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Why is President Obama still allowing covert operations in Cuba? It's just one failed disaster after another.

The idea of "democracy promotion" sells well in Washington -- it's practically untouchable. But yet another investigation into the covert action programs targeted against Cuba, published on Aug. 4 by the Associated Press, shows in vivid detail how amateur and feckless they are. Despite public statements about seeking a "new beginning" with Havana, U.S. President Barack Obama has continued -- even ramped up -- the clandestine activities on the island started by his predecessor, bringing the total resources wasted on the Cuba programs to well above a couple of hundred million dollars.

The effort has also cost us valuable prestige on the island and throughout Latin America, and Fidel Castro must have cracked a smile at it all as he celebrated his 88th birthday last week. It's time to stop these absurd programs and implement policies that will promote democracy, as they have in many countries.

The operations undertaken by former President George W. Bush and Obama have been both clandestine and covert, according to AP reports and the investigations the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) conducted when I was on its staff in 2010 to 2011. In fact, the State Department and USAID obsessively concealed the U.S. hand behind them, keeping that information from most of the people involved. Rather than "promoting democracy," their focus has been on regime change, and their objective has been to persuade Cubans to confront the Castro government to achieve it -- as if we knew better how they should build their future. This approach has created entrepreneurial dissidents eager for cash disbursements, and undercut the legitimate activists who see it as merely a continuation of a failed policy of embargoes, diplomatic isolation, and covert actions for the past five decades.

This new generation of covert operators does not hail from intelligence agencies, and they are not subject to the scrutiny imposed on real spooks. Nor do congressional oversight committees receive briefings of these operations necessary for appropriate oversight. When I was a senior advisor to SFRC chairman Sen. John Kerry, the State

Department and USAID told us during a meeting that was supposed to be a briefing that neither we (nor the chairman) were cleared to know what they were doing in Cuba. "People would die" was their excuse. The operations are planned, executed, and self-evaluated by the State Department, USAID, and their "partners" -- the corporations and government-subsidized NGOs receiving millions of taxpayer dollars a year.

In response to an AP report about the programs in April, Obama spokesmen claimed that they were not secret but merely "discreet," and not intended to incite political action in Cuba. (USAID defended itself with a list of eight facts about the program.) The information that inside sources have detailed for the AP and to the SFRC, however, make a mockery of such statements. USAID subcontractor Alan Gross, who's been in a Cuban hospital-prison for four years, was deploying sensitive government-controlled technology to create a secret communications system. He told CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer that his task was to set it up and "test to see if it works," apparently for future unspecified political operations. The administration claims still that Gross was merely helping the Jewish community across Cuba get Internet access, but Gross's remark to Blitzer and comments he's made to visitors in prison indicate that expanding Internet access was essentially an afterthought. Neither the supposed Jewish beneficiaries of his program, nor the "mules" -- as USAID called them in its emails -- smuggling gear to him in Cuba were aware of his real objective.

The AP revealed that the program, called Project ZunZuneo, linked unwitting Cubans -- unaware of the U.S. funding and objectives -- through cellphone networks with the purpose of encouraging them to engage in flash-mob protests and other anti-regime activities to "renegotiate the balance of power between the state and society," according to project documents. Other operations adopted a health care cover -- such as AIDS prevention -- to organize unsuspecting Cubans to undertake politically motivated activities. The White House spokesman who responded to the AP report in April apparently was never briefed on these operations.

More revelations are forthcoming, as people associated with the programs share their stories with news outlets. On the SFRC staff, we heard from professionals from USAID and the State Department -- privately, out of a fear of retribution -- about concerns over their agencies' embrace of the clandestine operations. Their stories were serious enough that Kerry, already leery of the initiatives that had resulted in Gross's arrest, put a hold on the programs for some months, allowing them to resume only after receiving a promise that they'd received a rigorous review. The State Department reneged on the promise, and the leaks have slowly been coming. Among the stories that whistleblowers shared confidentially with us back in 2010 were USAID's false-flag operations in Central America -- recently reported by the AP based on its own sources -- to recruit individuals, all unaware of the U.S. funding and regime-change objectives, to travel to Cuba to teach their counterparts how to organize politically. They were taught how to communicate through code and pass police interrogation.

We also learned from insiders that, under the rubric of "democracy promotion," some of USAID's "partners" were simply paying people \$50 cash -- a lot of money in Cuba -- to join anti-government protests, without knowing they were funded by the U.S. government. Others were distributing "informational products," including attacks on the Cuban Catholic Church, that were inconsistent with U.S. policy and values. And in 2011, a USAID grantee offered congressional staff bottles of fancy rum after a session boasting about how, in attempting to influence host governments' policies toward Cuba, he coordinated protests in Europe using U.S. tax dollars (without, incidentally, the knowledge of U.S. embassies in those countries).

The spy-vs.-spy tenor multiplies the harm that the operations represent to all involved. The secrecy of Gross's activity and his encrypted communications systems looked like an intelligence operation, making his defense many times harder and his Cuban prison term longer. Cash subsidies for political activities undermine participants' credibility and subject them to more hostile government treatment. Governments friendly to Washington feel betrayed when they are targeted by the political influence operations afoot in their capitals.

It's hard to judge how the Cuban people really feel about all this. According to sources within the human rights community, those who take our cash love it, and those who don't, don't. But most Cubans aren't as easily manipulated as our policy assumes they are, and a large number of them have got to resent that Cuban counterintelligence scores win after win against Washington. Cuban TV has shown videos, including a series that ran from March to April of 2011, of the State Department and USAID's agents doing their work, with voiceover commentary mocking the yanquis' arrogance in assuming they were undetected.

Cubans indeed want change, but it's clearer than ever that they want it to be evolutionary -- as seems to be happening now -- rather than revolutionary, destabilizing, and destructive. Raúl Castro's cautious opening of the economy has been tortuous, but paring back state enterprises and allowing space for certain private business is

indeed changing Cubans' relationship with the government in a way that they welcome. Many Cubans obviously wish they had the wealth of their brothers in Miami, but much of the rhetoric coming out of Miami for decades has also made them risk-averse. The regime-change programs, like the 60-year trade embargo, have not only failed to achieve their stated purposes; their approach -- heating the pressure-cooker to the point of exploding -- does not enjoy support beyond those directly benefiting from them.

If Obama wants to argue that covert operations to effect change in Cuba will work and are in the U.S. national interest, then he should make that case. And he should run the programs under a presidential finding -- as required by law -- and through the intelligence community, rather than policy agencies and their profit-making partners.

But democratic transitions in many countries show that there are vastly more effective ways of facilitating change -- through trade, tourism, and an array of social and cultural interactions. Before President George W. Bush shut them down in favor of his "Initiative for a New Cuba" in 2002 and his measures "hastening the end of the Cuban dictatorship" in 2004, the United States did a lot in Cuba that arguably helped people feel a sense of ownership of their future. Book exchanges, cultural and academic outreach, and visitor programs showed Cubans that we are more than an imperial ogre pushing just one, self-serving vision of their future. People-to-people contacts are a lot more effective than any covert action at getting information and resources to Cubans seeking a better life.

If President Obama's goal is to help Cubans have a better future, then he should stop the silliness, pull back the spies, get the U.S. government out of the way, and let the American people -- in business, academia, culture, even tourists -- take the lead.
