

# My Years with the CIA

George C. Herring

## Editor's Note

*These comments were made at the Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, January 4, 1997, at a roundtable session on "Intelligence Analysis and Operations: Hidden Drivers of U.S. Foreign Policy."*

Let me say at the outset that my remarks will be more personal than scholarly; they will deal with access to rather than analysis and use of intelligence documents. It should not be necessary to emphasize to a group such as this the importance of such access. Obviously, we cannot locate the "hidden drives" behind U.S. foreign policy without the documents that reveal them. Such documents are now very much unavailable. Let me assure you that if some people in the intelligence agencies have their way, they will remain so.

I have entitled these comments "My Years with the CIA." In other times, other places, such a title might conjure up visions of danger, intrigue, and adventure. My years with the CIA comprised the years 1990-1996, and involved service on the Agency's Historical Review Panel. Alas, there was nothing especially adventurous about them, although, I should add, there was much that was interesting. What I am left with, now that it is over, is a nagging sense of frustration and a persisting anger at having, on occasion, been used.

When I was first approached about serving on the Panel back in the summer of 1990, I was quite positive about the assignment. The Cold War had for all practical purposes ended, and there was some reason to assume that those agencies that had been on its front lines might now begin to open up some of their voluminous records. The Panel had been created by the CIA as part of a 1984 legislative package that had exempted its operational records from Freedom of Information Act requests. As it was explained to me, we would work with the CIA's History Staff to begin to designate materials for possible declassification.

My first meeting came in August of 1990 (just about the time Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait). The visit to Agency headquarters at Langley was worth the price of admission. Soon after we arrived, we were asked to give our plane tickets and other receipts for expenses to some individuals who had just come into the room. Shortly after, these same individuals returned and handed us the inevitable plain, brown envelopes—filled with cash. During the day's meeting we were forbidden to go to the rest room without being escorted by one of our hosts!

This first meeting itself was hard to read. In best government fashion, we were "briefed" by various officials. After a day's deliberations, we made a number of recommendations. Emphasizing the new era upon us and the importance of adapting to changing times, we called on the Agency to move toward greater openness. We urged the declassification of selected operational files, those concerning major covert operations, for example, and also the review of the files of the early Directors of Central Intelligence for possible declassification. We also urged improved cooperation with the State Department in compiling the Foreign Relations of the

United States series and the creation of a central inventory of CIA files. (We kept hearing that there was no such thing, and that the compartmentalization of records was one means of shielding them from disclosure.) I cannot speak for the others, but I left Washing-

ton that day with a wad of cash in my pocket and a feeling that if we had not conquered new worlds, we had at least taken that proverbial first step in the journey of a thousand miles.

Some important developments over the next few years seemed to confirm my initial optimism. In a celebrated speech in February 1992, CIA Director Robert Gates conceded that the agency had not lived up to its obligations under the 1984 legislation, the result, he said, of limited resources, a low priority for declassification, and, most important—as I later learned on my own—"rigid Agency policies and procedures heavily biased toward denial of declassification." He promised a new "openness". The following year, his successor publicly acknowledged eleven covert operations and promised that documents concerning them would be released.

In the meantime, Congress had passed legislation creating a committee to oversee declassification of State Department records and speed up publication and ensure the integrity of the *FRUS* series. With constant prodding from this committee (of which I was also a member), the Agency gave State Department historians greater

was used as window dressing.

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In fact, the gains were more illusory than real. When the CIA published documents, it refused to give any citations, obviously making it difficult to track these and other documents in whatever internal filing system there was. Declassification of documents for the *FRUS* series was at times excruciatingly slow, and the volume of documents released certainly did not live up to our expectations of the meaning of openness. Those of us involved with declassification came to appreciate the meaning of a word new to us. According to the dictionary definition, "redact" means to edit, revise, and prepare for publication. In CIA parlance, "redact" means to delete key words and phrases, to censor sometimes beyond recognition. The materials CIA released to the archives were some miscellaneous documents and some articles from

classified intelligence journals that didn't amount to a great deal substantially but not a single office file from any part of the Agency. Although, obviously, there is room for honest differences of opinion, from the standpoint of most historians, the pledges of Directors Gates and Woolsey were not lived up to. We have yet to see the promised materials on the various covert operations!

The Panel finally met again in June of 1994, the first time in almost four years and in much the same way and with the same result. After a series of briefings, we made recommendations that appeared almost a carbon copy of those of 1990, the two major ones being that the Agency create a central inventory of its records and initiate a systematic program of declassification. I drafted the report and submitted it. I never heard who, if anyone, saw it or what disposition, if any, was made of it.

One of the recommendations of 1994 was that the panel meet on a more regular basis and play some role in its presumably assigned tasks. After some hesitation, action was taken, at least in the first area. In 1996, the Panel was expanded to add new members. Remarkably, meetings were held in February and August of that year, and on each occasion, CIA Director John Deutch met with the group. At least in an administrative sense, this represented real progress.

Substantively and in terms of influence, however, it was hard to tell much difference. Promises were still being made regarding release of documents on the acknowledged covert operations, but as yet there had been no releases. The problem now, it was alleged, was that such releases would damage collaborative arrangements with foreign intelligence agencies. After conducting the decennial review of its files required by the 1984 legislation, the Agency removed from exemption to FOIA several important files—the administrative files of the Office of Policy Coordination, the National Committee for a Free Europe, and the Asia Foundation. But it did not trouble itself to inform the Panel, making the information available only to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

The Agency's response to the new executive order was less than reassuring. I can still vividly recall one memorable moment in the February meeting when an overhead was displayed measuring agency documents

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access for the *FRUS* volumes and took at least a slightly more liberal position on declassification. In addition, the CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence held a series of "show and tell" conferences on such subjects as the Cuban missile crisis and intelligence during the Truman years in which some important documents were released.

The hard truth, however, was that we on the CIA Panel could take no credit for anything that had happened. While the State Department's Historical Advisory Committee relentlessly prodded CIA, the Agency's own Panel set some kind of record for inactivity. It did not meet between August 1990 and June 1994, so it had no opportunity to exert any influence during a time of tremendous activity in the area of declassification. Even more galling to me personally, on several occasions when the issue of release of CIA records came up at historical conferences, CIA representatives would proudly point out to the group that the Agency had an advisory committee on which three prominent historians, including myself, sat. Now I'm from Kentucky, and I'm not supposed to be swift, but it didn't take too long even for me to realize that I was being used to cover the agency's ass while having no influence. The fact was that, in contrast to the HAC, the CIA panel had no chair, met at the whim of the Agency, exerted no real influence, and at times

in terms of Washington Monuments. The overhead also had graphic designs of the workings of a "redaction factory." Particularly disturbing, we were told that of the 165 million pages of pre-1975 agency records, the CIA would seek exemptions from declassification under the executive order for 106 million, or roughly 64 percent of the total.

We also learned that hours of valuable declassification time and dollars were being devoted to clearing such apparently innocuous things as Foreign Broadcast Information Service transcripts, some of which had been in the public domain for years. Declassification procedures remained impossibly cumbersome and labor intensive: as many as three "redactors" would read each line of each document. Officials continued to insist that protection of sources and methods made it impossible even to consider the release of operational files of any age. In an especially chilling moment, one troglodyte from the Directorate of Operations referred to the Executive Order as that "silly old law". When asked whether it would be necessary to keep secret materials from the American Revolution because of sources and methods, he said no, probably not, but he could not set a date beyond which such things did not have to be protected.

There was much inconclusive wrangling at the August meeting about the importance of systematic, as opposed to targeted declassification. The director eventually ruled that the agency would stand by its policy of targeted—or selective—declassification.

Shortly after the August meeting, which was heated on occasion, we were informed that the Panel was again being reorganized, and the three of us who had been with it from the early years were being grand fathered off. Term limits were being established for positions that previously had had none. I cannot say for sure what moti-

vated this change. Obviously, I cannot prove that it was designed to get rid of troublemakers or eliminate the expertise that some of us had gained. But the thought certainly occurred to John Gaddis and myself. And the result was to remove many years of experience and institutional memory at a most critical time in the process of declassification.

Looking back on the six years now and trying to be fair, I must concede that there has been some progress. The CIA has at least released some material: miscellaneous documents, some finished intelligence documents, and some materials required under the JFK Assassination Records Collection Act. If nothing else, these releases establish a precedent that did not exist before. At least as of August 1996, collaboration with State Department historians on *FRUS* volumes had improved dramatically, although the suspicion remained that access was still far less than complete. Access itself, of course, raised new problems in terms of declassification. More material was being declassified, although the "redaction factory" was still working overtime.

This much said, as I have already indicated, from my standpoint, at least, this seemed far short of the openness that had been promised. The main problem, as Director Gates noted in 1992, remains the culture of secrecy that has pervaded the agency since its founding—in Gates's own words, the "rigid agency policies and procedures heavily biased toward denial of declassification." Let me hasten to add that there are some people in the agency who would like to see this change. This includes some of the declassifiers, who are seriously committed to a policy of openness as long as it does not jeopardize legitimate interests. It certainly includes the people on the CIA History Staff, who, if nothing else, would like to

think that some of the studies they are doing and have done will sometime see the light of day. Still, the prevailing culture was and is one of secrecy, and my own very limited experience made abundantly clear how deeply rooted this culture is.

Can it change? Our experience with the State Department suggests that it can. But such change requires pressure from the outside, namely the threat of Congressional intrusion, and within the bureaucracy itself, from the top down. The Historical Review Panel, as it has been constituted, has lacked the means to bring to bear any real effective outside pressure. Whether, as it will be reconstituted, it will have such means is, to my mind, greatly in doubt. And so far, top officials at Langley have apparently decided that in an agency desperately searching for a mission and wracked with huge internal problems of all kinds they would rather spend their political capital in areas other than, what from their standpoint, is relatively insignificant and potentially troublesome matter of declassification.

The agency's handling of the executive order will be the most immediate test case, I suspect. Unless there is dramatic change in the priority assigned to declassification by the CIA leadership, I am not optimistic about the outcome. The one thing I learned in working with CIA and State is the vast ability of bureaucracies to frustrate change. My years with the CIA thus give me little reason to believe that at any time soon the "hidden drives" behind U.S. foreign policy will be available for us to analyze and try to understand. □

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