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## The U.S. Government Still Tries to Subvert Cuba

by Sheldon Richman

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When I saw the headline about the U.S. government and Cuba in my newspaper the other day, I thought I'd awoken in 1961. It was a *Twilight Zone* moment for sure: "U.S. program aimed to stir dissent in Cuba." I expected Rod Serling to welcome me to "another dimension."

But it was 2014. The AP news report said President Barack Obama and presumably then-secretary of state Hillary Clinton had plotted to incite a popular uprising — to "gin up opposition" — against the Cuban government by sending in young Latin Americans masquerading as tourists and health workers.

Did Obama, Clinton, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which oversaw the operation, learn nothing from the 1960s, when the Kennedy and Johnson administrations tried repeatedly to overthrow Cuban ruler Fidel Castro and even to assassinate him?

The AP investigation disclosed that the USAID agents had "little training in the dangers of clandestine operations — or how to evade one of the world's most sophisticated counter-

intelligence services.” Nevertheless, the AP continued, “their assignment was to recruit young Cubans to anti-government activism, which they did under the guise of civic programs, including an HIV prevention workshop.” The program, which lasted at least two years, began shortly after Obama’s inauguration.

The private firm Creative Associates International ran the operation. The undercover agents “posed as tourists, visited college campuses and used a ruse that could undermine USAID’s credibility in critical health work around the world: an HIV-prevention workshop one called the ‘perfect excuse’ to recruit political activists.”

This is reminiscent of the ruse used in the attempt to find Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, in which American agents posed as health personnel encouraging people to get vaccinated against hepatitis-B. In the wake of that operation, some expressed concern that future vaccination efforts in foreign countries could be met with public skepticism.

Covert American efforts to effect regime change, as occurred in Ukraine in February, also undermine genuine indigenous dissent against repressive governments by enabling rulers plausibly to accuse opposition groups of being foreign agents.

In the Cuban operation USAID agents had close calls with the government:

The AP investigation revealed an operation that often teetered on disaster. Cuban authorities questioned who was bankrolling the travelers. The young workers came dangerously close to blowing their mission to “identify potential social-change actors.” And there was no safety net for the inexperienced travelers, who were doing work that was explicitly illegal in Cuba.

The AP says that an instruction manual tried to assure the agents they were safe. “Although there is never total certainty,” the manual states, “trust that the authorities will not try to harm you physically, only frighten you. Remember that the Cuban government prefers to avoid negative media reports abroad, so a beaten foreigner is not convenient for them.”

The AP concludes, “There’s no evidence that the program advanced the mission to create a pro-democracy movement against the government of Raul Castro.”

That makes the U.S. government’s 53-year-long campaign for regime change in Cuba a perfect failure. Repeated efforts to spark an anti-Castro revolution or to kill the revolutionary-turned-dictator did nothing but strengthen the government’s power. The embargo that the U.S.

government imposed on Cuba in 1960, and which remains in force today, has given the Castros an excuse for the chronic hardship that Cubans suffer and has brought the people no closer to freedom.

News of the USAID operation reminds us of some of the U.S. government's most despicable acts during the Cold War. The government made eight attempts on Castro's life and other attempts on the lives of other Cuban leaders. In 1961 the CIA sent 1,500 Cuban exiles to invade Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. That operation, part of the Cuba Project (or Operation Mongoose), failed miserably and embarrassed President John F. Kennedy, who had taken office that year. The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff even contemplated having terrorists acts committed on U.S. soil in order to blame Castro and whip up war fever among Americans (Operation Northwoods). Thankfully, Kennedy vetoed that plan.

After all that, you'd think Obama and Clinton would have learned that the best way to liberate Cuba is for the United States to normalize relations, complete with free trade and free travel.