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Gentlemen Spies

Four C.I.A. agents at the dawn of the cold war.

THE VERY BEST MEN

Four Who Dared:
The Early Years of the CIA.
By Evan Thomas.
Illustrated. 427 pp. New York:
Simon & Schuster.
$27.50.

By Martin Walker

A LEGEND, in the jargon of intelligence, is a carefully crafted false identity. But rarely have the annals of espionage seen a more successful legend — in the ordinary sense of the term — than during the dashing early years of the Central Intelligence Agency after World War II, when the well-bred sons of Groton and Yale sailed out to glorious battle with a martini in hand and the Whiffenpoof song on their lips.

"This is in many ways a social history," Evan Thomas says of "The Very Best Men," his hugely readable and thoughtful account of Tracy Barnes and Richard Bissell, Desmond FitzGerald and Frank Wisner. "The actions of the men who ran the C.I.A. during the early cold war cannot be understood without examining the web of friendships, the class and culture that made them." Mr. Evans, the Washington bureau chief of Newsweek, describes their wealthy childhoods, the private schools that taught them a muscular decency and a code of service, and their formative experience in World War II. FitzGerald served with Chinese troops against the Japanese. Barnes fought with the French Resistance. Wisner worked for the O.S.S. in Istanbul and learned to loathe the Soviets when he watched their "liberation" of Romania.

Bissell was the odd one out, the brilliant administrator rather than the man of action. During World War II he ran the United States merchant shipping schedules and then helped draft details of the Marshall Plan. Perhaps his greatest service was to develop the U-2 spy planes and the satellites that became the jewels of American intelligence and helped render the dash and daring of the early days redundant.

But what days they were, says the legend. In the words of McGeorge Bundy, President Kennedy's national security adviser, the gentlemen of the C.I.A. "were having a marvelous time." Mr. Evans relates the parties, the dances, the serial marriages and the brittle glamour of a buccaneering caste that could at once wage a crusade against Communism and despise McCarthy's witch hunts. They tunneled underneath Berlin to eavesdrop on the Soviet high command, took to the airwaves to broadcast hope to the captive nations, and from lonely airfields in central Europe wished godspeed to the agents who would parachute beyond the Iron Curtain. They left their Georgetown dinner parties for the dirty wars in the alleys of Eastern Europe and the jungles of the third world. They charmed the leftish intellectuals of Europe and beguiled the suspicious peasants of Asia. And they rolled back the Communist menace.

On examination, the legend frays. The Berlin tunnel was exposed to the Soviets by their British agent George Blake, and Kim Philby betrayed many of the wretched agents parachuted into Eastern Europe. The radio networks gave the hapless Hungarians the tragically mistaken impression that the West would not let them down when anti-Communists in Budapest rose against the Red Army in 1956. As they were crushed, Wisner stood by in Vienna, confronted by the utter amateurism of his service: he had not a single Hungarian-speaking case officer at hand, no guns to send, no idea of where or to whom to send them, and orders from Washington "not to incite to action."

The two outstanding triumphs of the young C.I.A. were the coup that restored the Shah of Iran and secured British-American oil interests, and the overthrow of the leftist Arbenz Government of Guatemala. It was less Communism that was toppled than two regimes with the effrontery to nationalize Western assets. They were both soft targets, and neither operation was quite as brilliant as the legend maintained. Back in Washington, the C.I.A. thought each coup had failed. In Teheran, Kermit Roosevelt was cabled to flee for his life just as his bribes produced the street riots that panicked the Mossadegh Government into flight. But that was the thrill of it, a close-run thing that required nerves of steel, and hang the consequences.

There were always consequences. The early C.I.A. could afford to spend money like water, using unvouchered slush funds from the $200 million a year that the Europeans gave the United States in local currency under Marshall Plan rules. The money was known as "candy." Mr. Evans, who was given unprecedented access to the C.I.A.'s own internal histories of these times, records that two-thirds of the budget went to covert operations in the 1950's, compared to about five percent in the 1990's. The agents and secret armies proved almost as expendable — cannon fodder for the brutally efficient Soviet counterespionage forces. Desmond FitzGerald wrote movingly of Communist regimes

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in Asia churning out "nations of blind warrior ants," but his Tibetan tribesmen died like flies when he could no longer supply them by air.

Evan Thomas has written a tragedy, a book whose mood palpably shifts from the lighthearted, hard-living heroics of an Ian Fleming thriller to the glooms and betrayals and disappointed old men of a John le Carré novel. The moment of transition may have been provoked by Fleming, speaking glibly at then-Senator John Kennedy's dinner table in March 1960 of ways to topple Fidel Castro. Drop fake dollar bills over Cuba to destabilize the currency; spread the rumor that radioactivity lingered in long beards and threatened the revolutionaries' virility. Hearing of these bright ideas, Allen Dulles, the Director of Central Intelligence, tried to find Fleming to learn more, but James Bond's inventor was already heading back to London. The C.I.A. had to make do with the Mafia. The C.I.A.'s war against Fidel Castro was the end of the legend. It was not the agency's first failure, but it was the first to be publicized by a news media that had hitherto been part of the club.

BY the time of the Bay of Pigs invasion — Bissell's disaster — the ranks were already starting to thin. Shattered by the defeat of the Hungarian uprising, Wisner had a breakdown. He was to commit suicide in 1965. Having recommended against sending more American support to Vietnam, FitzGerald was hauled back to Washington to run the anti-Castro operations, and dreamed up a plan for an exploding seashell to be dropped at Castro's favorite scuba diving site. Barnes was left to sell off the more obvious C.I.A. assets — an airline here, a newspaper there, a tobacco factory in Mali.

"They could not see that the mortal enemy was within, that they were being slowly consumed by the moral ambiguities of a 'life in secrets,' " Mr. Thomas writes in an epitaph as wise as it is forgiving. Henry Breck, another Groton man who went into the C.I.A., put it more pungently. "The upper classes fight the hardest. They have the most to lose." □