

1-7-78

The Craft of Undercover Publishing

DECENT INTERVAL: An Insider's Account of Saigon's Indecent End Told by the CIA's Chief Strategy Analyst in Vietnam. By Frank Snapp. Random House. 590 pp. \$14.95

By LAURENCE STERN

TOWARD THE END of the week of November 14, with all the stealth of a covert operation, copies of the previously unpublicized book, *Decent Interval*, were shipped to bookstores

around the country. The author, Frank Snapp, 34, a veteran of five years of intelligence operations in Vietnam, had worked on the manuscript for more than 18 months under conditions of rigorous secrecy.

During that week the fact of the book's existence was known only to Snapp, a handful of top executives at Random House Inc., the publisher and—oh yes—The Washington Post, the New York Times and Mike Wallace of CBS's "Sixty Minutes," who already had the taped interview in the can.

By the end of the week, copies of the book were on their way to book editors with an apologetic note from Random House publicity director Harriet Blacker Algrant. "Because of the great

security measures we had to undertake to publish *Decent Interval* by Frank Snapp," she wrote, "it was impossible to give you any advance word of materials . . . I hope you will give it your immediate attention and assign it as soon as possible."

The point of all the secrecy, in the words of those closely associated with the project, was to prevent the CIA from enjoining the author and publishers from distributing the book. In the backs of minds were the two prior books of the 1970s which, strangely enough, seemed to thrive under the baleful eye of CIA censure: *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence*, by John Marks and Victor Marchetti, both former intelligence officers; and *Inside*

the Company, the autobiographical monograph of ex-spook Philip Agee.

Marks and Marchetti had to spend uncomfortable months in court hearings fighting the several hundred deletions ordered in their manuscript by CIA review officers and they won a substantial reduction in the number of "deleted" which appeared in the published version. Mindful of this litigious ordeal, Agee retired to the Cornish coast to write and then arranged publication.

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cation in England, beyond the injunctive reach of the CIA. *Inside the Company* found its way into the United States as contraband in the pockets and luggage of returning Americans who passed through the bookstore of Heathrow Airport in London where it was far and away a best seller.

In the case of *Decent Interval*, the publication strategy worked to a degree the agency might have found enviable in its own operations against others. The book and the first wave of publicity arrived in simultaneous climax. Front-page stories in the Times and Post followed by the Sunday evening "Sixty Minutes" interview propelled Snepp into overnight celebrity status.

Snepp, a jauntily articulate young man described by one interviewer as having "a Clint Eastwood face and bad guy boots" was then launched on a promotion tour by Random House. In Vietnam, Snepp was one of the few sources of accurate information to correspondents covering the final military rout in 1975. But on tour in the United States he rose like a trout to the lure of controversy and in no time at all, as the crank of publicity turned relentlessly, there were denials and denunciations from officials who surely had no occasion to have read the book before venting their reactions.

Henry Kissinger, speaking from his aerie of historical overview, pronounced Snepp too low-level an operator to have comprehended the complex realities of the Vietnam denouement. Graham Martin, the American ambassador who presided in a Canute-like posture over the American debacle all the way to the helicopter door, denounced Snepp's position. CIA director Stansfield Turner let it be known that he was referring the case to the Justice Department for prosecution—mindful as he must be these days of the several hundred witting and disaffected senior intelligence officers now being separated from the agency's payroll who might become prey to reporters or book agents. There seems to be little basis for criminal prosecution of Snepp on security grounds, as any fair reading of the book would show. But the national security establishment, with Turner leading the parade, is now citing Snepp as it previously did Agee, Marks

and Marchetti in campaigning for tougher sanctions against the range of self-expression permitted former government employees.

With the inevitability that seems to govern these things the Snepp controversy has attracted much more attention than the Snepp book, which is by far the richest document yet produced on the American and South Vietnamese end game. Not only did he draw from his own diary and remembrances but he also combed the recollections of scores of other participants in depicting the disordered panorama of the defeat. Snepp pays particular attention to his "unsung collaborator," North Vietnamese General Van Tien Dung, who led the final communist offensive against Saigon and published his own memoirs of the battle in the spring of 1976.

No after-battle report of comparable quality has been compiled within the government and placed in the public domain. During several days of hearings in December when Snepp appeared before the Senate Intelligence Committee on his own initiative, the questioning focused more on his motives for snitching than his analysis and description of the political and bureaucratic pathology in Vietnam.

Decent Interval raises a security issue only to those who cannot draw the distinction between national security and their own political reputations. Unlike Agee, or Marks and Marchetti, Snepp does not question the legitimacy of CIA operations or even the ill-fated American proxy war in which he took part in South Vietnam.

Without politics himself, Snepp's thesis could be embraced just as well from the Left or the Right of all Vietnam argumentation. "There is (I hope) little in this book that will touch anyone's ideological nerve," he wrote in the foreword. "By now most Americans have made up their minds about the rightness or wrongness of the Vietnam war, and the aptness of its ending." Snepp joined the CIA in 1968 during the height of the antiwar movement in which many of his contemporaries were engaged.

The central argument is that in the period prior to the collapse of the U.S.-South Vietnamese entity known as the Thieu government in Saigon, the top leadership of the American government, Secretary of State Kissinger included, were lulled into hopes of a negotiated settlement—in Kissinger's phrase a "decent interval"—rather than

expecting an unconditional military conquest by the North Vietnamese. This delusion, he contends and demonstrates, was fed by the vanities and grand designs of the policy makers in Washington and Saigon, reinforced by their calculated suppression of contrary intelligence from proven CIA agent networks and other sources.

If there is a moral argument in the book, it is Snepp's contention that the United States, through bungling and indifference on high, betrayed tens of thousands of South Vietnamese who had collaborated through the years

with CIA and other U.S. agencies by failing to extricate them from their homeland and snatch them from the reach of the Vietnamese communist revolutionary army.

Snepp expounds a doctrine of expiation by evacuation, his argument being that the mess Martin and his subordinates made in extracting the "friendly" Vietnamese was a betrayal of a sacred trust. As an intelligence officer Snepp strikes his one seriously unprofessional note on this point. The need to expiate is not part of the obligatory baggage of a professional spy.

When an operation spoils, the call of duty is to cut losses and get out quickly. Snepp's superiors in the national security establishment clearly understood this precept better than he did.

Yet if there is ever to be a great domestic argument in the United States over the "loss" of South Vietnam as there once was over the loss of China, there is fuel in Snepp's chronicle to feed it. (How curious, nonetheless, that Communist China has now become a veritable tourist Disneyland for many American conservatives, both old-line

and neo.)

In his last chapter Snepp, now writing outside his own experience after his departure from Vietnam, suggests that a massive political purge of opposition forces, if not the much-touted blood bath, has been conducted by the Hanoi government.

Whether or not it has been more pervasive or bloodier than the pacification program in which he was himself engaged in South Vietnam is a matter that might be pondered, and perhaps later historians will answer definitively. □
