

A Man Of Intelligence

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SUB ROSA: The CIA and the Uses of Intelligence. By Peer de Silva. New York Times Books. 308 pp. \$12.500

By ANTHONY MARRO

PEER DE SILVA, who died this past summer, used to say that he had been the Central Intelligence Agency's station chief in Saigon "at the time when all the wrong decisions were made." The unstated implication was that others had made them.

The others, he now says matter-of-factly in this book, included Robert McNamara, the defense secretary, whose "visits invariably left me with a feeling of gloom and foreboding"; William Westmoreland, the commander, who was "courageous, but intellectually uninspired"; and Maxwell Taylor, the ambassador, who seemed to think he was still fighting the Germans in France.

ANTHONY MARRO is a Washington-based reporter who covers the Justice Department.

This is not likely to surprise or shock anyone. All three have been trashed roundly and repeatedly over the years, and De Silva, as the obituary writers noted, has long been on record as having opposed the major escalations of the war in the mid-1960s on the grounds that the key to success wasn't firepower but winning the support of the peasants.

But it is of some value to be reminded that at least a few officials held this view as early as 1964, and held it so strongly that, 14 years after the fact, the anger and frustration and bitterness still show through. And one can't fault De Silva for wanting to leave behind his own account of how things went so terribly wrong; David Halberstam, after all, mentioned him only twice in *The Best and the Brightest*, and both times misspelled his name.

On one level, this is a cautious autobiography, of the sort many 19th-century public figures wrote in their retirement, intended more for their peers and their heirs than for wide public consumption. It chronicles a life, settles a few scores, makes a pitch for democracy and free enterprise,

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and tells the children what daddy did in the Cold War. It is written in the prose style of a man who has read and written far too many memos and cables and, like many cables, probably needs to be read between the lines.

At the same time, it clearly is intended to make a public case for a strong intelligence apparatus, particularly in the wake of several years of exposure of misdeeds and illegal acts, insane plots (remember the CIA plan to kill Castro with an exploding conch shell?), and the first public questioning since World War II of whether the cost, which is enormous, is worth the result. De Silva's subtitle, "The CIA and the Uses of Intelligence," seems intended as a counterpoint to John Marks and Victor Marchetti, whose earlier book, *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence*, pointed up the dangers of an intelligence apparatus left to its own device, accountable to no one in the Congress save a few geriatric Southerners who gave it the benefit of every doubt. De Silva never attacks them directly, but complains that the nation has been witnessing a "crucifixion" of the CIA, that much of the criticism has been marked by "distortion, inaccuracy, and plain ignorance," and that only fools would try to limit the intelligence effort at this time in our history. "It seems that the world becomes ever more dangerous to the survival and

flourishing of democracy as we know it, so that to be uninformed of the capabilities and intentions of the enemies of democracy seems, in this day and age, foolhardy and unacceptable," he writes.

Like some other defenders of the agency, he seems to equate oversight with emasculation. But on the whole, he makes an argument that is all the more effective because, mercifully, it lacks much of the whining and hand-wringing that has characterized several of the other recent pro-CIA books.

Although no one should buy this book for its entertainment value alone, there are some genuinely funny stories here, and De Silva tells them well. Several could form the nucleus of a comic movie on the Cold War, preferably directed by Billy Wilder and starring Peter Sellers: the waiter in the elegant American restaurant who lifted the cover from the silver chafing dish and carefully carved off the slices of Spam; the Greek diplomat who was romancing his Moscow housekeeper when plaster, cameras and microphones came crashing down suddenly from the bedroom ceiling; the Soviet spy in San Francisco who sent his American followers a "change of address" notice when he moved to a new apartment.

But on the whole, this is a somber book, and the theme, to the extent that there is one, is that "there are tigers roaming the world, and we must rec-

ognize them or perish." (This line—"the world is full of tigers"—was a favorite of De Silva's, and I angered him once during an interview when I replied that there were only about 600 left. He had been one of the first American soldiers to enter both Hishima and Nagasaki after the bombings, had been shot at by Soviet agents in Vienna, had monitored the collapse of the Hungarian revolution, had lost an eye in Vietnam, and wasn't receptive to chiding by a reporter who had never been in a jungle, either metaphorical or real.)

The "tigers," of course, included the Vietcong who were gaining control of the countryside when De Silva arrived to take charge of the station in Saigon, by this time the CIA's largest, early in 1964. By his account, he and other CIA officers recognized early on that it was impossible to win a war in a peasant country without both winning the support of the peasants and protecting them from intimidation by the Vietcong. To others, however, the key was firepower, directed both against the Vietcong and against Hanoi. These decisions, so tragic and so wrong, were mostly those of McNamara, Westmoreland and Taylor, he writes, three men who "came to the wrong war."

De Silva was given fair warning of this on his first day as station chief, when he sat in at a briefing for McNamara, who was touring the country, and listened to him bombard the brief-

ing officers with questions about yards of barbed wire strung and gallons of gas needed for army trucks. "I sat there amazed and thought to myself, what in the world is this man thinking about?" he writes. "This is not a problem of logistics . . . This is a war that needs discussion of strategic purpose and of strategy itself. What is he talking about?"

By the time he left, after being badly injured in a bombing of his office 15 months later, all of the critical, and wrong, decisions had been made, he says. "The loss of fifty thousand American dead, and the Vietnam War itself, had begun."

It is always risky to take a former spook at his word; even 25 years after the fact it's not certain that he's not trying to float out one last bit of "disinformation" or scramble some evidence. This is only a caveat, however, and not a warning to stay away from this book.

De Silva, a West Point graduate who distrusted the military and a patriot who felt our efforts in Asia had become "grotesque," has written a highly personal, subjective history of the Cold War, the Vietnam buildup, and the CIA itself, that is readable, at times engaging, and probably less self-serving than most. In the process, he has made a case for a strong, effective intelligence apparatus that is likely to have some merit even for people who don't agree with his tiger count. □