Books of The Times

The Unmaking of a Spy

By RICHARD R. LINGEMAN

INSIDE THE COMPANY. CIA Diary. By Philip Agee. 640 pages. Stonehill Publishing Company. $9.95.

Philip Agee's "Inside the Company" is not a diary of nearly 10 years with the Central Intelligence Agency, as the subtitle might suggest. As he explains in the foreword, the diary form is a device to organize his material. What Mr. Agee has done is to reconstruct the events he experienced from memory and supplemental research. Thus the book is more history than diary, with large chunks of material on the political, social and economic backgrounds for events he observed as an operations officer in Ecuador, Uruguay and Mexico from 1960 through 1968.

The book was first published in Britain to avoid the kind of C.I.A. censorship that shredded parts of Victor Marchetti and John D. Marks's "The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence." Its most valuable purpose is that of exposure, with Mr. Agee playing the "whistle-blower" who brings heretofore secret information into the light of public revelation. Although previous "outside" reporting on the C.I.A. has given us a pretty good idea of how the agency plies its sub rosa trade, we have never before had such a detailed account of its operations written by an insider, albeit a relatively low-level one whose service was limited to Latin America.

Open Window on a Secret World

Circumscribed as Mr. Agee's vantage point is, it nonetheless throws open a window on much of the C.I.A.'s secret world, and it is doubtful that the agency's methods elsewhere differ much from the ones Mr. Agee describes. In his eagerness to tell all, however, he almost swamps the reader at the outset while describing his preliminary training at the C.I.A. school at Camp Peary, Va. Here the "diary" reads like a digest of C.I.A. training manuals or even a Soviet secret agency confection.

It is when Mr. Agee moves on to his first assignment in Ecuador that the story loses its textbook quality and gains in authority. Here again, he leads off with what seems to be the entire file drawer as he describes the mission of the Quito "station," the political situation in Ecuador, all the various pending cases and even the cryptonyms of various informers —as well as their real names when he can remember them. This background is useful, though, because it sets the stage for Mr. Agee's description of what he and his colleagues did: In Ecuador—and the countries where Mr. Agee subsequently served—the C.I.A. mounted an aggressive, sometimes highly effective campaign of countersubversion against leftist groups. If it did not control the country's destiny, it certainly amended the political scenario in significant ways.

The book reports wide penetration of Ecuadorian life—the Government, the police, labor, left wing, right wing—even the World Assembly of Youth, an "umbrella" organization embracing, among other groups, the Boy Scouts and the Junior Red Cross. (One is touched to read that when the station chief was transferred, a local civic group gave him a medal "in recognition of his work with youth and sports groups in Quito.") The book goes on:

Not content merely to inform the police of the whereabouts of a guerrilla band, the Quito station also persuaded them to exaggerate the number of guerrillas still operating when the arrests were announced to the press. Forged documents were planted on leftists by compliant police, who then leaked their "discovery" to the newspapers. Numerous propaganda campaigns were concocted and financed; militant-action groups were formed to provoke anti-Communist crackdowns; an unremitting campaign to force the Government to break off diplomatic relations with Cuba was carried out—all these in addition to "normal" intelligence gathering. There were no coups or bought elections but nonetheless Ecuador was Chile written small—or rather Chile on an annual budget of $500,000, which was all the Quito station had to play with.

We tend to think overmuch of C.I.A. bungles; what Mr. Agee's book shows is that, left to itself, the organization is frequently all too effective. The trouble is that the means determine the ends, and the ends, in the sense of larger moral and policy consequences, are lost sight of. Mr. Agee's own disillusionment came when he began to assess these larger implications. He concluded that the agency was playing a powerful yet largely negative role as defender of a corrupt, exploitative status quo. Not only the C.I.A.'s activities in South America, but also other military and internal-security aid programs, merely shored up the ruling minority—the 5 per cent controlling over one-third of the wealth—by guaranteeing law and order. Once protest (read, the left) was silenced, with C.I.A. help, there was no incentive for reform.

An Arguable Conclusion

It is here that the diary becomes a political document. Mr. Agee's analysis of South American conditions is informative; his conclusion that only revolution (presumably of the Cuban type) can end gross economic inequities is certainly arguable.

Yet as an account of Mr. Agee's conversion "Inside the Company" falls rather flat; deep introspection is lacking, and the convert seems to have made a rather abrupt flip-flop from amoral C.I.A. technician to knee-jerk Marxist-Leninist. So when he tries to assess the meaning of the C.I.A. in terms of his newfound faith, Mr. Agee falls into a ritualistic denunciation of it as the inevitable "secret police of capitalism." The C.I.A. is a tool—and one that occasionally slips out of control —of American foreign policy and especially the President and that is something else—something more complicated and ambiguous yet also, at least potentially, more controllable by public opinion in convincing and disturbing detail.