Meg Greenfield Post 8/13/78

CIA: Reality vs. Romance

I have recently read two very interesting books about the CIA, one friendly and one hostile. The hostile book is Philip Agee's newly published "Inside the Company," the confessional memoir of a lapsed CIA operative. Agee is at pains to expose and, if possible, ruin the agency for which he worked for twelve years. The friendly book is one I in fact reread: "The Craft of Intelligence," by Allen Dulles, which was published with some fanfare back in 1963. It is the exultant, supportive memoir of a man who was director of the CIA for nearly nine years and whose spirit infused a whole generation of intelligence officers. I have no doubt that Dulles's book tells us more — directly and indirectly — about what has gone wrong at the CIA than Agee's book can begin to do.

This instruction may not be apparent to people who are fundamentally opposed to an agency with the CIA's general charter, or to those who believe—conversely—that anything goes. But the guidance is there for those I would call the choke-point set, people like myself who grant the need for some agency activities that are rough and intrusive and yet who are repelled by many of the things that have been revealed. I would list as chief among these the incredible decision to try to arrange for the Mafia to murder Fidel Castro. Murder in the first place, and, in the second, putting the U.S. government in the debt of the mob—how could it have come about?

Agee, who strikes me as one of those fellows who have simply turned in one uncritical enthusiasm for another, doesn't offer nearly so much insight as Dulles does. For in Dulles the potential for disaster is everywhere apparent, and in him we are not seeing some lone, misguided figure, but rather ourselves and our own perspective not so many years ago. And it is all there:

- The overblown and now overtaken sense of the agency's mandate, born of hot war and cold war and of a belief that America knew what was best for everyone else and should seek to achieve it by any means. Activities that Agee can nowadays condemn merely in the recounting, Dulles celebrates as duty.
- A failure—despite *pro forma* expressions of concern—to appreciate the capacity of such an organization to get out of hand, or to take account of the human frailties of officers one knows to be well-intended and patriotic.
- A classically ambivalent American attitude toward espionage—one part discomfort and one part romance. This appears in the former director's need to argue the legitimacy of espionage in the first place; in his impulse to tell how it all works and to boast about things that should probably have gone unacknowledged by a man in his position; in the repeated reference to the "adventure" and "excitement" of the work; in the fact that the book was written at all.

These aspects of Dulles's perception might not have leapt out at me had they not, in different variations, come up in a conversation I'd recently had with the agency's current director, William Colby. Colby is presiding over one of the great organizational wrecks of our time, a vast secret intelligence agency that has endured a veritable tornado of blown cover, and which is trying to get in line with a sudden demand for public accountability. His yes-we-have-no-bananas defense of the agency—conceding some error by way of stoutly defending the CIA's overall record—has not pleased people on any side of the dispute. Yet he struck me as a man who was relatively cheerful in his gloom because he believes that what has gone wrong can be remedied.

Colby begins with the overblown mandate, insisting that the ethos of the postwar decades produced an extravagant, no-holds-barred sense of mission that he claims has been trimmed back. He lays much of the blame for the

abuses on the political winks the agency was getting in the guise of directives. "Go and do it and don't tell me about it," is the way he sums them up, testimony to high-level mixed feelings on this subject, fascination mixed with revulsion, bravura with guilt. For his part Colby argues that discipline, indoctrination and clear directives can produce what he calls a "responsible American intelligence," one that is effective, that *includes* clandestine services and that functions within constitutional restraints. "I mean one," he says, "that has its mission defined. You have to say fairly clearly what the mission is—and without euphemism."

Because Colby has been involved in some very controversial agency operations, and because he wants to limit the number of persons sharing in any new congressional / executive branch oversight of the agency, much of what he has argued is dismissed by critics of the agency. They see it as just one more attempt to shroud from the public the CIA's overreachings of power.

My own reservations are different. I think the number of congressional and executive-branch overseers is much less important than the willingness of those who are chosen to exercise *real* responsibility, to crash through the myths and ambiguous feelings—the spy-story stuff—and face up to the hard, explicit and sometimes ugly choices that are required. And I do not think excessive secrecy in these matters represents nearly so great a threat to the public's right to know as it does to the perspective and judgment of those who live in the world of secrets. The first and foremost danger of excessive secrecy is that it corrupts the people who hold the secrets.

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Allen Dulles, in his self-assurance, brushes the risk aside, but it is real. We in Washington know that a certain condescension and contempt for normal values are the occupational disease of those who operate too long in the realm of secret information—an if-you-knew-what-I-know approach that can ultimately justify the most misbegotten of decisions. And that plus what Colby himself recognizes as the blurry "edges" between legitimate and illegitimate action presents a fierce challenge to the maturity and wisdom of everyone along the line. Secrecy and an extraordinary grant of power can be, like LSD, a mind-altering drug.

So while I agree with Colby in theory that these things can be rectified, my gloom is not quite as cheery as his. The mystique and the illusions of a generation of intelligence officers who served us well—and also ill—must be dispelled. An enormously difficult discipline must be imposed. And people in responsible positions must *accept* responsibility.

For my own part, I admit defeat: the required real-life attributes are plain enough to me, but the principal model that comes to mind is from spy fiction. It is John le Carre's hero, George Smiley, who has it all and has it all just right: a fanatical commitment to the inspection of reality, a corollary distaste for day-dream and drama, a willingness to make moral distinctions and an understanding of what the practical limits are.

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