

Book Week
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The Shadow Grows

**SPOOKS: The Haunting of America—The Private Use of Secret Agents. By Jim Houg-
an. Morrow. 478 pp. \$12.95**

By ALLEN WEINSTEIN

“AMERICA,” Jim Houg-
an writes, “has become
a haunted house aping its own worst fiction,
a rambling, Victorian manse whose rooms contain
spooks of every kind.” Houg-
an editor, has emerged from four years spent
researching the international underworld of private
U.S. intelligence agents with a lively, well-
researched, and occasionally garrulous book. He is a
superb storyteller, and the pages teem with unfor-
gettable characters from the bizarre world of pri-
vate domestic intelligence.

Houg-
an has stitched together three distinct
themes, each a volume in itself. The book’s overt
theme is the author’s concern for the dangers of our
virtually unregulated universe of “private CIAs for
hire,” which he argues “have metastasized across
the landscape” of America since the Second World
War. These agents include not only 32,000 licensed
private investigators, but also 4,200 registered firms
dealing in “security work” (five of which, according
to Houg-
an, account for half the revenue in the
field). All have access to the modern technology of
surveillance.

Thus, at one level, *Spooks* deals with the use of in-
telligence operatives by multinational corporations.

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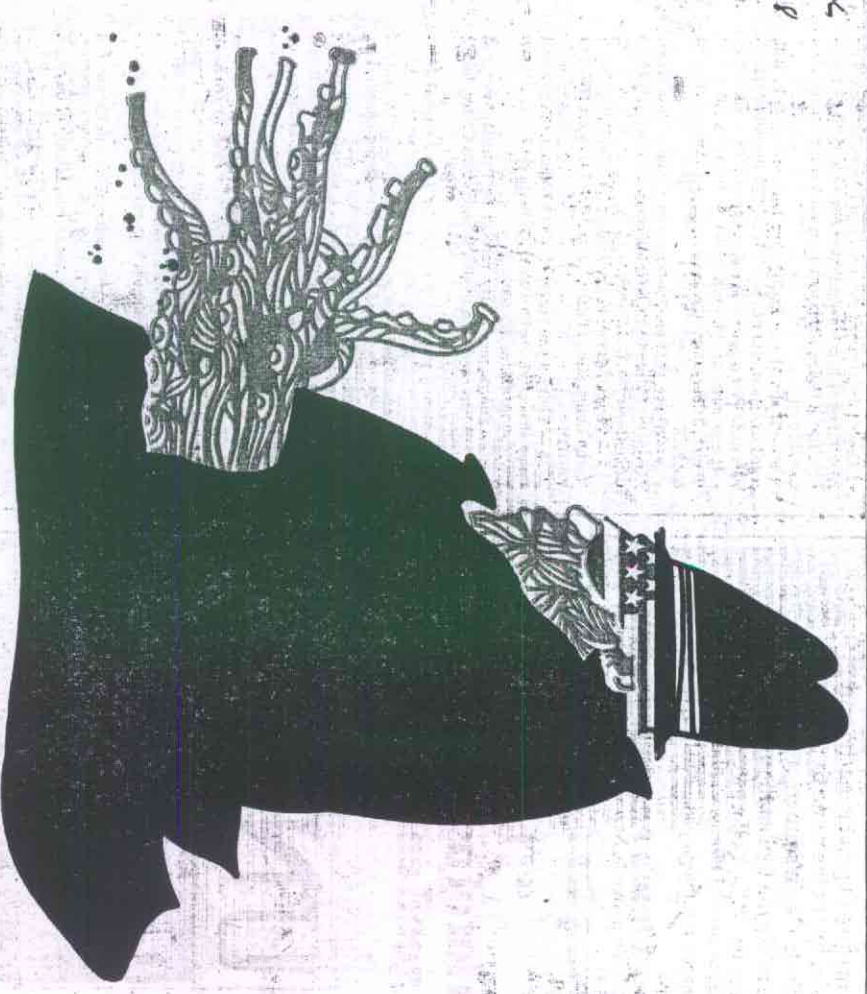


Illustration by Michael David Brown

the super-rich, and the malevolent wealthy. Houg-
an believes that the problems such firms pose for dem-
ocratic institutions have not yet been fully confront-
ed: “The technology needed to realize Orwell’s
worst nightmares is available, poorly regulated and
widely abused, but so far the United States has es-
caped its full potential.” Moreover, Houg-
an asserts that “the U.S. intelligence community has become
an instrument of multinational corporate policy,
reversing the natural order of things. . . .” Almost
none of the material in *Spooks*, however, documents
the precise extent and manner by which this pro-
cess has supposedly taken hold.

Of more immediate concern to the author than
multinational machinations are the extraordinary
intrigues of Robert Vesco and Howard Hughes, two
master buccaners of American enterprise whose

schemes and those of their henchmen fill more than
half the book. Houg-
an has collected a chilling mass
of material—from interviews, government records
and published sources—to document the elaborate
plots engaged in over the past quarter century by
Vesco, Hughes, and their respective associates: sub-
orning politicians, manipulating government intelli-
gence agencies, and adding to their often-corrupted
riches. These chapters form the heart of Houg-
an’s book and distill impressively the unsavory careers
of two American Midases.

A third concern throughout *Spooks* involves “the
milieu of intelligence,” particularly its major pri-
vate operatives. The author’s portraits of leading fig-
ures in the field will probably become a source book

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Spooks

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for the spy novelist in search of ominously credible master agents. We may expect thinly disguised fictional treatments in the years ahead of such people as arms merchant Mitch WerBell, of Howard Hughes' one-time chief of staff Robert Maheu, and of the late and legendary "wire man" Bernard R. Spindel.

Hougan's ability to convey both the devious skills and the sometimes paranoid purposes of his leading "spooks" reflects an admirable measure of empathy for the men, if not for their missions. In most of these private intelligence agents, who began their careers working for the OSS, CIA, FBI, and other government agencies, Hougan finds what he calls the "agent's syndrome," an inability to abandon either the practice or the mystique of covert operations, once civilians. "The Federal intelligence complex," Hougan writes, "serves as a kind of tax-supported university for industrial spooks . . . [whose] clandestine crafts . . . eventually, are brought to bear against private citizens, business competitors, and even the government itself." The book describes the fearsome "operational" end of the work engaged in by private spooks, drawing together material some of which had previously appeared in the writings of Victor Lasky, Edward Jay Epstein, the various Hughes and Vesco biographers, and in studies of Watergate and the intelligence agencies' scandals.

The result, in *Spooks*, is a work crammed in somewhat disorganized fashion with superb tales: Mitch WerBell's aborted "invasion" of the Bahamas (a local plot hatched "in meetings at Duke Zeibert's restaurant, the Class Reunion bar, and WerBell's \$95-a-day suite at Washington's Hay-Adams Hotel"); a scathing account of Bobby Kennedy's long private war against Jimmy Hoffa; the CIA-Mafia plots against Castro; other plots to overthrow Haiti's Duvalier and the Dominican Republic's Trujillo; schemes to assassinate international drug traffickers; takeovers directed against Caribbean governments; and similar stories of private intrigue.

Some of Hougan's findings should

surprise even the most knowledgeable reader. Thus, one of the investors in a 1970 WerBell-organized company to produce guns with improved silencers turned out to be the millionaire reformer and peace activist Stewart Mott. Mott, according to a skeptical Hougan, claims to have joined the venture on "environmental" grounds because the silencer could be adapted to snowmobiles and lawnmowers . . . to reduce noise."

The author reports also that applications for jobs at the CIA tripled immediately after the "bad publicity" of the Church committee hearings, which had the apparent effect of restoring the mystique of intelligence work for many young Americans. But my favorite document in the book is a diplomatic cable from the American consul general in the Dominican republic in 1960 dealing with the venomous dictator General Rafael Leonidas Trujillo: "If you recall Dracula," observed the writer, "you will remember it was necessary to drive a stake through his heart to prevent a continuation of his crimes," and the diplomat recommended a similar "sudden death" for Trujillo. At a time when leading CIA

officials were passing out supplies of poisoned darts and fatal drugs to a malodorous assortment of Mafia-connected figures in order to arrange the assassination of Fidel Castro, must we now assume that their Dominican counterparts received a supply of hammers and iron spikes?

Even Hougan admits that some of the incidents he describes remain difficult to evaluate carefully, given his sources who are often disaffected intelligence operatives, without further proof of their allegations. So I am not persuaded—on his evidence—that there exist tapes of a romance between Bobby Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe, that Robert Vesco was a CIA agent and the Cornfeld-Vesco company (Investors' Overseas Services) an Agency "front," that Vesco held bank accounts for Richard Nixon in the Caribbean, or that the CIA played a significant role in triggering Watergate.

Perhaps. . . . But Hougan concedes that at crucial points in his analysis, "inconclusive" data has forced him to

"speculate." And, occasionally, argument-by-innuendo crops up in *Spooks*, which does not strengthen his basic findings. His favorite *bete noire*, for example, seems to be Edward Bennett Williams whose involvement—as attorney at different times for Richard Helms, *The Washington Post*, Vesco, the Democratic National Committee and others—Hougan appears to find vaguely suspect but without perceptible evidence.

Fortunately for the author, *Spooks* does provide significant evidence of genuine illegality among professional agents and their ruthless employers. The rich documentation of the chapters on Vesco and Hughes kept this reader from questioning too strongly his occasional lapses, such as when he suggests that associates of the Kennedys played a larger role than previously suspected in Watergate. (In the same dubious vein are his curious observations on what might be called the "Indianapolis Connection." Here, Hougan sees "strange coincidences": one of the leading firms of private investigators was established in Indianapolis, the Houston Plan's own Tom Charles practiced law there, Richard Helms married an Indianapolis girl and worked there briefly as a newsman, and the CIA agent who "took charge of the Castro assassination efforts" retired to the city. Thus Indianapolis, the author assures us, "is not without its secrets.")

Still, *Spooks* deserves to be widely read. Hougan's research highlights the serious and unresolved issues of controlling massive private intelligence agencies within the United States, persuasively identifying "the problem and players." His solution is understandably tentative, and he suggests, recognizing the difficulties, that "a legislative mechanism . . . be established to monitor the private employment of 'retired' government intelligence agents and the apparatus for which they work."

America's army of civilian spooks, he believes, should be forced "to identify their clients and to make periodic reports concerning their activities, contracts, and contacts." Although the remedy may prove as elusive to manage as the existing situation, especially considering how ingenious Hougan's "players" have been in the past when circumventing or violating the law, the author deserves much credit for dramatizing the present danger. □