ethics and legality. Many of the ethical, legal and political debates on overt intervention do not give consideration to covert action. Such debates are clearly hampered by secrecy. Yet concepts of ‘ethical statecraft’ and debates about Britain’s ‘ethical foreign policy’ have largely ignored covert action, and indeed intelligence in general. Since the end of the Cold War and since September 11 significant changes in world politics have been apparent. In the last decade, for example, the belief that humanitarian intervention in other states was legally and ethically synonymous with aggression has altered. Ideas of humanitarian intervention, though contested, have underpinned military action in Kosovo. American embrace of pre-emptive (or rather preventive) action to forestall attacks on the United States and its allies, portends radical changes in world order. Predicting future trends is
inherently problematic, but it is reasonable to speculate that public and academic debate will engage with the normative questions about covert action in the ‘war against terror’ in more robust and systematic fashion.

Locating secret intervention within broader debates in international politics should not obscure critical questions about whether they work. Assessing their effectiveness and their consequences are crucial. As with diplomacy and military action such assessments cannot be fully evaluated by examining only the actions of the state that undertakes them. Understanding foreign policy making is a necessary but not sufficient part of understanding international politics. This has been apparent in recent historiography of the Cold War that has drawn from the archives and from the scholarship of former adversaries, and provided new insights and perspectives. The international history of secret intervention is surely part of this enterprise and of how mutual perceptions and misperceptions informed the Cold War struggle. This is an area that parallels the nuclear history of the Cold War where Soviet archival disclosures raise fascinating and disturbing questions about Soviet threat perceptions.

Until recently, these aspects have been under-explored. While John Gaddis’ acclaimed 1997 study of the new historiography of the Cold War provides evidence of how Soviet covert action impacted on Western approaches, there is little on how Soviet leaders interpreted Western secret intervention. Other accounts drawn from Soviet archival sources have begun to emphasise the importance of Soviet perceptions and misperceptions. Vojtech Mastny has explored how Western covert action in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union exerted a significant and undue influence on Stalin’s paranoia. Richard Aldrich has raised the controversial question of whether Western covert action in eastern Europe was specifically designed to provoke Soviet repression in order to destabilise and weaken Soviet hegemony. Recent interpretations of the nature and role of US covert action have indeed provoked radical revisions of the Cold War itself.

Such perspectives should not obscure the fact that although the Cold War provided context and pretext for many secret interventions since 1945, it is misleading to view all such action in these terms. There is a risk that the literature repeats the mistakes of Western decision makers in viewing post-colonial struggles through the lens of East–West conflict. As Ludo de Witte argues persuasively in his study of the Belgian intelligence service’s involvement in the assassination of the Congolese leader, Patrice Lumumba, the events of 1960–61 should be viewed primarily as a struggle against colonialism. Other studies and critiques have focused on secret interventions in post-colonial contexts. Yet while the end of the Cold War generated new opportunities to study Cold War intelligence conflicts, post-colonial politics provide very differing contexts and challenges to understanding.
In 1995 Roy Godson observed that ‘for many Americans, covert action, in the absence of clear and present danger, is a controversial proposition at best’. Perceptions of the immediacy and presence of danger have changed since September 11. The impact on long-term attitudes, both in the United States and Europe, is difficult to assess and will in part be informed by other events and revelations, not least war on Iraq. It is a reasonable assumption that American use of particular kinds of covert activity will be more robust and intrusive, through which organs of the US government will be intruding and where remains to be seen (assuming it can be seen). How these actions are viewed in Europe and elsewhere also remains to be seen. At the height of the Cold War covert action was justified as a quiet option, to be used where diplomacy was insufficient and force was inappropriate. If the United States and its allies consider themselves in semi-perpetual war against ‘terrorism’, and preventive action in counter-proliferation and counter-terrorism (in overt and covert policy) becomes increasingly prevalent, the implications for covert action will be profound.

**CLANDESTINE DIPLOMACY**

Diplomacy has been defined as the ‘process of dialogue and negotiation by which states in a system conduct their relations and pursue their purposes by means short of war’. It is also a policy option that can be used as an alternative to, or in support of, other approaches, such as military force. The use of secret services to conduct diplomacy was characteristic of pre-modern inter-state relations, when diplomacy, covert action and intelligence gathering were often conducted by the same people. The creation of modern intelligence bureaucracies led to a greater separation of functions, though not as clearly as might seem. Although clandestine diplomacy is a neglected area of enquiry, there are a number of examples of where intelligence services are used to engage in secret and deniable discussions with adversaries. One question is whether clandestine diplomacy can be conceived as a form of covert action intended to influence an adversary or whether it is distinct from covert action because it involves conscious co-operation with the adversary and potential disclosure of the officers involved.

Conceptually, there may be an overlap between diplomacy and liaison where relations between the actors are in part antagonistic – as in information exchanges between political adversaries in the ‘war against terror’ (for example, between the Americans and Syrians). There may also be overlap between conducting clandestine diplomacy and gathering intelligence. In 1945 the American Office of Strategic Service (OSS) identification of Japanese ‘peace feelers’ assisted its analysis that war against Japan could be terminated by negotiation. And there may also be overlap with secret
intervention: in 1983 the CIA apparently co-operated with the Iranian secret service by providing details of Soviet agents in the Tudeh party in Iran. One further and important distinction needs to be drawn, between intelligence services acting as diplomatic conduits, and intelligence services acting as quasi-independent foreign policy makers. While it may be difficult to distinguish between the two, the use of intelligence services by governments to conduct negotiations is distinct from where intelligence services have their own agendas and priorities. Various accounts of CIA and SIS activity in the Middle East in the 1950s, for example, suggest that both organisations were pursuing their own foreign policies at variance with their foreign ministry colleagues.

Examples of the clandestine diplomatic role of secret intelligence services that have emerged in recent years include the role of British intelligence in the Northern Ireland peace process, the role of Israeli intelligence services, including Mossad, in Middle East diplomacy and peace building, the CIA’s relations with the Palestine Liberation Organisation and SIS’s relations with Hamas. These examples illustrate that the activity concerns not just relations between states, but between states and non-state actors, in particular between states and insurgent or ‘terrorist’ groups. The value of clandestine diplomacy is that it is more readily deniable, and this is particularly significant where the adversary is engaged in armed attacks and/or terrorist activities. One difference between dialogue with states and with a paramilitary group is the greater potential of physical risk to the participants. Professionally, using intelligence officers to facilitate and conduct inter-state diplomacy risks blowing their cover. Paramilitary groups may harbour factions opposed to negotiation, and exposure of the intelligence officer may risk their safety. The paramilitary negotiator may well have parallel concerns.

The role of intelligence services can be to promote the cause of dialogue and reconciliation, both national and international. Depending upon our political assumptions and values, many would conclude that this role is intrinsically worthwhile, although of course, the intelligence service is but an instrument of a political will to engage in dialogue. For those who seek to justify the world of intelligence to the political world, clandestine diplomacy provides some fertile material. For those who wish to explore the ethical dimension of intelligence this is an interesting and neglected dimension. For those who seek to study intelligence, clandestine diplomacy is not only intrinsically interesting, but also a useful way of further exploring problems and challenges in studying the subject.

From the perspective of the study of intelligence, clandestine diplomacy illustrates one of the basic questions and basic problems. How do we know about things? Who is telling us? For what reason? Clandestine diplomacy involves often highly sensitive contacts and exchanges whose disclosure may
be intended as foreclosure on dialogue, and where the provenance of our knowledge is a calculation of a protagonist. Secret contacts may be scuppered by public awareness. After disclosure in a Lebanese newspaper of clandestine US negotiations to secure the release of US hostages in the Lebanon in the 1980s that dialogue came to an end as the Iran-Contra fiasco unravelled. Two examples of clandestine diplomacy are discussed below which illustrate the activity and issues in studying the subject. One involves diplomacy between states informed by archival disclosure as well as personal recollection. The other is between a state and a non-state actor based on testimony from the protagonists.

THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

In studying clandestine diplomacy it is rare to have details from both sides, and even rarer to have that in documentary form. The study of the Cuban missile crisis provides several examples of intelligence officers being used to undertake clandestine diplomacy. It provides material for exploring the problems of understanding the role of intelligence services, and moreover it provides opportunities to study how clandestine diplomacy was integrated into foreign policy making and crisis management.

Three examples have emerged of intelligence officers acting in diplomatic roles between adversaries in 1962: Georgi Bolshakov (GRU) and Aleksandr Feklisov (KGB) in Washington, and Yevgeny Ivanov (GRU) in London. There are also examples of intelligence officers working in co-operative political relationships: Aleksandr Alekseev (KGB) in Havana, Chet Cooper (CIA) in London, Sherman Kent (CIA) in Paris, William Tidwell (CIA) in Ottawa and Jack Smith (CIA) in Bonn.51 Alekseev enjoyed the confidence of the Cuban leadership as well as that of Nikita Khrushchev, who recalled him to Moscow to consult on the missile deployment, and promoted him to ambassador. Chester Cooper conveyed the photographic evidence of the Soviet missile deployments to London, and helped brief Prime Minister Macmillan. Sherman Kent accompanied Dean Acheson in briefing General De Gaulle and the North Atlantic Council; William Tidwell briefed Prime Minister Diefenbaker and Jack Smith briefed Konrad Adenauer.

The role of Bolshakov and Feklisov in Washington has generated a particularly fascinating literature. Most significantly, this draws upon Soviet sources and in particular Soviet archival sources, and illustrates the role of secret intelligence in the conduct of Soviet–US diplomacy, as well as problems of both conducting and studying that role.52 In the case of Ivanov, although we have British Foreign Office documentation and Lord Denning’s report into the Profumo Affair, the only Soviet source is Ivanov’s memoir, written in retirement, unaided by access to or corroboration from archives.
With both Feklisov and Bolshakov, however, we have US and Soviet archival sources, as well as memoirs and personal testimony.

Before access was gained to Soviet sources, it was known that Bolshakov, working under cover as a TASS correspondent, formed a secret back-channel of communication between Kennedy and Khrushchev. This was routed through the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy, with whom he held over 50 meetings in 1961 and 1962. Part of the historical interest of this was that Bolshakov was used by Khrushchev to reassure Kennedy about Soviet intentions in Cuba, and to deceive the US President about the secret deployment of Soviet nuclear missiles. Fursenko and Naftali have now provided evidence of the role of Bolshakov both before and during the missiles crisis. They argue that Bolshakov ‘shaped the Kremlin’s understanding of the US government’.

Contrary to previous understanding, Bolshakov was not immediately ‘discontinued’ when Kennedy learned of the missiles, but played an intriguing part in crisis diplomacy. Yet, once the missiles were discovered in Cuba his role in Soviet deception was apparent. Like other Soviet officials, including Ambassador Dobrynin in Washington, he was unaware of the truth. Another probable example of deception concerns Yevgeny Ivanov, a fellow GRU officer, who later in the week admitted to the British that the Soviets had missile deployments in Cuba, but insisted that they only had the range to strike Florida but not Washington. The nature and provenance of this disinformation (or misinformation) remains unclear. Indeed the provenance of Ivanov’s mission is not yet fully clear. Ivanov approached the British government to encourage Macmillan to pursue an international summit. Whether this was done on the instructions of Moscow rather than as an initiative of the London Residentura has yet to be confirmed.

Perhaps the most intriguing episode during the crisis involved the role of Aleksandr Feklisov (identified at the time and in the early literature as Aleksandr Fomin). Feklisov was the KGB Rezident in Washington. At the height of the crisis he contacted a US journalist, John Scali, who then conveyed to the State Department an outline deal to facilitate the withdrawal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba. The missiles were to be withdrawn under verifiable conditions in return for assurances that the United States would not invade Cuba. This outline deal was followed by the arrival of a personal letter from Khrushchev to Kennedy, which was seen within the White House to signal a willingness to find a negotiated solution. When Khrushchev then publicly communicated a different proposal involving ‘analogous’ US weapons in Turkey this greatly exercised the US government.

The revelations from the Soviet side provide fascinating vignettes into the workings of the KGB. It is clear that Feklisov was not acting under instruction from Moscow when he met Scali, and that the initiative was his.
Second, when the Americans responded and Feklisov reported back to Moscow, Fursenko and Naftali show how communications in Moscow worked – or rather failed to work. Feklisov’s crucial report remained on the desk of the Chairman of the KGB while events passed by.⁵⁹ So the Americans were mistaken in believing they were communicating with Khrushchev. The general point this underlines is that the mechanics and procedures of channels of communication are crucial. Without understanding how communication and decision-making processes work, neither the participant nor the student of clandestine diplomacy can properly understand events.

A second aspect concerns archival records. Both Scali’s and Feklisov’s contemporaneous records have now emerged, and both men have openly debated the episode. According to Feklisov it was the American who proposed the deal. According to Scali it was the Soviet official. So who to believe? The question assumes an additional interest given that the missile crisis provides examples of contending accounts of Americans and Soviets where the latter have proved reliable and the former deliberately misleading.⁶⁰ Yet, Scali had no reason at the time to misrepresent what he had been told. While there may have been confusion about what was said, Feklisov had good reason not to tell Moscow Centre that he had taken an initiative in Soviet foreign policy at a crucial moment in world history. In his memoir Feklisov admits that he did overreach his authority in threatening retaliation against Berlin in the event of an American attack on Cuba.⁶¹ Yet, he maintains that the initiative for the outline of the deal came from Scali.

It may be that further clarification will eventually become possible. The FBI encouraged Scali to meet Feklisov and it is conceivable that records exist of FBI surveillance of their meetings. In the meantime the episode is a reminder of the potential fallibility of archives as well as memory, and indeed provides what appears a good example of an intelligence document written for a purpose that hides part of the truth. And of course what this shows the intelligence historian, as indeed any historian, is that an archival record is a not a simple statement of truth – it is what someone wrote down at a particular time for a particular purpose.

The Scali–Feklisov back-channel now turns out not to have been a back-channel, and was not significant in the resolution of the crisis. When the US government needed to communicate urgently with Khrushchev to offer a secret assurance to withdraw the missiles from Turkey, it did not choose Soviet intelligence officers, but Ambassador Dobrynin. This is a further reminder that evaluating the importance of secret intelligence channels needs to be done within a broader framework of decision making and diplomacy. And it is also a reminder that that which is secret is not a priori more significant.
BRITISH INTELLIGENCE AND NORTHERN IRELAND

Just as the Reagan administration vowed never to negotiate with hostage takers, the Thatcher government made clear it would not talk to terrorists. Yet since the early 1970s the British intelligence services established and maintained lines of communication with the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) which eventually involved government ministers, and played a role in the political process in the 1970s and the 1990s, culminating in the Good Friday agreement.62 There were clear historical precedents in the 1920s for this kind of activity.63 In 1971, after Prime Minister Edward Heath involved SIS in Northern Ireland, lines of communication were opened with Sinn Fein/PIRA, leading to ministerial level dialogue with the PIRA in 1972. Contacts continued at a lower level and in the 1990s were reactivated following intelligence on potential reassessments within Sinn Fein/PIRA of political and military strategies.

Some details of the role of SIS (and later MI5) in the secret negotiations between the PIRA and the British government became known through disclosure and testimony, most interestingly on the British side. The role of two SIS officers, Frank Steele and Michael Oatley, has been described. Both Steele and Oatley have provided testimony of their activities and Michael Oatley has indeed appeared on camera speaking of his experience.64 This is of note as it was only in 1993 that a former senior SIS officer, Daphne Park, appeared on television with unprecedented authorisation from the Foreign Secretary (and when it was made clear that SIS engaged in disruptive activity).65 It is a reasonable assumption that Michael Oatley had similar dispensation. Moreover the former SIS officer wrote an article in the Sunday Times in 1999 in which he argued forcefully in support of the Republican leadership in the face of Unionist attacks on the PIRA’s failure to decommission its weapons.66

Why Frank Steele and Michael Oatley chose to make their views and their roles known, and how far this was sanctioned by SIS or by ministers are interesting questions. Frank Steele’s assertion that he ‘wanted to set the record straight’, while no doubt sincere, is hardly a sufficient explanation.67 Certainly Oatley appears to have been motivated by his personal view that the Sinn Fein leadership, in particular Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, were genuinely committed to political solutions and political processes. The fact that former SIS officers have provided such testimony without appearing to provoke official disapproval (or indeed prosecution), suggests that SIS and/ or the government do not see the disclosure of such information in the same way as other disclosures by security and intelligence officers. The revelation that British intelligence ‘talked to terrorists’ is potentially embarrassing and politically problematic in dealing with Unionist opinion. A more considered
response is that the British government understood that while it could thwart the PIRA’s objectives it could not defeat them by military means. Many in the military (and the Unionist community) believed that military victory was possible and that negotiating with the terrorists was counter-productive. Whichever is true, the role of SIS certainly provides contrast with the role of other security and intelligence agencies. As the Stevens Enquiry has concluded, elements of the RUC and the Army colluded with loyalist paramilitaries in murder and other crimes – findings that damage the credibility and legitimacy of the British security forces and indeed the British state in Northern Ireland.  

The role of SIS also raises aspects of broader interest in the study of intelligence, concerning the role of the individual and the nature of accountability. The essence of clandestine diplomacy is that the participants can deny that they are engaging in talks or negotiations. Michael Oatley operated under strict regulations governing contacts with the paramilitaries. Yet he and Frank Steele engaged creatively with these, and both appear to have enjoyed some latitude to pursue their own initiatives. The people who constitute the secret channel may be more than just a conduit, and their own initiative may be an important element. Just as Aleksandr Feklisov initiated what US officials took to be a back-channel of communication to Nikita Khrushchev, Michael Oatley appears to have developed contacts on his own initiative. His success in winning the trust of his adversaries reflected his skills and his understanding of those he dealt with. This raises intriguing questions about where plausible deniability ends and personal initiative begins.

Clandestine diplomacy is an activity undertaken by secret intelligence services where deniable communication between adversaries may be helpful, especially where the adversary is a paramilitary group with whom open political dialogue may be anathema for one or both sides. As an activity, clandestine diplomacy may overlap with gathering intelligence and/or conducting deception. One purpose may be to influence the behaviour of the adversary toward political as against military action, as appears the case in the actions of Aleksandr Feklisov and Michael Oatley. Yet clandestine diplomacy is distinct from secret intervention inasmuch as those involved may need to reveal their identity and risk exposure as intelligence officers. Critics of clandestine diplomacy (or specific cases of clandestine diplomacy) would argue that it undermines other approaches such as counter-insurgency or conventional diplomacy. Other examples of back-channel diplomacy such as in Soviet–US arms negotiations certainly afford examples of where circumvention of professional diplomatic expertise risked major policy errors. And Bolshakov’s role as a personal emissary of Khrushchev illustrates the risk of deception. Whether the risks of making
mistakes or being deceived are greater where an intelligence service is involved than where diplomats are used is an interesting question.

CONCLUSION

Clandestine diplomacy presupposes a willingness to talk to an adversary, even if talking may not lead to negotiation. There are clearly many political contexts in which the prospect of negotiation or agreement is illusory. To suggest that there might come a time when the US government could engage in clandestine diplomacy with al-Qaeda would seem beyond credulity and acceptability, although negotiations with allies or sponsors of the group or its associates may be another matter. And there are, of course, other states friendly to the United States who would have less political qualms about such contacts. Such reflections should be placed firmly in the context of the intelligence-led ‘war against terror’, where gathering and analysing secret intelligence is the overriding priority, and where covert action is given a new relevance and (arguably) a new legitimacy.

For critics, Western covert action undermined the legitimacy of Western (especially US) intelligence if not indeed Western (especially US) foreign policy during the Cold War. For their supporters they represented (usually) discreet forms of intervention that obviated more violent methods. The United States’ current mood shows little aversion to using force, and overt action is less constrained by domestic opposition or international restraint. US political and bureaucratic debates about covert action will for some time occur within a different context to much of the Cold War.

Cold War critics of covert action saw secret intervention not as instruments of statecraft but tools of political and economic self-interest designed to serve hegemonic, if not imperialist, aims. How far the events of September 11 and the search for Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction have strengthened the legitimacy of secret intelligence remains to be seen. Covert action may rest on a more secure domestic US consensus. Yet international support for a policy of pre-emptive or preventive attack is a different matter. Whether the war on Iraq reflects a sea change in the norms of intervention or the high tide of US belligerence remains to be seen. Covert action promises to deliver much of what it promised to deliver in the Cold War. As US action against Iraq demonstrated, the US government has limited interest in the views of others, even its allies. Yet is it conceivable that specific forms of covert action might be sanctioned in specific contexts, if not by the United Nations itself then by regional security alliances? Most probably not. Legitimising covert action risks weakening the legitimacy of the institutions of international society.

Such discussion reflects how far covert action can be viewed as an American phenomenon. Many questions – from the operational to the ethical
apply equally to other states. One consequence of September 11 is that much more has become known of intelligence activities and operations. Either the sophistication with which covert action is kept secret will need to increase. Or we may learn more about the phenomenon. The problems of learning about covert action (and clandestine diplomacy) will nevertheless persist, as the need to evaluate and judge them will undoubtedly grow.

NOTES

7. See, for example, Stephen Dorril, MI6: Fifty Years of Special Operations (London: Fourth Estate 2000) and Aldrich, Hidden Hand.
16. The Intelligence Services Act 1994, Chapter 13, section 7.1 states that the functions of SIS are: *(a)* to obtain and provide information relating to the actions or intentions of persons
outside the British Islands; and (b) to perform other tasks relating to the actions or intentions of such persons’. The legal formula is similar to the US legislation that created the CIA in 1947 that speaks of ‘other functions and duties’. Rudgers, ‘The Origins of Covert Action’, p. 249.

17. The 1998–1999 Intelligence and Security Committee Annual Report (Cm 4532) makes reference to the fact that British agencies ‘may be required to undertake disruptive action in response to specific tasking’ on the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, Cm 4532 para 58. I am grateful to Marc Davies for drawing my attention to this.

18. The document can be found at: www.cryptome.org/qadahfi-plot.htm.


22. Dorril, MI6, p. xiv.

23. Godson, Dirty Tricks, p. xii.

24. The pattern of declassification is not entirely uniform. Documents detailing CIA operations against Iran in the early 1950s have apparently been systematically destroyed. Craig Eisendrath (ed.), National Insecurity: US Intelligence after the Cold War (Washington: Center for International Policy 1999), p. 3.


31. Bower, Perfect English Spy.


33. For documentary sources of CIA covert action and accounts based on these see the National Security Archive website: www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/.

34. For recent criticisms of CIA covert action see Eisendrath, National Insecurity. For an excoriating attack on US policy see the views of former CIA analyst Melvin Goodman, ‘Espionage and Covert Action’, ibid., pp. 23–43. For a more general caustic critique of the CIA, see Rhodri Jeffrey-Jones, Cloak and Dollar: A History of American Secret Intelligence (London: Yale University Press 2002).


41. Godson, *Dirty Tricks*, p. 120.


43. Jim Risen and Tim Weiner, ‘CIA Sought Syrian Aid’, *New York Times*, 31 October 2001. The article also suggests a similar approach may have been made to Libyan intelligence.


45. Shulsky, *Silent Warfare*, pp. 90–1. Apparently 200 agents were killed as a result of this operation. A senior KGB officer who defected to the British supplied the information to the CIA.


50. Michael Smith uses the term ‘parallel diplomacy’ to describe this activity. *New Cloak*, p. 211.


52. See in particular, Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*.


56. Ibid., p. x.

57. Scott, *Macmillan, Kennedy*, p. 109. The medium-range ballistic missiles in Cuba had a range of 1,100 miles enabling them to strike Washington.


60. The testimony of Ambassador Dobrynin on the US offer to remove NATO nuclear missiles from Turkey proved truthful, in contrast to contemporary public testimony of Kennedy administration officials, and Robert Kennedy’s posthumously published account, as edited by Theodore Sorensen, *Thirteen Days* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1969).

61. For Feklisov’s account see Alexander Feklisov and Sergei Kostin, *The Man Behind the Rosenbergs: by the KGB Spymaster who was the Case Officer of Julius Rosenberg, and helped resolve the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Enigma Books 2001), pp. 362–402.


69. Oatley, transcript of ‘The Secret War’. 