Behind the Scenes Of a CIA Life

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Cord Meyer's Trek From One World Crusader to Chief of Clandestine Operations . . . and Out

By Paul Hendrickson

Smooth, uncalloused hands idle with a cigarette lighter. Sitting on the sofa, his legs crossed, batting questions away like tennis balls, he looks not so much like James Bond as, say, a bank president on holiday.

Actually Cord Meyer, 26 years in the Company, now retired, wouldn't know about James Bond. "I don't really read spy novels," he shrugs. "I did see a Bond movie once. It was . . . uh, highly imaginative." He insists he never carried a weapon in the CIA—or even learned a deadly martial art. "Course, I had some of that in the Marines." This with a weak smile.

The Grenade

History. In July 1944, seven years before he joins the CIA, Cord Meyer Jr. is 24, a lieutenant in the South Pacific, and uncommonly handsome—so everybody says. He has already made two landings on Eniwetok. Now he and his machine gun platoon are taking Guam.

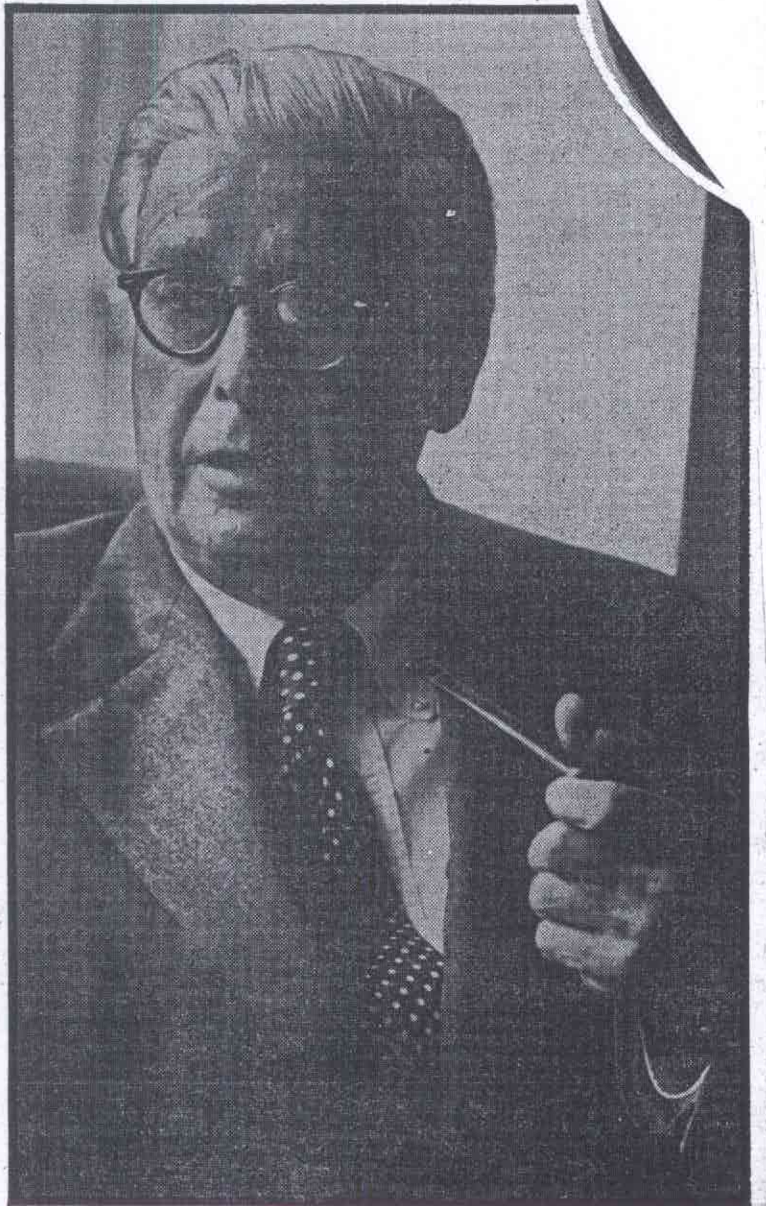
It is a starry night. A small, oval object suddenly bounces on the edge of his foxhole and rolls in. It lies there, softly hissing. He reaches for it as a child might reach tentatively toward a new toy. This is what happens next, as recorded in a story he later wrote called, "Waves of Darkness."

"A great club smashed him in the face. A light grew in his brain to agonizing brightness and then exploded in a roar of sound that was itself like a physical blow. He fell backward and an iron door clashed shut against his eyes."

Wounds

"You have to live with sorrow," he is saying nearly tonelessly. "What was Carlyle's remark? I think it was Carlyle. Somebody told him, 'I accept the universe,' and he answered, 'You damn well better.' "

He is cleaning his pipe. Though his war wounds are still visible—a divot like a dime in his cheek where the grenade first hit, the powder burns along his nose, the creamy yolk that constitutes his left eye—by any standard, you would call him handsome. He



Cord Meyer with the CIA seal. Left photo by Harry Naltchayan—The Washington Post.

is 57 now, tall and trim, with tortoise-shell glasses and white wavy hair combed straight back. This morning he's in a tweedy coat, khakis, a maroon polo shirt. Everything about him suggests class, connection. Also containment and control.

The house—which is in Georgetown—looks that way, too. In fact, the place is remarkable for its museum-like neatness. Everything here is stowecd away. Coffee tables and countertops are clean. The ship is tight. In the dining room are two bare wooden sculptures. "They're by Anne Truitt," he had said on the way in, pausing. "She's a minimalist."

In a while he takes off his glasses and points to his good eye. There's still a piece of metal in there, he says. When he was recovering, some of his doctors thought it was brass—Japanese grenades often had brass in them—which would have eventually oxydized and filmed over and caused him to go blind. Other doctors thought it was probably steel, in which case he'd turn out okay. He decided to hell with surgery, to chance it, and today, he says, that right eye is damn good.

"When you think of the scale of human tragedy in that war, what happened to me was nothing." A small, tight laugh. "A minor miracle, really. We're lucky to be alive."

Liberal Activist

History. Cord Meyer, of St. Paul's Preparatory School, the *summa cum*

See MEYER, B3, Col. 1

Cord Meyer's Trek

MEYER, From B1

laude at Yale (where he sculled, played goalie for Davenport College, was Scroll and Key), becomes after the war a kind of Galahad on a one-world crusade. "World government is possible. It is possible in our lifetime," he proclaims in speeches across the country.

He serves as an aide to Harold Stassen at the drafting of the U.N. Charter in 1945. He is an organizer of the American Veterans Committee ("Citizens First, Veterans Second"). He helps found and becomes president of the United World Federalist movement. He also writes a book, "Peace or Anarchy," that calls war "mechanized, impersonal mass murder."

In 1947, a Lowell Fellowship at Harvard and some Yale law courses behind him, he is named by the Jaycees one of the 10 outstanding young men in America. ("Richard M. Nixon, 34, of Whittier, Calif., congressman," is also named.)

In short, people say, Cord Meyer is a kind of missionary for world harmony. On college campuses he is thought a hero. Girls paste his picture in their lockers. He is nearly everybody's ideal of the well-bred liberal intellectual.

In 1951, without notice, he joins the CIA.

Tragedies

Charles Bartlett, syndicated Washington columnist, on his old Yale classmate, good friend, and current tennis partner:

"What did you expect, really? For Cord to emote? No, he has learned to be circumspect—most of the time. He doesn't enjoy giving himself away."

Bartlett pauses. "All of us have two postures, I suppose. And when you've been an official in the CIA for years, with hundreds of people below you depending on your judgment, you learn to be contained."

He speaks of the tragedies that have stalked his friend's life: the loss of Meyer's twin brother, Quentin, on Okinawa (Quentin was the better athlete, Cord the better brain), the loss of a 9-year-old son in 1959 (he was run down by a car in front of the Meyer house in McLean), the loss of Meyer's first wife, Mary Eno Pinchot (who, one clear, cool morning in 1964 was inexplicably murdered on the towpath along the C&O canal in Georgetown). The two had been divorced by then, but his friends say it cut deeply all the same.

"I mean, Quentin was one of the handsomest men who ever walked," Bartlett says. "The pain of that was excruciating. And of course getting half your own face shot off is not exactly easy to bear either."

Did he ever talk of his work? "Never," says Bartlett.

Before the War

History. His background wasn't as privileged as some people think, Meyer says. One summer in high school he worked as a copy boy at The New York Herald Tribune. He saw a lot. "They used the copy boys to collect bad checks. I had to learn the New York subway system like the back of my hand."

Another summer he worked on a farm in Connecticut. He made $18 a week. In the fall of '39 he entered Yale. "It was increasingly evident the war was going to catch up with us," he says. At college he read English lit and philosophy. "I was interested in the nature of reality." He was considering law, maybe teaching. He liked to write verse (even years later, in the agency).

A Consistent Life

"Yes, but he has his moment of uncontainment." This is Steuart Pittman

From One-World Crusader to CIA Official

"Cord Meyer's life is most consistent, says his long-time friend Steuart Pittman. 'The one thread running through it is a desire for world peace.' Pittman says when Meyer found peace impossible, when faced with the incontrovertible fact of Joe Stalin and communism, he decided to enter the CIA."

talking, well-placed Washington attorney, long-time friend of Meyer.

Pittman resents talk that Cord Meyer deserted his post-war ideals by joining the CIA. You can take his one-world aims and the fact that he ended up in the agency and try to make inconsistencies of it, he says. But in fact his friend's life is *most* consistent.

"The one thread running through it is a desire for world peace." Pittman says when Meyer found peace impossible, when faced with the incontrovertible fact of Joe Stalin and communism, he decided to enter the CIA. Back then, in the late '40s and early '50s, that was a respectable, even honorable, thing for a sensitive young liberal to do. Contrary to the revisionists, the agency was never run by the Howard Hunts of the world.

Pittman seems ready to say something more. He has been talking of his friend's intellectual acumen, the promise he always showed. "If there's any bitterness there, it might be . . . well, it might be that he's never really had the opportunity to see his ambitions fulfilled. I might be overstating that some . . ."

Dirty Tricks

History. Cord Meyer is personally recruited for the CIA by Allen Dulles (who becomes director in 1953). The two are on some talk shows in New York together and get to know each other. "We had the same perceptions, I think, about the protracted, ideological struggle we were in for with the Soviets," Meyer says.

Once inside Langley, Meyer proves a rising star. Eventually he makes A.D.D.P.—Assistant Deputy Director of Plans—a purposely innocuous title that means he is second in charge of all espionage and clandestine operations. (This section would later come to be called by its detractors "the department of dirty tricks.")

Meyer's boss is the D.D.P., a man everybody calls "The Greek." The Greek's real name is Thomas H. Karamessines, and together they comand vast money and manpower. In his book on Washington power, the late Stewart Alsop writes: "The D.D.P. is Washington's closest equivalent to James Bond's boss, 'M.'" He also characterizes Meyer as a "bright but rebarbative [repellent] man with a certain genius for making enemies."

It is widely assumed Meyer will get the Greek's job. He doesn't. In 1967 Ramparts magazine reveals that the CIA has for 15 years been covertly funding such supposed independent organizations as the National Student Association in their cold war competition with well-funded official Communist groups in the international youth movement. Cord Meyer is named the man in charge of the operation. There is public recrimination. Congressional investigations are demanded. President Johnson orders an executive "review."

Then, in the summer of 1972, his name swims to the top once more. Harper & Row is about to publish a book called "The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia," in which the CIA is hotly rumored to be playing a starring role. Meyer goes to the H&R offices of an old ally from world-government days, editor Cass Canfield, and asks to see the galleys. The story leaks.

After that Cord Meyer isn't exactly kicked upstairs. But neither does he make D.D.P. He is sent to London as station chief (where he finds several more controversies—such as having his name listed as a U.S. embassy attache instead of a CIA agent; such as having a connection with alleged CIA funding of British mercenaries for the fighting in Angola. He stays around till early 1976, then comes home to several paper-shuffling jobs. He is said to be unhappy. In December 1977, he quits, insisting he hasn't been fired or riffed. He says he is going off to write books and lecture.

Standing Down

"I'm learning where the mailbox is and where the bus routes are—and how indispensable my secretary was," he is saying. For the past two hours he has been talking, not always eagerly, of his life. "Retirement is . . . different."

He is asked about the flap over the Harper & Row incident. "The agency never had the slightest intention of suppressing the book," stiffening some. "But of course that was the net result of the publicity. I was simply asked by Helms (then the director) to go up there and let them know that if they were going to publish major allegations about us, we would like a chance to tell our side. In fact, we weren't trafficking in drugs, we were trying to *prevent* them. And I end up looking like some medieval censor."

He is flashing; but only for an instant.

He is asked about the National Student Association controversy. "Oh, that," he waves. "The object was not to subvert students, of course, but to make it possible for the American point of view to be represented."

He is asked if he would do it all over again, join the CIA. His teeth are clamped on his pipe, and if you strain, you can hear emitted a low, sucking sound—not exactly a whistle. The right arm starts to chop—a gesture reminiscent of Kennedys. He looks defiant, combative.

"Yes, I still think there are a lot of good people out there. It was true, and in some ways still is true, that the CIA is the best place in government to assess, to reason, to understand what is going on in the world. There have been some abuses, but in one sense you can accuse the agency of only having been an obedient servant."

Perhaps this has come out a bit dangerously. "I mean, no doubt there were times when certain things were done that no moral man could approve, but I honestly feel I never once had to compromise my principles. You don't have to believe that, but it's true."

Then: "I must say, I hope we can get to a world where this sort of activity isn't necessary. I doubt it, though."

For an instant, he had sounded like an old Quixote on a one-world cause. He grins.