

James Angleton: Spiespook or Tragic Figure?

By DAVID IGNATIUS

The literature on James Angleton, former chief of counterintelligence for the Central Intelligence Agency, could fill a small bookshelf.

Mr. Angleton's first chronicler was none other than Harold "Kim" Philby, the So-

The Bookshelf

"Wilderness of Mirrors"

By David C. Martin. Harper & Row. 236 pages. \$12.50.

viet "mole" who penetrated the top level of the British Intelligence Service. In his 1968 memoir, written from Moscow, Mr. Philby blew Mr. Angleton's cover and mischievously recalled the "genuine friendliness" between him and Mr. Angleton during the late 1940s.

When these embarrassing sections of the Philby book were summarized in The Washington Post in 1968, Mr. Angleton was irate. He promptly severed his friendship with Ben Bradlee, the Post's editor—ending a relationship that had seen the Bradlees and the Angletons learning to dance the "twist" together in happier days.

Much as he disliked that first mention by Mr. Philby, Mr. Angleton has seemed—to some of his former colleagues at the CIA—to be cultivating publicity in the years since his forced retirement in 1974. His detractors point to a recent wave of "Angletonia" as evidence that Mr. Angleton and some of his former associates have been using journalists in their battle for vindication and revenge.

A simpler explanation for the recent literary interest in Mr. Angleton is that he is—in the view of friends and foes alike—the most fascinating, and perhaps the most powerful, personality the CIA has yet produced. In "Orchids for Mother," a thinly disguised novel by Aaron Latham, intelligence buffs began to learn of Mr. Angleton's passion for cultivating rare flowers; his method of playing espionage agents slowly, like trout on a fishing line; and his habit of chain-smoking "Virginia Slims."

In a 1975 nonfiction account called "Legend," by Edward Jay Epstein, readers were briefed on Mr. Angleton's chilling theory that the Soviets have been sending false defectors to the U.S. to seduce and demoralize the CIA. And in "The Fourth Man," by Andrew Boyie, they thrilled at

his quiet role in unmasking Mr. Philby and other British traitors. In these books, Mr. Angleton seemed to personify the twilight world of espionage that had previously surfaced only in spy fiction.

David Martin, a reporter for Newsweek magazine, has turned the Angleton saga inside out in his new book, "Wilderness of Mirrors." In place of the prevailing view of Mr. Angleton as an eccentric spiespook, Mr. Martin argues that he is a near-tragic figure, whose own career was finally destroyed by the climate of suspicion he had instituted at the CIA.

Mr. Martin researched his book in a way that Mr. Angleton, as an intelligence professional, must find annoyingly familiar: a classic double-cross.

The book opens with Mr. Martin confiding that Mr. Angleton was once his "source," with whom he held "perhaps more than a hundred" conversations in the years after 1974. Indeed, he notes, "Angleton encouraged my first thoughts of writing a book"—although that book supposedly was to be a study of the late William Harvey, another of the CIA's great characters. Some material on Mr. Harvey's covert career remains in the book. Mr. Martin ultimately produced, but its pages are dominated by the enigmatic Mr. Angleton.

The reporter-source relationship ended suddenly, two years ago, when Mr. Martin began to explore one of the strangest riddles that haunts intelligence journalism: the allegation that Mr. Angleton, the CIA's chief mole hunter for 20 years, may himself have been a Soviet agent.

This allegation strikes most people who know Mr. Angleton as preposterous. But the fact that such a case was actually prepared by one of Mr. Angleton's associates on the CIA counterintelligence staff—and presented to top-level CIA officials in 1974—suggests the corrosive power of the analytical method that Mr. Angleton himself had championed.

This method started with the plausible assumption that there was a Soviet mole within the CIA, and then tried to deduce who the mole was on the basis of minute facts and discrepancies in a particular CIA officer's record. Eventually, Mr. Angleton's number came up.

The allegation, however dubious, is contained on 26 hours of tape recorded in 1974 by Mr. Angleton's accuser. The tape is said to be held in strict secrecy in the office of CIA Director Stansfield Turner.

It's ironic that the case was rejected by then CIA director William Colby, the same man who fired him later that year. Mr. Martin notes that Mr. Colby's reason for dismissing his counterintelligence chief—his dislike of what he viewed as Mr. Angleton's hypersuspicious methods—prevented him from taking seriously the similarly conspiratorial case made against Mr. Angleton.

Mr. Martin's underlying thesis is that during Mr. Angleton's 20 years as Chief of Counterintelligence, the CIA became lost in a "wilderness of mirrors." The phrase, it should be noted, was Mr. Angleton's own; he used it to describe what he believed was a massive Soviet KGB deception campaign against the West, in which nothing the CIA touched could be fully trusted.

Soviet defectors were likely to be false defectors; agents recruited by the CIA were likely to be Soviet double agents, feeding "disinformation" to their CIA case officers.

Within the CIA, this view of a nearly invisible KGB came to be known as the "ten-foot-tall syndrome," and many former CIA officers believe that it nearly paralyzed the CIA's own operations against the Soviets. They contend that Mr. Angleton's skepticism was so withering and pervasive that, during part of the 1960s, the agency nearly gave up trying to recruit spies behind the Iron Curtain.

The problem with this critique of the Angleton method is that much of the time, Mr. Angleton was right. Reliable evidence suggests that many of the CIA's supposed recruits during the 1960s were, in fact, Soviet double agents. And there is also some evidence that Soviet "disinformation" during this period contributed to erroneous CIA estimates of Soviet strategic capabilities and political goals. CIA officers didn't like being told by Mr. Angleton that they were drawing water from a poisoned well, but in many instances, he was correct.

"Wilderness of Mirrors" should be read partly as a battle document in the war of leaks between former CIA officers. Mr. Martin's sources—hostile to Mr. Angleton—have argued their case with a remarkably detailed account of the internal disputes about the defectors and double agents that tied the CIA in knots during the 1960s. But already, the Angleton forces are challenging parts of the book, and rebuttals will surely follow.

Intelligence buffs will savor each new revelation. So too, undoubtedly, will the KGB. But the discussion may be of limited interest to the general reader, who cannot be blamed if he decides to leave the tortuous logic of counterintelligence to the professionals.

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