

Another round to Gen.

Panama's tiny tyrant, spunky Gen. Manuel Noriega, has once again made Uncle Sam look like a monkey's uncle. The Keystone Kops coup mounted against Noriega on Oct. 3 not only failed, but it left the U.S. looking humiliated and impotent.

Naughty he may be, but Noriega is also one very macho guy who really sticks it to the puffed-up Yankees, as Latin Americans are noting with ill-disguised glee.

How could Washington so badly botch a coup against a nation with fewer people than the city of Toronto? Particularly when there are 10,200 U.S. troops and a small army of CIA agents camped in downtown Panama? Because of governmental gridlock in Washington and the emasculation of the CIA.

Congress has banned any U.S. involvement in coups in which a foreign leader might be killed. In Panama, the CIA and the U.S. Army couldn't guarantee that Noriega wouldn't be executed by the coup plotters.

Interestingly, this prohibition does not seem to extend to the Mideast. In years past, the U.S. tried to assassinate Egypt's Nasser and certainly had a hand in the deaths of Syria's Husni Zai'im and probably Iraq's Kasseem. More recently, the U.S. actively promoted attempts to murder Libya's Moammar Khadafy and the Lebanese Shia leader, Shiek Fadhallah. Washington also armed and financed anti-Khomeini terrorists who blew up many senior Iranian leaders as well as anti-government terrorists in Syria.

I don't think democratic nations should sully their hands with assassinations, no matter how tempting. Yet here's a troubling question: Suppose the U.S. or Britain could have killed Adolf Hitler in 1939, so saving millions of lives?

Anyway, what right does the U.S. have to overthrow

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Noriega? He has been charged in the U.S. with drug dealing — but not tried or convicted. If the U.S. is going to arrogantly extend its domestic law abroad, then so it should too with the presumption of innocence until guilt is proven.

Next, the CIA. Intelligence agencies tend to be run by either cowboys or bureaucrats. Able ones keep a balance between the two. President Jimmy Carter, avidly backed by liberals in Congress, purged the CIA's experienced field agents and turned the once feared outfit into just another federal agency filled with careerist paper-passers. Now CIA bureaucrats are being told to stop writing inter-departmental memos and go overthrow Latin bogeymen.

This sorry state of affairs comes just when Soviet KGB operations are rising sharply. From Silicon Valley to Osaka, KGB efforts to gain western military and technology secrets are on the upswing. Much of the media has simply ignored this disturbing fact since it simply does not fit in with our current view that east and west are sailing off on a moonlit honeymoon.

Moscow's intensifying involvement in the Afghan war has been similarly downplayed. See no evil is the order of the day. Small wonder. Even for the cynical, it's

Noriega

awfully hard to square the dramatic tide of liberalization and detente being promoted by the likable Mikhail Gorbachev with a surge in KGB foreign activities.

Unless, of course, you subscribe to my very unpopular theory that Gorbachev is the KGB's man in the Kremlin — more about this in a forthcoming column.

Still, the awkward facts keep piling up. Western security services report that the KGB is now more active than any time in the past decade.

Take, for example, neutral, leftist Sweden, the country so many Canadians want to emulate. Soviet submarine penetrations of Sweden's territorial waters and landings by Spetnaz commandos on its coast have markedly increased during the past six months. So has Soviet spying on the U.S. Army in West Germany.

Some claim these activities are merely to safeguard Soviet security at a time when the USSR appears to be thinning out its forces in East Europe. A less rosy view is that the Soviets, under KGB leadership, have realized that for now, they can gain far more through covert warfare — and at a lower cost to the wretched Soviet economy — than by the old method of threatening brute military force. Remember that intelligence is as much a Soviet speciality as chess.

All this comes at a time when NATO is in disarray and quietly cutting its armed forces. And when our security services are being hamstrung by budget cuts and glasnost-era restrictions.

The Panama fiasco provides a chilling reminder of just how inept and paper-bound the CIA has become. If the CIA can't even overthrow the tiny dictator of a pipe-squeak country, how will it do in the big leagues? For the answer, just ask smiling Gen. Noriega.