

## **Psychiatrists, Professors, Patriots: Remembering Drs. Jerrold Post (1934–2020) and Laurence Cove (1933–2020)**

*by Dr. Daniel Tsao*

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November 2020 saw the passing of two giants in the field of leadership and psychological analysis, Jerrold “Jerry” Post and Laurence “Larry” Cove, who collectively served for more than 50 years with the CIA. Drawing from their psychiatric expertise, dedication to the field of political psychology, and deep commitment to national service, they made major contributions that advanced the analytic discipline and the CIA’s overall mission.

The use of psychiatrists and psychologists to assess the personalities of world leaders in support of US national security goes back to World War II when psychoanalyst Walter Langer, the brother of Office of Strategic Services and CIA pioneer William Langer, prepared a psychological analysis of Adolf Hitler for the OSS. That assessment, which later was declassified, was hundreds of pages long (a bit longer than today’s Intelligence Assessments) and contained terms, such as “ego revulsion of latent tendencies,” that might sound archaic to modern-day readers. Nonetheless, the report correctly predicted that Hitler would become increasingly paranoid and vindictive as the war turned against him and, when faced with defeat, his suicide would be “the most plausible outcome.” (In subsequent decades, whenever an autocrat has been cornered, the question invariably has been asked, “Will he—and it is almost always “he”—do a Hitler?” History has shown that it is a rare outcome.)

It was Jerry Post, however, who, as founder and director of CIA’s Center for the Analysis of Personality and Political Behavior, created an enduring program of psychological analysis that continues to this day. During his 21-year career at CIA and in his subsequent academic career, Jerry was devoted to the field of political psychology. He constantly looked for ways to hone methodological approaches and find new sources of information. He recognized the need to minimize what might be characterized as “psychobabble” and make these assessments readily grasped by the lay reader. Recognizing the degree to which cultural and group psychological factors influence personality and behavior, Jerry created a multidisciplinary

unit comprised of psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, cultural anthropologists, and other social scientists. Above all, Jerry strove to make these assessments “actionable”—meaning they would provide readers estimates of what behavior to anticipate and insights that would help inform negotiating approaches.

That approach paid off in 1978 when psychological assessments prepared by Jerry’s unit provided critical support to negotiations that led to the historic Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel. In giving special praise to these assessments, President Carter stated, “After spending 13 days with the two principals, I wouldn’t change a word.” Indeed, one of Jerry’s most prized possessions was the former President Carter’s autobiography in which Carter wrote in Jerry’s copy: “Dear Jerry, if not for you, Camp David would not have been possible.” Jerry later told me he would “always treasure that book.”

Despite the triumph of Camp David, Jerry, who was awarded the Intelligence Medal of Merit in 1979 and the *Studies in Intelligence* Award in 1980 for his leadership of the Center, continued to look for ways to advance the field and break new ground in applying psychological analysis to key intelligence questions. He initiated efforts to understand the psychology of terrorism. He looked for innovative ways to present psychological analysis, including the use of video presentations. He always kept in mind that questions over the validity of personality assessments—questions going back to the days of Walter Langer—remained both within the intelligence and policymaking communities.

It certainly can be said that Jerry was no stranger to controversy. He was not shy about ruffling feathers. He fought to publish analysis that he thought was vital for policymakers. He once recalled being engaged in a protracted, vigorous effort to have an assessment of a major world leader published, finally getting the go-ahead and seeing it published—on the day the leader died.

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Jerry carried that fighting spirit with him in his second career at George Washington University, where he taught both at GW's Elliott School and GW Medical Center's Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences. At the Elliott School, Jerry taught scores of students who would go on to serve at CIA and other parts of the IC. It was as a young resident physician in GW's psychiatric department that this writer in 1990 first encountered Jerry, who was giving a fascinating presentation on the mindset of Saddam Husayn to a packed audience sitting in rapt attention. He tirelessly sought to advance the field of political psychology through his work with the International Institute of Political Psychology, of which he was a founding member, and the American Psychiatric Association, where he served as chair of the Task Force for National and International Terrorism and Violence.

That sense of commitment remained with Jerry until the very end of his life. Despite suffering from a growing list of medical issues, Jerry continued to speak out, teach, and travel. Several years ago, he insisted on giving an hour-long presentation on the psychology of terrorism at GW, even though he was suffering from pneumonia and had just gotten off the plane after a long flight from Israel. Perhaps reflecting his relentless commitment and passion to his work, he made it to the end of the talk—and then collapsed in front of his audience. In the last year of his life, Jerry—despite having great difficulty in walking and being unable to drive—asserting that he felt “underutilized”—still looked for new ways to contribute to CIA and its mission.

Although many years have passed since Jerry worked in the halls of CIA, his influence and impact remain.



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### *Laurence Cove*

Larry Cove, already possessed of a distinguished career as a child psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and academic, joined CIA in the mid-1980s and ensured the survival and continued success of the CIA's program of psychological assessments. The survival of that program was by no means guaranteed. Indeed, in the first years of Larry's career, the program underwent considerable change and turmoil. With a commitment to excellence and persistence that marked his career, Larry applied his expertise in ways that consistently enriched the analysis of foreign leaders—and drew major kudos from senior policymakers. A founding member of CIA's Senior Analytic Service, Larry also joined the Senior Intelligence Service in recognition of his invaluable contributions to CIA's analytic mission.

Larry would leave no stone unturned in understanding what made foreign leaders “tick”—their motivations, fears, reactions to stress, and capacity to change. During the 1990s, his assessments helped inform US policymakers involved in complex negotiations. On at least one occasion, he also presciently forecast that a sought-after outcome through negotiations probably would be futile because of the leader's personality and motivations. Larry's dauntless efforts to seek “the truth” in assessing leaders almost certainly reflected both his training in psychoanalysis—in which a core tenet is the pursuit the truth wherever it might lead—and his dedication as an

intelligence officer at CIA, where the inscribed words, “and the truth shall make you free,” face the CIA's Wall of Stars.

Larry paid painstaking attention to providing clarity and conciseness in his assessments to ensure that complex concepts were readily grasped by readers. When he reviewed the work of his colleagues, he unfailingly found ways to improve the message, argumentation, and concision of the analysis. Eschewing the use of technical diagnostic terminology, Larry would always find a better term or phrase to convey a key analytic point. A former chief of the VIP Medical Analysis Center, which managed the psychological assessments program in the late 1990s and early 2000s, once remarked that he viewed any pieces written or reviewed by Larry as “Coved,” and therefore did not require further editing.

Larry's mastery of the English language may seem surprising, given his background. Born Ari Icikovic in Lithuania, he and his mother, a schoolteacher, left the country in the late 1930s at the urging of his father, a prominent Lithuanian Jewish leader, who later perished in the Holocaust. Larry and his mother had to initially stay in Nazi-ruled Germany, where he received treatment for an eye condition that persisted for the rest of his life. They constantly had to stay in hiding, especially after Kristallnacht, the pogrom in November

1938 that presaged the Holocaust. After arriving in the United States in July 1939, Larry struggled in school, in large part because of his difficulties learning English. Nonetheless, through his talent and sheer persistence, he earned scholarships to New York's Ramaz School, Columbia University, and SUNY Downstate College of Medicine.

After Larry formally retired from CIA in 2003, he returned shortly afterward as an independent contractor. Always apt to be self-effacing, Larry, a self-described "character," once stated that his role as contractor was to serve as a "professional curmudgeon." In actuality, Larry, in his quiet, understated way, played a critical stabilizing role as senior expert, informal adviser, mentor, and teacher as the program underwent a renewed cycle of changes, including multiple reorganizations. Perhaps aware of the need to alleviate periods of tension, he enjoyed talking about his beloved dogs, Benjy and Daisy, and could be counted on to give outstanding restaurant recommendations, based in part on tips from his devoted wife, Ann Brody Cove.

Perhaps not surprisingly, it was the role of being mentor and teacher that Larry cherished most of all. He enjoyed working with clinicians and leadership analysts, always generous with his time and unabashedly candid—some would say blunt—with his opinions and recommendations. Even as his health steadily declined, he looked for opportunities to teach about the principles of psychological assessments and to consult with analysts across regional offices and mission centers, sometimes bringing food—including his lunch—which he would then offer to the analysts.

In his last few months, Larry was no longer physically able to go to work, but he still hoped to contribute to the next generations of analysts. Indeed, on the day before he passed away, he reached out one last time, looking to be helpful and supportive—and proud of the people he worked with.

He, too, will be greatly missed.



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