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# John Stockwell: An Ex-CIA Agent Tells All

by Neil Hoffman

John Stockwell belongs to that select company of former Central Intelligence Agency operatives — Philip Agee is the best known — who have gone public with shocking revelations about CIA murders and dirty tricks around the world. Stockwell, a striking, well-built man in his early 40s, might not wear the trenchcoat and fedora of the classic film spy, but he does look like someone who would be at home in difficult and dangerous situations.

Born and raised in Africa, he spent 19 years as a Marine and 12 years in the CIA. On orders from his superiors, he fabricated intelligence reports in Vietnam and in Angola, where he acted as station chief for the agency's covert operations. In 1978, after quitting the agency, he published his book, *In Search of Enemies: A CIA Story*, a lucid and personal account of his role in the CIA, and more particularly, in Angola.

Today, he spends his time largely as a writer and powerful lecturer on the abuses of his onetime employer. The following interview took place en route from Mexico City to Managua, Nicaragua. In light of the CIA's current involvement in Nicaragua, including the creation and funding of an army of *contras* — anti-government guerrillas — Stockwell's insight into the agency's covert operations and the psychology of being an agent acquire an immediate relevance.

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**Michigan Voice:** What led you to leave the CIA?

**Stockwell:** I went into the CIA thinking I was doing the best thing I could with my life, the contradiction being that I was a humanist at heart. But, of course, their propaganda line is that you're serving humanity by struggling to keep the world free from communism. It just took a lot of years making my way up the chain of command until I became convinced just the opposite was true.

I saw it in Africa, but in Africa I was working out of embassies. I did not have Phil Agee's experience from Latin America where there was more bombing and torture and terrorism, and issues were clearer. The inhumanity was clearer. Then I saw in Vietnam, there was no doubt.

At that point I was totally disillusioned. I felt like my soul had been fucked. Literally everything I had been taught to believe in, I realized was untrue about my government.

Then, they offered me a position on the National Security Council, in a subcommittee managing from a global point of view the covert action targeting in Angola. I accepted the job pure and simple because it would give me a chance to see from the inside what was at the root of all this horror. Would it make sense if you were really inside? So I took the job just like making a deal with the devil, and worked hard so I would have access to every bloody piece of paper, conversation, or whatever that had anything to do with my program.

I found it even more cynical than you would ever dream. Meeting after meeting, 170 meetings, discussing what lies to tell the American people, what lies to tell the Congress, what lies to tell the president, even what lies to tell each other, and never, ever any conception of telling the truth to the people or the Congress. There wasn't even a twitch of honesty in the thing. I mean, nobody walked in joking one day and said, "Hey, why don't we tell the truth this once, just for fun."

**MV:** How would you describe the extent of the CIA's reach around the world?

**Stockwell:** These case officers are working tirelessly, long hours, highly motivated. There's a hell of a lot of killing.

I count — well, all people who were closely involved count — over a million people that have died in the first echelon of violence in CIA-agitated covert operations, people that

would not have died if the CIA had not been there doing its thing. Then you have the Vietnam War, which tracks directly from a prolonged CIA covert action: Cambodia was thoroughly destabilized by the CIA. Right there, between those two, you have three to five million people dead.

Now, that's speaking only in terms of dead people. You know, "destabilization," which the CIA has done in dozens and dozens and dozens of countries, is not fun, it's not nice-guy stuff. It means by definition that you upset the economic and social balance of the country so it doesn't work, so the people can't make a living, so they don't dare send their children to school, so the hospitals are full of wounded people instead of sick, and money is spent on arms instead of hospitals and schools and social projects. So, the numbers of people who have suffered from CIA destabilization, had their lives deeply affected in a negative way, are literally in the tens of millions of people. All of this is allegedly in defense of the United States' national security.

The national security aspect is obviously just a big lie to justify what these CIA operatives want to do in their war against the world. It's fun, it's enchanting, it's deeply exciting to be a spy operative and have an unlimited budget and have no moral or legal constraints. You can do anything you want to do around the world — killing, experimenting on people with drugs, inciting wars, overthrowing governments, shafting enemies, blackmail, bribery, poisoning crops.

And it's not a felony, because overseas, if you're caught, you have no fear of ever going to jail. Diplomatic immunity protects you and you just fly back home. And in the States, it's national security. So even if you're caught hot as they were, with experimenting on American citizens with LSD, mind-blowing drugs, it's not a felony because it's in the highest interest of the country. This is, for a certain type of people, irresistible.

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It's very significant to understand that CIA case officers tend to feel or at least act very self-righteous about what they do. Part of the reason they do that is by believing or pretending to believe their own party lines — that communists are bad, that by what they're doing in Nicaragua today, they're stopping the Cubans and the Russians from taking over the world. And you know, Cubans and Russians are not God, God forbid. But the people that are dying are Nicaraguan people, the women and children and Miskito Indians.

What makes this work, in part, is that you operate from an embassy context — big, beautiful villas, servants, embassy office, embassy country team meetings, lunches and dinners at ambassadors' houses, and gorgeous gardens with flowers and swimming pools. You work with *contra* leaders. You're giving them money, so they have houses and what not.

You're working with the police in El Salvador, for example. Well, the world tends to see these things through the press — the police, the death squads in El Salvador, as horrible things, which they are. On a one-to-one basis, however, you don't see the horror. You just see educated people, who are educated at Fort Bragg in the States, who drive around in Mercedes and live very well, whose sons go to UCLA with your own sons. All very glamorous, very friendly, very sociable, very nice, nice-guy stuff — an overlapping community of the elite far away from and above the killing.

The way the case officers will protect their own conscience from the killing is: You deliver a load of arms, say bombs, say white phosphorous grenades, to a *contra* commander. Now, anyone would know that those are going to be used to blow up and burn civilians. But, what you do is, as you deliver them, you give him a lecture and warn him they're only to be used against the Sandinista forces.

O.K. You go back into the office and you write a memo saying, "... And I told him under the strictest possible terms that they should under no circumstances be used against civilians." And then, when the next week civilians are killed with some of these grenades thrown into a schoolhouse or something, well then, you may decide not to believe it, and say it's exaggerated. Or, you may put some propaganda out and say that they were really killed by the Sandinistas, and

then choose to believe that. Or, you might kick a door and yell and storm around the office for five minutes saying, "Goddammit, I've told those bastards, it's not my fault my president tells me to do this. I'm a faithful, patriotic American citizen. I do my duty, but I made my position crystal clear in this."

Now this sounds far fetched, but it actually works. And they use these games, self-supporting, supporting each other. The attacks, the horror of what they're doing, the way it's written and presented in the press — they just don't read those stories, or they'll read them and slam them down and say, "Yea, that's communist bullshit. I know that Captain So-and-So is a nice man. My son's going to UCLA with his son." I absolutely shed it off, so it doesn't sink it.

It does sink in with some. There are plenty who are more intelligent and perceptive and get out with a great ease of disillusionment. Some of them, 18 or so, have gotten out and gone public. But, by and large, most of them are able to assuage their consciences.

Even the disillusioned "spook" is a syndrome in our society. Hollywood is a way that you play, as in the movies. At the end of the movie you put on your trenchcoat and walk off into the fog and the cynicism is unchanging and you take your own private life and go somewhere and nurse your wounds.

**MV: But you don't become an activist?**

**Stockwell:** No, that isn't the Hollywood line. It doesn't recommend that solution. *The Three Days of the Condor* did have Robert Redford walking into the *New York Times* with his story. That's the way the movie ended, but of course, by and large if you walk into the *New York Times* with a story like that, they'll throw you out. This is not to discredit them, for they introduced my own book. But see, that wasn't just me going to them with a story. I had succeeded in writing and publishing a book. I had succeeded in creating a situation that interested Mike Wallace and *60 Minutes*, so the book was a big event. But just the simple truth, the unending and continuing horror of what the CIA is doing, they don't publish it.

**MV: What information do you have about [current] CIA activity in Central America?**

**Stockwell:** Well, in a way, I don't have any. I mean, I'm the last person in the world who has inside information. On the other hand, I should be one of the world's most astute people at reading between the lines and figuring out what's going on, because I was a colonel in the CIA running these things at one time.

My book is a blueprint for what's been happening in Nicaragua. They're working the thing from Washington, training camps in Florida, working with exiles, counterrevolutionaries (apparently the *contras*, mostly), flowing the arms mostly through Honduras, flowing political sanction and terrorism through Costa Rica, and also hiring mercenaries from Latin Argentina — Venezuela, Columbia, Argentina — to go in and do the killing for them.

Meanwhile, they've got a propaganda machine pumping out stories and trying to get them into the world press. The most successful one was where they got it into the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* about the massacre of some Miskito Indians by the Sandinistas. That massacre never occurred. The press picked it up and published it, but then when they tried to go in and document it, both the Moravian Church and Amnesty International said, "No, it never happened."

**CNS: The photograph turned out to be false?**

**Stockwell:** Photographs. We had photographs in the Angolan thing of the Cuban rapists: Cuban rapists being caught, Cuban rapists being tried, Cuban rapists being executed. I mean, that's simple photography to document stuff like that and put it out to the world. There were no Cuban rapists. It was all made up. If there was a massacre of Miskito Indian bodies, they probably had been killed by the *contras*. But there was no massacre. ■