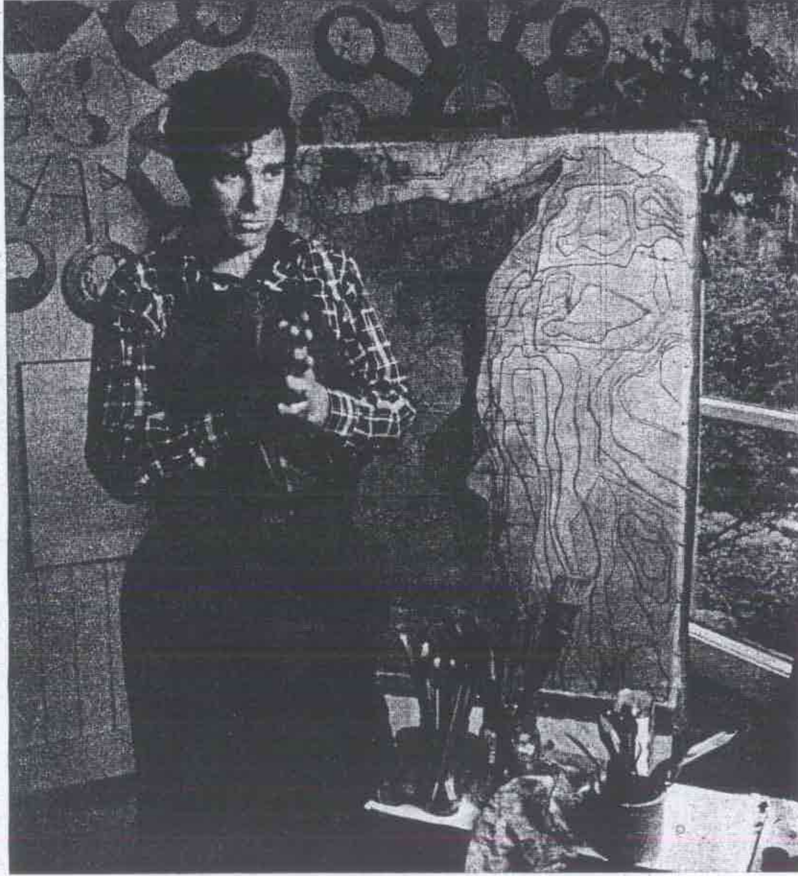
Vint Lawrence

From the CIA to the Drawing Board

by Connecticut Walker



Vint Lawrence at work: Now a successful political illustrator in Washington, he helped to run the CIA'S secret war in Laos, 1962-66.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

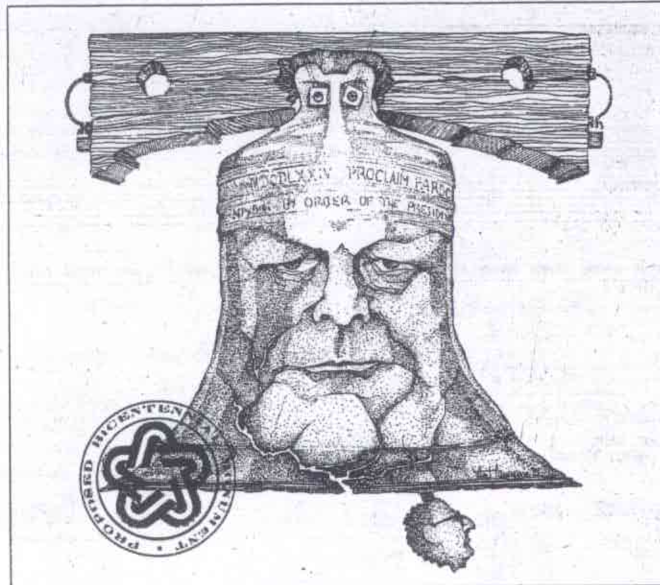
What happens to a former CIA agent who leaves the spy business after a brief but brilliant career and becomes a hot political artist?

According to Vint Lawrence, a tall, strapping, gentle 36-year-old former secret agent in Laos, the transition was rough. "At first," he says, "my former agency colleagues couldn't believe that I'd really left the CIA to become an artist. They'd come up to me at parties and ask, 'What are you really doing?' I'd tell them, and after listening for a few minutes they'd smile. 'That's a great cover,' they'd say. 'You really have your story down pat.' "

It's not his 'story' that Lawrence has down but his new career. In the six years since he left the government, he has become one of a handful of nationally successful cartoonists. His drawings of former Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, Jordan's King Hussein, Secretary of State Kissinger, President Ford and many other political and popular personalities ranging from Barbra Streisand to Franklin Delano Roosevelt illustrate posters and invitations to fund-raisers as well as newspaper and magazine articles. His work has appeared in various magazines—Harper's, Audubon, Washington Monthly, Potomac, and Washingtonian, among others.

"Vint is as well-known and successful a commercial illustrator as there is in Washington," says Andrew Born-

His view of Franklin D. Roosevelt.



How Lawrence sees Gerald Ford and Henry Kissinger (bell clapper): "I deal with the public function or image of a person," says the artist.

stein, former art director for Washingtonian magazine, "and it's difficult to be a success, because the demand here as in the rest of the country is very limited. Vint publishes an enormous number of drawings in a year.

Nader the Viking

"He has a marvelous way of capturing a certain characteristic in a person. His drawings are strong but not nasty. He has made people into various types of animals or inanimate objects. For example, he showed a series of humorous writers as an endangered species and a group of people as male chauvinist pigs. He drew Ralph Nader as a sail on a Viking ship. And he did a fantastic drawing of Mao Tse-tung, turning his mouth into a map of China and his wart into Taiwan. He's a damned good artist, and at what he does—drawing people—he's one of the best."

In the 1960's Lawrence was one of the most promising young agents to work for William Colby, former director of the CIA. "He was one of our real stars," recalls Colby. "He was bright, intelligent, and courageous. He could relate well with foreign types, get their confidence; they respected him."

From 1962 to 1966, Lawrence helped run what became known as the CIA's "secret war in Laos." Under President Kennedy's orders the CIA recruited 30,000 Meo and other Lao mountain tribesmen into a clandestine army to combat the North Vietnamese. Lawrence was the American "case officer." He slept, ate, and lived with the tribesmen, learning their dialect, sharing their paramilitary jungle operations.

After four years in Laos, Lawrence was asked by Colby, then head of the Far East division of CIA's clandestine services, to return to agency headquarters and become his executive assistant. It was customary for Colby to bring young officers, or what he calls "good field

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types," into the home office to learn how the rest of the agency operated. Lawrence reluctantly returned to Washington.

For a year he served as Colby's special aide. "I knew then," he says, "that I'd never have another assignment like the one I had had. I had gotten too much recognition too soon. Ahead of me was a job as a junior officer in an embassy somewhere."

In 1968, Lawrence asked for a leave of absence to marry an Austrian-born fashion photographer he had met on a skiing trip two years earlier. He also wanted to return to his alma mater, Princeton, to study anthropology. (He had graduated in 1960 with a BA in art history.) His studies were interrupted after a few months when Paul Nitze, then Deputy Secretary of Defense under Robert McNamara, asked him to become his aide at the Pentagon.

Quickly, life as a Washington bureaucrat became "senseless" to Lawrence. One December morning he went to a public telephone between a weapons display and the credit union in the Pentagon and dialed his wife. "I told her I'd decided to become an artist," he says. "We went out to lunch and talked some more about it. All along she'd been advising me to go ahead and try. So at the age of 30, I began a new career."

Brief stay at art school

Lawrence attended art school for a few months, but "I left to work on my own," he says. "You can learn things about paper, preparing a canvas and so forth from art school, but it's all eyewash. It ends up clouding your development. The real work has to be done by yourself.

"What sustained me when I left the umbrella of the 'company' [CIA]," he continues, "was the desire to become an artist. It's one thing to be dissatisfied with your job and another to have something else that you really want to do more. I wanted to be an artist."

Lawrence works at home, often dressed in a rugby shirt or lumberman's wool jacket. He occasionally takes time out to babysit for his son Gabriel, 6, and his daughter Rebecca, 3, to play tennis or attend a weekly yoga class with his wife.

He works as a free lance. Art directors from magazines and newspapers come to him with requests for illustrations, although sometimes he goes to them with ideas. He generally gets about $300 for a drawing that he'll think about for a week or so and draw in two or three days. Simultaneously, he starts on five oil paintings — "enough so I'll get scared and really go to work."

Lawrence's political portraits differ from the issue-oriented editorial car-

A map of Vietnam on the troubled face of Lyndon Johnson makes this portrait one of Lawrence's most memorable.

toons of, say, Herblock, Oliphant or Bill Mauldin. They are more detached, more detailed and less slanted. They are also less ferocious and exaggerated than the caricatures of David Levine.

"Levine's work is marvelous," remarks Lawrence, "but he works by exploding parts of the face—enlarging a subject's nose or pulling out his jowls. My drawings don't destroy people's faces. They are more symbolic and less funny. I deal with the public function or image of a person. This image is more real to most people than anything else. We tend to make mythological figures out of people in public life. I draw and make comments upon what everyone else sees."

Lawrence rarely meets the people he draws. "I keep my distance on purpose," he says. "Meeting the subjects of my drawings would make me nervous."

Lawrence does keep abreast of politics. He subscribes to lots of newspapers and magazines, clips and files photos and stories to build up images of people he may want to draw.

Women are tough

Unfortunately, comments Lawrence, he is rarely asked to draw women. "I love to draw women, but the press doesn't write much about them," he says. "Drawing women is difficult. There's something about a woman's face that you can't handle the way you would handle a man's face. There's a flair to a woman's face that doesn't exist in a man's. You can't become sidetracked in a bulbous nose. When you reduce a woman's face to line, you often make her look older and less beautiful. So to do a woman's face well, I think, you must become much more abstract."

Meanwhile, he's doing all right, thank you, drawing mostly men.