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A Historical Analysis of the United States' Use of Front Organizations from the American Revolutionary War to the Cold War

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ABSTRACT

As a crucial means of implementing covert action, front organizations have been flexibly employed by U.S. intelligence agencies, playing significant roles in psychological warfare, propaganda campaigns, and paramilitary operations. Surveying the U.S. utilization of front organizations in covert actions not only deepens the understanding of such entities but also allows for an assessment of their developmental trends in conjunction with contemporary characteristics. Employing historical research and documentary analysis, this paper traces the developmental trajectory of U.S. front organizations from the perspective of covert action, analyzing their trends against the backdrop of different eras. The United States has been able to utilize front organizations in various ways to support its covert operations.

KEYWORDS

front organizations, covert action, central intelligence agency (cia), intelligence agencies, united states

INTRODUCTION

Front organizations serve as an important instrument for U.S. intelligence agencies in covert action, closely linked to the U.S. understanding and practice of such operations, and influenced by covert action policy. The U.S. understanding of front organizations evolved over a long period. On February 14, 1967, the *New York Times* front-page headline read: "A Student Group Concedes It Took Funds from C.I.A." The article by reporter Neil Sheehan unleashed a series of revelations about secret operations of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), causing a public uproar. During the weeks following the *New York Times* article, there were new revelations in the media almost daily about independent American organizations and institutions that

had received money from the CIA for years via charitable foundations, unbeknownst to the government and Congress. This sparked academic research into CIA covert actions and front organizations. David Milne cited the Soviet example, noting that “Given sustenance – and guidance not always heeded – by Soviet Union, front organizations such as these proliferated and thrived in interwar America,” arguing that Soviet propagandists did not engage in propaganda directly but secretly through so-called ‘front organizations’ composed of ordinary citizens, ostensibly serving a purpose but actually funded and controlled by Moscow, highlighting how front organizations provide cover for hidden hands [1]. Javier Sutil Toledano defines a front organization as “a group set up to conceal the true identity or purpose of the person or group behind it, in order to create a false sense of legitimacy, independence, and public support[2].” The Collins Dictionary also defines a “front organization” as “an organization that acts as the face of another organization or group, for example a crime group or intelligence agency, in order to conceal the activities of that organization or group[3].” It can be seen that the US government is capable of utilizing layers of cover organizations to serve its own policies.

Compared to front organizations, covert action is a ‘third’ or ‘silent’ option that went beyond traditional diplomacy but fell short of precipitating war and the nuclear conflagration such an outcome implied[4]. Until World War II, U.S. intelligence work remained at a relatively nascent stage. The function of intelligence agencies focused more on intelligence activities, with no clear understanding of covert action. Similarly, front organizations existed in intelligence work before WWII, but their use was limited in scale and function. As the covert action function of intelligence agencies was not yet clearly defined, front organizations were initially used primarily for intelligence gathering. With the onset of the Cold War, the U.S. government established the Central Intelligence Agency and issued documents concerning covert action, making this function increasingly important for intelligence agencies. To contain the expansion of Soviet influence, U.S. intelligence agencies initiated long-term covert operations in regions such as Eastern Europe, South America, and Southeast Asia. In these numerous covert actions, front organizations, acting as cut-outs for intelligence agencies, saw their scale and functions expand with the deepening of covert operations, evolving through distinct phases over time: the Germination Stage (pre-1947), the Nascent Stage (1948-1949), the Maturation Stage (1950-1966), and the Stage of Constraints and Adaptation (1967-1991).

THE GERMINATION OF U.S. FRONT ORGANIZATIONS

Before establishing a sophisticated intelligence system to utilize front organizations, the United States relied on cooperative entities to serve its strategic interests. Initially, to conceal the identities of intelligence personnel,

the U.S. used cooperative organizations for intelligence activities. However, regarding covert action, the U.S. had little active awareness or initiative. This was closely related to the U.S. understanding of covert action. Before WWII, comprehensive national power and the national culture constrained the U.S. perception of covert action. Covert action aims to influence other countries through secret means. Before becoming a superpower, the core of U.S. national strategy was domestic development, with external strategic actions mainly concentrated in the Western Hemisphere and showing a regional and selective expansion characteristic. Although the U.S. implemented gunboat diplomacy and carried out multiple intervention activities in Latin America in the early 20th century, such external actions were mostly based on overt military and diplomatic means, which made the U.S. have no systematic demand for transnational covert influence expansion, and thus lack of in-depth understanding and large-scale practical experience in modern covert action in the sense of global intelligence operations.. Consequently, in its early history, the U.S. had almost no need to use front organizations for covert action, nor did it develop a professional, systematic understanding of them. Instead, it spontaneously used cooperative organizations for intelligence work. The presence of cooperative organizations can be seen in important historical processes such as the Revolutionary War and the Civil War. Overall, early U.S. practices with cooperative organizations and the post-WWII understanding of covert action provided favorable conditions for the subsequent use and development of U.S. front organizations. It is important to clarify that these external cooperative entities are not equivalent to the modern CIA front organizations defined in this paper, and their existence only constitutes the historical background for the U.S. to recognize the value of organizational cover in intelligence activities, laying a conceptual foundation for the subsequent development of its own front organizations.

First, the U.S. used cooperative organizations to alleviate material pressures. During the Revolutionary War, the U.S. cooperated with an entity to obtain material support. The earliest origin of U.S. use of a cooperative organization can be traced to Roderigue Hortalez and Company during the Revolutionary War, used to provide weaponry. Facing British blockade and superior military force, American forces had to resort to guerrilla warfare. This strategy placed high demands on intelligence work and severely tested U.S. supply capabilities for weapons and materials. As rebels, direct purchase of weapons on the open international market was unlikely. Under strong British diplomatic pressure, acquiring weapons through black markets or illegal channels became increasingly difficult. Moreover, Britain used its powerful navy to control most sea routes, intercepting ships and confiscating cargo to prevent the flow of weapons to America. To seek aid, Franklin and the Secret

Committee of Correspondence went to Paris to request French assistance. To secretly transport weapons to America, the French established Roderigue Hortalez and Company, a shell corporation created by Spain and France on July 4, 1776, to provide arms and financial assistance to American Revolutionaries in anticipation of the American Revolutionary War against Britain[5]. The company was orchestrated by the multifaceted French figure Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, known for his roles as a playwright, watchmaker, inventor, musician, politician, fugitive, spy, publisher, arms dealer, and revolutionary. Operating via a corporation, he secured weapons and materials to support the American war effort against Britain. Through cooperation with Hortalez & Company, the U.S. could obtain urgently needed weapons. However, Hortalez & Company was neither established nor controlled by the U.S.; it merely cooperated to provide material support. Through cooperation with companies, the United States has gradually accumulated experience in using organizational forms such as corporations to serve its strategic interests.

Second, the U.S. used cover identity to provide cover identities for spies. During the Civil War, the U.S. intelligence structure was loose and not an efficient, unified system. To help spies conceal their identities and conduct secret intelligence collection, spies often needed a social cover. Compared to intelligence work in other countries, the Civil War divided the nation into two opposing sides, fostering the development of intelligence activities. Choosing suitable social covers for spies became crucial. For example, to gather information on Southern railroads and steamboats, President Lincoln recruited William A. Lloyd as a personal intelligence agent. Prior to his government service, Lloyd had published railroad and steamboat schedules in the Southern states; with the outbreak of war, he could no longer travel into Confederate territory without official documentation. Reviewing Lloyd's passport application, Lincoln recognized an opportunity to utilize Lloyd's familiarity with and frequent access to the Confederacy. In exchange for Lloyd's agreement to serve as his confidential spy, Lincoln arranged for the issuance of a travel passport and a regular monthly stipend. In this capacity, Lloyd supplied the President with a range of military intelligence, including maps of Confederate encampments and fortifications, reports on supply depots in Richmond, and information concerning the forces under General Robert E. Lee. For a considerable period thereafter, the U.S. cooperated with organizations to provide cover identities for intelligence personnel, enabling the collection of needed intelligence. Examples of using organizational identities to cover spies were common during WWI and WWII. However, due to the immature intelligence system, the U.S. application of cooperative organizations during this period was superficial, lacking specialized intelligence agencies to manage and utilize them.

THE FIRST ATTEMPTS AT COVERT ACTION AND THE BIRTH OF FRONT ORGANIZATIONS

The U.S. understanding and practice of covert action promoted the birth of front organizations. After WWII, with reduced intelligence needs and controversies over intelligence agency methods, intelligence agencies faced many constraints. President Truman even disbanded the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). However, as Soviet influence grew in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, the U.S. urgently needed an organization capable of collecting intelligence globally and conducting secret activities to counter the USSR. Against this backdrop, the Central Intelligence Agency was formally established. The CIA's initial focus was building a global intelligence collection network, recruiting numerous spies and intelligence personnel to gather intelligence from various countries. With the rapid expansion of Soviet influence, mere intelligence collection could no longer meet the U.S. government's need to combat communism. The U.S. government gradually considered using covert action to contain Soviet influence and maintain America's superpower status. On September 25, 1947, CIA Counsel Lawrence Houston submitted a memorandum to the first CIA Director, Roscoe Hillenkoetter, offering an extended interpretation of the CIA's functions. Houston argued that, according to the National Security Act of 1947, activities such as black propaganda, secret infiltration, sabotage, support for guerrilla activities, and organizing resistance movements fell within the CIA's purview as policy tools to stop communist expansion. Therefore, the CIA needed to establish corresponding policy plans promptly[6]. In December of the same year, the U.S. National Security Council passed NSC 4-A, marking the beginning of emphasis on psychological warfare. In June 1948, the NSC passed NSC 10/2, recognizing that "the USSR, its satellites, and communist groups are conducting activities to discredit and defeat U.S. activities" and deciding to launch comprehensive covert actions to "supplement overt foreign activities." The document divided covert action into "political, economic, psychological, and paramilitary," emphasizing that their characteristic was that "the U.S. government could plausibly deny any responsibility[7]." Thereafter, the U.S. government extensively used covert action to support puppet forces and overthrow pro-Soviet regimes to achieve the goal of containing Soviet expansion. In these U.S. covert actions, front organizations, as extensions of U.S. intelligence agency influence, could disguise the true actors implementing covert actions and were naturally utilized by U.S. intelligence agencies, evolving through practice.

Currently, there is no consensus on the earliest event where the U.S. used a front organization for covert action. However, scholars generally agree that U.S. intervention in the 1948 Italian elections was the first covert action conducted after the formation of relevant policy documents. Internationally, scholar Kaeten Mistry

explicitly identifies the Italian general election of April 1948 as the CIA's first practice of secretly influencing another country[8] . James E. Miller similarly regards the Italian election as the first major secret political action undertaken by the United States[9] . Scholars such as D. Robert Worley[10] and William Blum[11] have also analyzed U.S. intervention in the 1948 Italian elections. Furthermore, chronologically, after the National Security Council approved NSC 4-A in December 1947, the Assistant Director for Special Operations, Galloway, established the "Special Procedures Group" in March 1948, specifically responsible for implementing covert propaganda operations against the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, which were put into practice during the Italian elections in April. Therefore, from the perspective of covert action, it is reasonable to treat the front organizations used in the 1948 U.S. covert action in Italy as the starting point for this study.

In December 1947, the U.S. issued NSC 4-A, stating: "The National Security Council, taking cognizance of the vicious psychological efforts of the USSR, its satellite countries and Communist groups to discredit and defeat the aims and activities of the United States and other western powers, has determined that, in the interests of world peace and U.S. national security, the foreign information activities of the U.S. Government must be supplemented by covert psychological operations." and "the National Security Council directs the Director of Central Intelligence to initiate and conduct, within the limit of available funds, covert psychological operations designed to counteract Soviet and Soviet-inspired activities which constitute a threat to world peace and security or are designed to discredit and defeat the United States in its endeavors to promote world peace and security[12]." After NSC 4-A was issued, the CIA began attempting covert actions through funding projects and influencing personnel selection. After WWII, Italy lay in ruins with severe damage to infrastructure and immense losses in housing, transportation, and industry. The domestic political situation was complex, with growing contradictions among the Christian Democrats (DC), the Italian Communist Party (PCI), and the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), among others. In this context, the highly centralized Soviet political-economic system held natural appeal for a nation in need of reconstruction, and communist ideology began to spread and develop in Italy. The growth of communist ideology caused concern in the Western camp. "U.S. planners believed that a communist takeover in Italy would spell serious trouble for all of Western Europe. A communist victory in a country which the United States had done so much to liberate and keep from sliding into economic disaster would deal a severe blow to U.S. prestige. A communist Italy would call into question America's ability to effectively counter the expansion of the Soviet Union and communism everywhere[13]." To contain the development of communism in Italy, the U.S. exploited Italy's complex political landscape and

sharp domestic contradictions, actively intervening in Italian affairs through various means to prevent the Italian Communist Party from winning the elections.

Covert action became an important tool for U.S. intervention in the Italian elections. “Covert action, U.S. policy-makers believed, was the surest way to avoid such a scenario. Clandestine activity had the advantage of being hidden from public scrutiny and, therefore, was beyond any accountability to the elected representatives of the American public[13].” Compared to military force, the U.S. relied more on its economic and cultural advantages to persuade Italian voters to oppose communism. “Secretary of State George Marshall threatened to withdraw aid under the European Recovery Program should Italy go communist. Thousands of Italian Americans were encouraged by the State Department to write to relatives and friends in the ‘old country’ to warn them of the consequences of a communist victory[13].” To contain communism and foster pro-American forces, U.S. intelligence agencies actively supported the pro-American Christian Democrats (DC) and employed various means for propaganda to shape a positive U.S. image and gain public support. During the elections, the U.S. provided substantial campaign funds to the Italian Christian Democrats. In the process of transferring funds from the U.S. to Italy, Common Cause Incorporated, a New York City-based organization ostensibly dedicated to addressing the challenges faced by urban immigrants and minorities, served in reality as a conduit for covert financial transfers. Enjoying tax-exempt status as a non-profit entity, it solicited donations from U.S. businesses, labor unions, and private citizens, channeling these funds clandestinely to Italy. The majority of this financial support was directed toward the financially strained Socialist Party led by Giuseppe Saragat[13]. Furthermore, following the 1948 Italian general election, the United States developed a potent narrative of successful intervention, firmly convinced that its covert actions had shifted the electoral outcome in favor of anti-communist forces. This entrenched belief legitimized and precipitated decades of subsequent Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) covert operations and political funding within Italy. Such activities escalated in response to the intensification of the Cold War and the concurrent growth in electoral strength and political influence of the Italian Communist Party[13]. This belief provided a basis for the CIA’s long-term covert funding and secret intervention activities in Italy in the following decades, which were further intensified with the escalation of the Cold War and the continuous growth of the political influence of the Italian Communist Party. (Figure 1).

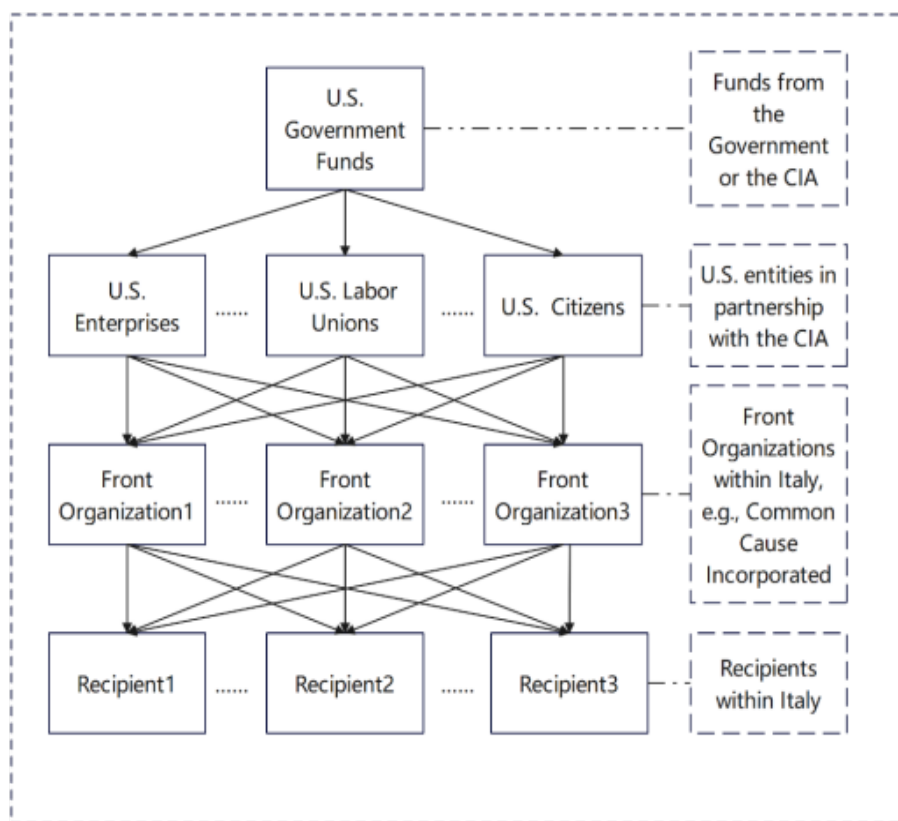


Figure 1. Funds are “legally” transferred from within the United States to Italy

THE FULL-FLEDGED UTILIZATION OF FRONT ORGANIZATIONS UNDER COVERT ACTION POLICY

The period from 1948 to 1965 marks the birth and full-fledged utilization stage of front organizations. This stage began with Project UMPIRE and ended with the large-scale media disclosure of CIA covert actions in 1966. After WWII, the U.S. and USSR began vying for influence globally, expanding their spheres of influence. Against this backdrop, U.S. covert action gradually peaked, and the U.S. began actively using front organizations to serve covert actions.

Early Use of Front Organizations (1948-1949)

Propaganda activities were an important means for the U.S. to conduct covert actions against the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries. The CIA funded numerous projects to counter the appeal of communism among intellectuals in Europe and developing nations. President Truman emphasized the importance of propaganda: “This is a struggle, above all else, for the minds of men. Propaganda is one of the most powerful weapons the Communists have in this struggle. Deceit, distortion and lies are systematically used by them as

a matter of deliberate policy. . . Communist propaganda is so false, so crude, so blatant that we wonder how men can be swayed by it. We forget that most of the people to whom it is directed do not have free access to accurate information. . . In many parts of the world . . . where men must choose between freedom and Communism, the true story is going untold. We cannot run the risk that nations may be lost to the cause of freedom because their people do not know the facts. . . We must use every means at our command, private as well as governmental, to get the truth to other peoples[14].” Guided by U.S. government propaganda war policy, the U.S. actively conducted extensive propaganda activities against the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, with radio broadcasting becoming the preferred method. In 1948, the CIA’s Special Procedures Group (SPG) had acquired from the U.S. military small short-wave transmitters for broadcasting to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe from the U.S. zone of Germany, under the code name “Project UMPIRE.” A small, 7.5-kilowatt, short-wave transmitter, nicknamed Barbara, was positioned on a flatbed truck near Lampertheim, Germany[15], aiming to broadcast radio programs to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe from the U.S. occupation zone in Germany. Against this backdrop, the CIA front organization “National Committee for Free Europe” was announced in May 1949. Its founders stated in a declaration: “Our program begins with the tangible fact of the presence here of these exiles and refugees. There is an American tradition of hospitality to political refugees. The promise which we gave at Yalta remains unredeemed. More than that we have a definite self-interest in helping to keep alive, and in full vigor, political leaders who share our view of life—leaders who have refused to knuckle under, men who have not hesitated to risk their lives for their democratic faith[16].” The uses of front organizations diversified. Operation Valuable, a covert paramilitary campaign mounted jointly by the United States and the United Kingdom with support from other Western Bloc allies during the Cold War, sought to subvert the communist government of Enver Hoxha in Albania. This initiative formed part of a wider Western strategy to roll back communist influence globally and establish a pro-Western leadership in the country. The operation employed a multi-domain approach, utilizing coordinated air, naval, and ground assets to achieve its strategic objectives. In Operation Valuable, the CIA funded the “National Committee for a Free Albania” (NCFA) and established the front organization Radio Free Albania for propaganda activities[17]. Subsequently, front organizations appeared in almost every U.S. covert action, including Operation BGFIEND targeting Albania and Operation AERODYNAMIC targeting Ukraine, where the U.S. used front organizations for propaganda.

CIA Use of Front Organizations in the Context of the Korean War (1950-1952)

In April 1950, the U.S. issued NSC-68, declaring: "A continuation of present trends would result in a serious decline in the strength of the free world relative to the Soviet Union and its satellites. This unfavorable trend arises from the inadequacy of current programs and plans rather than from any error in our objectives and aims. These trends lead in the direction of isolation, not by deliberate decision but by lack of the necessary basis for a vigorous initiative in the conflict with the Soviet Union[18]." In June 1950, the outbreak of the Korean War greatly alarmed the United States, leading to a unified understanding of NSC-68 within the government and a significant increase in demand for intelligence analysis and covert action. To expand the scope of U.S. covert action, beyond using front organizations for propaganda and funding, the U.S. began focusing on East Asia and utilizing front organizations to support the frontlines.

Civil Air Transport (CAT) was the first front organization that the U.S. actually controlled through acquisition for use in covert action and also the first used in paramilitary operations. CAT was founded in 1946 by Claire Lee Chennault and Whiting Willauer. In 1950, to conduct covert operations in Southeast Asia, the CIA recognized the importance of air power in covert actions and actively approached Chennault and Willauer to seek the acquisition of the company. The Korean War marked an explosive growth in CIA paramilitary forces and led to the extensive use of CAT to support a series of secret operations throughout the Far East. CAT operated as a commercial airline conducting scheduled and non-scheduled flights across the Far East, with its headquarters and major maintenance facilities based in Taiwan, China. Functioning as a CIA proprietary entity, the airline furnished logistical support under commercial guise to fulfill operational requirements for the CIA and other U.S. government agencies. Through covert commercial channels, CAT supplied trained personnel, procured equipment, and facilitated covert and clandestine air operations[19].

Additionally, the U.S. continued psychological warfare against the Soviet Union through front organizations, promoting anti-communist ideology and attempting to divide and win over Eastern Europe. Abstract Expressionism became a tool in the U.S. cultural Cold War. Against this backdrop, the CIA-funded front organization Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) was inaugurated in Frankfurt. The CCF aimed to combat communist influence in the cultural and intellectual spheres by sponsoring cultural events, publications, conferences, and artistic exchanges that promoted Western values of freedom, democracy, and individualism. It sought to counter the appeal of communism among intellectuals and artists in Europe and other parts of the world, declaring that "totalitarian states" posed the most serious challenge to human civilization and world

peace[20], and utilizing “non-communist left” figures to promote views favorable to the “American way[21].” Simultaneously, to facilitate CIA funding for the CCF, the CIA established the cover funding platform Farfield Foundation, providing financial aid to the CCF and its American affiliate through philanthropic means. Domestically, the U.S. also actively utilized student organizations to participate in its Cold War crusade. To provide secret funds to the National Student Association (NSA), which cooperated closely with the CIA, the CIA created the Foundation for Youth and Student Affairs (FYSA) in June 1952 as a front organization for fund transfer[22].

The Eisenhower Administration’s Use of Front Organizations Reaches its Peak (1953-1960)

With the Eisenhower administration taking office, CIA covert action was given unprecedented prominence in U.S. foreign and defense policy, and front organizations were utilized on an unprecedented scale. Geographically, from 1953 onward, the Cold War was widely perceived to have expanded from the Far East to across Europe. In this context, Eisenhower needed to project an image of U.S. superiority in the Cold War from a covert yet firm stance, maintaining this position as clearly, inexpensively, and discreetly as possible[23]. Essentially, covert action “promised to thwart Soviet ambitions without precipitating conflict,” becoming the perfect tool to meet Eisenhower’s needs in an era emphasizing massive retaliation[23]. To expand the scope of covert action, the Eisenhower administration drafted NSC 5412, NSC 5412/1, and NSC 5412/2, titled “National Security Council Directive on Covert Operations,” between 1954 and 1955, providing new guidelines for covert action. These documents directed covert action against the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, broadening its scope and objectives. Under Eisenhower’s more aggressive covert action policy, the CIA began subversive and destructive activities against global “communist” forces.

In terms of political subversion, due to the Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh’s oil nationalization policy and the rapid development of Iran-Soviet relations, Iran became a target for U.S. covert action. In 1953, the CIA began implementing Operation Ajax (TPAJAX) to overthrow the Mossadegh government and protect British oil interests. Operation Ajax constituted a multi-faceted covert campaign designed to systematically undermine Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh’s government and create a pretext for military intervention. In preparation, the CIA spent months cultivating networks of Iranian assets across key sectors, including the military, political establishment, media, and grassroots organizations, all of whom were to be mobilized at the operational stage. A central element of the operation was its comprehensive propaganda effort. CIA officers placed fabricated stories in local newspapers that depicted Mossadegh as aligning with communist interests and steering Iran toward Soviet influence. They also forged documents purporting to

show his intention to abolish the monarchy in favor of a republic. Simultaneously, religious conservatives were fed disinformation alleging that Mossadegh planned to seize religious endowments and suppress Islamic institutions. In Operation Ajax, the CIA established the front organization "Beirut Arab Service" (broadcasting to the Near East) to disseminate misleading information to the public. On September 11, 1953, with the direct goal of eliminating communist influence in Guatemala, the CIA formulated a covert action plan memorandum (the "9/11 Memorandum") to overthrow the Árbenz government, forming the main framework for Operation PBSUCCESS[24]. To advance Operation PBSUCCESS, the CIA not only cooperated with the established United Fruit Company but also independently established front organizations such as the "Voice of Liberation" radio, International Armament Corporation (Interarmco), and "charitable foundations." As deployed by the CIA, the "Voice of Liberation" radio continuously broadcast false news and reports, such as non-existent domestic uprisings and military defections in Guatemala. In terms of practical effect, the radio broadcasts not only created widespread psychological impact and social effects but also fostered a public opinion environment favorable for Operation PBSUCCESS. International media, including influential U.S. mainstream outlets like the *New York Times* and *Time* magazine, used the CIA-manipulated "Voice of Liberation" broadcasts as a source of information[25]. Moreover, after the victory of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, to improve the domestic economy, the Cuban government enacted the *Agrarian Reform Law*, abolishing large estates and prohibiting foreigners from owning Cuban land, severely infringing on U.S. interests. In November 1959, Eisenhower approved a memorandum to "change or replace the Castro regime[26]." Operation Pluto was born. To support the propaganda offensive in Operation Pluto, the CIA established "Radio Swan" on the desolate Swan Islands in the Caribbean in 1960, specifically targeting Cuba with radio broadcasts[27].

In terms of supporting frontlines, besides creating new front organizations for covert action, the Eisenhower administration extensively utilized already established front organizations for psychological warfare and paramilitary operations. To maintain the French position in Indochina, the U.S., through the Civil Air Transport acquired in 1950, provided the French military with equipment, ammunition, communication devices, medical facilities, and helped train French pilots, indirectly supporting France in the First Indochina War[28]. Furthermore, in operations supporting the Outer Islands Rebellion in Indonesia, besides providing material aid to the rebels, Civil Air Transport even directly participated in combat operations to support them. In April 1958, the Sukarno regime launched a large-scale campaign in Sumatra to eliminate the rebels once and for all. Government forces captured one important rebel base after another, forcing guerrilla militias to re-

establish headquarters in the Indonesian interior. The Americans secretly provided military supplies and aid to the guerrillas, supported by the U.S. government in many ways; therefore, protecting the heavily damaged guerrillas was a U.S. priority. To cover the retreat of the rebels so they could regroup and launch another attack against the Sukarno government, CIA-piloted B-26 light attack aircraft, flown by CAT pilots stationed in the Philippines, conducted numerous close air support missions, strafing and bombing government troops[29]. The number of CIA proprietary airlines grew so large that by the late 1960s, Richard Helms, then director of the CIA, asked one of his staff officers in the mid-sixties what he thought was a simple question: “How many airplanes does the CIA own?” An officer possessing extensive Clandestine Service experience was tasked with conducting an internal review of the Agency’s air proprietary operations. After three months of a convoluted and challenging investigation, he presented his findings in a secure facility using a large world map studded with hundreds of color-coded pins, each representing an aircraft. For approximately an hour, he detailed the vast scale of the CIA’s aviation network, which encompassed dozens of airlines and hundreds of aircraft. The officer noted that the map’s accuracy was, at best, estimated at ninety percent at any given moment. This inherent imprecision stemmed from the constant, opaque practices within the proprietary network, including the frequent leasing of aircraft between carriers, the alteration of engine and tail numbers, and the cannibalization of planes for parts. Consequently, even after a three-month internal inquiry, the Agency could not ascertain the exact number of aircraft it owned. He did, however, clarify that a single major holding entity, the Pacific Corporation—which operated subsidiaries such as Air America and Air Asia—employed over ten thousand personnel, a workforce nearly equivalent in size to that of the CIA itself[29].

The Kennedy and Johnson Administrations’ Continued Use of Front Organizations (1961-1965)

After Kennedy took office in 1961, he largely continued Eisenhower’s covert action policy, still using covert action as a primary means to contain communist influence and achieve U.S. objectives. Regarding Cuba, Kennedy declared Castro the “greatest source of danger,” criticized the Eisenhower administration during the election for tolerating a “communist satellite” “on our doorstep,” and demanded a “seriously mounted offensive” against Cuba, accelerating the process of armed subversion of the Cuban government.

Building on Eisenhower’s Operation Pluto concerning Cuba, the Kennedy administration decided to utilize the pro-American Cuban armed forces trained at the CIA’s bases in Guatemala under Operation Pluto. Believing that the U.S. could not tolerate the Castro regime’s existence in Cuba, these forces were considered a resource worth using. Supported by Kennedy administration policy, the CIA began planning covert action to overthrow

Cuba. Under intense pressure from domestic and international situations and different departments, the CIA revised and formed the “Bay of Pigs Plan.” In the Bay of Pigs operation, the CIA utilized the front organization “Double-Chek Corporation,” established in Miami in 1959, and through it recruited pilots to provide air support for Cuban exile groups. However, because the plan was “too large to remain secret, yet too small to succeed,” the Bay of Pigs invasion ultimately failed[30]. After the failure, the Kennedy administration still did not abandon “secret military operations” against Cuba and devised the larger-scale Operation Mongoose. To advance Operation Mongoose and conceal identities, the CIA established a front organization called Zenith Technical Enterprises on the campus of the University of Miami[31]. The company existed as an electronics business but was actually the CIA’s Miami station, providing cover identities for CIA personnel to secretly push forward Operation Mongoose.

Front organizations also played a significant role in Operation Flypast. In 1963, to obstruct the Jagan government in British Guiana from advancing the *Labour Relations Bill* and to subvert the government, the CIA instigated domestic conflicts and organized strikes in British Guiana[32]. In the early stages of the strikes, trade unions in British Guiana faced risks of funding and food shortages. To support anti-communist labor activities in British Guiana, the CIA on one hand cooperated with the AFL-CIO[32] and on the other channeled secret funds to unions in British Guiana through front organizations such as the Public Services International (PSI) and the Gotham Foundation[23]. The large-scale strikes caused a rapid decline in support for the Jagan government, ultimately forcing Jagan to resign in December 1964, allowing the U.S. to achieve the goal of Operation Flypast.

Due to intensified Cold War confrontation, the rise of national liberation movements, and the needs of regional wars, U.S. intelligence agencies during this stage bore the important tasks of monitoring global dynamics, assessing hidden threats, and implementing covert actions. The frequency of using front organizations increased significantly, and situations arose where multiple front organizations worked together in the same covert operation. Compared to the early development stage, the scope and functions of front organizations were further enhanced, gradually forming relatively mature methods of use through practice in covert operations: First, using commercial companies to support opposition factions in target countries through funding and military means, supporting “proxy wars” launched by “proxies” through front organizations, and using armed force to subvert ruling authorities. Second, using propaganda organizations to instigate “color revolutions,” infiltrating ideological domains to stir public dissatisfaction with ruling authorities, continuously

inciting demonstrations and protests in target countries, and overthrowing existing regimes through elections or violence. Third, using the guise of commercial companies and their assets, such as aircraft, to directly participate in military operations, secretly providing support to the frontlines. However, “perfect” front organizations do not exist. The U.S. also encountered unexpected situations such as exposure of identities and operational failures in the process of using front organizations, incurring widespread international criticism.

CONSTRAINTS AND ADAPTATION OF FRONT ORGANIZATIONS (1966-1991)

The period from 1966 to 1991 was a stage of constraint and adaptation for the U.S. use of front organizations in covert action. This stage began with U.S. media disclosures of CIA use of front organizations for covert actions and ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in 1991. Compared to the full-fledged utilization stage, the scale of U.S. use of front organizations significantly decreased during this period, CIA control over them gradually weakened, and many front organizations were reorganized or even dissolved due to various reasons. Front organization activities entered a low ebb.

Media Disclosures of Front Organizations Spark Widespread Public Doubt in the U.S. (1966-1973)

Large-scale media disclosures of CIA covert actions marked the beginning of the downturn for front organizations. Shortly after U.S. Marines landed in Vietnam in 1966, revelations emerged about CIA secret involvement with ostensibly non-governmental organizations, many of which were CIA front organizations. In 1966, the *New York Times* published a series of articles starting with “CIA: Maker of Policy, or Tool?” disclosing extensive CIA covert actions in cultural and global public opinion spheres. By publishing numerous front-page stories about plotting coups and political assassinations (many notorious for their clumsiness), the CIA’s image became that of “a rogue elephant rampaging through the thickets of international politics[22].” CIA secret propaganda activities using front organizations like the Congress for Cultural Freedom aroused widespread questioning about the CIA. Subsequently, the U.S. magazine *Ramparts* disclosed that the CIA used Michigan State University to train secret police for South Vietnam. In 1967, *Ramparts* further disclosed CIA secret cooperation with the National Student Association (NSA), accusing the “CIA of using undercover funds and secret collaborators to turn the NSA into a ‘tool of U.S. foreign policy,’” and establishing front organizations to fund the NSA[33]. In the same year, *New York Times* reporter Neil Sheehan corroborated this information and further revealed CIA cooperation with organizations like the American Society of African Culture and the International Commission of Jurists. Various CIA scandals triggered strong public reaction, leading to a crisis of trust in the CIA. Polls showed that public trust in the U.S. government dropped from 61% in 1966 to 45% in

1968. Many members of Congress called the incident “a threat to American and foreign democratic institutions alike[33].” Under bipartisan pressure, Johnson established a committee headed by Under Secretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach. On March 29, 1967, the committee issued a report explicitly prohibiting federal agencies from providing any form (secret, direct, or indirect) funding to American educational or private voluntary organizations and setting December 31, 1967, as the deadline for terminating all such secret funding[33].

U.S. media disclosures about the CIA initiated a shift in the media’s role from government supporter to watchdog. The CIA’s long-standing hypocritical mask as a defender of “democracy,” “human rights,” and “freedom” was torn off for the first time. Countries around the world began recognizing numerous facts of U.S. manipulation of geopolitics, cultivation of pro-American forces, and instigation of social divisions, re-examining their relations with the U.S. Many CIA front organizations were discredited due to large-scale media disclosures, losing their effectiveness as cover for covert actions. After this event, the National Student Association lost international credibility and was no longer viable as a front organization; the American Society of African Culture, a major CIA front within Black nationalist groups, was severely damaged, its operations in Africa became nearly impossible, and it ultimately dissolved in 1969; the Congress for Cultural Freedom and its magazine *Encounter* also suffered reputational attacks, with several editors resigning in anger upon learning the truth. Although the CCF soon established a committee to apologize for the CIA links, the reputation of this front organization and the intellectual community involved was fundamentally damaged, and the CIA had to cease funding the CCF. CIA front organizations began their downturn.

The Watergate Scandal Mires CIA Covert Action (1973-1978)

The Watergate scandal caused profound psychological shock for the American public. The President’s abuse of power was unacceptable. Nixon’s humiliating resignation further plunged the U.S. presidency into an unprecedented crisis of trust and fragility. The Watergate incident led to the complete collapse of domestic Cold War consensus. ‘The imperial Congress’ began to replace ‘the imperial presidency,’ and ‘congressional activism’ became popular. Under congressional oversight, legislation like the Hughes-Ryan Amendment (1974) and the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA, 1978) imposed strict controls on virtually all covert actions. In 1974, under then CIA Director James Schlesinger’s directive for an internal review of illegal activities, the CIA internally compiled the 693-page “Family Jewels” report, disclosing numerous CIA covert actions during the Cold War, such as plots to assassinate Cuban leader Fidel Castro and experiments with hallucinogenic drugs on citizens[34]. In the “Family Jewels” report, the term “proprietary” is mentioned in connection with multiple

covert action projects, serving various functions such as training personnel for covert actions, secretly infiltrating and monitoring other groups. The fact of CIA use of front organizations gradually gained attention. The CIA began gradually abandoning less valuable front organizations. Civil Air Transport, which had repeatedly provided air support for CIA operations, was dissolved by the CIA in 1974, with its remaining operational assets transferred to Continental Air Services Inc. (CASI), after which it received little CIA attention[35].

The Watergate scandal also stimulated academic research in the U.S. on front organizations. Many researchers recognized covert action as a secret instrument and began contemplating theoretical frameworks for its study. Numerous books on U.S. covert action emerged, leading to further exposure of front organizations. Victor Marchetti and John D. Marks's *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence* (1974) was a pioneering work in the study of covert action. The book disclosed CIA use of "Proprietary Organizations," involving front organizations like Civil Air Transport and Radio Free Europe[36]. Thereafter, news media began consciously tracking and reporting on various illegal CIA covert actions and the front organizations involved. "Overnight, the Central Intelligence Agency became in the minds of the American people a sinister stalker ... the threat to America that detractors had long said it was[37]." After the intense scrutiny of the CIA during the "Year of Intelligence" (1975), the U.S. became more cautious about covert action. The prevailing political environment and personal convictions determined that President Ford was unwilling to "go along" with the CIA. He strongly supported the principle of congressional oversight of the CIA and was the first president to establish a formal investigative oversight system for the agency. President Carter publicly stated during his campaign that CIA covert actions were "corrupt and undemocratic" and that the CIA was "a national disgrace[38]." Under presidential distrust, while the CIA faced significant staff reductions, funding for maintaining front organization operations was also sharply reduced. Many front organizations were forced to close due to lack of CIA financial support. Thus, CIA covert actions and activities utilizing front organizations hit a low point.

Reassessment of Covert Action Promotes Renewed Use of Front Organizations (1979-1991)

Media disclosures about CIA front organizations and the Watergate scandal mired CIA covert action. After the intense scrutiny of 1975, the U.S. became more cautious about covert action, and subsequent presidents adopted a conservative attitude. However, against the backdrop of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, U.S. perceptions of covert action began to shift.

President Carter began actively pursuing covert action to influence the situation in Afghanistan. Although Carter initially maintained oversight of the CIA and covert action, with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and

the ineffectiveness of open diplomatic means, Carter had to change his stance on covert action, considering it a necessary tool for achieving foreign policy objectives in certain circumstances. To address the crisis, Carter on one hand strengthened intelligence cooperation with Pakistan and expanded military aid to Pakistan, utilizing Pakistan's geographical location to enhance the efficiency of covert actions; on the other hand approved a series of covert actions supporting Afghan anti-Soviet organizations, discussing the feasibility of radio broadcasts into Afghanistan and providing economic, material aid, and training to resistance groups within Afghanistan. Driven by geopolitical interests, covert action once again returned to the forefront as a primary tool for secretly interfering in other countries.

The Reagan administration actively employed covert action to intervene in other countries. During the Reagan era, due to intense arms races with the U.S., heavy foreign burdens, and domestic systemic flaws, the Soviet Union faced increasingly severe economic and social difficulties. Upon taking office, the Reagan administration actively adjusted foreign policy, ending the previous phase of "strategic détente" and seeking active confrontation with the USSR. Aiming to "leave communism on the ash-heap of history," the Reagan administration highly valued covert action, considering it "an integral part of an offensive foreign policy[38]." Facing a complex congressional oversight system for covert action, the Reagan administration made clear it "would not yield to congressional oversight unless absolutely necessary." On December 4, 1981, Reagan signed Executive Order 12333 (United States Intelligence Activities), reemphasizing that intelligence agencies had the function to conduct "special activities," with the CIA Director as the executor responsible for ensuring their implementation[38]. Supported by Reagan administration policy, U.S. covert action reached another peak. In the Afghan War, the U.S. provided over \$3 billion in aid to Afghan resistance groups via the CIA, including advanced weapons like Stinger missiles. In Central America, the U.S. provided substantial weaponry and equipment to the Nicaraguan Contras, attempting to overthrow the Sandinista government. In these covert actions, the CIA also utilized front organizations to advance operations. In paramilitary actions against Nicaragua, the CIA leased aircraft from civilian airlines to secretly provide support to forces resisting the Sandinista government. During this process, the CIA also established a new generation of specialized airlines serving the CIA. Companies such as Southern Air Transport, Investair Leasing, Aero-Mil, and Summit Aviation served as CIA front organizations supporting its covert actions in Nicaragua.

CONCLUSION

Covert action serves as a critical instrument for the United States to safeguard its strategic interests and advance its foreign policy objectives. As extensions of intelligence agencies' operational capabilities and resource reach, front organizations exhibit remarkable adaptability, allowing them to alter their identities in response to the unique political, social, and cultural conditions of target countries. Overall, the CIA's utilization of front organizations demonstrates three key characteristics:

First, a broad global scope of application. During the Cold War, intelligence agencies led by the CIA actively infiltrated numerous countries—including Italy, Albania, China, Guatemala, and Cuba—seeking to subvert incumbent governments and shift target nations' political orientations through tactics such as disinformation campaigns and critical infrastructure sabotage.

Second, deep, organic integration into local societies. Unlike intelligence agencies themselves, front organizations possess a distinct advantage in embedding within local communities. They typically operate under plausible cover identities, such as commercial enterprises, cultural foundations, or academic institutions, enabling them to maintain legitimate, routine activities while advancing covert objectives. Moreover, by funding academic projects, influencing media outlets, and cultivating local networks, these organizations penetrate core sectors of target societies, reducing the risk of exposure and laying the groundwork for sustained operations.

Third, inextricable alignment with covert action imperatives. Throughout their evolution, the operational tempo of front organizations has closely tracked the intensity of U.S. covert actions across different eras. As the practice of covert intervention has matured, front organizations have evolved from auxiliary tools into central pillars of such operations, directly supporting their execution by providing funding, personnel, technical expertise, and other critical resources.

Author Contributions

Yupeng Huo conceived the research idea, formulated the research methodology, drafted the original manuscript, and took charge of the supervision and project administration of the whole research; Litongxing Yu was responsible for the literature investigation and data curation, completed the formal analysis of the research content, and participated in the review and revision of the manuscript; Yushan Ji provided research resources, conducted the validation of research findings, finished the visualization of relevant research content, and also participated in the review and editing of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version

of the manuscript for submission.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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