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A Tribute to Angleton

Before his colors fade, I would like to pay a personal tribute to James Angleton, late of the CIA. I have known Angleton for 27 years; for 12 of them, before my retirement in 1968, I worked under him. My view of him, therefore, is different from that hurriedly scraped together by reporters from sources, many of which were unfriendly.

Angleton's unpopularity with the average CIA bureaucrat was guaranteed: he was the closest thing to genius the operational side of that agency has known. He demanded a rigidly high standard of performance and loyalty, and did not suffer fools gladly. How could such a man win support among career-oriented bureaucrats? For years he was the target of cliques determined to oust him. From the late '40s until just now he defeated in turn every attempt to box him in and destroy the agency's counterintelligence programs. On occasion in the past, far-seeing CIA directors had supported him in these internecine fights. This time support was lacking. So Angleton now takes his place in a distinguished company.

Donovan, Dulles, Helms and Angleton. These four shaped our modern intelligence system. Three of the four were dismissed from office with callous ingratitude for the service they had rendered. None of these three, I am certain, was surprised at the manner of his going. Each knew the penalty that superb performance can incur in their world. But where shall we find their successors? Alas, the signal has been given: high excellence brings its own downfall in the world of intelligence. So young persons who might have chosen anonymous service to their country will look elsewhere for careers. That is the real tragedy of Angleton's departure.

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