Walter Pforzheimer Reminisces

Interviewing an Intelligence Icon

William Nolte

Living legend is not a term to be used frequently or loosely. That said, Walter Pforzheimer is a living legend in American intelligence. After graduation from Yale College and Yale Law School, and World War II service in the US Army, Mr. Pforzheimer joined the new Central Intelligence Agency as its first Legislative Counsel. Among the other accomplishments of a distinguished career, Mr. Pforzheimer is the founder of the Historical Intelligence Collection, one of the world’s greatest resources in intelligence literature. Since his retirement in 1974, he has continued to serve as a source of information and perspective to Directors of Central Intelligence (DCIs), scholars, and virtually anyone else fortunate enough to seek his views on the past, present, and future of intelligence. In 1997, he was honored as one of CIA’s 50 Trailblazers.

Over the years, Pforzheimer has spoken many times to various audiences at CIA. He has also been interviewed as part of the Agency’s oral history program; I interviewed him in November 1998. What follows are excerpts from those collections of Pforzheimer’s observations on DCIs, colleagues, the Congress and some of its members, and a host of other topics of interest to a man with a great range of interests.

"It Beats Digging Ditches": The Origins of a Career in Intelligence.

Robin Winks [Yale University professor and author] links the beginning of your intelligence career with something called the Yale Library Project. Does Winks have that story about right?

That’s an interesting story. A friend of my family’s, Robert Ullman, called me one day and asked me to come the next night to dinner in New York. “Don’t tell anyone about this. Don’t mention a word,” was the way he put it. So I went to his house the next night or so, and as it turns out the other people there were people from OSS [the Office of Strategic Services]. He was a Yale graduate, and they wanted me to get $25,000 into the hands of a Yale professor who was going abroad for OSS. Well, at that time “I didn’t know nothin’ about nothin’” when it came to intelligence, but I said I’d try. So that evening a project was set up called the Yale Library Project that was intended to put into the hands of this Yale professor overt material—periodicals and so forth—for the Yale Library.

This was all new to me, but I worked it out so that Yale could announce that Professor Joe Curtiss was going abroad for the purpose of building collections for the Yale Library. This was really easy to do, because I was a trustee of the library, and OSS wanted it to seem as though the money came from friends of the university, not from OSS. So we set it up that way, and it was announced by Yale, but the problem was I couldn’t keep the thing going because I was within a few days of going off to officer candidates’ school in Florida. So my father ended up keeping the books for the duration of the war.

Now, when it came time for Joe Curtiss to leave on his mission, several other libraries—Yale had announced this as a public project—
came in and said they wanted Curtiss to step in and do the same thing for their libraries. A Midwestern university, Harvard, and a few others got involved in such a way that it actually complicated Curtiss’s visa application until Yale finally agreed to broaden the effort.

So, after the initial contact, I had little to do with it. I was in Florida and then in Europe. The money came to a young Yale man named Tom Mendenhall, who later became president of Smith College, and my father ended up having to do the accounting, not just for Yale, but for Harvard and the other schools. Not that the other schools got much from Curtiss, who really wanted to keep them at some distance so he didn’t have to answer too many questions. It was terribly secret. I got letters from the president of Yale, asking me “Would you please let the president of Yale know who these ‘Yale people’ are putting up this twenty-five grand?” And I had to tell him I couldn’t. I never did.

Finally, in about 1952, Donald Downes, one of the men who had been at that dinner with Robert Ullman and me decided to publish a book on secrets of the OSS—largely to annoy J. Edgar Hoover. The book was published in England, and it included a chapter on the library project. So I took the book to the head of the Yale Library, who had been one of the officials sending me telegrams during the war trying to find out the source of the money, and told him he might be interested in this story. I thought he’d die.

Years later, there was this young kid named Tim Naftali preparing his senior thesis at Yale. Robin Winks called me and asked if I would talk to Tim about the library project. I said “Sure. The war’s over.” So I talked to Tim. What was interesting was that Tim couldn’t find anyone else to talk to him. Tim, by the way, is one of the few students who’s ever come to talk to me who has ever, when he got back to college, called to say thank you. Tim, of course, has become well established and has since published this great book, One Hell of a Gamble, on the Cuban missile crisis.

studied Interview, 1998

...I graduated from Army Air Force officer candidate school, Miami Beach, in December 1942. Shortly before that, a young officer I didn’t know, never saw before, never saw since, asked me, “Would you like to go into intelligence?” Beats digging ditches, I supposed, and so I did.

Remarks to the staff of the Office of General Counsel [OGC, 1991]

...I was overseas for the last 15 months of the war, with the Army Air Force Intelligence Headquarters in Europe. As chief of operational intelligence, handling all the ULTRA intercepts, we had a Col. Lewis W. Powell, better known as Associate Justice Lewis Powell, a marvelous officer.

Remarks to the General Counsel Staff, 1997 [OGC, 1991]

When the war was over, did you intend to stay in intelligence or in government?

I certainly didn’t intend to stay in intelligence. But here I was practicing law, and I hated every minute of it. The dean, when I graduated from Yale Law School, wrung my hand and said, “Best of luck, Walter,

You’ve provided the most original excuses I’ve ever had a student write.”

Studies Interview, 1998

Creating CIA

Before CIA we had the Central Intelligence Group (CIG), created in January 1946. You wouldn’t have any idea, unless you were there, how very, very difficult it was to keep CIG alive because its personnel were made available from the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, State. One by one. We couldn’t hire any of our own people. We couldn’t spend any money unless it came to us from one of these outlets.

OGC, 1996

...There was a long buildup to the National Security Act of 1947. Just to give you an idea of how things were before that was passed, Larry Houston, the General Counsel, was located at 2430 E Street, the old OSS offices. But the Director of CIG and his staff—including his legislative man—were in North Interior, opposite the Interior Department on F Street. In February 1947, a report proposed drafting something to give CIG better stability.

One day, General Vandenberg told me he wanted the new structure to include something like an Official Secrets Act. I told him that FDR in his high heyday couldn’t have gotten an Official Secrets Act through Congress. We had the espionage laws, but the problem there was intent. The government had to prove that someone disclosing information did so to harm the United States or to aid a foreign power. The government had
just lost the Amerasia case on these grounds.

Well, Vandenberg has this friend, Mark Watson, military correspondent of *The Baltimore Sun*, and the general asked me to talk to him about an Official Secrets Act. I manfully went along and suggested to Watson there were ways to get around the question of intent. The Sullivan Act, for example, didn’t require intent to shoot somebody in order to find that person guilty of illegal possession of a gun. Possession was the crux. And, woe to myself, I suggested the Volstead Act—which you’re too young to remember—simply required the possession of liquor. So, I said, arguing on that sort of precedent, having in your possession unauthorized classified information—whether anyone could prove your intent to give it to the Russians—just might be enough.

So Watson wrote a splendid article, full of references to this “spokesman for the CIA,” who didn’t care about the Bill of Rights and who cited the Volstead Act, which really wasn’t the most popular piece of legislation in our history. That’s the last time I or anyone else around here ever floated that one!

OGC, 1991

**Directors**

*You described Walter Bedell Smith as the greatest director.*

Oh, yes. Many of us would.

*He doesn’t get the credit….*

He should. Next to him, of course, is John McCone. You can get in trouble with “so and so was number one, and so and so was number two,” but General Smith was unbelievable. He really got the Agency firmly established. Shortly after he was sworn in, he called his first staff meeting. And about the first thing he said was something like, “It’s interesting to see all you fellows here. It’ll be even more interesting to see how many of your are here a few months from now.” That was Smith.

He doesn’t get the credit for a lot of reasons. Ike didn’t leave him at CIA as long as he might have, because he needed someone to manage State. Foster Dulles had never managed something that size, and, after all, Smith had run the war for Ike. I don’t know what would have happened at CIA had Ike not moved Smith. But he was brilliant.

He came to us from Moscow, where he’d been Ambassador. And he really wanted to go off and make some money. But someone mentioned him to Ike for the DCI job, and he accepted. I think others would agree that he was a great Director, but he’s not as well known as some others.

We did have a problem, however, with his swearing in. He was supposed to be sworn in at 10 a.m., and at the last minute somebody found out the general wanted to be sworn in using a Catholic Bible. Now, people were looking all over the place, and we had Bibles from all over the world. But no Catholic Bible. I’ll tell you, it was a hell of a scramble until finally, somewhere, we found a Catholic Bible. So he got him sworn in.

*Studies Interview, 1998*

...It was very hard to have affection for General Smith, because he was so frosty and so chilly, but he was a very, very great man.

*CSI Oral History Interview, 1998*

*Any thoughts on General Smith and your responsibilities with Congress?*

Shortly after General Smith became Director, he got a call from a man who was then Senator from Connecticut named William Benton, who had been Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs at State when General Smith was in Moscow. He asked to come see the general as soon as possible after he became Director. The general came to me and told me that Benton and he had been close friends for a long time and that he wanted me to expedite any requests for assistance the senator had. And what was really at issue was Benton was coming over to get anything we had to support his position on some issue. I told the general there were very few senators as unpopular and incompetent as Senator Benton and that supporting him would in the end cost the Agency more votes on any project we wanted to get through Congress than he could imagine.

Well, you never quite knew where an answer like that would stand with the general. In the end, however, he knew what I was talking about and let me do my job.
One of the realities we face is that few current employees worked with people like that or even know that much about them: Richard Bissell, Richard Helms, among others.

Dick Helms is a dear friend and, if you’re looking at all the DCIs, Dick is the number-three guy, just behind Smith and John McConal. Even ahead of Allen Dulles. I will never criticize Dick Helms. It’s so sad, the problems he encountered with the testimony he gave to Congress. It was a vile business, reflecting not so much on Dick but on [Senator Stuart] Symington. Symington had been our great friend on the Hill. He went out to Vietnam after he left his job as Secretary of the Air Force and became a member of the Senate, and he knew a lot about our activities around the world, including in Chile. He and Helms were close friends.

So when the Chilean controversy came up and he was asked by Symington about Chile, Helms was stunned that his friend Symington would ask about our involvement in Chile. It was staggering; fortunately, the judge gave Dick a suspended sentence. It was a shock that Symington would do this, seemingly deliberately, to his great friend. I'll never be able to explain it.

William Colby?

Bill and I were friends, as many other people from the Agency were friends. But he realized that we didn't agree with him. [Continued references to Colby in present tense (as with Bissell, here edited.) We think he did great damage in the advances he made to Congress. And then Ford, Rockefeller, and Kissinger called him over to the White House one Sunday morning and said “Bye, bye.”

Whatever Bill had in mind on a given day, it was going to come out. It didn’t matter how old it was or what the issue was, once he had it in his mind to release something, it was coming out. And he didn’t want to be bothered with the details. He just had a style that if I disagreed with him—if nine out of ten people in the room disagreed with him—his response tended to be “Fine, I’l go with the tenth.”

At the same time, he was an important Director in what he had to live through on the Hill, but even there it was difficult to deal with him once he’d made up his mind. I remember trying to dissuade him from testifying about different kinds of special weapons we had built for various operations, but he insisted. I kept arguing that he should be trying to minimize the issue, but he had made up his mind to get all of this out in the open. One day, he had testified about this particular gun, and Bill was angry because he never got around to showing the other weapons he had brought along. He had a whole briefcase full of them.

Well, I didn’t agree with him, and, as it turned out, neither did the President of the United States. For all of this, Bill had great integrity, and sometimes you found yourself just saying “Bill, we disagree.”

Studies Interview, 1998

Congressional Relations

How did you get the Legislative Counsel job?

I remember Larry Houston, the General Counsel, telling me he couldn’t afford a Legislative Counsel. It wasn’t in the authorization. So he made me Assistant General Counsel. And that was typical. You made do. And you got the job done.

We had many occasions in these early years where we suddenly discovered we didn’t have authority to do something or another. It wasn’t a case of wanting a law changed. There just was no law. In 1954, when Ike announced Allen Dulles as Director and General Cabell as his deputy, we discovered there was no authority to appoint Cabell. We eventually fixed it up, but it took me two or three weeks on the Hill to get a special act through to make it happen.

Studies Interview, 1998

...In about August, 1946, Congress produced a splendid report on Pearl Harbor, from a joint investigation headed by then Senator Alben Barkley. But it was supported by 39 volumes of hearings! Who in the front office was going to read the report, let alone 39 volumes of hearings? I never read the 39 volumes either, but I summarized the report, broke it down into manageable intelligence portions—collection, analysis, dissemination, and recommendations—and it became the first thing I ever signed as the legislative liaison officer of the CIG. It was a big division, by the way—I myself and one secretary. Then it grew—to myself and two secretaries. But the front office beamed. We were on our way, legislatively speaking.

OGC, 1991

...We had a lot of grief with polygraphs and Congress in those days, because at that time we didn’t polygraph people until the day they
reported in. And people would come in and look over those questions and announce, “I guess there’s something I never mentioned to you.” And we used to tell them: “Look, there’s a desk over there with a form on it. If you’ll just sign the resignation.” Anyway, then we would get Congressional questions about what we had done to the son or daughter of someone’s favorite constituent. Once in awhile, you’d ask the employee’s name, and you could hear the Congressman put his hand over the phone and ask, “What was your son’s name again?”

...There used to be a place in Washington called the Cooperative Bookshop, a place the FBI had tabbed as subversive. This was a place where you paid a dollar or two to be a member, and somehow the Bureau had gotten the membership files. So we had new employees come in from someplace where cooperatives—co-ops—were a big and legitimate deal, and they’d pay the dollar or two, and the next thing the Bureau has them in front of a loyalty board. Fortunately, Col. Scheff Edwards, our marvellous security officer, could take care of these. Good old Scheff, a regular Army officer with a heart and judgment of absolutely pure gold.

OGC, 1991

How would you characterize Congressional relations during that time?

Amusing. Amusing. The word is amusing.

When Walter Bedell Smith was Director of CIA—maybe our greatest Director—he encouraged me to have small lunches for a member of Congress or two every Monday.

One day, I went in to the Deputy Director for Administration, who at that point was in charge of “downtown” things, including the legislative counsel, and suggested that I had this friend from law school who had been elected to Congress and was a member of the Naval Intelligence Subcommittee of Appropriations. I described him as a real comer, and suggested the general ought to have him to lunch. The DDA got back to me later and said he’d been checking with banking friends from Michigan who told him Jerry Ford wasn’t worth the general’s time. So I said just forget it and walked out. When this guy went off for vacation, I brought Jerry in anyway.

Was President Ford a classmate of yours?

No. Jerry graduated in 1940. I was in my third year when he was first year. But it’s funny that you mention him. Years later, when people put together a book for my 80th birthday, with contributions from various people who’d been in intelligence, Jerry wasn’t included. People didn’t realize his connection. Early in his career in Congress, he was one of the members of the CIA Appropriations Subcommittee.

Studies Interview, 1998

...We had some remarkable friends on the Hill in the early days. John McCormack [later Speaker of the House] was on the committee that established CIA. Whenever I had a question to ask, he would sit me down and lecture me for 15 or 20 minutes on Congressional relations. In the kindest and most helpful way you can imagine. I learned more listening to John McCormack than if I’d had 26 courses in law school.

CSI Oral History Interview, 1988

...At one time, the chairman of the Appropriations Committee was an old curmudgeon named Clare Hoffman [of Michigan], one of those skinflints who cut people’s appropriations to the bone. Everybody was scared of him. One day we were testifying before the committee, and Hoffman turned to the Director, Admiral Hillenkoetter, and said “Admiral, I have only one question. Do you have enough money to do the job?” At which point the whole committee fainted. That’s not something you can manufacture. You have to build up a feeling of trust.

CSI Oral History Interview, 1988

It must look very different to you now as you look at the Agency and see the emphasis on Congressional relations and the number of former Hill staffers in senior positions.

We’ve had great directors: McConé, Dulles. And I’m going to predict to you that George Tenet is going to be one of them. He has a guy helping him named Britt Snider, who may not like being the IG but who will be a fine one.

Studies Interview, 1998

...One thing you did not do was fight with [Senator from Georgia] Carl Vinson. When Lyndon Johnson was a freshman member of the Armed Services Committee, he said to Chairman Vinson, “Mr. Chairman, may I ask a question?” And Vinson replied, “You just did. Sit down.” The Pentagon had an office on the Hill and they waited on Vinson hand and foot. But he used to refer to us as “Mah Pentagon” and
Walter, you know there were times during this week when I saw myself with my hands around your throat.

The first time I ever saw McCarthy he was at the ballpark. He was stinking drunk. And eventually it killed him.

Let me tell you one story that ought to be in your record. McCarthy kept talking about the list he had with some number of names of Communist agents on it. People forget that McCarthy never released the names. But he did have lists, whether they meant anything or not. One of the names on one of those lists was one of our people. So, I went up to see McCarthy and told him I thought he was wrong about this person, or we would make sure this person was an ex-CIA employee by morning. And I told him I needed to know everything he had on the case. He wouldn’t show me the file, but he went through it for me. And I told him I was intimately familiar with the case, because we had had a loyalty board review the individual. It was a simple case. A Russian expert, working for FBIS, who, to keep her Russian ability up to speed, would bring home Pravda or things like that. She was living in a rooming house at the time, and there was another Russian expert living there. And the two of them spoke Russian all the time, joking that their landlady, who hated Russians, was probably going to turn them in. Which is exactly what she did. Under the Truman executive order in place at that time, we had no option but to convene a loyalty board on her. But it was nothing except the landlady. Nothing sinister; nothing wrong, except displeasing their landlady. I told McCarthy that he didn’t have a case. He made a deal: if I could get the Director to sign a letter that this landlady’s accusation was all there was, he’d drop the case. And I did. He simply took the case out of contention. He obviously knew this was a loser for him.

He was never as successful attacking CIA as he was with State.

For a couple of reasons. First, there was a large element of folks within State who flocked to him like mice, providing information and so on. We didn’t have the same sort of thing. Second, when those issues came up, Lyman Kirkpatrick, then the Executive Director, took charge of the cases very effectively.

We had a case come up involving William Bundy. We got a call from Roy Cohn, McCarthy’s aide, saying they wanted one of our employees, Bundy, to testify before their committee. That day. It had nothing to do with the Agency really but with some of Bundy’s other associations. I called Cohn and told him we couldn’t comply because Bundy was on leave. Roy was furious, and told me that before they called my office with the request they had called Bundy’s office. They told him he was in but had stepped out for a minute. I told him I couldn’t control what he had been told; Bill Bundy was on leave. What a fight! Later that day, my secretary tracked me down to tell me Cohn wanted to talk to me. And he wanted me to testify about Bundy’s file. The Director wouldn’t allow it.

I ended up getting subpoenaed. It didn’t amount to much, but—I’m so mad about this—I don’t know what happened to the subpoena. Allen Dulles took it and gave it to somebody. I wanted it for posterity, but no one’s ever found it.

[After the Bundy case was over] I was in General Smith’s office and he says, “Walter, you know these were times during this week when I saw myself with my hands around your throat. But what you did was a blessing in disguise.”

[Interviewer] What did he mean?

I don’t know, but I was glad to hear it.

The Historical Intelligence Collection and the Literature of Intelligence

How did the Historical Intelligence Collection get started?

There came a point where Allen Dulles was happy to see me move from the Legislative Counsel job, which I did. The library was a shamblles at the time. We had a number of rare and valuable books that the
librarian wanted as part of the library collection where she thought they belonged. Where they belonged, of course, was in a separate collection.

My family has been in the rare book game all their lives—my father, my uncle. My father and Uncle Carl had been partners, but then they split in 1925 or 1926. And this included their book collecting. My uncle was involved in English books, so my father emphasized French books, largely because my mother loved French. So he put together a great Molière collection.

Do you read much intelligence fiction?

No. Do you? I read some, as little as I can. I think most of us who’ve been in the business feel the same way. I know Dick Helms doesn’t believe in it. I have a lot of it here in my library, much of it because someone would come up to me and say, “You haven’t read this? Here, take it.” So I’d take it.

Studies Interview, 1998
Friends, Associates, and the Future of Intelligence

What are your thoughts on the state of the Agency?

I make a point of not seeing much of George. If he had the time, he’d see me. But I don’t harass him. At the 50th Anniversary, September of last year, 50 medallions were presented for achievements that made the Agency. There was a commemorative program with photographs of each of the 50 honorees, so the families would know in the future what mom or dad did. It was great. When it came to lunch, they had about 250 people. Once we were seated, George came in, stopped at each table and talked to everyone there. That was probably the high point of the day, that and the fact after about 10 minutes his wife came in and did the same thing. He’s absolutely terrific. He’s going to be one of our great Directors if everything works out.

Let me tell you another story. At some point when Jim Woolsey was Director, the name R. V. Jones came up. And a lot of people were unaware of who Jones, who was a great friend of mine, was. So Jim decided to create a medal in his honor.

Was Jones overlooked because his work was technical rather than in the more traditional MI5-MI6 areas of interest?

In part, but he was also a devil of a guy to work with. If your style, starting in his case at an early age, was to have an idea and then to insist, and to insist, and to insist on furthering that idea, you will make enemies. Even if you’re right, maybe especially if you’re right. In the end, he wasn’t knighted, which caused some resentment, but in the end the Queen made him a Companion of Honour, which is a very small group of 20 to 25. So, it beats a knighthood. R. V. was very proud of it. Whenever he’d come over here, we’d always have a party.

What’s your assessment of Richard Bissell?

Dickie didn’t really come to the Agency until the mid-1950s. I knew Dickie from my freshman year at Yale. He was wonderful. The way I always described Bissell is that he was the man who dragged the Agency by its neck, kicking and screaming, into the 20th century. But of course there were problems—the Bay of Pigs—that cost him his job. And ultimately the Directorship.

You think he would have been DCI?

Yes. Look at the projects he was involved in: U-2, Corona, the use of satellites. That was Dickie Bissell. He was always miles ahead of Allen Dulles, for instance, who, to his credit, was smart enough to recognize Dickie’s abilities. I never worked with him that closely on a day-to-day basis, but he was a tremendous figure.

Was he bitter about the Bay of Pigs and its outcome for him?

I never saw it, but I suspect he may have been. He must have realized there was no alternative. It may be true that Kennedy told him “Dick, if we were in England, I’d have to resign. But we’re not. And you will.” He knew what had to be done. But he was so brilliant in what he brought to our business, it was a shame.
You really occupy a unique place in intelligence. You know all the people who’ve worked in the business and most of the people writing about it.

We had some very good people here [at the Watergate] for my birthday in August [1988]. Keith Melton arranged it. Sam Halpern, among others. And we were in a private room with a table for six or eight. But there was another table there, and Keith told me not to worry about it. So I didn’t pay attention to it, but when we sat down, suddenly I hear, “Happy birthday to you.” My back was turned, and I turned around there were 10 more people there: Rupert Allason [pen name: Nigel West], John Ranelagh. It floored me.

Maybe we can get that fellow who just passed by to sing “Happy Birthday” for you next year.

I don’t know who that was.

Plácido Domingo. [Note: this interview took place in the restaurant at the Watergate, Mr. Pforzheimer’s residence of many years.]

Oh yeah. One of the “other tenors.” We ought to get him for that. He’s all right as a singer.

But the night of my birthday, when I turned around here were John Gannon and Britt Snider, all these people. We pushed the two tables together. That was quite a table.

And then about 9:30 p.m., George Tenet walks in. In a sport shirt on his way to catch an airplane that was being held for him. Suddenly, the Director says, “Walter, I have a presentation to make.” It was the Director’s award—the third one given in his tenure. This beautiful award with a citation that was read into the record. Even Dick Helms seemed overwhelmed. Rupert and some of the others did not know the Director was coming, and they had their own gifts, including a framed letter signed by George II and Robert Walpole, his prime minister, authorizing certain expenditures for our business. A beautiful thing.

Dan Mulvaney from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, an old friend of mine, brought a beautiful set of framed stamps commemorating the Mounties.

There’s a wonderful passage in Ranelagh’s book where he talks about CIA, with all its ups and downs, as being a faithful agent of the great power that most consistently practiced the virtue of hope.

He does beautiful work. He came over just for the birthday.

What would you say to a young man or woman—20 or 25 years old—considering a career in intelligence?

Go away! Actually, what I hope they’d realize is something of the struggle to build our business. When I think of that first class in 1946-1947, the CIG, then CIA, it was hard. You wouldn’t believe the dedication.

After half a century at this, you must have the sense that you played a significant role in building something important.

Yes, I do—the more I think of it. As I said, when Director Tenet walked in on my birthday party, unbeknownst to me though others knew about the plan, I was overwhelmed. Or when, before he took the DCI job, he came over here and sat and talked with me for an hour or so. So I do feel part of something important. Very important.

Studies Interview, 1998