

In a Way, the End of an Era

His first reaction was deep depression, then great bitterness. "It was a tremendous shock, and I was very, very depressed, naturally, that after all my years of service and all I had done for the agency, that I was going to be terminated in this manner." He brooded about it. Only when a sense of anger and rage set in did he begin to feel better. "My wife was delighted when she saw that I was becoming angry. My anger somewhat compensated for the depression."

The notification came to them all in the same brutal manner—a terse memorandum, personally delivered by special courier, giving the news coldly and clearly. "SUBJECT: Notification of Intent to Recommend Separation," it was headed. The message was conveyed in two short sentences: "This is to inform you of my intent to recommend to the Director of Personnel your separation in order to achieve the reduction in Operations Directorate strength ordered by the DCI . . . I or my designee will first review your case with the Director of Personnel or his designee."

That spelled the end of his career, a career covering more than a quarter of a century as

a United States government employee. But it represented more than that. It was, in a way, the end of an era, for him and hundreds of others like him. They were operatives for the Central Intelligence Agency, members of the clandestine service — secret agents, spies, "spooks" — and their work had taken them

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into dark corners of the world. Many of them were veterans of the Cold War, of the period that linked Korea and Vietnam, Berlin and Cuba. Some of their careers spanned an even longer time: They had served in the old OSS during World War II under "Wild Bill" Donovan and had helped found the CIA early in the post-war years.

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Now their branch of the CIA, the one holding the covert operator, was being singled out for decimation. A "purge," some say, unlike any in CIA history, with no reasons given, no thanks rendered for duties performed, and no future remaining, carried out by a new director at a time when the role of the agents and the agency had changed. It wasn't a case of coming in out of the cold, of following the novelist's plot and exchanging the cloak and the dagger for the bureaucrat's desk. For him, like the others, it was the way their careers were being ended that out so deeply.

He knew, as he said, that "when the ball game's over you got off the football field." But: "If you have to handle a relationship with a senior official by a legalistic two-line message for fear that you may not be legally qualified to do what you're doing, then the agency's in a lot of trouble."

It's more complex than that, of course. It's the life he's led, the jobs he's held, the bitter feeling of being betrayed by the agency that should appreciate him best. The personal humiliation of it. He's been a CIA station chief in several critical posts, has won many commendations and has fashioned a distinguished career. In the course of his work he's experienced hardship and danger—he's been ambushed, been marked for assassination by the Palestine Liberation Organization, and has successfully handled sensitive political problems in major capitals. No fiction, and not much romance, either. His career has been similar to that of many top American agents. And, like them, the end comes not in disgrace, but with a sense of personal devastation. That wasn't how it was supposed to be played out.

The irony was that he was talking about his career at all—and to the press, no less. That wouldn't have been part of the game, the rules of the corps, under which he came up. But the rules have changed now, for him and others, just as the perception of the agency has undergone dramatic revisions.

In the early days they all gloried their anonymity; they never even would where they really worked—"I work for the government," that was all. They traveled in the small circles, lived together, felt unique.

The nature of the job, the secrecy and the sense of power, of operating apart, brought successes. And, in time, problems—an en-justifies-the-means mentality, a conviction, for some, of the ardent true believer's zeal. "Executive actou" and "Mk-Ultra" were part of the ugly fruits of some of this: assassination plots, poison pens, commissioning the Mafia, all in the name of the good cause.

But whether involved in such areas or not, they all had believed in what they were doing. And they knew, no matter what anyone says, they had the support of the leaders of the American government, across the board, bipartisan, unchanging year after year. They played by the rules, they expected to be backed them.

So there he was, speaking not only about himself, but his career and his colleagues and a lifetime of operating in the shadows. He was sitting in his home, equipped with a special security system, surrounded by men-toes gathered around the world, speaking calmly about his work: An man in his 50s, dark-haired, trim, with a trace of the recent and manner of an Easterner. A spy, real, not out of Ian Mening or John LeCarre.

There have been spies since the days of Jericho, some CIA leaders like to say. Americans have had their secret agents since the Revolution, but the tradition of establishing a professional network of spies never took root here as it did in Europe and other places. The remark of Henry Stimson, our secretary of war at the time of Pearl Harbor, correctly expressed the prevailing official view. "Gentlemen don't read each other's mail," he said.

World War II and America's new global position changed that. Still, when the CIA was created a generation ago it had the air of a special gentleman's establishment. There was a distinctly Ivy League—and particularly, that of Yale—atmosphere about the men who formed and led the agency. Allen Dulles, Tracy Barnes, Richard Bissell, Frank Wisner, Richard Helms, James Angleton—they and the subordinates they picked had a number of things in common. They were highly educated, widely traveled, and deeply motivated by what they considered to be a cause: in the nuclear age, they were needed to safeguard America from the sudden atomic strike and the threat of foreign subversion. Communism. The world

was their arena; the agency, or "the company," their vehicle.

It was a special place to be, one of the most prestigious in the government. To be selected by the special recruiters who combed the "best" colleges and universities in the late 1940s and early 1950s was to take rank immediately with the government's elite. The CIA in that period attracted probably the most liberal people to the government's service. It became a prime target of Joseph R. McCarthy and his witchhunts. Those kinds of outside assaults strengthened the CIA's internal bonds.

And his motivations in joining were not unusual. He had been a military officer during the war; was decorated for valor, and had gone on to complete post-graduate training later. He also had had experience in government: helping lay the groundwork for the post-war rehabilitation of Europe. It was the CIA that sought him, not he the agency.

"I suppose I went with the agency," he said, "for patriotic reasons. I felt that it sounded challenging. I had seen all the Communist strikes and had seen how close - - - came to a Communist takeover. And those were exciting times.

"As a young officer you felt that you had a very direct relationship to your chief—that if he approved of someone you were going to recruit, or some action you wanted to take, you knew that if it backfired he was going to take the blame. You also had enough admiration for his experience to know that when he approved your action it probably wasn't going to backfire. You also had a relationship to the division chief, and even to the director himself.

"When I came back from - - - as a relatively junior officer I always had to go and see Mr. Dulles, because he was intrigued by this Communist operation I was talking to you about, and about some other things. And you knew your director of operations personally. You felt you had a very, very close relationship. You knew them by their first names, they knew you. Dick Helms was always Dick Helms as far as I was concerned. Of course, Mr. Dulles was Mr. Dulles, but I was always - - - to him.

"It was an easy, yet tough, camaraderie you had. If you talked to a guy like Helms you'd better know your stuff professionally, because he was certainly going to pick out the thing you didn't know. On the other hand,

you always felt the measure of your performance was being understood. It was an intimate, close relationship and some of the things you did were quite exciting."

There had been the time when he was the only person in the world who knew where a certain key Communist leader was. There had been the time when he received credit, privately of course, for keeping an important country from going Communist through his contacts and work with the leaders of that government. ("We had one of those CA (covert action) programs that didn't cost any money at all. Not a penny.") There had been other assignments, delicate and difficult, and nothing but praise for the way he had handled them.

"Being subjective, there's nothing in my career that has a dead wood aspect to it. It was enjoyable and productive, and I can say that the U.S. government was better informed as a result of my work than it would have been if I had not been there. I would say that during my years in our government was never misinformed on any military adventures and intentions—and this particularly was at a time when very frequently our assessment was quite different from that of the defense attaches and the embassies.

"I'm proud of my career. There's nothing about it that I felt ever involved any moral decisions of conscience. I think I can say that of most of my friends. What's happening here shows a real lack of communications with the clandestine service.

I've been subjected to ambushes. I've been lying desperately ill in a hospital in . . . I've seen my children fortunately come through trials and tribulations in great shape. Most senior officers have had these experiences. I've been on the PLO list. I've received threatening notes from them. A lot of senior people have. And I have had more harrowing experiences, and more difficult service. Some of these people who have received notices have been division chiefs, recently assigned to their positions. If you're selecting out the senior people I don't see how you can be objective, because by the very fact that you're supergraded means your record must be good."

What's ironic, and embittering, is that he been thinking the past few years of leaving CIA. He'd been in it long enough, and for the sake of his family it was probably time to get

away from the clandestine life of anonymity and try to develop another career. But he was asked to take on another important assignment, and did.

The point isn't that the CIA director—in this case, Adm. Stansfield Turner—can't remove whom he wishes, he was saying. It's the reasons for the dismissals, or lack of them, and the failure to understand the special role they all have had to play. It's not sympathy he's talking about, he said. The hell with that. It was fairness.

I'd say nearly everybody, at least let's say 40 or older, who has received one of these notices has achieved something in his record that is unique. There are commendations in his record; there is something he has done that somebody else didn't do.

"When you've got a guy who's 44 years old with a couple of kids in high school and he's received his little notice, little retirement, and the only commodity he has to sell is intelligence—well, I can't get that across. This fellow has been trained to only one life, the life of clandestine operational skills about which he can hardly talk when he's looking for a new job.

"Well, people say, so what? Look at Youngstown Steel. Those guys are out of work. Look at this and that. Well, after all, if you're a pipe fitter, you can look for another job as a pipe fitter. And you know the steel business is still there when things pick up. Again, this may not be much of a point, but the fact that marriages break up or the kids are left in the states or they come down with rare diseases overseas and all that: 'Well, he got well paid for it, didn't he?'"

Until then, he had been speaking dispassionately, analytically. But here he became quietly emotional. His voice broke, and tears welled in his eyes: "I can think of the days and nights when my wife would have no idea of what I was doing, sitting at home at nights with three little children and I'd disappear into the suburbs of—with Communists and the police looking for me, not knowing whether I was going to get back or not. Then wandering in at 5 o'clock in the morning and not being able to say where I'd been, or what I was doing.

"That type of thing poses tremendous burdens. Whether you find a greater degree of emotional problems amongst people like that I don't know. Anyway, I know I've got a good solid

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family and a great wife and we'll find something else to do. But it's not that easy."

He said something else. It was about all the senior people, like himself, who are being terminated, and his words bridged all the old attitudes and the rules under which they thought they had played.

"All the senior people I know look at it very much this way: had they been approached in a different manner and treated as gentlemen, as people who have worked together for 25 years, their reaction could have been different."

They weren't treated as gentlemen.
—an epitaph for a spy, American, circa, 1970s.