

NEW HAVEN ADVOCATE (CT)

7 July 1986

OPINION

The Faithful Agent of a Simple Great Power

John Ranelagh's belief in the CIA is fundamental

By Jim Motavalli

John Ranelagh does not seem the most likely man to write a comprehensive history of the CIA. He is British, a producer at Channel 4 Television in England and the author of two books on the history of Ireland. Still, this is the '80s, the CIA has been "rehabilitated" by the media, and kiss-and-tell tomes by ex-agents like Victor Marchetti, Frank Snepp and Phillip Agee are no longer the fashion.

Ranelagh's 800-page tome gives Agee, perhaps the CIA's most important author-defector, only a few paragraphs, and in those merely repeats CIA charges of Agee's complicity in the murder of the agency's Athens station chief. Agee's book, *Inside the Company*, is dismissed as having been written "with the help of the Cuban government."

So it's fair to say that *The Agency: The Rise and Decline of the CIA, From Wild Bill Donovan to William Casey* (Simon and Schuster) is a comprehensive but unflinchingly positive view of America's overseas intelligence agency. Ranelagh's tone during our telephone interview was respectful and admiring. He thinks America needs a CIA, and that undercover operations and "dirty tricks" are a necessary ingredient to its success. He denies the widely-held view of CIA involvement in the overthrow and subsequent death of President Allende in Chile; he calls Latin American "super agent" David Atlee Phillips, "Dave."

Ranelagh's feelings about the agency can best be summed up in this statement from the epilogue. The CIA, he says, "was a faithful instrument of the most decent and perhaps the simplest of the great powers, and certainly the one that even in its darkest passages practiced most consistently the virtue of hope."

Advocate: Tell me how you got involved with writing a

book about the CIA?

Ranelagh: My career is basically in television in England. We were working on a history of Ireland for the BBC, shown over here recently on PBS, and we were thinking about what to do next when it struck me that one of the big subjects that hadn't been covered was the Cold War. When you think about the Cold War it really becomes a history of our times. One night it suddenly hit me that the CIA was the organization of the Cold War—President Truman described it as the Cold War arm of the U.S. government. So it seemed to me that the CIA was the thing to focus on. And I discovered that there were no books out there that really gave you a history of the CIA, just autobiographies and memoirs. All of them had a particular point to make.

How do you think the CIA evolved from the OSS after the war? Most people don't see the OSS as ideologically involved.

Change is at the center of this story. The CIA is almost exactly 40 years old—it was founded in 1947. At that time, we all thought we were going to have a real hot war, possibly a nuclear war, with the Soviet Union. And so there was a very great energy and concentration—people thought they were working against the clock. But now, 40 years later, we realize we can live in a state that is neither war nor peace. And so what we've really got now is a bureaucracy of intelligence, rather than an organization that was preparing the United States for the prospect of war.

Tell us a little bit about the CIA today, as you see it operating under William Casey's direction. He's displayed considerable enthusiasm for covert action.

Bill Casey started out as an OSS officer in London during World War II; he ran espionage agents in Germany at the end of

the war. He was parachuting guys in. Then he went out of intelligence and made himself an extremely wealthy man on the New York Stock Exchange. He came back in as a result of being Reagan's campaign manager in 1980. He's come back, exactly as you say, an enthusiast for covert operations because that's what he knew best. And it's probably a very good thing that he did because the CIA, like the National Security Agency and others, has become very technologically dependent; it's been moving away from the human touch. Casey is reintroducing a balance. He's using people to interpret what all the microphones and satellites are giving us back.

The New York Times recently revealed that the CIA may have been involved in attempting to murder General Manuel Antonio Noriega, formerly the head of the Panamanian secret service, now the head of its armed forces, for his role in drug-running. Did your research show that this kind of thing happens often. How often do these plans get carried out?

This has been a subject of great controversy. But the real point is that assassination is always an option. We sit back and think about whether the world would be better off if we'd gotten rid of Hitler, or Khaddafi, or Khomeini, whom ever it might be. What do we expect a secret agency to do. It's a fair assumption that it's always an option, but the real question is whether or not it is used. And the Church Committee (chaired by Frank Church), which investigated CIA abuses in the early 1970s, demonstrated that they have the plans but they don't actually use them. The only one they came close to implementing was against Castro in Cuba.

I knew they tried to make his beard fall out and his cigars explode.

Well, they tried to kill him too, and they were doing it because President Kennedy wanted them to do it. If the CIA had actually murdered people it would get out. In America everything gets out sooner or later. We'd know about it.

Your book talks about CIA mind control experiments using LSD.

Well, you have to keep in mind that this was in the 1950s, before a lot of these substances were banned. They were experimenting with all kinds of drugs, including LSD, to see if it was possible to turn people into human robots who could be programmed to do things at great distances, as in *The Manchurian Candidate*. That was the idea, and in the course of the experiment they kept a lot of people tripping on LSD for 77 days. We don't really know what happened to those people. I would suspect their minds were blown—they would have had to be. But these people were drug offenders and drug abusers already, although it isn't at all clear that these people knew they were being used as guinea pigs.

Do you think the agency has changed much since Reagan has been in office?

I don't think it really has. I think that the thing we need to remember is that when the Church Committee was going on, there was no great flood of telegrams and letters to Washington one way or another. It was very much an internal affair in the capital. This shows that, to the average person, there is a place for secrecy in government. There is a place for covert information.

Suppose we actually had murdered Castro? Do you think people would have been upset then?

I don't think they would. Suppose we murdered Khaddafy? Do you think people would have been pissed off? I think a lot of people would be cheering. Or if we'd gotten Khomeini during the Iranian hostage crisis.

Well, a lot of people think we were responsible for killing Salvador Allende in Chile.

Yes, but there is some evidence that Allende committed suicide. But there's a lot of logic to the thought that it's better the devil you know than the devil you don't. In those terms, you only assassinate someone if you have a clear view of who's going to succeed him or her. If we'd gotten rid of Khaddafy, do we know who'd succeed him? It might have been an even crazier fellow.

Did your own views of the so-called "Company" change during the writing of this book?

No, they haven't. I came to it with the simple idea that all great states need an intelligence service, so I'm not somebody who's ever questioned that. I think we need it. What I was surprised to find was the high caliber of people and the brainpower it has. That was a revelation.

I think there has been a real change in people's attitudes as well. People no longer question the need for the agency—it's been accepted. And that's reflected in the quality of the people who are applying. Bill Casey told me personally that he was terribly impressed with the caliber of good, college-educated people who want to work for the CIA.