

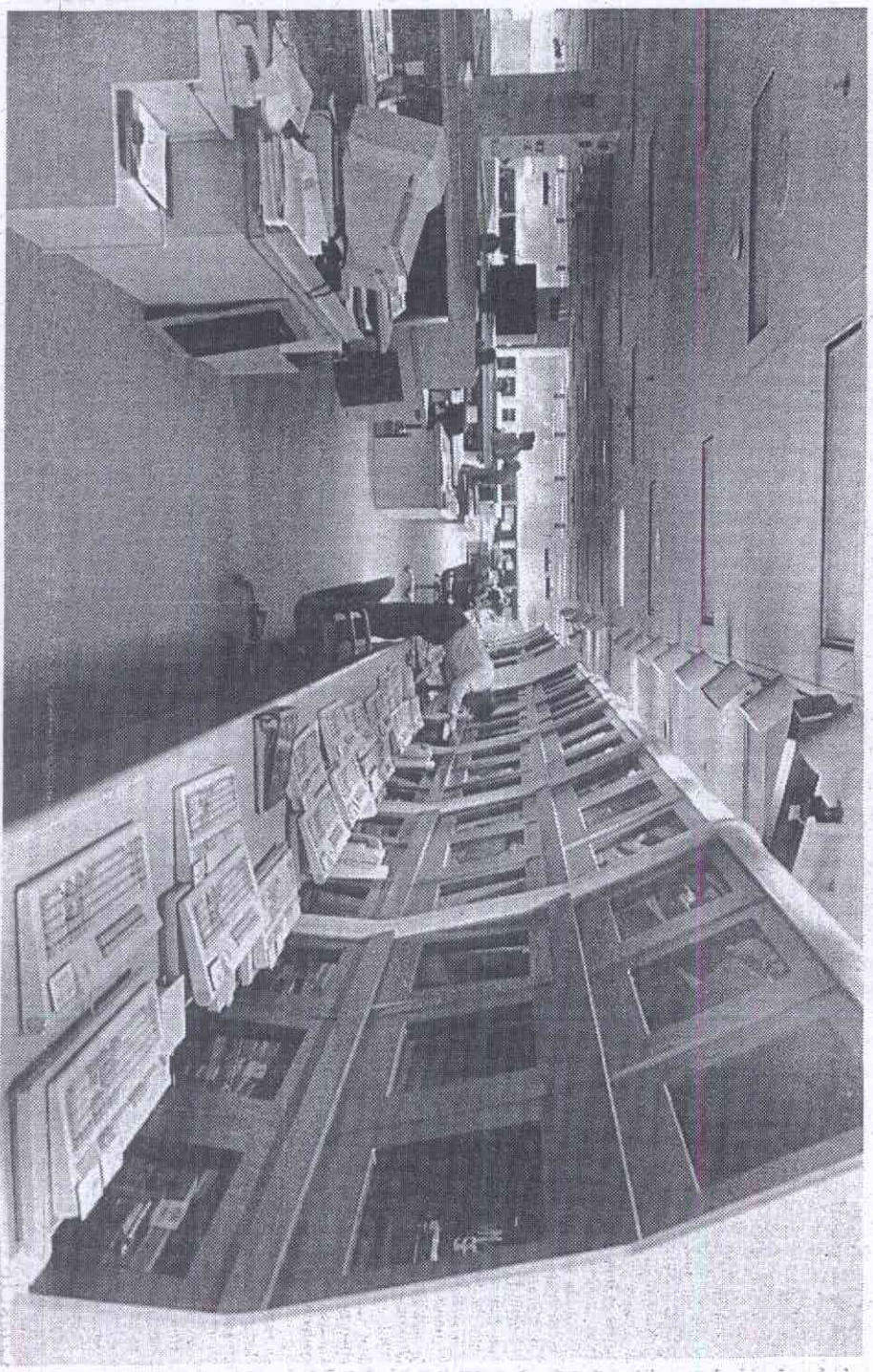
CC "

# The Living Arts

The New York Times

2 B1

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 1992



A view of the network management center, above, and a robotic center, below, at the Central Intelligence Agency in Langley, Va.

Photographs by George James for The New York Times



# Mailer Visits C.I.A. And Finds He's With Friends. Really.

By ELAINE SCIOLINO

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Feb. 2 — Like the narrator of "Harlot's Ghost" who devised convoluted schemes to avoid detection in his spy posts overseas, Norman Mailer quietly slipped in and out of the Central Intelligence Agency last week.

Although the veteran novelist spent seven years writing his 1,310-page book on the agency and its role in American life, the visit marked the first time he had set foot in its sprawling headquarters on the banks of the Potomac, invited as part of its guest speaker program.

But why was Norman Mailer, the lifelong promoter of the left, receiving a standing ovation from a standing-room-only crowd of more than 500 officials who crammed into the bubble-topped auditorium to hear him?

## A Reversal of Roles

And why did three dozen senior officers meet him afterward in the private conference room of Robert M. Gates, the Director of Central Intelligence, for a two-hour debate on subjects as wide-ranging as his definition of treason to the demise of Communism?

Had they all forgotten that this was the same Norman Mailer who be-

tween belts of bourbon at his 50th birthday party in 1973 announced the creation of a "people's C.I.A." to rein in a devious agency that he said threatened American democracy?

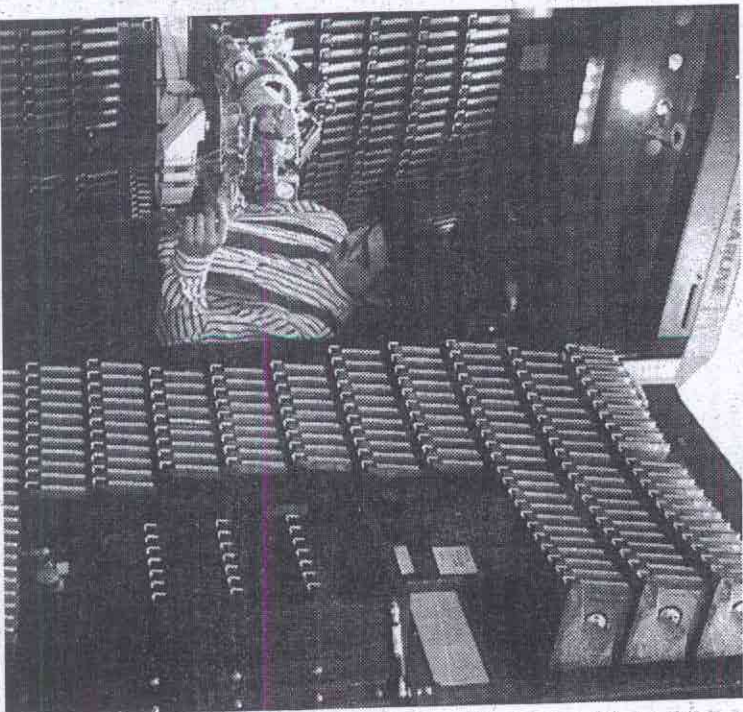
Forgotten, no, but perhaps forgiven. Over the years, as the cold war waned and then ended, both the author and his subject have mellowed. At one point during the long afternoon encounter it seemed that the world had changed so much that the two sides had reversed roles.

When Mr. Mailer confessed that he was not opposed to the C.I.A. conducting "wet jobs," K.G.B. slang for murder and assassination, and that the American people would not be upset if the agency assassinated President Saddam Hussein of Iraq, one career officer in the clandestine service said he was shaken.

"It really shocked me when he said that," the officer said. "We've been so conditioned to the fact that such operations are wrong, that they're illegal. Then you hear this and you gasp."

Mr. Mailer's novel is a glorification of the godless, life-and-death struggle against Communism from the mid-1950's to the mid-1960's and the men and women who waged it, a rare validation of an institution unaccustomed to accolades from the outside.

For him, the invitation to address the agency was an opportunity not only to see first hand the institution



he had studied so long from the outside but also to get its stamp of approval.

For the agency, the embrace of a former adversary proved just how far removed it is from its reputation as a plottor of coups and assassinations.

The visit, as described by officers and analysts interviewed later, also seemed to be splendid entertainment. One longtime agency official recalled that in a gushy introduction

Richard Kerr, the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, "talked about how Mailer was a World War II veteran, how he wrote 27 books, how he won the Pulitzer Prize twice, how he ran for the mayoralty of New York, how he went into the ring with Jose Torres."

"When Kerr said, 'Who would have ever thought I'd be here introducing Norman Mailer at Langley,' well, it

Continued on Page B4



Continued From Page B1

brought the house down," the official said.

Mr. Mailer surprised his audiences when he told them that even without a cold war the agency had a more important role than ever, a message that fit nicely with Mr. Gates's pronouncements that the agency's mission has not evaporated just because the Soviet Union has disintegrated.

"I told them that ideology distorts intelligence and that during the cold war they ended up being seen by the world at large as spoilers," Mr. Mailer said in an interview.

He called the danger of nuclear proliferation to the developing world "staggering," adding, "Now that the cold war is over, the C.I.A. can get out of the beartrap of ideology and begin to provide serious and needed intelligence on the rest of the world."

#### Novel Draws Criticism

As for the novel itself, several agency officials dismissed Mr. Mailer's C.I.A. as not at all believable, not now, not ever. They seemed to share the sentiment expressed last November by E. Howard Hunt, the former agent who played a leading role in the Watergate break-in and who is a character in the book, in his review of "Harlot's Ghost" for GQ: "The writer who presumes to reveal the inner world of espionage without having experienced it is comparable to a young man haunting a brothel exit and asking patrons what it was like."

One veteran operations officer familiar with American intelligence even before the C.I.A. was created after World War II said the agency was never the free-for-all that Mr. Mailer describes, not even in the days of William J. (Wild Bill) Donovan, the creator of the O.S.S., America's first coordinated intelligence agency.

"Anyone who worked for Bill Donovan knew perfectly well that you didn't run riot," he said. "Yes, he was a flamboyant man of endless ideas, 90 percent of which were wild. But in the last analysis, he was a sane, rational man, and the impression that his people were running off doing things with no sense of responsibility is not true."

A female C.I.A. analyst was more blunt. The aristocratic, larger-than-life, East-Coast, Ivy Leaguers with insatiable appetites for sex and duplicity, she said, "would never have passed the polygraph."

But when you have Norman Mailer in your presence, why quibble over facts? The audiences did not dwell on the inaccuracies in their craft or on his mixing up cryptonyms and pseudonyms. Neither did they break it to him that unlike his narrator, agency officials do not spend much of their time rock-climbing, writing endless letters or taking three-month vacations in Maine.

"As a reader, one operations officer said, "you have to get beyond the retired-British-colonel mentality which says that jasmine don't smell in the Kashmir in September," and that as result the whole book is worth-

less.

#### Delight About Mistakes

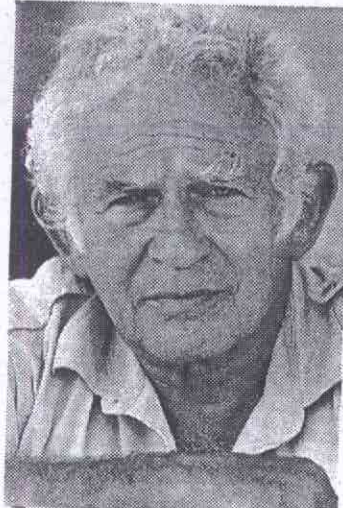
On the contrary, some officials were delighted that in a world where secrecy is sacred, Mr. Mailer got it wrong. "It bothers you most when someone has a lot of sources in the agency and what is written is totally accurate," said one official who has worked both as an analyst and administrator. "You like to see inaccuracies."

During his presentations, Mr. Mailer was asked whether he realized that the real C.I.A. was much grayer than his portrait, and why he paid only fleeting attention to the basic function of the organization: the collection and analysis of information for policy makers. "If you want to write a novel about bureaucracy and not write satire, you need a writer of Thomas Mann's status," he said he told them. But one agency official had a less diplomatic response: "Coordinating and drafting assessments is pretty boring."

What most struck Mr. Mailer about his audiences was just how mainstream and well, polite, they were. "If I was told I was in a seminar at Georgetown or Harvard where intelligence was being discussed, I wouldn't think twice," he said of the small group meeting.

When asked about Mr. Mailer's observation that his audiences were not very confrontational, one official explained: "We were polite because we didn't have a lever. If you read a book by someone who pretends to be an expert, who pretends to know about the C.I.A., then you can argue what an idiot he is. But here was this extreme liberal, and he's telling you he favors wet jobs. He's telling you this as a novelist, so there's no point arguing with him."

Said another: "What did he expect? Guys with guns?"



Random House

Norman Mailer surprised his C.I.A. audience with his comments on the C.I.A.