

A Spy Agency Recruit's Own Story

Don't Call Us, the CIA

By Richard J. Walton
Special to The Chronicle

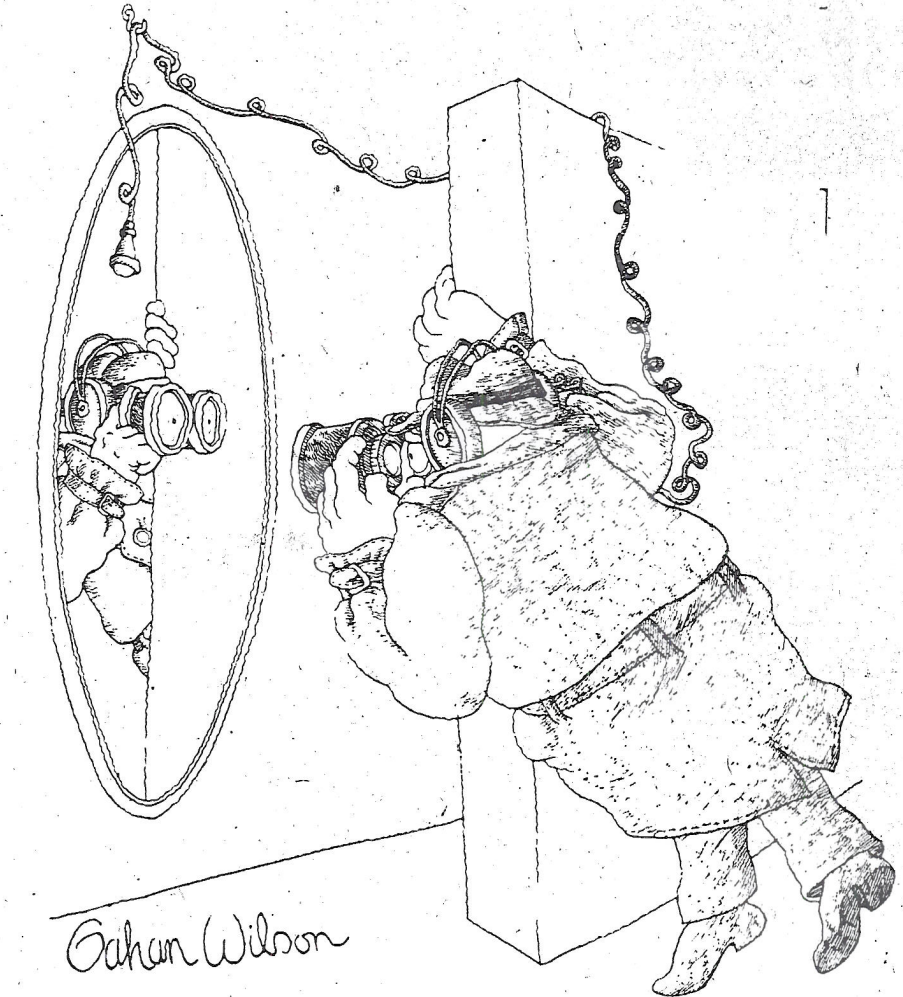
THE CENTRAL Intelligence Agency is so much in the news these days that I thought it might be interesting to tell how it recruited me more than 20 years ago when it, and I, were still in the formative years. I imagine my experience was not unique, and many of those who are now in the CIA's upper echelons must have been recruited the same way.

One day, in 1952, I think, I got a phone call from a man who identified himself as having gone to my university, Brown, a few years before me. He asked if I was interested in working for the CIA. I was 24, with a young man's thirst for adventure. I was also formidably ignorant about world affairs and totally unquestioning about the then current cold war consensus — that we were good and the Communists were evil. So of course I said yes.

I had no idea then, and still don't why he called me, but I guess it's like working for The New Yorker. They call you; you don't call them. I suppose he had had access to my college record. It certainly couldn't have been my grades. Maybe it was because I had been sort of a Big Man on Campus.

Anyway, he told me I'd have to go down to Washington for an interview but that I couldn't tell my employers anything. I was instructed to say something vague about a Government job. So off I went to Washington. This was before the CIA had its bureaucratic country club office in Virginia. The offices I went to were in cluster of wooden "temporaries" near the Potomac, enclosed, I think, by a chain-link fence. They were expecting me, so there was no difficulty getting in. Inside, it was like walking across the Brown University campus of a couple of years before. I kept seeing guys I knew. I chatted briefly with some of them and they assured me there'd be no strain getting in. Evidently, the Old Boy Network would take care of me.

So that's what had happened to all those guys after graduation! I soon learned that three administrators I had known at Brown were CIA



executives and that any number of recent graduates were there too. The CIA was then, as everyone came to know later, an Ivy League club. Indeed, it has been a source of recurrent amusement to me that the most famous (infamous?) CIA operative of recent years, E. Howard Hunt, was a Brown man, along with his White House benefactor Charles Colson.

★ ★ ★

I WAS put through a series of interviews — no, they were more interrogations, the kind to which suspects of particularly vile crimes are subjected. I was put in a little room and teams of interrogators

fired questions at me, a team of two men for a half hour or so, and then another team. The questions came so fast and were often so weird that there wasn't time to formulate the answers I thought they wanted. I just had to answer them as straightforwardly as I could and hope I said the right things.

I can't remember the answers I mumbled. I do remember that they were very confused and anything but impressive. No cool, crisp operative was I. But if I don't remember much of those chaotic interrogations, I do remember a few of the questions. I was asked at one time or another whether I would parachute from a plane, whether I would intervene in domestic affairs of another country

Said

and whether I could kill someone. I don't remember exactly what I said but it was something along these lines: I wasn't keen on parachuting but maybe I could; I suppose I could if it were necessary to American security; and I just didn't know.

When the interrogators were finished with me, I, in something of a daze, moved outside, convinced I had made a botch of the whole thing. But again I bumped into some people I knew and they assured me that my inept performance was entirely normal and that I didn't have a thing to worry about.

So I went home to await the word that I had been told would soon be forthcoming. When it didn't come after weeks and then months, I figured I had indeed blown it and that was that. Gradually, I stopped thinking about it, until about a year later when, to my complete surprise, I got a letter from the CIA personnel office, signed by a man I knew from college, asking if I was still interested. I promptly wrote back something to the effect that I was interested to know what they had in mind. I never heard from them again.

★ ★ ★

FOR A while I was disappointed, for I was a Stevenson liberal then, the kind who despised Joe McCarthy but thought the Soviet Communists were out to conquer the world. In short, I was, except for some flaw, whatever it was, the perfect CIA type, ready to make the world safe for democracy. If they had invited me to join, I almost certainly would have accepted.

And soon I might have been busily overthrowing the legitimate governments of Iran and Guatemala and later, because I had studied Spanish, I might have been working with my fellow Brown man, E. Howard Hunt, on the Bay of Pigs fiasco. So by sheer chance, or maybe by virtue of some lovely failing (cowardice? skepticism?), I am now a mildly radical revisionist writer instead of a middle-aged agent muttering about their mucking up the finest intelligence apparatus ever devised or, more likely, a cynical agent too afraid to come in out of the cold.
