

The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America

Hugh Wilford. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008. 342 pages, including notes and index.

Reviewed by Michael Warner

Once upon a time, serious and well-meaning people believed communism to be the wave of the future. They thought that only scientific socialism could build just societies in which the arts and the intellect could flourish; that the Soviet Union was the place where the future existed today; and that the avuncular Josef Stalin was the only true opponent of fascism in all its capitalist and war-mongering forms.

Once upon a time, the Central Intelligence Agency ran a world-wide covert action campaign to counter such nonsense in societies in which communism might take hold. Almost every CIA station had case officers dedicated to working with labor unions, intellectuals, youth and student organizations, journalists, veterans, women's groups, and more. The Agency dealt directly with foreign representatives of these groups, but it also subsidized their activities indirectly by laundering funds through allied organizations based in the United States. In short, the Agency's covert political action depended on the anti-communist zeal of private American citizens, only a few of whom knew that the overseas works of their ostensibly independent organizations were financed by the CIA until the campaign's cover was disastrously blown in 1967.

British historian Hugh Wilford has just given us the best history of the covert political action campaign to date. Wilford is now associate professor of history at California State University (Long Beach), but before arriving there he spent years in pursuit of the documentation that he sensed had to exist in the organizational remains of the groups that the Agency had funded. His work brought him metaphorically to my door at the CIA History Staff, as the truth-in-reviewing code obliges me acknowledge. Full disclosure also bids me say that I wrote on the covert action campaign in a still-classified monograph published by CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence in 1999.

Where I had viewed the CIA's campaign from the inside looking out, Wilford's new book *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* does the job from the outside in. Wilford exploits contemporary public accounts, memoirs, and, most important, the remaining files of the various private groups involved. The *Mighty Wurlitzer* surpasses early attempts like Peter Coleman's *The Liberal Conspiracy* (1989) and Frances Stonor Saunders' *Cultural Cold*

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War (2000).¹ The former book had examined only one organization, the Congress for Cultural Freedom, and took a congratulatory tone that was disliked by some reviewers. The latter cast a wider net and surveyed a congeries of cultural, artistic, and intellectual groups, but its conspiracy-mongering style undermined its judgments.

Unlike these efforts, Wilford writes, he provides “the first comprehensive account of the CIA’s covert network from its creation in the late 1940s to its exposure 20 years later, encompassing all the main American citizen groups involved in front operations.” He adds that he set out to portray “the relationship between the CIA and its client organizations in as complete and rounded a manner as possible” given his lack of access to CIA files: “My hope is that, by telling both sides of the story, the groups’ as well as the CIA’s, I will shed new light not only on the U.S. government’s conduct of the Cold War, but also on American society and culture in the mid-twentieth century.” [10]. On both of these scores, Wilford does better than the earlier works.

The Mighty Wurlitzer succeeds at its first goal of presenting as comprehensive a survey as can be expected without access to CIA files. In doing so, Wilford has surely saved a wealth of detail from oblivion. He located and studied the yellowing archives of mostly forgotten organizations like the National Student Association, the American Congress for Cultural Freedom, the Committees of Correspondence, and the Family Rosary Crusade. Few historians work as hard as he did to capture the fading memories of a private America in the age just before cheap copy machines. His method frequently uncovered details that no longer exist in the CIA’s official memory, such as the personal ties between early CIA officials and the officers of American voluntary organizations that would soon receive Agency subsidies.

Wilford falls short, however, in his second aim for *The Mighty Wurlitzer*, that of explaining both sides of the relationship between the Agency and its private clients. Despite his careful research, he did not explore all available sources and avenues. For example, Wilford spoke with very few veterans, whether former Agency employees or officers of the relevant front groups. Doing so would have added texture to his tale, particularly with regard to the inter-personal dynamics inside and outside the CIA that played such large roles in these operations. Wilford’s choice of incidents, groups, and individuals to discuss, moreover, makes for a rather choppy narrative. *The Mighty Wurlitzer* jumps from episode to episode and group to group, detailing each in turn but leaving the reader wondering about the connections between them. This is not a glaring flaw and it is more than compensated for by Wilford’s larger insight. Though he does not quite succeed in showing the Agency’s side of the story, he still gets one big point right.

Here it might help the reader to understand that the insinuating sub-title of this book is a bit of a misnomer. My complaint may not be with Wilford at all but rather with his publishers at Harvard; “How the CIA Played America” sounds like something coined in a marketing office. Wilford explains the title derived

¹ *The Liberal Conspiracy: The Congress of Cultural Freedom and the Struggle for the Mind of Postwar Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1989); *Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: New Press, 2000).

from a 1950s quip by CIA operational chief Frank Wisner, who reportedly spoke of his directorate's complex of front organizations as a "mighty Wurlitzer"; a big theater organ "capable of playing any propaganda tune he desired." [7] Wilford does not claim the CIA "played" America, in the sense of duping gullible presidents or Congresses for the purpose of pursuing its own foreign policies. Instead, he means to say that the CIA used Americans, indeed, the whole country, as instruments in a mission that for two decades had bipartisan support in this nation: the goal of demonstrating to communism's adherents and a candid world the multifarious variety and hence the superiority of liberal democracy.

This point was made well in a declassified CIA History Staff study of DCI Allen Dulles that Wilford might not have seen. (Absence of a bibliography in *The Mighty Wurlitzer* makes it hard to be certain.) In discussing CIA's covert political action campaign, the study explained that it had survived so long because presidents and key Congressmen held "a fairly sophisticated point of view" that understood that "the public exhibition of unorthodox views was a potent weapon against monolithic communist uniformity of action." The CIA subsidized freedom in order to expose the lies of tyrants—and then winced silently when that freedom led to an occasional bite on America's hand.

Wilford grasps this point, and adds another. When the CIA played America like a mighty Wurlitzer, he argues, "U.S. citizens at first followed the Agency's score, [but] then began improvising their own tunes, eventually turning harmony into cacophony." [10] In that, *The Mighty Wurlitzer* is certainly correct. Wilford has explained for an academic audience what CIA case officers learned the hard way in the early Cold War. Covert political action always requires willing partners, and they almost always work two agendas at once: that of the intelligence agency that subsidizes them, and that of their own faction within the private organization or movement they represent. "Who co-opted whom?" was a little joke whispered by former officers of the National Student Association once they joined CIA to run Covert Action Staff's Branch 5—and thus took over the youth and student field in the Agency's larger campaign.

Why is this important? Because scholars and graduate students will someday follow Wilford's lead. His judicious approach should set the standard for their studies. Second, it matters because some quarters inside and outside government argue today that America needs to replicate the successes of the CIA's covert political action campaign for the Global War on Terror. *The Mighty Wurlitzer* might not convince them that that's a bad idea, but Wilford's observations should give them pause to consider the risks and unintended consequences of projects that they are unlikely to be able to control completely.

