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The Man Who Kept the Secret

CASEY
From the OSS to the CIA.
By Joseph E. Persico.
Illustrated. 601 pp. New York: Viking. $24.95.

By Michael R. Beschloss

IN November 1986, Americans learned that their Government had sold arms to Iran in hopes of gaining the release of hostages, diverted the profits to the Nicaraguan contras and lied about it. Congress demanded to know who was responsible. High on the list of suspects was William J. Casey, the mumbling, buccaneering cold warrior who ran Ronald Reagan's Central Intelligence Agency. In December, a stroke incapacitated him. Casey died five months later, his lips forever sealed just as the Iran-contra hearings began.

This Allen Drury-style plot twist probably did more than anything else in Casey's life to infuse it with legend. It is possible that by allowing what the Director of Central Intelligence may have told the President about the Iran-contra affair to remain a mystery, Casey's death might have kept Mr. Reagan in office. More likely, had Casey regained his health and defended himself before Congress and the courts and in lectures and memoirs — for which, no doubt, he would have made certain he was magnificently compensated — we would not find the prospect of "Casey," Joseph E. Persico's biography, nearly so interesting.

Mr. Persico, a onetime speechwriter for Nelson Rockefeller who has written well-received books on Rockefeller and Edward R. Murrow, interviewed Casey in 1977 for his book "Piercing the Reich." He writes that Casey's widow gave him exclusive access to more than 300,000 pages of her husband's private papers with "no strings attached." The result is a lively and balanced narrative that conveys his subject's complex mixture of earthy selfishness and higher loyalties.

Born in Queens in 1913 to a French Canadian mother and an Irish father who won a street cleaner's job from Tammany Hall, Casey matriculated at Fordham University, concluding that the Jesuits had, as he wrote to a friend, "the right dope on this world." He studied social work after deciding that there were, as he told a friend, "crying injustices" in America and, perhaps more to the point, that in a depression the only growth industry was poverty.

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He soon grew disenchanted with what he described as this "sissy stuff," and spent two years working his way through law school. After graduation he began writing and publishing financial guides such as "The Tax Shelter in Real Estate," which later allowed him to boast of earning more royalties than Hemingway. He said that he would have preferred to write on more elevated subjects, such as missionaries, "the best story of organization and salesmanship in the world." But he was always too busy climbing the greasy pole of success. During the war, Casey wangled an introduction to a chieftain of the Office of Strategic Services, and by 1945 was leading intelligence efforts against Nazi Germany, which he later called "the greatest experience of my life."

Restless despite his many successes, he ran unsuccessfully in 1966 for Congress from Long Island, posing as a follower of Nelson Rockefeller, whom he privately loathed as too liberal and privileged. After the 1968 Presidential election, he presumed that he had topped off his bank account with Richard Nixon by publishing an overnight volume called "Nixon on the Issues." When no suitable job was offered, he reminded the President-elect's entourage that he had "made *major* financial commitments *before* Miami" (where the 1968 Republican National Convention had been held). Finally Mr. Nixon appointed him chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission. He next served as an Under Secretary of State, a position in which he felt ignored by his boss, Henry Kissinger.

In 1980, as Ronald Reagan's campaign manager, he told friends that Mr. Kissinger would re-enter Government "over my dead body." He had caught the candidate's attention by raising nearly a million dollars for him at a New York Hilton banquet. After Casey made his postelection job request, Nancy Reagan "didn't consider Bill Casey State Department caliber," according to a "future cabinet member" quoted by the author. Instead the President-elect offered him the C.I.A. directorship, and he accepted on the condition that he serve as what Mr. Persico calls "a coarchitect of American foreign policy." Mr. Reagan replied: "Bill, I wouldn't have it any other way. If it wasn't for you, you know, I wouldn't be in this hot seat."

Asked by a reporter what was so important about Nicaragua, Casey said, "I'm looking for a place to start rolling back the Communist empire." None of his predecessors would have so brazenly advertised an intention to exceed his statutory role and make foreign policy. The author emphasizes Casey's lifelong inclination to cut corners, which, he believes, helped to create the atmosphere that nurtured the Iran-contra affair. Mr. Persico writes that when Casey urged his daughter to marry, he told her that if it didn't work out, she could "always get out of it." He quotes an old Casey business associate who says that Casey "never saw an ethical dimension to business. Is it illegal? If not, then you can do it."

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Mr. Persico does a good job of rendering Casey's impatience, his romanticism about espionage, his near-addiction to making money even while at the C.I.A., his allegiance to friends, his brushes with business scandal, his yearning to be accepted by the American social elite, his poignant efforts to cope with public criticism ("It only hurts for a day") and his self-promotion. A 1980 press release that Casey wrote himself said: "Dwight Eisenhower, Ronald Reagan and a lot of people in between have turned to William J. Casey when they needed decisive action. . . . *Fortune* magazine recently proclaimed him a member of the Eastern establishment, while saying he hates to admit it."

One must lament the author's decision not to provide us with source notes. Non-Government historians who write on recent American intelligence operations have access to only a sliver of the existing evidence; their books will of necessity be less authoritative and complete than a history of, for example, the recent operations of the United States Agriculture Department. More than journalists, who aspire to write the first rough draft of history, historians writing about recent covert operations, like Mr. Persico, should give readers information allowing them to judge the soundness of their sources, or at least those sources whose concealment is not essential. This is particularly true of "Casey" (more than half of which deals with the subject's C.I.A. years) because Mr. Persico claims for his volume a higher standard of accuracy than "Veil," Bob Woodward's 1987 book on the Casey C.I.A.: he repeatedly challenges the facts in "Veil," and devotes two pages to an assessment of Mr. Woodward's controversial sickroom visit with Casey after his stroke, that is heavily weighted against the possibility that the reporter actually saw the ailing man. He adds as the only appendix in the book a transcription of his own interview with Mr. Woodward about whether or not the visit actually took place.

ONE demonstration of the problem is Mr. Persico's assertion that in 1981, Casey and the head of the Israeli intelligence service arrived at a "mutually beneficial arrangement." The United States offered satellite reconnaissance support for the Israeli destruction of Iraq's nuclear reactor. The author writes that "the Jewish lobby took a listless pro forma stand" and "the Israeli government barely objected" to the sale of American Awacs planes to Saudi Arabia. In the absence of persuasive documentation, the reader who remembers the pro-Israel lobby's battle against Awacs as more than "listless" must question Mr. Persico's implication. Misspellings of names and misstatements of minor facts in "Casey" (eight by this reviewer's count) do not undermine the author's central arguments, but they do weaken his claim to superior credibility.

Mr. Persico writes that "Casey did advocate the Iran-arms deal, and enthusiastically. He willingly connived in excluding Congress from knowledge of it." He argues that Casey was not the mastermind of the diversion of the arms proceeds to the contras, which violated the Boland Amendment barring Government involvement in efforts to topple the Sandinista regime. Instead, he blames Casey's close colleague, the "reckless romantic," Lieut. Col. Oliver North, for that — but concludes that Casey had "favored keeping the war going in Nicaragua in spite of the Boland Amendment, which created the climate in which a diversion could happen. . . . That is guilt enough."

The author quotes Mr. Reagan, who was hard of hearing, as saying to William F. Buckley Jr. after Casey's death, regarding his C.I.A director's slurred speech: "My problem with Bill was that I didn't understand him at meetings. Now, you can ask a person to repeat himself once. You can ask him twice. But you can't ask him a third time. You start to sound rude. So I'd just nod my head, but I didn't know what he was actually saying." As Mr. Persico writes, "One wonders what Casey might have been proposing that the President was agreeing to with his uncomprehending nods." □

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