

**A Drop of Treason: Philip Agee and His Exposure of the CIA**

Jonathan Stevenson (University of Chicago Press, 2021), 337 pages, photographs, index.

**Reviewed by Brent Geary**

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In October 1974, former CIA case officer Philip Agee called a press conference in London. With attention growing in the media about a sensational book he planned to publish in the coming days, and stories on both sides of the Atlantic calling his character into question, Agee wanted to state plainly his intentions: to have the CIA abolished and to expose its officers wherever they operated. With that, he named 37 CIA operations officers and administrative personnel at the CIA station in Mexico City, the start of a career of attacking his former organization and its employees.

*De mortuis nil nisi bonum*—loosely translated as “Do not speak ill of the dead”—is a dictum dating to roughly 600 BCE. Because the dead are unable to defend themselves, so the thought goes, it is best to speak of them with only kind words or—barring that—none at all. For many, including this reviewer, Agee’s actions disqualify him from such consideration. Jonathan Stevenson’s new Agee biography *A Drop of Treason* tries in vain to depict Agee as a troubled soul whose actions were not entirely the result of base instincts and weakness. Agee, who died in exile in 2008 in Cuba, was despicable and deserved far worse than he got.

*A Drop of Treason* reads very much like a book its author never intended to write, at least not in its final form. Stevenson, a longtime instructor at the US Naval War College and a former member of the National Security Council staff during the Obama administration, must have once thought that Agee was worth a more careful examination than he had previously been given. Why else devote the time and energy to conduct a thorough, well-researched account such as his? The evidence he marshaled and carefully documented, however, points to a conclusion that he struggles to resist.

Agee was the son of a Florida millionaire who made his fortune in the laundry business and belonged to all the highbrow social and business clubs in Tampa. Agee attended Catholic high school, drove a vintage hot rod, and was reasonably popular. Stevenson found Agee to

have been a “model student” who participated in several clubs and excelled in the classroom and had a few close friends, one of whom was “just floored” and “stunned” by the anti-American rhetoric and actions of Agee’s later years. (13) At the University of Notre Dame, Agee was elected to the student senate, participated in several clubs, and graduated with honors.

In every respect, Agee’s was a traditional, moderately conservative upbringing, based on Stevenson’s research, although the author argues that Agee’s later conversion to radical politics might have taken root while at Notre Dame. Regardless, after a brief attempt at law school, Agee joined CIA in 1957, serving first an abbreviated stint in the air force as part of his cover before joining the CIA as an operations officer.

Stevenson devotes relatively little space to Agee’s CIA career—mostly as a case officer assigned to Latin America—before his resignation in 1968, focusing specifically on the incidents Agee later claimed turned him against US foreign policy and the CIA. He details, for example, Agee’s claim of having overheard the torture of a Uruguayan communist—fingered by Agee—at the hands of local security forces (48) as well as the massacre of protesters decrying the cost of the Mexico City Olympics in 1968 by a pro-US Mexican regime. (62–63) He also describes Agee’s failed first marriage, his bad performance evaluations from his last posting, and his efforts to retain custody of his children.

With the exception of accounts Agee wrote years later, Stevenson finds little to suggest that Agee had truly turned against his country and CIA until after his 1968 resignation. Without that evidence, Stevenson tries to position Agee within the larger socio-political turmoil of the late 1960s in the United States, while noting that Agee’s posting overseas during that time meant he did not experience much of it firsthand. He also points to other evidence that Agee’s claim to radicalization during his time in the Agency did not quite add up.

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Stevenson points out, for example, that Agee's resignation letter was filled with praise for the people he had worked with and his desire to "maintain their friendship ... in the years to come." (65) Agee's stated reason for his departure was "personal circumstances incompatible at this time with the best interests of the Agency," alluding to his forthcoming divorce and custody battle for his children. When Agee resigned, he stayed in Mexico City—his last CIA posting—attempting and failing at two separate business ventures completely unrelated to politics. Only then did he propose to write a book about the CIA, but he could find no takers for a fairly straightforward account of the business of intelligence buoyed by a "vanilla critique" of US foreign policy. By Stevenson's own reading, Agee only decided to write "a sensationalized exposé" after several publishers indicated to him that it was his only avenue to publication. (70) "It seems safe to say," Stevenson wrote, "that had any of Agee's politically tamer enterprises been a success, he might well have turned out like many an unsung retired CIA officer: cynical and disenchanted but content to keep his demons private." (72)

Left unmentioned here, but referred to later in the book, is a claim by former KGB case officer Oleg Kalugin—and a similar account by a defector from Cuban intelligence—that Agee in 1973 approached the KGB in Mexico City and offered to sell secrets, but that the Soviets feared he was disingenuous or a "dangle" and turned him away, so Agee instead approached the Cubans. (227–28) Stevenson mentions this story in his concluding chapter but explains it away as being unlikely. He does detail, however, that at some point in 1971, Agee traveled to Cuba—after obtaining a visa in Canada—where he spent the last half of the year conducting research for his book, and Stevenson states that it is clear that Cuban intelligence supported him in his work then and for years thereafter. (72)

When he finally published his first of several books, *Inside the Company: CIA Diary* in 1975, Agee went all in denouncing both US foreign policy and the CIA and voicing his support for socialist and communist causes. While he was not the first to write a scathing "tell all" from within the agency, he was the first to do so without submitting his work for CIA's prepublication review. More importantly, Agee listed the names of over 400 CIA officers, agents, contacts, and programs around the world. He dedicated the book to one of several female

revolutionary activists who became his lovers during these years, in this case the Brazilian Angela Camargo Seixas. Stevenson recounts how the US government became aware of Agee's intention to write a book and monitored his progress but, without any laws at the time against naming CIA officers and after several attempts to convince him to stop, was ultimately unable to prevent its publication.

After the release of *Inside the Company*, Agee became a minor celebrity for a few years, rubbing elbows with leftist artists, writers, and activists in Europe and the Western Hemisphere. Stevenson recounts how Agee's notoriety opened doors to speaking engagements on college campuses across the United States until the government revoked his passport during the Carter administration, leaving him stranded abroad.

One factor that contributed to his exile was the 1975 assassination of CIA officer Richard Welch in Athens, Greece. Welch had been "outed" by the Greek media after first being named in the magazine *Counterspy*, whose founders had been inspired by Agee's actions and featured a separate article by him in the same issue that named Welch. Stevenson argues that while Agee became the focus of blame for Welch's death, he had played no direct role in the affair. While technically correct, the author misses—by a wide mark—the larger point: Agee did not care about the lives of CIA officers or had convinced himself that they were expendable. In a letter to the editor of the *Washington Star*, Agee wrote that while he had not "fingered" Welch, he would have done so had the Greek media asked. Moreover, he claimed that his actions produced "no danger of violence" to CIA personnel if exposed officers "return to Langley, [Virginia]." Likewise, in a letter to British authorities appealing his 1977 deportation from the United Kingdom, he wrote that "My work on balance is serving the vital interests of people vastly greater in number and worth than any lives of the CIA's employees."

While Stevenson rightly critiques some of Agee's actions at points throughout the book, he seeks to rationalize and explain away others. For example, Stevenson points out that both the journalist James Risen and two of the retired CIA officers who helped identify CIA mole Aldrich Ames tell a similar story about Agee. They wrote that while claiming to represent the CIA's inspector general, he attempted to solicit classified information

from a CIA officer in Mexico City in 1989, probably at the behest of Cuban intelligence. Stevenson explains this away as highly unlikely given Agee's notoriety, although Agee and his second wife split their time between apartments in Germany and Cuba for over two decades, clearly with the at least tacit support of Havana. Most importantly, Stevenson admits that Agee's exposure of CIA personnel undoubtedly wreaked havoc on their families and careers but plays down the threat to their physical safety or that of the CIA's assets and contacts similarly revealed, arguing that no evidence has ever surfaced of physical harm having come to anyone Agee compromised.

This is his most puzzling—and disturbing—rationalization of all. Even if Welch's death could not be attributed directly to Agee, his actions popularized the idea of identifying CIA officers posted overseas and spawned a cottage industry of the same for several years. In another example that Stevenson mentions, in 1980 CIA officer Richard Kinsman and his family survived an attempt on their lives and were forced to relocate from Jamaica after an Agee collaborator exposed Kinsman and provided his home address to the local media. Stevenson calls the incident mere "pot shots" taken at Kinsman's house (115) and as a "rather pathetic attack." (249) In fact, someone fired more than 20 bullets into Kinsman's home, including through the window of his daughter's bedroom. Had Kinsman or a member of his family been killed, would Agee have been to blame? Would Stevenson have written this book? Stevenson admits that "Agee's revelations easily could have resulted in the assassination of a CIA officer, and it is arguably a matter of luck that they didn't." (115) So why, then, did he expend such effort minimizing the instances where Agee might have played a part in putting CIA officers and assets in harm's way?

In his conclusion, Stevenson derides Agee's critics with the following passage:

*His detractors might say he just got mildly disenchanted with CIA work; tried to take the quiet, nontreasonous way out; got frustrated; was seduced by a couple of lefty women; felt the allure of dissident celebrity; and only then became a real dissenter.*  
(257)

This view, Stevenson writes, is a "gross oversimplification." Simplified? Yes, but not overly so. Stevenson's own work illustrates that Agee—the privileged son of a millionaire—chose not only to turn his back on his country but rejected the very idea that the people he had worked with for over a decade were good and moral and worth protecting. He callously upended and endangered lives, destroyed careers, and gave aid and comfort to America's enemies not because of deeply held ideological differences but because—after a succession of failures—he was paid to do so and enjoyed the notoriety it brought him.

Stevenson grudgingly acknowledges that "Agee behaved far more objectionably than necessary or proper to make his point," (254) yet ties himself in knots trying to avoid admitting something else: that he wasted his time and effort examining someone who was not worth it. I encourage prospective readers to learn from Stevenson's mistake and give Agee—and this biography—wide berth. For those who insist on reading it, particularly counter-intelligence officers, there may be some lessons here to learn about turncoats, but I rather doubt it. Money and ego, after all, are already well-documented motivations for treachery. Agee found a lucrative grift and—lacking any other options after the fact—stuck with it until his death. End of story.



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