**When the CIA Interferes in Foreign Elections**

**A Modern-Day History of American Covert Action**

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U.S. President George W. Bush and CIA director George Tenet at ​the White House, December 2001.

Christopher Morris / VII / Redux

Russian President Vladimir Putin tends to respond to questions about his government’s interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election with a mix of denials and countercharges. It is the United States, he [**alleged**](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54688) in June 2017, that “all over the world is actively interfering in electoral campaigns in other countries.” The purpose of this claim is to excuse and distract from Russia’s actions, and in many places overseas, it’s working. From Kyiv to Brussels to London, government officials told me that they assume the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) frequently interferes in elections abroad.

This perception is understandable: for decades, it was true. The CIA’s first-ever covert action program was an operation to manipulate Italy’s 1948 election. American intelligence officers spread incendiary propaganda, bankrolled their preferred candidate, and orchestrated grassroots initiatives—all to advantage Italy’s centrist forces over their leftist competitors. After the Italian Communist Party lost, the 1948 operation became “a template,” David Robarge, the CIA’s chief internal historian, told me, for what the agency then did in “many, many countries” in competition with its Soviet counterpart, the KGB. From Chile and Guyana to El Salvador and Japan, the CIA and the KGB targeted democratic elections across the globe. Some of those operations manipulated ballots directly; others manipulated public opinion; all were designed to influence election outcomes.

Then, the Cold War ended, and the opposing objectives of Moscow’s and Washington’s electoral operations—to spread or to contain communism—became obsolete. Since then, Russian intelligence has interfered in many foreign elections, not to advance an ideology but to promote divisive and authoritarian-minded candidates, sow chaos and confusion, and delegitimize the democratic model. But what of the CIA?

Over the past two years, I interviewed more than 130 officials about the century-long history of covert electoral interference, or concealed foreign efforts to manipulate democratic votes of succession. My interviewees included eight former CIA directors and many more CIA officers, as well as directors of national intelligence, secretaries of state, national security advisers, a KGB general, and a former U.S. president. I learned that in the twenty-first century, Washington’s senior-most national security officials have considered using the CIA to interfere in foreign elections at least twice. In one instance—in Serbia in 2000—debate turned into action, as the CIA spent millions of dollars working against the tyrant Slobodan Milosevic. In the other—in Iraq in 2005—the CIA stood down. In both instances, U.S. policymakers weighed the potential benefits of covert action against the perceived risks. These behind-the-scenes stories reveal why, contrary to Putin’s claims, Washington, unlike Moscow, has moved away from the practice of covert electoral interference.

**“THERE’S A DEATH THRESHOLD, AND MILOSEVIC CROSSED IT”**

The first case arrived in 2000, when Milosevic, the Yugoslav president, was competing for reelection in Serbia. Milosevic was many things: a Moscow-aligned Communist, a Serbian nationalist, and a grave abuser of human rights. In the mid-1990s, he had enabled a campaign of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A few years later, he did the same in Kosovo, as his soldiers systemically terrorized, murdered, and expelled ethnic Albanians. The severity of these atrocities prompted NATO, in 1999, to launch an air campaign against Milosevic’s forces and an international court to indict him as a war criminal. Leon Panetta, U.S. President Bill Clinton’s chief of staff from 1994 to 1997, told me, “Milosevic was viewed as a bad guy and influence and somebody that was going to turn that part of the world upside down if there weren’t steps taken to go after him.”

The 2000 election presented such an opportunity. “I don’t know that we publicly said that our goal was regime change,” said James O’Brien, then Clinton’s special envoy for the Balkans, but “we did not see Milosevic being able to lead a normal country.” From mid-1999 to late 2000, public and private U.S. organizations spent roughly $40 million on Serbian programs, supporting not just Milosevic’s opposition but also the independent media, civic organizations, and get-out-the-vote initiatives. Through this overt engagement, O’Brien explained, the United States aimed to level the playing field in an election that Milosevic was poised to manipulate.

As the State Department, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and U.S.-funded nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) influenced the Serbian election in the light, the CIA did the same in secret. John Sipher told me that between 1991 and 2014, when he was serving as a CIA operations officer, he knew of just one “successful” operation to interfere in an election: in Serbia in 2000. “There was a covert effort to try to support the opposition to Milosevic,” Sipher said, recalling that after Clinton notified select members of Congress, the CIA went to work “supporting and funding and providing help to specific opposition candidates—that was the main thing.”

Sipher, who became the CIA’s station chief in Serbia just after the election, explained that the agency funneled “certainly millions of dollars” into the anti-Milosevic campaign, mostly by meeting with key aides to Serbian opposition leaders outside their country’s borders and “providing them with cash” on the spot.

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In an interview, Clinton confirmed that he authorized the CIA to interfere in the 2000 election in favor of Milosevic’s opponents. “I didn’t have a problem with it,” he told me of the CIA’s covert action program, because Milosevic “was a stone-cold killer and had caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people.” Just as Cold War–era U.S. presidents believed they could strengthen foreign democracies by undermining communist candidates, Clinton believed he could strengthen Serbian democracy by working against Milosevic. “The guy was a war criminal,” Clinton told me. “I didn’t consider Milosevic to be a democracy candidate; I thought he was trying to get rid of democracy.”

In Serbia, the CIA’s focus was on influencing minds rather than altering ballots. “We did not rig the vote nor knowingly lie to the voters to get them to support the people we hoped to win,” Clinton explained. Instead, the CIA provided money and other types of assistance to the opposition campaign.

Congressional leaders knew about and backed this secret plan. Trent Lott, the Senate majority leader, recalled that when he was briefed on the CIA’s operation, he supported it wholeheartedly. “[Milosevic] was totally out of control,” Lott told me. “We weren’t gonna invade, but it was a mess, and we had to do something.” CIA officers, unlike other U.S. government officials, could operate undercover. “Because of the nature of the way we do business,” explained Douglas Wise, then a CIA operations officer based in the Balkans, “Serbia was a lot more penetrable than it was for people who were much more overt, shall we say.” The U.S. intelligence community’s involvement in the election was “substantial,” Wise continued, as Washington used “all the instruments of our national power to create an outcome that was pleasing for the United States.”

Milosevic speaks to a crowd in Montenegro, September 2000

Reuters

But would it be enough? As the election approached, Clinton worried that Milosevic would cheat his way to victory. “These elections are going to be important, but they probably won’t be fair,” he told Vladimir Putin, Russia’s new president, two and a half weeks before the vote, according to a recently declassified transcript of their conversation. “Milosevic is running behind in the polls, so he’ll probably steal it. It would be preferable for him to lose, but he’ll probably arrange not to.” (Putin, in response, complained about NATO’s intervention the previous year. “We weren’t consulted in the decision to bomb Yugoslavia,” he said. “That’s not fair.”)

U.S. democracy promotion organizations, sharing Clinton’s concerns, sought to ensure that Milosevic could not falsify the vote count. One U.S.-funded NGO [**trained**](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2000%20Annual%20Report.pdf) more than 15,000 activists to monitor polling places. The day of the election, opposition members tallied ballots alongside government officials. The state’s vote count suggested that Milosevic had a narrow lead. The parallel count, however, revealed the truth: he had lost overwhelmingly. Major protests erupted. Milosevic, unable to quell a popular revolution, was forced to resign.

The CIA’s hand remained hidden. Two decades later, now retired American intelligence officers expressed unexplained confidence that their work proved pivotal in defeating Milosevic. Sipher commented on the “success” of the CIA’s operation. Wise said that the United States made “a big difference” and that “a combination” of covert and overt tactics had produced “a positive outcome.” As with all covert operations to influence voters, though, the CIA could not assess its precise impact. “Measuring it is hard,” Sipher recognized. But he noted that Serbian government officials did credit the CIA for their victory behind closed doors. “Many of the key players who became senior figures in the follow-on government continued to meet with us and continued to tell us that it was our efforts that led to their success,” Sipher said, “in terms of helping them with everything, from advertising to financing to how they did things” during the campaign.

In interviews, more senior government officials grew uncomfortable at any mention of the CIA and Milosevic’s defeat. “I know stuff about that, but I’m not able to talk about it,” said John McLaughlin, who was the CIA’s deputy director in 2000. This discomfort made sense: CIA interference in the 2000 election was not representative of the agency’s post–Cold War operations. How often, after all, can a war criminal be ousted by ballot? “There seemed to be a higher comfort level not just in the intelligence part of the world but really just policy writ large that something had to be done in the Balkans,” said Steven Hall, a former CIA operations officer who was stationed in the region in 2000. For Washington, “electoral manipulation” had become “a tool of last resort,” Wise added, and the Serbian case was “the complete exception,” in part because of Milosevic’s atrocities and in part because of the “receptive,” “credible,” and “attractive” nature of the opposition. For such cases, Wise argued generally, “the ends justify the means . . . the risk is you maybe do something that is un-American in the eyes of some.” But the result is “the genocidal maniac is no longer in power.”

When I asked Clinton why covert action was merited in Serbia, he said simply, “There’s a death threshold, and Milosevic crossed it.”

**THE CIA IS SIDELINED**

In 2004, U.S. President George W. Bush was on the verge of authorizing another such operation. The story unfolded in the White House Situation Room, where, in the summer and fall, national security officials weighed a familiar proposal: for the CIA to engage in covert electoral interference. This time, the target would be Iraq.

In March 2003, the United States had invaded Iraq to remove Saddam Hussein, the country’s longtime dictator, and seize weapons of mass destruction that he allegedly possessed. Hussein’s government fell within weeks, but no such weapons were found. Struggling to justify the war, Bush renewed his promise to transform Iraq’s political system. In late 2003, he [**declared**](https://www.ned.org/remarks-by-president-george-w-bush-at-the-20th-anniversary/) that “Iraqi democracy will succeed” and that its citizens would enjoy popular representation. “For [the U.S. government] at that time it was extremely important to have free and fair elections because that’s actually justifying the invasion,” said Arturo Muñoz, then a senior CIA operations officer. “As long as we didn’t find weapons of mass destruction, we were kind of desperate by then to justify ourselves, so at least we can create democracy in this place.” American democracy promotion organizations poured resources into Iraq. The International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute, in particular, launched substantial programs there, helping to produce voter-education materials, train party officials, and facilitate political debates and get-out-the-vote efforts.

The purpose of elections, though, is for voters to determine the direction of their state. In this sense, Bush had a problem: intelligence reports indicated that his preferred candidate, Ayad Allawi, would lose in Iraq’s first-ever parliamentary election, scheduled for January 2005.

The transition from containing Communism to promoting democracy made electoral interference a riskier proposition.

The U.S. intelligence community believed that Iran was manipulating the election in favor of Allawi’s opposition. “Of course, Iran was involved,” said McLaughlin, then the CIA’s deputy director. “Why wouldn’t they be? They’re right next door, they have the capability, and they were close to some of the leadership.” Wise was based in Iraq ahead of the election and a few years later, became the CIA’s station chief there. He described Iranian interference in the Iraqi election as wide-ranging: “We’re talking money, activists, threats, extortion, a paramilitary presence.”

Bush and his advisers debated whether to respond with covert action. John Negroponte, then the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, regularly participated in interagency teleconferences from Baghdad with a sole agenda item: CIA-led electoral interference. “We really thought about it hard,” said Negroponte, who told me that he had been “open to the possibility” in discussions with other senior administration officials.

Deliberations reached a serious enough stage that the White House briefed the congressional leadership on its planning. “[The] top line was that there’s an opportunity here to engage in a way that could provide much more of a guaranteed outcome,” recounted Tom Daschle, then the Senate minority leader. The officials I interviewed could not recall, or were unwilling to share, the operational details of the CIA’s plan, although Daschle told me that it included “a lot of activities that we thought were just untoward and inadvisable.”

For the CIA, interfering in Iraq’s election would be the latest rendition of an age-old operation, and by the fall of 2004, the agency was moving toward action. Allawi had come to expect covert help. “The initial attitude of the U.S. was to support moderate forces, financially and in the media,” [**he said in 2007**](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2007/08/its_too_late_to_counter_iran_i.html). Then, unexpectedly, this assistance “was brought to a halt,” Allawi said, “under the pretext that the U.S. does not want to interfere.”

Within the CIA, Congress, and the White House, an unlikely alliance of officials had united against covert electoral interference. The CIA’s representatives, Negroponte recalled, “least wanted to be involved” with this operation, since it could expose the agency to criticism if detected. McLaughlin, laughing, said that he “wouldn’t disagree” with Negroponte’s recollection. “We had, after all, invaded a country to make it democratic,” he said. “How hypocritical would it be then to subvert their election?” Speaking generally, Muñoz said, “If you’re going to ruin the elections, and it becomes known, and things frequently leak,” then once “word gets out that so-and-so won because the CIA did X, Y, and Z, then you’ve just wrecked the whole foreign policy adventure that you’ve embarked on.”

Congressional leaders also objected to the plan. For Daschle, the arguments against covert action were twofold. The first was a matter of optics: how “terrible it would look” if exposed. The second was normative. “It was no longer the Cold War,” he said. “Doing what we had been doing even twenty years earlier was just not appropriate; it wasn’t keeping with what our country should be all about.” Daschle recalled that Nancy Pelosi, his counterpart in the House of Representatives, was “very vocal” in opposing the plan. Pelosi [**reportedly**](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2007/08/its_too_late_to_counter_iran_i.html) found an ally in Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser. “As I heard the debate go on,” Negroponte said, “I realized, ‘It is just not worth it, and people do not want to do it,’ and we rejected it.”

Bush, in attempting to build a democracy, was unwilling to intervene covertly in that democracy’s elections. “You wanted to be pretty much clean and free when it came to interference in their electoral processes,” McLaughlin said. “I was involved in a lot of covert action planning and decisions, and you always have to ask yourself, ‘What are the unintended consequences of what we are proposing to do or thinking about doing?’”

The CIA’s plan was shelved. And come January 2005, Allawi’s coalition lost resoundingly in a contest marred by instability and terrorist attacks. A governing coalition with close ties to Tehran then took power.

**A NEW AGE**

How, then, has the role of the CIA changed in the post–Cold War period? As Russian intelligence again manipulates elections around the world, the CIA has charted the opposite course. The Serbian operation, according to various U.S. officials, was an “extraordinary” measure that reflected extraordinary circumstances. For the Iraqi election, which did not involve a ruler like Milosevic, U.S. policymakers judged that the risks of covert action were too high. In the years since, based on my interviews with the seven directors of the CIA from July 2004 to January 2017, as well as former directors of national intelligence and deputy CIA directors, the logic behind the Iraqi decision has become the norm. Contrary to Putin’s claims, Washington has all but abandoned the use of covert electoral interference.

In interviews about the CIA’s modern covert action programs, the United States’ former spy chiefs fall into two groups. The first insists that the agency no longer engages in covert electoral interference. David Petraeus, who led the CIA in 2011 and 2012, said he is “not aware . . . in more recent times” of such operations. John Brennan, the CIA’s director from 2013 to 2017, offered a more blanket assurance: “With President Obama and President Bush 43, there was never an effort to try to influence the outcome of a democratic election. We believed it was antithetical to the democratic process to do that.” The CIA once targeted foreign elections, he continued, “but over the course of the last 18 years or so, that has not been the case.”

The second group of officials does not speak in absolutes, suggesting instead that the CIA has moved away from, but not necessarily stopped, influencing elections overseas. “There wasn’t much of it. This is not something that intelligence does with anything like the sense of flexibility and freedom that it might have had in the early Cold War,” said McLaughlin, who, as the CIA’s number two in 2000, would have been involved with the Milosevic case. Since then, such operations have, at the very least, been raised at the highest levels. The Bush administration debated the Iraq scheme; the Obama administration weighed similar proposals. “It’s not like these ideas don’t resurface, but at least in [the Obama] administration they would get rejected,” said Tony Blinken, who served in senior national security positions for the entirety of Barack Obama’s presidency.

Former CIA director John Brennan testifying before the House Intelligence Committee in Washington, May 2017

Kevin Lamarque / Reuters

Of this second group, Leon Panetta, the CIA’s director from 2009 to 2011, was the most forthcoming. He said he never “got into” altering votes directly or spreading disinformation. But on rare occasions, his CIA did influence foreign media outlets ahead of elections in order to “change attitudes within the country.” The CIA’s method, Panetta went on, was to “acquire media within a country or within a region that could very well be used for being able to deliver” a specific message or work to “influence those that may own elements of the media to be able to cooperate, work with you in delivering that message.” As in Italy in 1948 or Serbia in 2000, the programs that Panetta described complemented overt propaganda campaigns. “Even though we were operating on a covert basis,” he said, “you had to make sure that the overt methods that were being used at least delivered the same message.” Even this type of operation presented risks. “There is no question it’s a gamble,” Panetta continued, which is why it was an option of last resort and why more aggressive tactics had been sidelined.

Every interview pointed to the same conclusion: for the CIA, covert electoral interference has become the exception rather than the rule. Either the agency no longer seeks to influence election outcomes, as Brennan and Petraeus asserted, or it does so in rare cases when, as with Milosevic, a tyrant can be ousted by ballot. The exact truth is unknown. But this general shift marks a dramatic departure from the Cold War, when the CIA was interfering in the elections of “many, many” countries. Of this evolution, Negroponte, a former director of national intelligence, said, “Frankly, political action of that kind is really part of the past. Iraq convinced me of that. It was just zero appetite for [electoral] intervention.”

Skeptics will insist that the United States’ intelligence chiefs are lying. But considering present-day realities, the skeptics may be the ones defying logic. It would be self-defeating for the CIA to manipulate foreign elections in all but the most exceptional of circumstances. One reason why concerns the end of the Cold War, which robbed the CIA of its long-running purpose: to counter the Soviet Union. Milosevic, for one, was a relic of a previous era. In September 2001, the CIA found a new focus in counterterrorism, which called for drone strikes and paramilitary operations, not electoral interference.

The United States’ post–Cold War leaders declared an era of liberal democracy defined by free and fair elections. This transition, from containing communism to promoting democracy, made covert electoral interference a riskier proposition. As Michael Hayden, a former CIA director, explained, “Meddling in an electoral process cuts across the grain of our own fundamental beliefs. You might want to do it to level the playing field, you might want to do it because of just the demands of national security, but it doesn’t feel right.” McLaughlin elaborated upon Washington’s evolving outlook. “If you are interfering in an election and are exposed as doing so,” he said, “you are a lot more hypocritical than you would have appeared in the Cold War, when that sort of thing tended to be excused as part of the cost of doing business.”

Hypocrisy, however, had not stopped the CIA before. And in recent years, as great-power competition has reemerged, the United States has had a stake in many foreign elections. Changes in high politics, then, only partly explain this shift in CIA activity. The rest of this story has to do with the spread of the Internet, which has exposed American elections to outside interference. Officials in Washington are reluctant to execute the type of operation to which their country has become so vulnerable. “If you’re in a glass house, don’t throw stones,” Petraeus said. “And we’re the biggest glass house when it comes to Internet connectivity.”

The digital age has also made it harder to maintain the secrecy of covert operations to manipulate foreign electorates. “It’s very difficult to keep that kind of activity from ultimately getting out,” Petraeus continued. And for Washington, getting caught matters. “If the United States were identified as having promoted disinformation or tampering with votes in an election, it would undermine our credibility and our policy efforts, given how inconsistent such actions would be with the values we promote, which are at the heart of our soft power,” said Avril Haines, a former deputy CIA director. “The same is not true for Russia.”

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