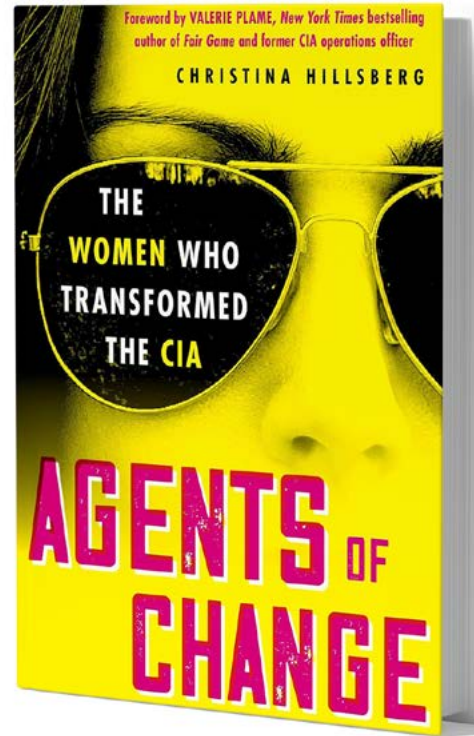


# intelligence in public media

## *Agents of Change* *The Women Who* *Transformed the CIA*

Reviewed John M. Pulju

**Author:** Christina Hillsberg; foreword by Valerie Plame  
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**Reviewer:** John M. Pulju is a retired CIA officer.



In her author's note, Christina Hillsberg writes that she had set out to tell the stories of ordinary women at CIA who broke through barriers to do extraordinary things. Hillsberg planned her book to be "the kind of pop history she would want to read" and would appeal to readers beyond "spy aficionados and history buffs." (xvii) She writes that her research led her to emphasize gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and even assault. She should have stuck with her original plan. Instead, she mixed pop elements with her new emphasis. The result is disjointed and doesn't deliver on either approach.

The book comes closest to achieving Hillsberg's original plan. Its half dozen chapters open with a breezy pop feminist overview of each decade beginning with the 1960s; the role of women in James Bond films is a feature.

The overviews are followed by what amounts to oral history, based mainly on interviews and memoirs. Hillsberg also draws on her own experience during almost a decade at the agency, where she started in the Directorate of Intelligence (since renamed the Directorate of Analysis) before moving to the Directorate of Operations (DO).

Hillsberg concentrates on the career histories of 10 women who served in the DO. She supplements these profiles with snippets about a dozen women who served in analysis, science and technology, and information systems. The earliest careers started in the late 1960s, and a few appear to be ongoing; certainly some of the women were still working after the COVID pandemic. Several of the women rose to senior management positions over

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## *Agents of Change*

their careers of 20 to 30 years. Others spent a decade or less at CIA.

Clearly, this doesn't add up to a history of "the women who transformed the CIA." Hillsberg doesn't profile operational trailblazers in the early decades of the agency—the first women case officers and chiefs of station, for example—although she mentions a couple. And, her emphasis on the DO is unfortunate because there is plenty of material to profile women from other directorates, including the first women heads of directorates and of such key positions as general counsel. Career highlights of DO and other trailblazers can be found on CIA's public website.

Still, collectively the career histories offer a valuable addition to the intelligence bookshelf. They weave a colorful tapestry that richly illustrates not only how women broke through barriers but also what they accomplished and the trade-offs they made balancing work, family, health, and other interests. The histories are filled with vivid details on hiring, training, and human operations. They give good insight into the changing culture of CIA and the role of women, culminating in Gina Haspel's appointment as director.

A strength of the histories is the variety of experiences they convey. We see smart, determined women overcome open sexism during the 1980s to enter the ranks of case officers, some with the help of supportive men. We see the stress they felt to continually prove themselves and to balance careers, relationships, and families—including whether to have children. We see women who took advantage of growing opportunities to carve out satisfying careers that advanced US national security. One started as a teenage secretary, got her degree with CIA help, and held an array of field positions, including acting chief of station. Another was a midcareer hire who applied her niche expertise to drive operations on a critical topic. We see other officers who grappled with the challenge of war zone and austere assignments, including their perception

that childless officers are disproportionately expected to pursue them. And, we see the agency grappling with making tandem assignments work—including for same-sex couples—and with the expectations of different generations.

Readers should keep in mind the limits of oral history. Interviewees are speaking from memory and, presumably, are trying to be interesting. Oral history tends to emphasize overcoming challenges. And, it is not confession. There is little self-criticism, whether about job performance or personal behavior. By contrast, judgments about other people often are not tempered by the doubts interviewees undoubtedly had about their ability to get into another person's head.

Readers should also consider how Hillsberg's pop feminist approach affects the narrative. She notes that although she tried to be balanced, her own conscious and unconscious biases undoubtedly color the book. She quotes CIA's critics uncritically and seems to accept at face value interviewees' sweeping statements, such as women make good case officers because they are better listeners and judges of character than men.

For the most part, *Agents of Change* delivers on Hillsberg's objective. She weaves her tapestry in bold colors. Her prose is clear and lively; it moves right along. Too much critical analysis or data would have bogged it down. It is easy for readers to account for her biases, which are clear even if not always consistent.

*Agents of Change* is more problematic when drawing conclusions about complex issues, including how well CIA has done handling specific allegations of sexual discrimination, harassment, and assault. Tonally, there is a clash with the overall pop tone of the book. More importantly, Hillsberg lacks the access to CIA records and people or the expertise to draw conclusions. In a few recent cases, she does not appear to have sought alternate perspectives, leading to an unbalanced presentation. It would have been better to exclude these cases. ■