

Book World 10/8/88

Bad Old Boys

THE VERY BEST MEN
Four Who Dared:
The Early Years of the CIA

By Evan Thomas
Simon & Schuster. 448 pp. \$27.50

By David Wise

THERE IS ONE SMALL but telling anecdote near the end of Evan Thomas's wonderful book that explains the Bay of Pigs and a lot of other CIA debacles. Tracy Barnes—tall, blond, and dashing, a character out of F. Scott Fitzgerald and one of the architects of the CIA's failed invasion of Cuba—had taken his grandchildren to an island in Narragansett Bay for a Fourth of July picnic. The fog rolled in and Barnes loaded everyone into the boat. He hit the throttle and gave his wife, Janet, who was sitting in the stern, a big A-OK sign. She beamed. But at the wheel, a guest asked nervously, "Do you know where you're going?" Barnes shrugged. "No, keep a watch out," he replied. The boat "roared off in the wrong direction and almost ran into a warship at Quonset Point Naval Base."

Thomas has produced a jewel of a book. *The Very Best Men* is a road map to understanding what went on inside the CIA during the height of the Cold War. As a way in to the clandestine world, Thomas has chosen to detail the lives and fortunes of four men who ran the agency's covert operations during its most free-wheeling era in the 1950s and 1960s, under Allen Dulles and some of his successors. The target was the Soviet Union; the CIA men sincerely, if grandiosely, felt that the survival of the Free World depended on them.

Better than most, Thomas has grasped the fact that the roots of power in Washington were to be found as much in the salons of Georgetown, where Richard Bissell and Frank Wisner mingled with Joe Alsop and Katharine Graham, as behind the locked doors of the CIA. To know these men, one has to understand their social and educational roots; in many ways Scroll and Key, a Yale secret society, was as important as cloak and dagger.

Born to privilege, they all seemed to have gone to Groton and Yale or the equivalent, where they acquired social graces, arrogance and an enormous self-confidence which often greatly exceeded their competence. It was a mismatch between style and performance that proved, in many cases, a sure recipe for disaster for themselves and the country.

Barnes and Bissell, under Wisner's supervision, overthrew the leftist government of Guatemala in 1954. Barnes got a medal for it. But the ironically named "Oper-

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PHOTO BY ROB KYFF

Richard Bissell



COURTESY OF JANE BARNES

Tracy Barnes



COURTESY OF THE FITZGERALD FAMILY

Desmond Fitzgerald



REUTER PHOTO

Frank Wisner

ation Success" paved the way for four decades of military dictatorship, brutal repression and torture in that country. United Fruit got back its bananas.

Bissell, a nerd at Yale, was universally regarded as brilliant. He conceived of the U-2 spy plane, an enormous success that ended in disaster when one was shot down in 1960. He also was the father of the Bay of Pigs, which never had a chance of toppling Fidel Castro, regardless of the subsequent debate over air cover and President Kennedy's role. Bissell also hoped to develop a death ray for assassinations (the Mafia had proved unreliable). He was a prime leak for the columns of his old schoolmate

Joe Alsop, whose notes he had stolen on the eve of a debate at Yale. Bissell had won that debate.

Frank Wisner's messianic goal was to "roll back" the Iron Curtain. His agents, parachuted into the Soviet Union, were all captured and executed. Wisner committed suicide with his son's shotgun in 1965. Desmond FitzGerald (St. Mark's and Harvard) belonged to all the right clubs, had a good war—he ate monkey brains in Burma—and swashbuckled his way through the clandestine world, turning up in the subtropics in a pith helmet and safari suits from Abercrombie & Fitch.

Evan Thomas, the Washington bureau chief for Newsweek and the coauthor or author of two previous books, was given extraordinary access by the CIA to a number of the previously secret histories of its operations. In turn, he had to sign a "secrecy agreement," the precise nature of which is not explained. Presumably, this gave the CIA the right to review at least those portions of the manuscript based on its secret files. Thomas owed it to the reader to spell out clearly whether the agency had the right of prepublication review, but he does not do so, an unfortunate omission in an otherwise admirable work.

STILL, the intelligence agency may be kicking itself for having opened up its secret files. For Thomas, whatever the CIA's expectations, has not glorified these buccaneers of the Cold War. He captures their humanity and succeeds in making them real, often sympathetic and sometimes likeable. But he also portrays their foibles, their patrician egotism, the harebrained quality of many of their schemes, and their hopelessly quixotic natures. Indeed, on Thomas's canvas, the CIA's Brahmins appear almost as children who never grew up, well-educated Boy Scouts attempting to divert the river of history with toothpicks.

There are minor errors: Among them, the Bahia de Cochinos, the Spanish name of the Bay of Pigs, is misspelled; the CIA's cover in Miami was called Zenith Technical Enterprises; John McCone was a California not a Texas businessman; and the title of David Corn's book about Ted Shackley is *Blond Ghost*, not (like Madonna's tour) *Blond Ambition*. Where are the fact checkers when we need them? But the errors, while annoying, do not detract from the book's overall value.

Thomas has an unerring eye for colorful and entertaining detail and the revealing quote. Witness Janet Barnes, Tracy's wife, reflecting on the Bay of Pigs: "How could they have been so dumb?"

Only the title may be debatable. The families of the 100,000 dead in Guatemala, or the human wrecks who survived the torture chambers of the Savak or any number of other secret services propped up by the CIA, or the Hmong tribesmen abandoned by the agency in Laos, might argue that a better title would be *The Very Worst Men*. That would perhaps be unfair to the elegant gentlemen of Langley. Their romantic schemes turned into fiascos and their agency became an embarrassment. But, after all, they meant well. ■