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SPYGLASS
THE HAUNTING OF AMERICA—
THE PRIVATE USE OF SECRET AGENTS
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forming the analyses "pro bono publico." (The conclusions reached: the tape gap was probably accidental in origin; that was indeed Howard Hughes on the phone—or at least a man who believed he was Howard Hughes.) In other places and times, Robert Mahou and Richard Nixon take a bead on Aristotle Onassis, deploying wiretaps against a multibillion-dollar contract opposed by the Seven Sisters and the CIA; The Wackenhut Corporation prepares a private study on "Communist Expansion in the Caribbean"; and Walt Macken travels incognito to the Bahamas, there to assess the efficiency of a private intelligence operation designed to separate the island of Abaco from the republic to which it belongs. In Rome, Lockheed's Roger Smith hunches over a yellow pad in his suite at the Grand Hotel, scribbling a memorandum to be made public should a French consortium engineer his "death, disability, or disappearance." In London, Colonel David Sterling makes preparations for a privately financed invasion of Libya, while a luxury yacht eases out of Miami laden with a secret cargo of automatic weapons.

There is real variety in the operations of industry's secret agents. But while those operations are of importance to the public and to those directly involved, they're nevertheless inconsequential in comparison with, for instance, strategic arms limitation. As a result, private intelligence agents tend to be more cynical about their own activities than are their federal counterparts. For the most part, the stakes are financial and the agent's loyalty is secured not by patriotism but by contract. Few spooks enjoy the affluence in which Richard Bast is ensconced and few, therefore, can afford (as he can) to accept only those assignments in which they have a special interest.

Understanding the psychology of private intelligence agents is therefore something of a study in cynicism: they work for money, and, as with some of the agents assigned to Interrel's Lordstown job, they sometimes dislike the people who've hired them and the side they represent. Moreover, the private spook is often less secure than his federal counterpart. For one thing, his working conditions are more isolated; he isn't a part of a bureaucratic and so lacks the day-to-day support of colleagues engaged in what they believe is an all-important national

objective. Nor does the private agent have the financial security offered by government work, and neither does he enjoy the protection of the state. The risks he takes are proportionately greater for his lack of federal authority, and in the end he may even come to fear his own client, Paul Rothermel, for instance, a former FBI agent hired by the ultrarightist Hunt family in Texas, is convinced that Nelson Bunker Hunt was prepared to kill him after Rothermel refused to participate in what he says was Hunt's intention to establish an American version of the Brazilian death squads.*

The psychology of the secret agent working for private interests, then, differs in many ways from that of federal spooks. And yet, with the exception of those writing technical books on business intelligence and on "industrial espionage," the private use of secret agents has been the exclusive province of pulp novelists and B-film makers. And these works, sensational in concept, tend to exploit the customer's romanticism more than they explore the psychology of their own characters. Nevertheless, it would be arrogant to dismiss them out of hand, Ian Fleming was not "merely" a writer of thrillers but a knowledgeable espionage buff and a friend to numerous intelligence officers in Britain and the United States. His characters (or caricatures) were often based on real figures (e.g., Goldfinger on the American tycoon Charles Englehard, James Bond on CIA officer Steve King). The spy technology he "invented" was often speculative, but at least some of it—e.g., shellfish toxin—was leaked to him in conversations with friends belonging to one intelligence service or another. And at least one of his plots, as we'll see in subsequent pages, came peculiarly close to reality.

In any event, dismissing the pulps would be an amateurish mistake. The CIA itself maintains what may be the world's largest collection of espionage literature and fiction—literally tens of thousands of volumes, ranging from Sun Tzu's *Roots of Strategy—Art of War* (Peking, 500 B.C.) to Harry Murphy's *Where's What* and Fleming's *Dr.*

*The reference here is to vigilante groups operating in Brazil, apparently with the cooperation of authorities; their specialty is the assassination of petty hoodlums and Marxist theoreticians.

Bank). Indeed, the *Fortune* 500 group is a likely source of employment for a retiring agent, especially if the firm he applies to is involved overseas or, better yet, is *considering* such an involvement. According to Harry Howe Ransom of Vanderbilt University, one of the most respected analysts of intelligence affairs, "The pattern of history suggests that aggressive, expansionist societies have the best organized intelligence systems."* Undoubtedly, Professor Ransom was thinking in terms of countries (the United States, Iran, Israel, North Korea, and the USSR) when he wrote that, but his dictum applies equally well to corporations.

Nor has the spy yet exhausted all the opportunities available to him. Like former Justice Department spook Walter Sheridan, who went to work for Senators Robert and Edward Kennedy, he might become an investigator for a politician. Or, like former FBI agent Ken Smith, currently a private eye in the employ of Bud Fensterwald and his Committee to Investigate Assassinations, he might become the secret envoy of a powerful attorney with a sense of mission, a grudge, or both. Speaking of grudges, retiring CIA officers have found a market for a service which euphemists call "aggressive protection"; that is, if a prospective client is threatened by an identifiable antagonist—for instance, an unusually forceful creditor who seems unaware of the fact that gambling debts are not legally collectible—it may not be necessary to hire a full-time bodyguard. Former CIA officers can be hired to "persuade" the obnoxious to desist in their threats. How? According to one spook who handles such assignments on occasion, "I scare the shit out of them, that's all. And if that doesn't work, I knock it out of them. Real scientific."

The art world is yet another milieu in which the expertise of spooks is lucratively employed, and not just in the protection of valuable *objets*. Gallery owners and collectors alike are notoriously secretive about their acquisitions and sales, requiring inviolable confidentiality in their communications. Electronic surveillance long ago became a tool of respected art dealers interested in learning the terms of a rival's sale and the identity, price, and provenance of the objects being offered; accordingly, coun-

*Harry H. Ransom, *The Intelligence Establishment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 49.

termeasures experts are needed as much to protect the terms of important transactions as they are to protect the treasures those transactions concern. In the same milieu, "exfiltration" skills are highly regarded. In recent years the smuggling of Third World masterpieces has become a profession in its own right. From Central America to Far East Asia, Africa, and the Mediterranean, everything from Mayan friezes and Olmec heads to Hindu statuary, animist totems, Renaissance paintings, and potsherds has been looted, smuggled, and sold. The buyers are multimillionaires such as Los Angeles businessman Norton Simon, proprietor of an Asian collection whose centerpiece is a priceless tenth-century bronze Shiva stolen from a dirt-poor Indian village in Madras. Simon reportedly paid one million dollars for the statue after a fake was substituted for it in the unguarded temple from which it disappeared. Unrepentant, the art baron has been quoted by *The New York Times*: "I spent between fifteen and sixteen million dollars over the last two years on Asian art, and most of it was smuggled."

Other millionaire collectors, such as Nelson Rockefeller and the late J. Paul Getty, have hired former Secret Service, CIA, and FBI agents to handle a variety of sensitive assignments within their organizations, protecting not only their property and commercial secrets but their persons as well. Working for the very wealthy can be hazardous to your health, however, as former FBI agent Paul Rothermeil claims to have discovered. In conversations with reporter Peter Noyes, and subsequently with myself, Rothermeil described his peculiar past association with the fabulously wealthy Hunt family of Texas. While employed in the secret service of the patriarch, H. L. Hunt, Rothermeil said that the old man's son, Nelson Bunker Hunt, approached him in connection with a plan to form a paramilitary group for "political purposes," a killer force that would train on desert estates in the West. A connoisseur of racehorses and right-wing causes alike, Nelson Bunker Hunt is an important contributor to the John Birch Society and a confidant of its Maximum Leader, Robert Welch. He is also one of the world's richest men, having at one time held title to all the oil in Libya. According to Rothermeil, however, Hunt was not content with mere riches, and therefore organized the so-called American Volunteer Group (AVG)—organized it, that is,

with supposedly lethal intent. Recounting the story, the former G-man contends that Hunt planned to recruit his private army from the ranks of General Edwin Walker's Birch Society cell in Dallas. The weapon of choice, Rothermell claimed, was to be a type of "gas gun" imported from Europe, a weapon whose singular virtue was that its victims would appear to have died of heart attacks.* Asked to join the paramilitary unit in a war on liberals and the Left, Rothermell says he refused. It was then that he found his telephone had been tapped by other spooks in Hunt's employ, and began to fear for his life.

Asked about Rothermell's story, Hunt calls it all nonsense and makes accusations of his own. In his opinion, Rothermell was part of a conspiracy to embezzle millions from his employer, H. L. Hunt. That was supposedly why a detective agency was hired to wiretap members of the Hunt family's own internal security forces. (An unusual course for Hunt to take, perhaps, but it was by no means the first time an employer of spooks has had to set his right hand against his left.) Denying any knowledge of paramilitary affairs or European "gas guns," Nelson Bunker Hunt urged this writer to investigate Rothermell's government background. "I think you'll find he's CIA," the billionaire said, though he declined to elaborate on the significance of that belief, adding only that it would explain the government's failure to indict Rothermell in connection with the embezzling plot.

Rothermell's story is a bizarre one that may be impossible to prove or disprove. In conversations with this reporter, it's clear that the former Hunt employee remains frightened of his old boss, and there is no doubt that his telephone was tapped. As for the AVG itself, its short history is a bloody one that's led investigators (most notably Peter Noyes) into an extremists' Wonderland. Seeking out its origins and "training bases," Noyes had reason to interview Minuteman leader Robert DePugh, who described the group in terms of a runaway apparat whose politics were extreme even for him. Others connected to the

*The "gas gun" described by Rothermell sounds very much like the one used by KGB defector Bogdan Stashinsky to assassinate East European anti-Communists during the 1950s. A Houston defector from a massive wiretapping conspiracy in which he'd hired a Houston detective agency to eavesdrop upon his own security force, a KGB spy complained largely of former FBI agents. According to Hunt, he was concerned about an embezzling plot directed against his late father, H. L. Hunt.

group in one way or another included a wealthy Californian car dealer whose private arsenal of weapons is said to exceed that of some small countries; a far-right cleric whose desert ranch is surrounded by armed guards; and a defrocked Californian cop. This last individual, living in a trailer outfitted as an electronics command post, claimed that the AVG's founding leader was an ex-Marine, Captain Medrick Johnson. A Bircher and a Minuteman, Johnson became national chairman of the AVG in May, 1968, journeying from southern California to Borger, Texas, to implement the group's policies. In July of that year, however, Johnson died of supposedly "self-inflicted" gunshot wounds—though the ex-cop insisted that the AVG chief had actually been murdered. Despite the efforts of investigators, however, no connections between the Hunts and a violent underground have been established.

Going to work for ultrarightist multimillionaires can immerse agents like Rothermell in a weird, sometimes violent universe of plots and counterplots. Most spooks, of course, will avoid such intrigues, regarding extremists as dangerous amateurs. But others, like former Green Beret officer Robert K. Brown, will be attracted to the action, even infatuated by it.* Paramilitary maneuvers on the desert? Possibly. House trailers redolent with electronics gear? Why not? Suspicious suicides, private arsenal, and wiretaps directed against one's own secret agents? Of course. Gas guns? Maybe. Whatever the truth, this is the stuff of pulp novels, and it hardly matters that the cabals border on the insane. America has become a haunted house, aping its own worst fiction, a rambling Victorian

*For more than a decade, Colonel Brown has functioned near the center of America's most violent intrigues, usually as an "agent" or "journalist." The bizarre plot attributed to Nelson Bunker Hunt may seem incredible, but Brown has been approached with even stranger notions. For instance, according to an FBI report prepared in the wake of the JFK assassination, Brown "advised that he has been in the line of Cuban matters for several years and during the Spring of 1962, in connection with anti-Castro activities, he was in contact with the National States Rights Party in Los Angeles, California. In connection with activities, Brown stated that he had been a guest in Dr. Drennan's home, Drennan stated in general conversation that he could not do it, but would like the Cabinet and all members of young men to get rid of Kennedy, maybe 10,000 other people. Brown stated that he considered the remark as being 'crackpot'; however, Drennan may have been propagating him on this matter." Currently, Colonel Brown is publisher of *Soldiers of Fortune*, a quarterly review of mercenaries' activities and opportunities.