

# intelligence in public media

## Covert City *The Cold War and the Making of Miami*

Reviewed by Alissa M.

**Author:** Vince Houghton and Eric Driggs  
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**Reviewer:** The reviewer is a CIA intelligence analyst specializing in Iranian foreign policy.



**R**eal-life spy dramas tend to happen in European capitals or Moscow. Maybe Washington, DC, or New York City. But Miami has also had its share of intelligence drama, almost all of it focused on Cuba and the relentless pursuit of counterrevolution in Havana. Even earlier this year (February 2024), for instance, the FBI in Miami arrested a career US diplomat and former ambassador, Manuel Rocha for decades of spying for Cuba.

Feeling the need to fill a Miami-shaped hole in the non-fiction literature of intelligence derring-do, Vince Houghton and Eric Driggs have written a book that falls somewhere between journalism and popular history. It's an account of Cuban-focused and Cuban-origin clandestine operations, covert influence, and spycraft (some of it embarrassingly ham-handed), all with a Miami nexus.

The book is broken into four parts of uncertain themes, a blurriness that is itself a common issue throughout

the book. Part I opens with a step back to the earliest US-based Cuban counterrevolutionary efforts in 1891 and describes the early years of Cuban exile groups in Miami as they struggled to find cohesion, funding, and operational momentum in the first half of the 20th century. It also describes the US government's efforts to implement a coherent Cuba policy in the face of too much operational momentum.

Chapters two and three are interesting for the consideration of intelligence and policy choices. They portray Operation MONGOOSE, instituted after the failed Bay of Pigs operation, as a failure of policymakers to align proposed operational plans with the desired policy results, rather than a failure of intelligence analysis or intelligence collection. Chapter three describes a CIA in Miami that had grown exponentially from being staffed by one fellow named Justin in 1959 to an expansive establishment with hundreds of employees, thousands of

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contacts, and a massive impact on the Miami economy, by 1964. It also describes CIA as wary of covert action to prompt regime change in Cuba and the two Kennedys, John and Robert, as reluctant to hear CIA's message over Edward Lansdale's louder claims that covert action was a can't-lose proposition to bring down Castro. (41)

Part II veers away from intelligence operations and into the policy tit-for-tat between Washington and Havana during the Cold War. It describes the Cuban government's education policy and why Cuban parents were desperate to get their kids to the United States in the 1960s—Operation Pedro Pan brought thousands of Cuban children ages 6 to 16 to the United States—and Miami's demographics started trending overwhelmingly Cuban. There is more Cold War tension and near-miss disaster in chapter five as Cuba became harder to access and Miami-based Cubans turned to hit-and-run raids on the island. The Kennedy administration, battle-scarred from the Cuban Missile Crisis, ceased sponsoring raids and clamped down on the freelancers to ensure their raids did not start World War III.

After a focus on historical covert ops in the first part and a foray into demographics and policy in the second part, Part III is a view into slightly more recent Cuban history, with a lot of focus on humanitarian crises, including Cuban citizens claiming asylum in the Peruvian embassy in Havana, boatloads of Cubans arriving in Florida—all facilitated by a Castro happy to see a potentially destabilizing force sent to his adversary's homeland.

There's not much to say about most of Part IV, which is a series of mostly short and unsatisfying chapters on a hodgepodge of topics, including Elian Gonzales, Castro's death, and the role of international crime and corruption in Miami. But chapter 11, cryptically entitled "Double Trouble," stands out as a chapter of particular interest for intelligence-minded readers, and not only because it has a reference to *Studies in*

*Intelligence* but because it relies heavily on a book on Cuban intelligence written by Brian Latell, a former chair of the *Studies* Editorial Board, and delves into the early struggles of and later absolute Cuban intelligence domination over CIA and the FBI. They quote (anonymously and second-hand) several CIA and FBI intelligence professionals as saying, in effect, that the Cuban services absolutely dominated the American services for the second half of the Cold War and beyond. Intelligence debacles included the sweepingly large Wasp Network of Cuban spies in the 1990s and the devastatingly effective long game the Cuban services played in developing, recruiting, and running DIA analyst Ana Montes.<sup>a</sup>

Overall, *Covert City* reads like an extra-long-form journalism article more than a history book, for all the positives and negatives that implies. It has a somewhat irreverent tone that makes it accessible, and the covert ops anecdotes are told entertainingly, but the book lacks a story arc to anchor the reader in a narrative from chapter to chapter. Its flippant approach has other meaningful downsides. For example, none of the chapter titles or subheadings is descriptive; instead, they are punny ("Raiders of the Lost Archipelago") or merely vague ("Exporting Counterrevolution" is the most descriptive of the bunch), making them unhelpful when trying to return to a particular topic.

The authors are frank about their personal biases—both are from Miami, and Driggs' family came from Cuba—which is refreshing and does not undermine the credibility of their historical research.<sup>b</sup> Neither has experience in intelligence operations, though both have been exposed to intel issues—Houghton as the director of the National Cryptological Museum and Driggs as US SOUTHCOM's congressional liaison. Their disassociation from sponsors of the Cold War activity they recount probably freed the two from any need to defend the operations and allows them, as outsiders, to marvel at the boldness, risk tolerance, and occasional foolhardiness of Cold War intelligence officers and the policymakers they served. ■

a. Curiously, the authors do not mention the case of Walter Kendall Myers, a retired State Department intelligence analyst who was arrested in 2009 after almost 30 years of spying for Havana; he is now serving a life sentence for espionage.

b. Houghton and Driggs's source material includes a slew of books along with contemporary news articles, documents from the George Washington University National Security Archive and the Mary Ferrell Foundation, a handful of podcast interviews, many officially released government documents, and a couple of government documents released perhaps less officially and noted as "in authors' possession" in the endnotes.