

Being tasked with an arbitrary, last-minute change was something the CIA was accustomed to managing. But it also renewed the concerns some shared over the necessity, and legality, of the entire operation.

The President's secret orders also evoked the CIA's dilemma in the Vietnam War days, when President Johnson, confronted by growing anti-Vietnam War sentiment, ordered the Agency to violate its charter—which specifically barred it from operating inside America—by spying on antiwar leaders to determine whether they were being controlled by Communist Russia.

The agency ultimately acquiesced, and throughout the 1970s it became clear just how far it had been willing to go. There were subsequent newspaper revelations in the aftermath of the Watergate scandals about the Agency's spying on American citizens, its involvement in the assassination of foreign leaders and its undermining of the socialist government of Salvador Allende.

Those revelations led to a dramatic series of hearings in the mid-1970s in the Senate, led by Frank Church of Idaho, that made it clear that Richard Helms, the Agency director at the time, accepted that he had an obligation to do what the President wanted, even if it meant violating the law.

In unpublished, closed-door testimony, Helms ruefully explained that "you almost have an Immaculate Conception when you do something" under secret orders from a President. "Whether it's right that you should have it, or wrong that you shall have it, [the CIA] works under different rules and ground rules than any other part of the government." He was essentially telling the Senators that he, as head of the CIA, understood that he had been working for the Crown, and not the Constitution.

The Americans at work in Norway operated under the same dynamic, and dutifully began working on the new problem—how to remotely detonate the C4 explosives on Biden's order. It was a much more demanding assignment than those in Washington understood. There was no way for the team in Norway to know when the President might push the button. Would it be in a few weeks, in many months or in half a year or longer?

The C4 attached to the pipelines would be triggered by a sonar buoy dropped by a plane on short notice, but the procedure involved the most advanced signal processing technology. Once in place, the delayed timing devices attached to any of the four pipelines could be accidentally triggered by the complex mix of ocean background noises throughout the heavily trafficked Baltic Sea—from near and distant ships, underwater drilling, seismic events, waves and even sea creatures. To avoid this, the sonar buoy, once in place, would emit a sequence of unique low frequency tonal sounds—much like those emitted by a flute or a piano—that would be recognized by the timing device and, after a pre-set hours of delay, trigger the explosives. ("You want a signal that is robust enough so that no other signal could accidentally send a pulse that detonated the explosives," I was told by Dr. Theodore Postol, professor emeritus of science, technology and national security policy at MIT. Postol, who has served as the science adviser to the Pentagon's Chief of Naval Operations, said the issue facing the group in Norway because of Biden's delay was one of chance: "The longer the explosives are in the water the greater risk there would be of a random signal that would launch the bombs.")

On September 26, 2022, a Norwegian Navy P8 surveillance plane made a seemingly routine flight and dropped a sonar buoy. The signal spread underwater, initially to Nord Stream 2 and then on to Nord Stream 1. A few hours later, the high-powered C4 explosives were triggered and three of the four pipelines were put out of commission. Within a few minutes, pools of methane gas that remained in the

shuttered pipelines could be seen spreading on the water's surface and the world learned that something irreversible had taken place.

FALLOUT

In the immediate aftermath of the pipeline bombing, the American media treated it like an unsolved mystery. Russia was repeatedly cited as a likely culprit, spurred on by calculated leaks from the White House—but without ever establishing a clear motive for such an act of self-sabotage, beyond simple retribution. A few months later, when it emerged that Russian authorities had been quietly getting estimates for the cost to repair the pipelines, the New York Times described the news as "complicating theories about who was behind" the attack. No major American newspaper dug into the earlier threats to the pipelines made by Biden and Undersecretary of State Nuland.

While it was never clear why Russia would seek to destroy its own lucrative pipeline, a more telling rationale for the President's action came from Secretary of State Blinken.

Asked at a press conference last September about the consequences of the worsening energy crisis in Western Europe, Blinken described the moment as a potentially good one:

*"It's a tremendous opportunity to once and for all remove the dependence on Russian energy and thus to take away from Vladimir Putin the weaponization of energy as a means of advancing his imperial designs. That's very significant and that offers tremendous strategic opportunity for the years to come, but meanwhile we're determined to do everything we possibly can to make sure the consequences of all of this are not borne by citizens in our countries or, for that matter, around the world."*

More recently, Victoria Nuland expressed satisfaction at the demise of the newest of the pipelines. Testifying at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing in late January she told Senator Ted Cruz, "Like you, I am, and I think the Administration is, very gratified to know that Nord Stream 2 is now, as you like to say, a hunk of metal at the bottom of the sea."

The source had a much more streetwise view of Biden's decision to sabotage more than 1500 miles of Gazprom pipeline as winter approached. "Well," he said, speaking of the President, "I gotta admit the guy has a pair of balls. He said he was going to do it, and he did."

Asked why he thought the Russians failed to respond, he said cynically, "Maybe they want the capability to do the same things the U.S. did."

"It was a beautiful cover story," he went on. "Behind it was a covert operation that placed experts in the field and equipment that operated on a covert signal."

"The only flaw was the decision to do it."

