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An interview with author R. Harris Smith

OSS

The **SECRET** History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency

BARBARA CADY

What did Allen Dulles, Julia Child, John Birch, Arthur Goldberg, Walt Rostow, Stewart Alsop, David Bruce, Herbert Marcuse, Charles Hitch, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., have in common?

"What they had in common was they were all in the OSS. They all served as intelligence officers or intelligence analysts during the war. I'll even add a few names — Ralph Bunch, Sterling Hayden, Bud Shulberg, Carson Kanin, and John Ford. That's good for a little cross-section."

R. Harris Smith does more than name names in his new book, *OSS: The Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency*. Approaching his subject with the thoroughness and zeal of a dedicated graduate student (which he is), Smith has taken whole basements-worth of unorganized archival material (both classified and declassified), personal interviews with over one hundred OSS operatives, and the dry facts of an entire era

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unclassified), personal interviews with over one hundred OSS operatives, and the dry facts of an entire era and produced a fascinating reconstruction of the New Deal's junket into espionage, sabotage, and guerrilla warfare. The picture he presents is a tragicomic one — unconventional methods required by the exigencies of war, financial extravagance, chaotic organization, and a checkered record of successes and disasters.

According to Smith, the OSS was, in every respect, the brain-child of its founder and director General William "Wild Bill" Donovan, a "civilian general" who had been a successful corporate attorney and a highly decorated World War Two hero. Donovan nurtured the infant intelligence agency and mediated its adolescent internal squabbles, assuring its existence in "a twilight zone of civilian-military identity."

Donovan ignored the advice of Ian Fleming, James Bond's creator and then an officer with British Naval Intelligence, who advised him to choose as operatives men around forty to fifty years old and characterized by "absolute discretion, sobriety, devotion to duty, languages, and wide experience." In direct contrast, Donovan chose typically bright, young amateurs — usually wealthy — and sent them on daring and often harebrained assignments all over the globe.

This gaggle of "reckless" agents

was augmented by an operational staff of varied skills, exceptional ability, and disparate backgrounds. In OSS you found the cream of wealth and intelligence — a Yale law professor rubbing leather elbow patches with an Hawaiian pineapple magnate. And you found both ends of the political spectrum — a right-wing journalist rubbing psyches with a communist union organizer. The net result was no small measure of internal disorder and a hail of criticism that would have wilted a

more conventional, less optimistic organization.

As Donovan argued, this very confusion enabled his staff, whether they were to the political left, center, or right, to become apolitical pragmatists for the hour and to work as a team for a common cause.

Smith's book is unusual, not from the standpoint of its subject matter, but because of the political questions it implicitly poses. On one level, it reads simply as a popular history of an unorthodox governmental agency. On another level, it could serve as a CIA recruiting manual for disenchanted liberals.

On yet another level, it sometimes appears to whitewash shady OSS dealings, not to mention those of its successor, the CIA. Smith's frequent keystone cop images of OSS and CIA operatives, dashing around the board of a Parker Brothers espionage game, at times belies the deadly, shot-in-the-dark realities of international intelligence-gathering. Romantic campfire songs shared between American agents and French resistance fighters do not explain away death-inducing mistakes. And OSS medical treatment given to one Ho Chi Minh is merely an ironic footnote to America's history of paramilitary operations in Indochina.

How did you come to write the book? It seems to me that since Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., was an operative in the OSS and since he's written many other books, he might have undertaken the task of writing a history of the OSS. Why hasn't anyone, for that matter, already written it?

A couple people started writing it. Cornelius Ryan, who wrote *The Longest Day*, started. Whitney Shephardson, who was a great international relations specialist, started writing it. I think they couldn't find the key element to hold it together. It's a very difficult story to keep together.

What's the key element?

Well, what I felt to be the key element was simply the idea that you had a group of very imaginative, young officers who believed in what they were fighting for and oriented

their intelligence operations that way. It was sort of a reverse CIA, even the techniques were the same as the CIA, but they were fighting fascism instead of communism. They believed they were really helping democracy and fighting for universal freedom and whatever. I think that's the key element in all the country studies that I did in the book.

When I started reading the book, especially when I started reading the reviews of the book and some of your off-the-cuff comments about it, it occurred to me that it would make a hysterical movie. Madcap, zany characters, thoroughly convinced that what they were doing was absolutely right ... and committing horrendous blunders in their enthusiasm.

I have been trying to put together a movie scenario, which is difficult to do out of that book. As many people say, it breathes with about nine million facts thrown together without a lot of unity.

You could have Sterling Hayden playing Sterling Hayden.

That wouldn't be a bad idea. Bud Shulberg can write it and Abraham Polansky, who is also in it, can direct it. What I would like to do is to focus on the culture shock and the political shock to one, young,

September 1, 1972 Part One

Idealistic Yale graduate — who would be a composite of several people that are in the book — through working with the French Maquis and the communists behind the lines before D-Day and then being transferred to Hanoi. There, as some people did, they met Ho Chi Minh and found that he was the new underdog, whereas they had felt that the French were the people they had associated most with. Suddenly the French became the enemies, not the enemies, but certainly the bad guys, and the Viet Minh became the new heroes.

They had a lot of heroes in the OSS, particularly the resistance. If you were in guerrilla warfare against the Germans or the Japanese, it was very difficult not to have an emotional rapport with those people. The impact of generally wealthy, well-educated, young New Deal products on the world and the impact of the world on them, a world that they had not seen before, is something that I think would make an interesting drama.

There were a lot of brain-trusters in the OSS and a lot of people that weren't exactly part of the masses. They were America's aristocracy in

every sense of the word. Now would you contrast, having been in the CIA yourself, the kind of people that were involved in the OSS with the kind of people that are involved in the CIA now?

Well, I think at a high level there isn't much difference at all, since most of the high-level officers of the CIA were in the OSS, including the director, of course. The difference, I think, is that these men are no longer twenty-four. That's very significant. They've grown older, more conservative both socially and politically. Their methods are more restrained.

The bureaucracy is certainly much more strict and there's much more red tape than the OSS had. And probably that's for the best. It's fun to read about a bunch of guys who ran around the world conducting secret operations, making some mistakes, and sometimes doing some fascinating things. But that kind of intelligence organization could only function effectively in time of war. When you have a world on the brink of nuclear war, as we are today, it probably is best that the intelligence organization be much more conservative in its orientation. At least in its techniques.

You mean conservative in the sense of bureaucracy.

Right. I'm not saying the politics. It's disastrous that they've also become more conservative in their political attitudes. And again, as I've said to other people that I've talked to, I don't blame the CIA for that. That's a function of our foreign policy. They institute what the White House tells them to.

Do you really believe that?

Yes, I do.

You don't think that the CIA is a policy-formation group in and of itself?

Well, there was a time during the Eisenhower administration, when Allen Dulles was the director and his brother was the secretary of state, when you had a lot of CIA independence.

Nepotism.

Exactly. And I talk a little about Allen Dulles coming to cabinet meetings where he would be asked, 'What does the CIA think we ought to do about this?' And he would say, 'Well, that's not my business. That's the business of the Secretary of State.' And everyone would break up. It was obviously a pretty funny comment, because they talked to each other every night. It made the life of CIA officers much more independent in the fifties. Since the Bay of Pigs, I can't see that there's been any real independence of field officers. They do what the White House wants them to, or at least what the State Department wants them to.

Well, this is generally not what the

liberal press would have the public believe.

Well, I don't know why they feel the need to blame it on the CIA rather than on Richard Nixon. Frankly, if there is a guerrilla warfare operation in Laos, it's because the White House wants it, not because the CIA wants it.

Does this go back to the Kennedy administration?

Well, the Kennedy administration was the breaking point, where the CIA was finally brought into line with official policy. John Kennedy certainly felt that there was a little too

much operational freedom. And, again, if the CIA did things, as in the Diem coup d'etat, it was because the White House approved of it and thought it would be a good idea to kick out Diem.

Now I think there is much more, not only White House control, but there are very few CIA professionals who I think find the guerrilla paramilitary warfare operations to be a useful thing for the CIA to engage in. It's hurting their image fantastically. It's making it difficult to recruit intelligent people.

But it's always been a very low-profile organization. I think that their involvement with guerrilla activities changed that profile. I don't think it's a question of their ideology changing. People are just finding out what the CIA is into and the CIA is embarrassed by it. They feel if everybody would just shut up, we could continue with the insurgency operations.

No, I don't think so. I can't speak for what Richard Helms really believes, but Helms' whole career as an intelligence officer was in the collection of espionage and the chess game operations in Berlin. I think he believes that the function of an intelligence agency is espionage, not to go around supporting guerrillas in the mountains of Laos. It's not only a drain on their activities, I mean, you have to ship huge numbers of people out there — but you also have to pick up officers who are not really trained people. That's why they pick Green Berets on contract.

I have great faith in the young guys from Harvard and Yale who went through career training and who are now working in Prague or Berlin or wherever. They're very different kinds of individuals from Green Berets who blow up bridges in Laos. They may both be working for the CIA, but the paramilitary is a



Allen Welsh Dulles, controversial OSS "master spy" in neutral Switzerland later director of the CIA. His wartime network stretched throughout Europe and into the heart of Hitler's Third Reich.

fluke. It's not really a function that they're oriented toward conducting, and it's something I think they'd just as soon get rid of.

With the introduction of extremely sophisticated methods of electronic surveillance, not to mention satellite operations, how useful will the older type of "code-breaking" espionage be?

I think that the distinction that's always been important in that kind of intelligence is between capability and intention. That fight's been going on between the CIA and the Pentagon for twenty years. You can say that Russia has x number of missiles and they're offensive or defensive and those aren't really clear terms to start with. But then the really important thing is what are they going to do with them? And that's where an intelligence organization comes in. If Comrade X becomes the premier of Russia and Comrade X wants to launch a preventive war, that's damned important intelligence. That's far more important than whether they have forty or forty-eight nuclear submarines.

There's no way of telling intention from satellite photos or even from code-breaking. Czechoslovakia was the great case where electronically we were getting all kinds of different signals from troop movements in 1968. I remember there were a lot of different scares about the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, whereas we didn't know what the Russians intended to do. You move a troop unit to the border, it could mean nothing and it could mean

you're going to move in the next minute. It's the role of the much-maligned secret agent to find out that kind of information. And I don't think there's any other way to get it but through espionage.

Could you elaborate on how you gleaned information for your book? I know that most of it was done through interviews and I'm interested in how the people reacted to you personally and how much of the secret information they were privy to they were able to tell you.

Beyond the written sources, which, of course, was about fifty per cent of the information, I did over a hundred interviews and got letters from another hundred and twenty people. All of them, without exception, were more free and open than I would have expected. Partly, because I didn't tape any of them. I took notes, which is really the only way you can research an intelligence book. People won't talk into a tape recorder about anything that's even vaguely sensitive. But, if you don't tape, particularly since I identified myself as former CIA, which none of them ever checked out, I might add, people will tell you the most embarrassing things. None of them stopped at OSS. They would go on and tell me all sorts of sensitive state secrets and tell me about conflicts in CIA and State Department and so forth. A lot of that I obviously couldn't print.

What kind of documents did you use? What were your primary sources and were any of them ever classified?

Thirty per cent of the book is

material in universities like the Hoover institution at Stanford, sometimes in boxes in peoples' basements. It was a common practice after the war to take the documents in your files and to wander off with them. Some people kept them at home. Some people gave them to universities as their personal papers.

In any case, the Hoover material, for instance, which has thousands of pages still stamped Top Secret, still legally classified, has some of the most sensitive things, politically, in the book that I revealed. The British plot to overthrow Franco's government, for instance, was in there. When Dr. Langer, the Harvard historian, did a book on America's French policy in 1948, he quoted the same document but cut that entire paragraph out. There were just three dots in the book. That kind of thing is still classified. I don't see any reason for it, except that it might embarrass some people. But certainly there's no national security purpose involved.

So you don't think that you'd be involved in any legal hassles?

Oh, people in the CIA read it. The kinds of things they suggested changing had nothing to do with sensitivity. In some cases they just thought I was wrong and in some cases they were right. I did change a few facts, but in no way could they be regarded as things that were personally embarrassing. None of them objected to the things that are really, quote-unquote, HOT in the book.

(please turn to page 8)

(continued from page 3)

like the Pope's involvement in an espionage network. Maybe they didn't see it, the book's not written in a highly dramatic fashion. It's a history and it was intended to be a carefully thought out history.

I'm curious as to what slant you got from working as a member of the CIA and how much of what you knew

based on documents that are still classified and, as I pointed out in a news conference yesterday, the legal distinction between this and the Pentagon Papers is not really that great. There's obviously a time-lag.

I found that there were hordes of

from your job you were able to use.

If I had used anything in the book that I got from my job, it would have been illegal. And there's nothing in the book — well, maybe one or two little things, and they're not really from my job. It was from cocktail party gossip that I probably might have avoided using. But even then, no question of sensitivity.

I do include a few people in the book as former CIA officers who've never been identified that way. Some of them are well known, like Shirley Temple's husband. He's never listed his CIA affiliation and I picked that up at a cocktail party in

Washington. In the job I had, which was analyzing highly classified intelligence information, none of that is involved in the book at all. And I would have felt, since I signed an agreement when I left not to use it, a pang of conscience about putting it in the book.

Did you leave the CIA for ideological or academic reasons?

A number of combining things. It was the last year of the Johnson administration. I was violently against the war, and it was difficult to read the casualty statistics every morning, which was part of our report. A very close friend of mine was killed in action at the time that I was there. He was a marine officer. Just the emotional effect of that was considerable.

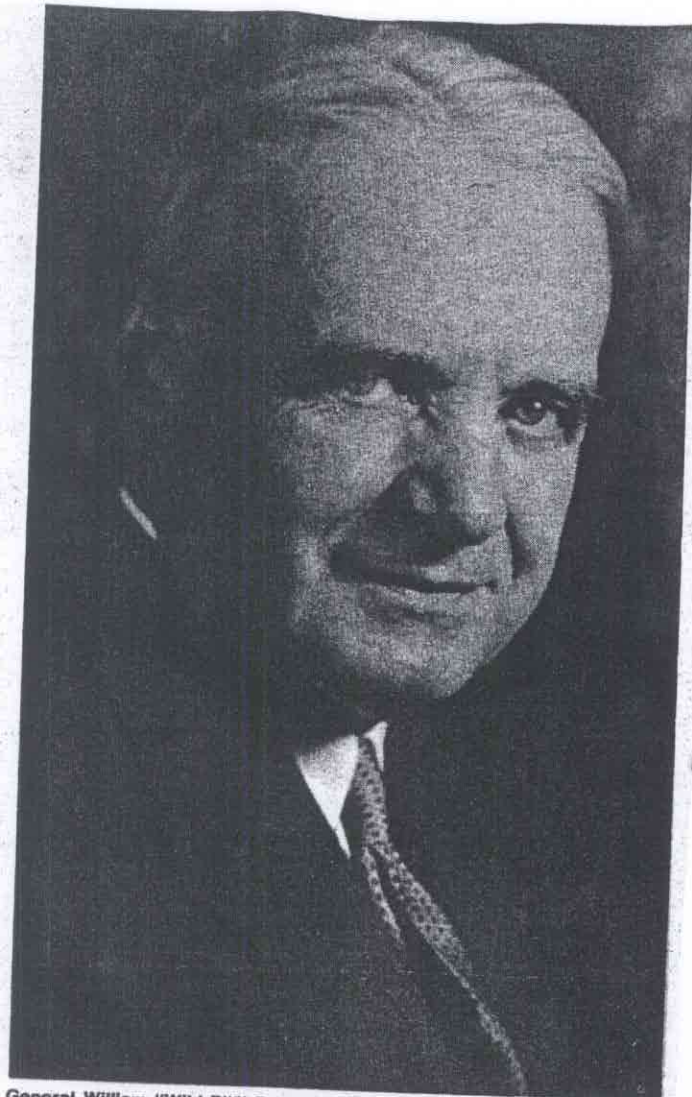
I was also there when Martin Luther King was killed, and that was difficult to live through because there was a good number of southern bigots hanging around the office. Beyond that I simply got tired of the bureaucracy.

How specifically were you involved in the war? What specifically was your job, and did you feel it was intimately related to what was going on over there?

As a matter of fact, I felt that we were having as good a purpose as we could have in contradicting the very optimistic reports that were coming out of the Pentagon. We

were trying to show that the war was not going well. I think we had some impact on Johnson that way.

I worked in the CIA counterpart to the White House situation room. In other words, we were dealing with what is called the President's intelligence bulletin that's marked 'For the President's Eyes Only.' Obviously, he's not the only one who



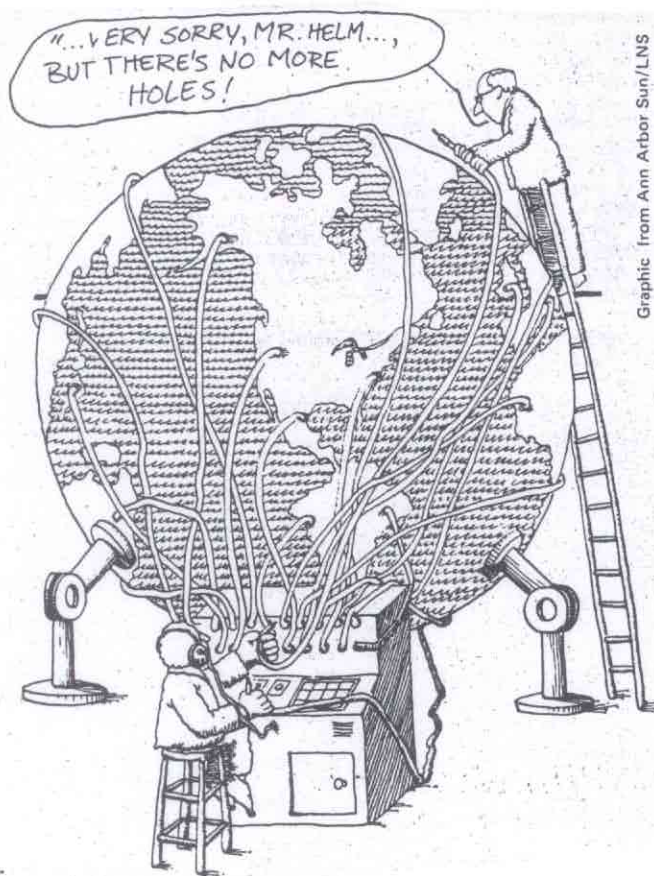
General William "Wild Bill" Donovan, Director of Strategic Services. OSS was a product of his fertile imagination.

reads it, since we all read it every morning. I think we perhaps did throw in a few ringers that helped make up Johnson's mind on stopping the bombing and beginning the negotiations. I hope we did. I like to think that we did.

I never felt that I was a part of the war machine. I did quit the agency specifically to go to work for Senator Kennedy. Unfortunately he was killed four days after I resigned.

If classified documents you did not have access to were now made available, don't you think an entirely different picture might emerge?

No. I think what might emerge would probably make the OSS look a lot better than it turned out to be in



—in. That was a Dulles policy. He adopted it from OSS.

Dulles felt you had to have a left-wing in intelligence as well as a right wing, because an intelligence organization should be purely expedient. And I think that contributed a good deal to some of the more open foreign policy thinking that went on in Washington, the fact that Dulles encouraged liberals to go into intelligence.

Certainly things like the Soviet-Chinese rift, which broke our idea of the international communist conspiracy, was something that came, not out of the State Department, but out of the CIA. And it was because Allen Dulles brought people into intelligence who were willing to think about those kinds of things and to get rid of the ideas they had been working with for so long.

How would you explain the relationship of the FBI vis-a-vis the OSS and the relationship between the FBI and the CIA today? Especially the conflicts of power.

There's a good deal of continuity in the two. The FBI was out to get OSS from the start. A couple of incidents I talk about in the book. The OSS was stealing documents from

the Spanish embassy in Washington and the FBI felt it was part of their territory. So they sent an FBI squad car around to the front of the embassy at three in the morning, when these OSS men had entered illegally, and turned on their sirens specifically to get the OSS men kicked out. That was the kind of thing that went on for a good many years in the war.

Was it politically grounded?

Well, there's no question that Hoover felt that OSS was unnecessarily hiring too many left-wingers, in some cases communists. That was an OSS policy. General Donovan felt that the best people to work with the communist resistance were American communists, and as long as they made no secret about their beliefs, he hired them. He sent them to Italy and France and Yugoslavia and China. And, in many cases, they were some of the braver OSS men behind the lines.

J. Edgar Hoover thought that was a disaster. He never quite got over the idea we were fighting fascism. He was still running his red-baiting operation from the thirties.

After the war, you didn't have the ideological conflict as much as a social conflict. The fact is that everyone in Washington knows that

FBI types are real straight, clean-cut, all-American boys and CIA men are just not that way.

People call some CIA officers the hippies of Washington. That's an overstatement, but in some ways it has some viability. Their life-styles are completely different from the FBI and it's difficult for the two kinds of

personalities to get along.

Just last year, before Hoover died, he issued a directive: for a time, the FBI wasn't supposed to talk to the CIA anymore. It made front-page news. That thing's been going on now for twenty or thirty years. Perhaps under Gray now things will be better.

Was there anything that any of the Presidential administrations that you (please turn to page 9)

(continued from page 8)

studied tried to do to get the OSS or the CIA to work as a team with the FBI? Or were they just treated as two feuding kids?

Well, I think in a way it isn't a bad idea to keep them feuding. I think it would be disastrous to bring them together. No viable democracy in the world combines domestic intelligence with foreign intelligence. The countries that do combine them, like Russia and Nazi Germany — now you do have the Committee for State Security in Russia which combines domestic counter-intelligence, hunting down intellectuals with hunting down American agents abroad. They're different kinds of things, but it puts too much power in the hands of a secret bureaucracy. We have enough power in the hands of secret bureaucracies already without bringing them together.

Oh, I don't know. There's something to be said for enlightened despotism. Political scientists, as you know, are always talking about efficiency and responsibility in government. It seems like totalitarianism is infinitely more efficient, while it might not be as responsible. In this country, I don't think you have either the responsibility or efficiency. You're always sacrificing, in the name of democratic ideals, a lot of what good government can bring you.

Well, I'm not sure that that's true. I think that in the sense of counter-intelligence, I'd just as soon have inefficiency to some degree.

Well, you certainly had that with the OSS. Some of the tales are hysterical, especially the Japanese code escapade.

By the way, someone from the CIA said it wasn't true. He based it on the fact that he had the documents

and I didn't, so I don't even know if the story is true. But certainly General Marshall believed it. Apparently the OSS broke into the Japanese embassy in Lisbon and stole their code books, not knowing that the Navy Department had already broken the codes. The Japanese, knowing that the code book was stolen, changed the codes. So we were left without any information for a good period of time.

Reading your book, one becomes aware of how incredibly paranoid, rigid, and anal-retentive a lot of the policy-makers were and are. How do you think our security forces differ from those of Russia, for example.

Do you feel that they're as paranoid as we are and were?

Yes, I think counter-intelligence officers of any country are a lot alike. They're humorless, paranoid individuals. That's their job. They're supposed to see enemies under every bed, I think, however, intelligence people, people that collect information, that is aggressive intelligence, have a tendency to be more imaginative, more free-wheeling. Perhaps too free-wheeling sometimes. But American intelligence people, generally, I think, are better than the Russians. Maybe the Russian intelligence people that I've run into are just all very humorless individuals. But certainly there's no sense of the irony or sarcasm that is very strong in CIA halls, and hopefully will remain so. It is difficult to function in a highly secretive bureaucracy without maintaining a sort of detachment from the whole thing and being able to stand back and laugh at it from time to time.

You mentioned in your book that the CIA was a haven for free-thinkers, a bastion of liberals, and a supporter of progressive causes, although clandestinely. That isn't what it is today.

I think there is a danger now that they're losing their so-called liberal wing.

How would you place this in terms of time?

Well, the great demarcation was the Ramparts exposure, which just demolished the liberals in the CIA. Everything Ramparts exposed was basically the funding of a left-wing

Somehow that really doesn't bother me too much. The point is to get done what you need to do, and if the government has to do it, the government does it.

I think that the real enemies of the liberal wing in the CIA is the American liberal establishment itself. It makes it very difficult for liberals to continue to function in any capacity in the CIA.

Are there any functioning liberals in the Nixon administration?

I don't know. I haven't met any, but there must be one or two here and there.

organization and they thought it was terrible to do it. But the end result was that the people who were doing it lost their jobs. I think perhaps it was badly done and it should have been cut down a bit. Certainly the funding of domestic organizations.

But I don't see anything wrong with funding socialist organizations abroad. I think that some of them did some outstanding work. I think the whole paranoia of the thing was overdone. For instance, people didn't go too carefully into the funding operation, but the main conduit was something called the Kaplan fund. I think if they checked the records in the late fifties you'd find the Kaplan fund also gave money to Pacifica radio when it was starting. I'm not saying that's CIA money, but I think the left would probably jump on that as being an automatic CIA plot.

SNCC got some money from the Kaplan foundation. A lot of the civil rights activity of the NSA probably was funded in part by CIA funds.

Getting back to the OSS, the class distinction aspect is interesting. No doubt a lot of people in the resistance abroad were from the lower classes. Intellectuals, too, of course. The kind of people the OSS sent over, in contrast, were not engaged in farming in upper New York State.

Even more shocking than that, some of these very rich young people from Connecticut and Massachusetts, whether they were working with communist guerrilla movements, never met communists before in their lives. I think that what they found was it wasn't all too shocking to be a communist in France or in Italy and that many of these people were good people, not only good, but very brave people. I think at the time, at least, it might have changed their attitudes a little bit toward political ideologies.

Now most of these people are old stodgy fellows and say, 'No, No, I didn't like the communists.' But, if you were an OSS officer working



people who worked with the left during the war developed some kind of different viewpoint than they may have had when they went into the OSS. One of the things that I'm trying to do in my dramatic scenario is to show the impact of this on a guy who might well have been Scull and Bones at Yale and came from a Connecticut farm where he raised horses. These were the kind of people who went in. You stuck them in a guerrilla situation and it had a tremendous impact on their thinking.

I think now we've come to the point where American society is ready to see this kind of thing, to realize that the people supporting Ho Chi Minh in 1945 were Americans and that some of them are now in very establishment positions in the United States. But in 1945 Ho Chi Minh welcomed it and actually expected America to be his friend. If things had been a little different, the Vietnam war might have turned out to be an entirely different experience.

It's strange that the American left has not seized on that particular fact, that the U.S. supported Ho Chi Minh, first against the Japanese and then against the French.

I think that the American left finds it difficult to think of an American intelligence agency supporting the left wing. It's the reason I wrote the book, to show them that the operations were the same. If you're going to run guerrilla warfare with the French communists in 1944, it's very easy to use the same techniques to invade Cuba in 1961. And in fact, the people who came up with that operation were ex-OSS men.

Therefore the failure of the Bay of Pigs Operation.

That may well have been. Bill Colby, who was an outstanding OSS man with the Norwegian and French resistance during the war, ended up as our pacification director in Vietnam some thirty years later as a CIA man. I don't know what his thinking is, but he must have wondered how he made that turnabout so completely. Maybe he didn't wonder. Maybe those people never think about it. But it's certainly something the American left ought to think about, because it is a tremendous irony in the historical turnabout that's occurred in the last twenty years.

with a guerrilla movement, it was pretty hard not to like the people you were working with. You couldn't stay alive unless you had a tremendous emotional rapport with the guerrilla movement.

Other people, like Sterling Hayden, for instance, the guerrilla movement had a tremendous impact on their thinking. Sterling Hayden later said that after he worked with Tito's guerrillas for a year or so, he came back to the United States and joined the communist party for a brief period.

I think that in some cases the