

IN FOCUS

Ex-'Spook' Can't Shake

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By John Fialka
Washington Star Staff Writer

For 15 years now, Eric H. Biddle Jr. has been trying, unsuccessfully, to come back from the cold.

On the surface, he has every possible credential one might need to succeed in Washington. He has excellent social connections, coming from a famous, "main line" family in Philadelphia. His academic credentials are impeccable, he prepped at the Haverford School and graduated from Harvard.

He is regarded by his friends and even some of his enemies as an honest, hard worker. He has demonstrat-

ed experience and skill at overseeing multimillion dollar programs. "He is the ideal civil servant," states an evaluation report once done by one of his supervisors, "with a very high standard of performance to which he consistently adheres."

Yet, Biddle, at age 46, has seen his hopes for a meaningful career in the federal government shattered.

FOR FIVE YEARS he has been a "nonperson" at Action, the agency where he works. He is not invited to policy meetings. He may not compete for high-level promotions. Although he was, until recently, a GS-15, his work was reviewed by a GS-12. Fre-

The 'Old Rooseveltian'

quently he has been assigned to do nothing, and, frequently, his superiors have tried to act as though Biddle does not exist.

Why? Because Eric Biddle is still regarded as a "spook." He succumbed, along with many of his Ivy League peers in the early 1950s to the blandishments of government recruiters who promised jobs with the "most exciting agency in Washington." It was the heyday of the Central Intelligence Agency and Biddle was one of the thousands of bright young men who signed on. Although

the Stigma From 15 Years Ago

concept of service' turned sour

Biddle resigned in 1960, no one has ever let him forget it.

Now the "agency," as Biddle calls it, sometimes with respect and sometimes with gentle criticism, is going through its blackest days, tarred with attacks from the press, Congress and even the White House.

Many of Biddle's class of "bright young men" are now getting a taste of what Biddle has had. He believes there are hundreds, if not thousands who are having great difficulty finding jobs. There have been complaints of discrimination against ex-CIA

agents by private employers, but Biddle's case, now pending in District Court is believed to be the first one charging that his civil rights are being violated by the discrimination of one federal agency against another.

Biddle believes that the majority of his former peers are still in the CIA. "Because, in the first place it is interesting work and they are devoted to it. It is also hard to get out, very hard if you're married and have a family. Now it must be much harder than ever."

IT IS DIFFICULT for him to convey to a younger generation, a child

of the Sixties, the aura, the feeling that young, liberal idealists were charged with in the early Fifties.

"I wanted to serve my country. It was the old Rooseveltian concept of service. That's why I majored in government. The CIA was considered to be the most exciting place in Washington. That's why so many of my peers were recruited, because of the aura of mystery and adventure.

"I was asked, for example, when I was interviewed whether or not I was willing to jump — parachute — into the Soviet Union. I didn't know whether that was a realistic possibil-

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ity or not, I had no idea. I sort of gulped and said yes."

The State Department, once the Mecca for blue bloods like Biddle, had been demolished by the McCarthy era. But the CIA was unscathed. "Because we had passed such a rigid security screening, we were immune from suspicion of disloyalty, even though most of the people I knew were rather liberal in politics. For example, they were for Adlai Stevenson in 1952 and skeptical of candidate Eisenhower's promises to "roll back" the Iron Curtain.

He had taken Russian at Harvard. And, in the spring of 1952, Biddle took nine months of more intensive Russian lessons at the Navy's language school in Anacostia. The competition for overseas assignments was intense, especially for the Eastern European sector, and Biddle was sure that was where he wanted to be.

He wanted action and he got it. During the next two years he trained, dispatched and monitored agents, some of them, he says, for missions within the Soviet Union. This is the art of spy handling, or "agent running." Biddle, the practitioner, stayed in the background, operating from bases in Germany and elsewhere.

HE DESCRIBES IT as a kind of gentlemanly game. Although there was considerable thievery and trespass, there was none of the James Bond hugger-mugger. Poison darts did not whiz around the arena and CIA and KGB agents were not continually trying to waste each other with exotic weaponry.

"The two absolute no-nos were that you did not take away the other guy's diplomatic pouch and you didn't kill or even physically harm anybody on the other side because that went both ways and there was no knowing when it would end."

During those years, however, he began to feel symptoms of career frustration. "I was hired toward the end of the CIA's big recruiting drive. They had recruited too many people. The people in key positions were guys not much older than me. I could see the promotional possibilities were going to be very, very slow."

So when Biddle returned to Washington in 1955, he was tempted to accept a fellowship for Russian studies at Columbia University in New York. His supervisor, on the very day Biddle mentioned that, came up with an assignment to Greece.

Eastern Europe might have been where the action was, but Greece, in those days, was where much of the "action" was mounted. "We, I mean



ERIC H. BIDDLE JR.
Former CIA officer

the United States, practically ran that country in those days. There were a lot of (CIA) operations there. Besides, Greece was a decidedly better place to live than Germany." Biddle spent much of his free time exploring ancient monuments.

Another reason Biddle enjoyed Greece was because he fell in love with a Greek woman. He wasn't entirely sure he wanted to marry her, but he decided he would clear the possibility, anyway, with his superiors.

They turned him down flat, even though he'd offered to subject the woman to a complete security check. CIA agents were not permitted to marry foreign nationals, he was told. That was the beginning of the end for Biddle's CIA aspirations. "It was totally unjustified. It was ridiculous to make a generalization that all foreigners are automatically security risks."

IN THE LATE FIFTIES, when Biddle returned from Greece, he made it clear to his superiors that he was leaving the agency as soon as he could find an acceptable job.

He began spending long weekends in New York, visiting personnel offices on Mondays. At first he found few takers. "When you leave the agency, you have this peculiar burden, you can't say what you've done. The only thing I had to talk about was my foreign experience and languages."

Finally, in March 1960, Biddle decided to make a clean break with the agency and spend all of his time looking for a job. He resigned and was given a glowing letter of recommendation from G.M. Stewart, then the CIA's director of personnel.

For a while Biddle worked for a drug company in Philadelphia, later he shifted to a major international engineering company in San Francisco, but he decided that working in the private sector was, after his experience, just not that interesting.

In November 1963 when John F. Kennedy was assassinated, Biddle was sure he had to "get back into some kind of meaningful work."

At first he decided that the way to do that was to become active in the Anglican Church. In 1964 he started work at Union Seminary at Columbia University in New York on a masters degree in religious studies. To finance his education, he worked for the National Council of Churches.

The following year, however, he decided that he needed a higher paying job and returned to Washington, looking for full-time government work.

Biddle has always been fussy

about working in Washington. In 1952 the exciting new agency, the magnet for the idealists, might have been the CIA, but that era was gone, perhaps forever. The new magnet was now the Peace Corps and, of course, that was where Biddle had to be.

In the late summer of 1965, Biddle had an interview with one of the corp's chief "talent scouts" that he has never forgotten. It was the way she did it.

He had been in an outer office, completing his forms, when a lower echelon official told him that, because of his CIA background, he could never be eligible for a position in the Peace Corps.

"I said I'm not satisfied with that answer. I want to talk to somebody higher up." Then he was introduced to a woman who seemed, at first, very interested. After running through his background, Biddle

added that there was something he felt she should know.

"Is it intelligence?" she asked, cheerily.

"Yes," said Biddle.

"Bye," said the woman, sweetly, waving at him.

LATER THAT YEAR, Biddle signed on as an inspector for the Office of Equal Opportunity, which was then in charge of waging President Johnson's War on Poverty

Biddle's work as an inspector for OEO often required him to travel to various communities to see whether the antipoverty funds were being abused. According to several of Biddle's associates, his work was legendary. "He had all sorts of strange ways to dig up information. The people out in the field were afraid of him," said one.

Later, at a time when there was considerable sympathy for the plight of the American Indian, there was Biddle, pointing out that leaders of the American Indian Movement had police records and that bands of armed thugs fought over government money and positions at various Indian reservations, assertions that later turned out to be true.

By 1970, it became perfectly clear to many OEO workers that if they wanted a lengthy career in a government agency, OEO was not the place to be. The Nixon administration had marked the agency for extinction.

Biddle then signed on with a new agency, the Office of Voluntary Action, but not, however, without a few skirmishes with minor White House officials who concluded that Biddle

would be "too anti-Communist."

BIDDLE'S NEW BOSS was Christopher Mould. Mould was impressed with his work, promoted him to GS-15 and assigned him to a new task force that was drawing up plans for a new agency, Action, which would merge the Peace Corps, Vista and other volunteer groups into one unit.

It was arranged that Biddle would go over to Action when the agency was authorized to begin. It was arranged, that is, until Mould took it upon himself to tell Joseph Blatchford, then the head of Action, about Biddle's CIA background.

Blatchford, Mould has later sworn in an affidavit supporting Biddle's case, "concluded that Mr. Biddle could not remain in any part of Action because of the damage his presence might cause the Peace Corps overseas."

Mould, who became associate director for Action, asserts in the affidavit that, as a result, "Mr. Biddle was persona non grata in Action and was given little or no work and was essentially isolated from the day to day work of the agency."

At the time, however, it was not clear to anyone just how long Biddle's "nonperson" status would continue. Biddle, who worried about his previous rejection by the Peace Corps, remembers being reassured by Mould: "Don't worry, you're going into Action, not into the Peace Corps."

But Biddle did worry. He worried enough to ask the CIA why there was such a taboo about joining the Peace Corps. He was told, he said, that in the early days of the Peace Corps, when Sargent Shriver was its director, there was a secret agreement with then-CIA director Allen Dulles that, in order to keep Peace Corps volunteers above all suspicion, the CIA would never use the corps for a "cover," and that no ex-CIA agent could be hired by the Peace Corps within five years after resigning from the CIA.

OFFICIALLY, Biddle was a GS-15 program analyst in the agency's domestic Policy and Program Development section. Unofficially, he was given few assignments and encouraged to find another job. He tried, sending resumes at first to other agencies. The Office of Management and Budget, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Commerce's East-West Trade section were among his first choices.

Later, as his search became more

desperate, the list was broadened to include the Departments of Health Education and Welfare, Agriculture, and the General Services Administration. There were no takers.

"In the old days at CIA," Biddle reminisced to a reporter, "we used to laugh about Agriculture, that being sent there would be like dying or something. The CIA was the swinging place to be."

In February 1972, when Howard Phillips was assigned the task of demolishing OEO, he asked Biddle whether he'd be interested in a temporary transfer to OEO to work

as a program auditor. Biddle, who was bored and frustrated, accepted.

Unlike any of the former directors of OEO, Phillips used all of Biddle's reports and then some in his all-out effort to abolish the agency. Biddle was not pleased by the highly political nature of Phillips' attacks and, when Michael P. Balzano Jr. took over as the head of Action, Biddle was back after his old job.

IN THE MEANTIME, however, someone had leaked the story of Biddle's former CIA experience to the press. There were several headlines about the existence of an "ex-CIA man in Action," and at least one article talked about "former spooks" serving in OEO.

Because Biddle was still officially an employe of Action, Blatchford felt it necessary to issue a memo emphasizing that the Peace Corps would always maintain its bar against former CIA employes. Referring to Biddle as "this individual," Blatchford noted that he had made considerable efforts to find Biddle another job. "Action cannot and would not discharge this man, who has civil service rights," said Blatchford.

Under the Balzano regime, although he had had assurances that there would be no more discrimination, it became clear to Biddle one morning that there was still a problem

He had made arrangements to go to night law classes at George Washington University, arrangements that seemed to be satisfactory to his superiors at the time.

One Aug. 27, just before law school was to begin, he received a memorandum from Marjorie Lynch, who was then the agency's associate

director for domestic and antipoverty operations. The agency, she said, had decided on a "partial decentralization," of Biddle's office. The part that was being decentralized was Biddle, who was being assigned to Kansas City.

When Biddle threatened to take up the matter with the Civil Service Commission, plans for the "partial decentralization" were suddenly dropped.

THEN, LAST SEPTEMBER, Biddle's unit was hit by a reduction in force. Biddle's GS-15 slot was abolished. Shortly afterwards, a friend, Fred Patrick, then head of Action's Internal Audit staff, offered Biddle a GS-14 slot and Biddle accepted, provided there was an understanding that he would not be prohibited from doing anything in the job's description, which mentioned auditing trips to scrutinize Action's foreign and domestic operations.

The real test of this came this spring when Patrick quietly assigned Biddle to audit Peace Corps activities in Belize and Costa Rica. Nobody objected, so Biddle went. There were no coups in Central America while he was there, and no foreign leaders were seen to be stricken by mysterious poisons. But when the trip was discovered there was an explosion in Action.

Patrick, according to a letter he later sent Biddle, was summoned by Jorge Cordova, then Action's general counsel, and told that the Peace Corps ban on CIA employees extended

to people auditing the Peace Corps. Based on meetings with Cordova and other Action officials, Patrick wrote Biddle that "the opinion of the general counsel will serve as a restriction prohibiting your future involvement in Peace Corps work assignments."

Eric Biddle is on familiar grounds now. He is fighting a gentlemanly but desperate battle. In December, he took his case before the Civil Service Commission, which rejected his argument that his civil rights have been violated.

In August he brought suit in District Court, here, against Balzano, Action and the Civil Service Commission. All along, his opposition has been formidable, but gentlemanly.

For example, Phillip Bourbon, Action's personnel director, asserts that Biddle's charge of discrimination is "simply not true." He defends the agency's latest regulation on the matter as being necessary to keep the Peace Corps inviolate.

The regulation now prohibits all former government intelligence officers from holding any job in the Peace Corps or any Action support facilities that deal with the Peace Corps. Bourbon said the regulation extends to former intelligence agents from the armed forces and might even bar a former FBI agent, although he said that would have to be examined on a "case-by-case basis."

Biddle is convinced that the regulation was written expressly for him. Bourbon denies it.

"He (Biddle) is a good man," said Bourbon, "I don't think anybody's ever questioned that."