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BOOK REVIEW/

Tom Diaz

Catching a CIA renegade

The director of the Central Intelligence Agency, William Casey, reportedly has argued forcefully in administration councils of war that Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi should be given a thorough pasting.

Mr. Casey's zeal may be rooted in part in an urge to make institutional expiation. Because every time a bomb planted by one of Col. Qaddafi's thugs goes off around the world — blasting small children, their mothers, and other living things to glory — the CIA finds a tiny bit of innocent blood on its own hands.

The evidence has become compelling "beyond peradventure of a doubt," as our lawyer friends like to say, that the agency failed utterly in its duty to oversee the actions of a bizarre and dangerous creature it created and set loose upon the world — Edwin P. Wilson.

Wilson, now in federal prison through no help of the agency, is the former CIA agent — ostensibly renegade — who sold Col. Qaddafi's regime, among other things, 40,000 pounds of C-4 plastic explosive and sophisticated miniature timing devices with which to make terror bombs.

That amount of C-4 is staggering. The stuff looks innocent enough. It's about the color and texture of children's modeling clay. But a piece the size of a small potato can quite effectively devastate a room full of people. The thought of several hundred such explosive potatoes tucked in various nooks and crannies about the world leaves the mind reeling.

Here is what E. Lawrence Barcella, the federal prosecutor who eventually hounded down and put Wilson behind bars, thought when he first learned about the size of the sale to Libya, according to Peter Maas in *Manhunt*, his book about the case:

"From that second on, whenever a bomb went off — in a London department store, in a delicatessen in Paris, on a train in Italy — he would

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wonder if it had come from that huge cache sitting in Libya. C-4 was practically indestructible. It could be used in every climate, from arctic to tropical. Under the most minimal care, it had a life expectancy of at least 20 years."

Quite simply speaking, Wilson became filthy rich selling the means and know-how of death to the devil incarnate. He sold the mad dog of Tripoli guns, explosives, and spare parts for weapons. He arranged at least one assassination attempt, perhaps others, and recruited American experts — including Green Berets — to teach the Libyans how to use their deadly toys.

But Wilson couldn't have done it without, at best, the negligence of his former employer, the CIA, and, at worst, the cooperation of several of its highest-ranking officials.

The agency either didn't notice or didn't care very much that — even while he was intimately involved in its activities — Wilson and his friends were piling up big bucks and living lives of glaring ostentation far beyond the means of ordinary civil servants.

Wilson was either booted out of the agency or quit in mid-career (accounts vary) in 1971. He had been expert in setting up and running front corporations for the agency's world-wide operations.

But, drawing on his experience in front operations, he continued to have a hand in intelligence matters, running a similar front for the Navy between 1971 and 1976. That front folded after Wilson made the big mistake of trying to bribe Adm. Bobby Ray Inman, who was then running the Navy operation. (Adm. Inman is one of the few characters involved in Wilson's world who comes off with dignity and honor — not to mention common sense. He wrote a memo on the incident to the FBI, which promptly lost it.)

But almost until the moment when the doors of the federal prison slammed shut behind him, Wilson continued to have extensive contacts with high officials in the CIA and other defense and intelligence agencies. Their help, and the patina of legitimacy they willingly lent Wilson at key points in his scheming, made it possible for him to deal boldly and profitably in the trade of terror.

For example, according to Mr. Maas, when Wilson first needed to get his hands on miniature detonators, programmable to set off explosives at precise times, he turned to friends in the CIA: William Weisenburger, "the CIA's man for ex-

otic equipment," got a handful of the devices for Wilson through an agency supplier — making a tidy profit for himself in the process — and Wilson used these demonstrators to clinch his first big deal with the Libyans.

Wilson also used other top officials in the agency to carry his water and cover his tracks for years. Some appear to have been merely greedy, others stupid, some a combination of both.

What is worse, if Mr. Maas's account is accurate, when the facts of what Wilson was doing finally penetrated the agency's dinosaurian bulk and began to glimmer in its institutional brain, the CIA acted just like any other Washington bureaucracy — it closed ranks to protect itself.

When news of Wilson's high-level CIA connections hit the press, President Reagan ordered the agency to get to the bottom of the affair. Mr. Casey sent orders down the line for an inquiry, and a woman lawyer was given the task of investigating the matter.

"She did her job too energetically," Mr. Maas writes. "In six months, an annoyed clandestine directorate succeeded in having her replaced. It wasn't about to let outsiders pry into its affairs, no matter what the reason for the inquiry or who ordered it. CIA directors and general counsels came and went, but the directorate remained."

Mr. Maas's book is a good detective yarn, skillfully spinning out the story of Mr. Barcella's pursuit and eventual successful prosecution of Wilson. It adds several interesting nuggets to the earlier account, *The Death Merchant*, written by Joseph C. Goulden. Among them, the allegation that Erich Fritz von Marbod, a former top Defense Department official, was involved in one of Wilson's schemes.

The book is also an unflattering portrait — rather like the dwarfs of the Spanish court in Velazquez's paintings — of the lust for wealth and power that compels Washington's insiders to curry the favor of a character like Wilson.

Finally, it raises profoundly troubling questions about how the necessarily secret operations of the CIA can be protected, while the country is itself protected from deviant madmen like Wilson who breed like toadstools in protected dark corners under the cloak of secrecy.

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