A Man Of Intelligence


By ANTHONY MARRO

P EER DE SILVA, who died this past summer, used to say that he had been the Central Intelligence Agency's station chief in Saigon "at the time when all the wrong decisions were made." The unstated implication was that others had made them.

The others, he now says matter-of-factly in this book, included Robert McNamara, the defense secretary, whose "visits invariably left me with a feeling of gloom and foreboding"; William Westmoreland, the commander, who was "courageous, but intellectually uninspired"; and Maxwell Taylor, the ambassador, who seemed to think he was still fighting the Germans in France.

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This is not likely to surprise or shock anyone. All three have been trashed roundly and repeatedly over the years, and De Silva, as the obituary writers noted, has long been on record as having opposed the major escalations of the war in the mid-1960s on the grounds that the key to success wasn't firepower but winning the support of the peasants.

But it is of some value to be reminded that at least a few officials held this view as early as 1964, and held it so strongly that, 14 years after the fact, the anger and frustration and bitterness still show through. And one can't fault De Silva for wanting to leave behind his own account of how things went so terribly wrong; David Halberstam, after all, mentioned him only twice in The Best and the Brightest, and both times misspelled his name.

On one level, this is a cautious autobiography, of the sort many 19th-century public figures wrote in their retirement, intended more for their peers and their heirs than for wide public consumption. It chronicles a life, settles a few scores, makes a pitch for democracy and free enterprise,

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flourishing of democracy as we know it, so that to be uninformed of the cap-abilities and intentions of the enemies of democracy seems, in this day and age, foolhardy and unacceptable," he writes. Like some other defenders of the agency, he seems to equate oversight with emasculation. But on the whole, he makes an argument that is all the more ... it lacks much of the whining and hand-wringing that has characterized sev-eral of the other recent pro-CIA books.

Although no one should buy this book for its entertainment value alone, there are some genuinely funny sto-ries here, and De Silva tells them well. ... spy in San Franciico who sent his American followers a "change of ad-dress" notice when he moved to a new apartment.

But on the whole, this is a somber book, and the theme, to the extent that there is one, is that "there are tigers roaming the world, and we must rec-
ognize them or perish." (This line—"the world is full of tigers"—was a fa-vorite of De Silva's, and I angered him once ... in Vietnam, and wasn't recep-tive to chiding by a reporter who had never been in a jungle, either meta-phorical or real.)

The "tigers," of course, included the Vietcong who were gaining control of the countryside when De Silva arrived to take charge of the station in Saigon, by ... and so wrong, were mostly those of McNamara, Westmore-land.and Taylor, he writes; three Men who "came to the wrong war."

De Silva was given fair warning of this on his first day as station. chief, when he sat in at a briefing for MeNa-Mara, who was touring the country, and listened to him bombard the brief-
ing officers with questions about yards of barbed wire strung and gallons of gas needed for army trucks. "I sat there ... . . . This is a war that needs discussion of strategic purpose and of strategy itself. What is he talk-ing about?"

By the time he left, after being badly injured in a bombing of his of-fice 15 months later, all of the critical, and wrong, decisions had been made, he says. "The loss of fifty thousand American dead, and the Vietnam War itself, had begun."

It is always risky to take a former spook at his word; even 25 years after the fact it's not certain that he's not trying to float out one last bit of "disin-formation" or scramble some evi-dence. This is only a caveat, however, and not a warning to stay away from this book. De Silva, a West Point graduate who distrusted the military and a patriot who felt our efforts in Asia had be-come "grotesque," has written a highly personal, subjective history of the Cold War, the Vietnam buildup, and the CIA itself, that is readable, at times en-gaging, and probably less self-serving than most. In the process, he has made a case for a strong, effective intelli-gence apparatus that is likely to have some merit even for people who don't agree with his tiger count.