Gaining Access to CIA's Records

Evan Thomas

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Editor's Note: Mr. Evan Thomas was allowed to see CIA classified records under the historical access policy. The basic authority for this policy is Executive Order 12356 [April 1982], as implemented in HR 10-24 (c)4. Under these provisions, CIA may grant individual researchers and former Presidential appointees access to classified files, once the recipient of this access signs a secrecy agreement and agrees to allow the Agency to review his manuscript to ensure that it contains no classified information. Former DCI Robert Gates granted Mr. Thomas historical access in 1992, and directed that the CIA History Staff locate and provide records that would satisfy Mr. Thomas's research request. Mr. Thomas's manuscript was subsequently reviewed in accordance with his secrecy agreement and approved on 2 March 1995 by the Information Review Officer of the Directorate of Operations, with the concurrence of the Office of General Counsel. The views expressed by Mr. Thomas in his manuscript and in this article are his own, and do not necessarily represent the opinions of CIA or any of its components.

It is no secret that, over time, many CIA secrets leak. The most sensational stories have a way of surfacing, especially in the covert action arena where there are often many witting participants and the action has tangible consequences. In the early days, the larger, more spectacular covert actions in Indonesia and at the Bay of Pigs all were the subjects of rumors and newspaper accounts within a few months (or hours) of their occurrence. Post-Watergate Congressional investigators uncovered much of what remained secret: the assassination plots, drug experiments, and mail-opening campaigns.

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Yet, for a variety of reasons, the CIA hangs on to the illusion of secrecy about these early operations. Sources and methods must be protected, even from many decades ago, and there is a certain tradition to consider. To some old hands like Richard Helms, secrets are forever. Thus, numerous books have reported that the Guatemala operation was codenamed PBSUCCESS. To the CIA, however, the code name remains classified. This is understandable to officials of the Directorate of Operations (DO), perhaps, but to historical researchers it seems slightly surreal. There is not a lot historians can do about it, because the operations of the CIA are largely exempt from the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

This may be about to change. There is a move afoot in Congress and the Clinton administration to declassify CIA records from the early days—more than 30 years ago. But it will be a slow and cumbersome process, if my own experience is an indication.

I have had the singular opportunity of being allowed behind the veil and permitted to see all of the Clandestine Service's classified histories and some of the Agency's classified records. I believe I am the first outside historian or journalist to

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be granted such an opportunity. But the process I went through tells a little about the difficulty the CIA will have opening up for wider viewing. The result was satisfactory to me, and Agency officials, though encumbered by bureaucratic imperatives, showed good faith. Nonetheless, the process was complex and, at times, slightly comic.

My access was granted for a book I was working on, entitled *The Very Best Men*, published last year by Simon & Schuster. Several years ago, I had the idea of writing a joint biography of four men who were prominent figures running covert action in the first two decades of the Cold War. In a way, I wanted to write a sequel to *The Wise Men*, which I co-authored with Walter Isaacson, published in 1986. *The Wise Men* was the story of six statesmen who shaped the doctrine of containment in the years right after World War II. Two "wise men," George Kennan and Chip Bohlen, were close friends with Frank Wisner, the man most responsible for creating a covert action capability for the United States in the postwar era.

Wisner's story, of an impassioned, driven man who helped create a counterforce to Soviet subversion and later became a tragic suicide, intrigued me. As I looked into it, I found that there was a group of men within the CIA who, like Wisner, were similar to the group we wrote about in *The Wise Men*. This group shared the same social background, the same ideals, and the same confidence in America's role in the world. They had a sureness of purpose, a deep confidence that America's time had come and that they were ideally suited to take a leadership role.

I settled on four subjects: Wisner, Richard Bissell, Tracy Barnes, and Desmond FitzGerald. Wisner, Bissell, and FitzGerald were Deputy Directors for Plans, and Barnes was an Associate Deputy Director for Plans and a major participant in some of the bigger actions, including Guatemala and the Bay of Pigs. They all were distinguished by a certain social background—members of the same set in Georgetown—and they all believed in acting boldly and taking risks. Within the Agency, they were known for their dash and charm, and, by some, for their innocence of tradecraft and occasional recklessness.

All four show up in various books on the CIA. Bissell was briefly but vividly portrayed in Tom Powers's *The Man Who Kept the Secrets*. Wisner was somewhat cruelly captured in *The Old Boys* by Burton Hersh. Barnes and FitzGerald are more obscure figures. I hoped that I would be able to find out more about these men from their families and friends. Although of a much later generation, I was reasonably well connected to their world through my own acquaintanceships and through my employer, Katharine Graham of *The Washington Post*. But I was eager to see as well if I could persuade the CIA to open up its records. Oral history is useful to get a feel for the motivations behind official acts and the character and temperament of the officials themselves. But it is not always accurate. People tend to remember stories they have told about events, not the events themselves, and memories have a way of improving those stories. If there was a paper trail to the stories I was hearing from the old hands, I wanted to see it.

In the winter of 1992, I called out to the CIA's Office of Public Affairs, not quite sure what to expect. I was pleasantly surprised when Joe DeTrani, then the Agency's chief spokesman, invited me to visit Langley to discuss possible access. Noting that the Cold War was over, he said that the Agency was looking for ways to open up to historians and journalists. When I arrived at CIA headquarters, I was received by DeTrani, Ken McDonald, the head of the CIA's History Staff, and another official who handled FOIA requests. The Agency officials were friendly and seemed eager to help, but I got a taste of what was in store when I reached down to pick up the CIA résumés of my four subjects, one-page summaries that were laid out on the table. The résumés seemed innocuous—they consisted of titles and dates of employment. But one of the officials present quickly stayed my hand. Classified, he explained.

Nonetheless, the Agency officials hoped that we could work out some kind of an arrangement. Although records of Agency operations are largely exempt from FOIA, there is an obscure executive order that allows historians to have access if they sign an Agency secrecy oath. The provision had been used once before, they explained, for Jerry Schecter, who wrote a book about the Penkovsky case called *The Spy Who Saved the World*. Schecter had been allowed to see Penkovsky's file, although he had not been

allowed to cite Agency records in his footnotes.

I knew that I could not sign the Agency's secrecy agreement. It would allow the government to censor my work before publication. DeTrani assured me that the CIA would be reasonable. But how could I be sure? I thought of the Agency's lawsuit against Frank Snepp, a former case officer who had published secrets in his book, *Decent Interval.* The Agency had a reputation for fighting to keep its secrets. The secrecy agreement that was shown to me—a standard form signed by Agency employees—is incredibly broad. It would, if literally applied, affect not only my book but also anything I ever wrote about the intelligence business. I asked a few other journalists, including Bob Woodward, what they thought about signing such an oath. They replied that I would be out of my mind.

Still, I was tempted to try to find some compromise. Here was a chance to get inside, to see what no one in my situation had ever seen before. Schecter had been given access to a very important case, but it was just one case. The CIA was talking about giving me the entire run of Agency records from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s. I wanted to find some way to take advantage of the offer without sacrificing my own freedom to publish.

To represent me, I hired a lawyer, Sven Holmes, a partner at Williams & Connolly, who had plenty of experience in this area because he had been chief counsel of the Senate Intelligence Committee. (Equally important, he offered to discount his

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rates.) Together, we worked out a proposal designed to protect my interests and the Agency's. It was basically a two-step process. I would write the manuscript based on my interviews with retired Agency officials, the large literature on intelligence, and whatever public documents I could find. The CIA would read it and tell me if there was any information in the manuscript that they would object to if published. I would then decide whether or not to take the information out of the manuscript. If the deletions demanded were not too significant or onerous, I would then be prepared to take the next step—to sign a secrecy oath agreeing to submit to pre-publication review. The purpose of this two-step process was to make sure that I could protect my own reporting from Agency censorship. I wanted to know—in advance—what was likely to give the Agency trouble. I also wanted to modify the CIA's standard and all-encompassing secrecy oath to apply narrowly to information I got from CIA archives—not from any other source, including former Agency officials.

While I was pondering what to do about the CIA's secrecy oath, I was reporting and researching my book. I read public accounts, looked at some of the scant archival material, and interviewed about 50 former officials who had worked with my subjects. I also spent several days interviewing the one survivor in my group, Richard Bissell. Almost everyone I contacted, including Bissell, spoke freely and on the record. There are no unattributed quotes in the book, and in the end I was able to cite all my sources by name, with a single exception of an official who did not want to reveal his knowledge of an assassination plot.

Meanwhile, my lawyer negotiated with CIA. The talks went slowly—on and off for nearly two years. I was given a security clearance and went to several long meetings with large numbers of anxious-looking officials. They were concerned about the amount of work that might be involved in providing access, and, most important, what kind of precedent might be set. For a while, it looked like the Agency would abandon the project. But at a meeting set up to accomplish just that, an official from the DO, having read my first draft, declared that there was nothing in it that would harm the national security. His candor helped salvage the negotiations.

It was clear by this stage that the Agency lacked the resources or the willingness to give me complete access to the records. By this juncture, I was also running out of time—my publisher was clamoring for my manuscript. I narrowed my document request to focus on the Clandestine Service histories and several other documents that I knew to be in the archives.

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On 1 December 1994, after extensive meetings between my lawyer and Agency officials, I received back my first draft with the Agency's request for 33 changes and deletions. Most simply requested that I specifically cite a non-CIA source, which was easy to do. In a few cases, I was asked to not use a cryptonym or to delete the name of a case officer or the country where he had served. In the few cases where I could not find a public source, I agreed. I was able to do this without detracting from the book. Indeed, it was hard to see what all the fuss had been about, because there was little in my original draft that required changing. The Agency made no attempt to stop me from publishing information that was critical or embarrassing—with one small exception. Bissell and one of his aides, Bob King, had told me about a plot, never carried off, to kill President Sukarno of Indonesia or to infect him somehow with venereal disease. The Agency allowed me to use this somewhat tawdry tale when I was able to point to some testimony from Bissell before the Church Committee that alluded, in general terms, to the plot.

After we had agreed on a few changes and citations to sourcing, I was allowed into the office of the History Staff to read the Clandestine Service histories and various other documents. I read all or parts of about 30 of the histories, mostly dealing with covert operations in various regions in the time frame (1948-67) of my book. I was especially interested in the histories of the major operations, particularly Guatemala and the Bay of Pigs, in which several of my subjects had played major roles. I was allowed to read the Inspector General's report on the Bay of Pigs, a document that historians have been after for some time. I asked for and was allowed to see personnel records pertaining to my subjects, although the Agency balked at medical records for privacy reasons. I was able to look at some planning documents and cables on the Guatemala operation, but the DO was unable to find some cables from Frank Wisner during the 1956 Hungary crisis, though a log summarizing the cables was located.

I was lucky to have as my guide in this process Michael Warner of the CIA's History Staff. He was smart, responsive, thorough, and good-humored about my undertaking. He warned me at the outset that most of the histories, written largely by intelligence officers, were turgid and sometimes incomplete. This was true. On the other hand, they gave me a feel for the way the Agency saw itself. I feel reasonably confident in saying, after having read the histories and talked to members of the History Staff, that there are no great secrets remaining from the early days—neither victories nor defeats. (As a result, I now take with a grain of salt the oft-used line by Agency veterans, "You only hear about our defeats. If only you knew about our victories!") The histories confirmed much of what I had read in public sources or heard from old Agency hands, while correcting some important details. For instance, a lore has grown over time, repeated in various CIA books as recently as Peter Grose's 1994 biography of Allen Dulles, that the Agency contemplated arming the freedom fighters during the Hungarian Revolution and even turning loose a paramilitary army. Frank Wisner, it is true, wanted to do something to exploit the uprising, but, as a practical matter, he was powerless to do much. There were no readily available arms, the émigrés trained to fight in the paramilitary force were not ready, and the CIA station in Vienna, the closest launching base, did not have any Hungarian speakers.

Off and on through December, I came to the History Staff office to read and take notes on a computer supplied by the Agency. In January, I submitted about 80 items for declassification. The Agency agreed to almost all, objecting to certain cryptonyms and some operational details, like the number of airdrops of weapons into a country with which the United States now has delicate diplomatic relations. I took the items cleared by the Agency and incorporated them into my manuscript. The Agency signed off on the final draft, with only a few last-minute quibbles.

For me, the experience was long and expensive, sometimes perplexing and a little exasperating, but in the end worthwhile. It further convinced me that the CIA would probably be wise to open up its files from this early period for one simple reason: most people believe that the CIA is still hiding terrible secrets—that do not exist!

Millions have seen the movie JFK and give credence to the conspiracy theories of its writer, Oliver Stone. I gather that Stone's latest movie in progress about Richard Nixon will spin out a new and equally fictional set of tales about the Agency. People will believe them, no matter how far-fetched. Polls show that nearly 80 percent of Americans believe JFK died as a result of a conspiracy, and about half believe CIA was somehow involved. Whatever remains in the CIA files cannot be nearly as awful as the American public imagines. To be sure, I hardly saw everything there was to see, but I got not even a whiff of dirty tricks that had somehow remained hidden from Church Committee investigators or the army of historians and authors who write about the CIA. I really believe that it would be in the Agency's interest to let historians see for themselves what remains classified. I do not see why the Agency does not declassify almost any secret that is more than 30 years old.

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Somehow, however, I do not believe that is going to happen any time soon. Bureaucracy, lack of manpower, worries about diplomatic relations with other nations and their intelligence services, and some genuine residual concerns about protecting sources and methods stand in the way. I am grateful to the Agency for my limited access, but I am not sure the Agency officials are eager to repeat the experience. As he was reviewing my manuscript for the umpteenth time, the DO Information Review Officer handling my manuscript, Bill McNair, looked up at me with a weary smile. He said, "We are never, ever, going to do this again."