Clarity in Crisis: Leadership Lessons from the CIA

Marc Polymeropoulos (HarperCollins, 2021), 168 pages, notes, index.

Reviewed by Mike R.

Clarity in Crisis: *Leadership Lessons from the CIA* by Marc Polymeropoulos is an unusual amalgam: a mix of leadership, intelligence—and baseball. The 26-year veteran CIA operations officer who retired in 2019 as a member of the Senior Intelligence Service puts forward his core leadership principles in a series of chapters illustrated by a combination of baseball stories and vignettes from his intelligence career. Though packaged in a new way, the principles are not groundbreaking, and the operational sections are thin on detail. But if one looks beyond these flaws, at the heart of the book are nuggets illuminating the human element at CIA in a way not often exposed to public view. This counterbalances the other shortcomings, even if in the end it isn't enough to make for a fully satisfying read.

Those seeking tales of a CIA operative's exploits will find that Polymeropoulos barely skims the surface of a career steeped in the Middle East, war zones, and counterterrorism, with a final position overseeing operations in Europe and Eurasia. He was one of CIA's most decorated officers, in the middle of some of the agency's key events in a post-9/11 world. If his operational career were fleshed out more, he could have written a welcome addition to the ever-multiplying volumes of memoirs by retired case officers. Instead, his chapters are more like a pilot's touch-and-go landing, quickly plopping down on an intelligence issue, then taking off right away without providing extensive detail or context. And they focus predominantly on war-zone-related service to the exclusion of other locales and issues.

Polymeropoulos dishes up a series of appetizers, treating operational events concisely and keeping much of the information generic. For example, his tale of redemption, tracking down a terrorist high-value target (HVT) responsible for the death of a colleague years earlier, has enormous potential but is over almost before it begins. After noting briefly that months were spent recruiting sources to attempt to report on his location somewhere in South Asia, he cuts to the chase in record time:

> *One day, the HVT went to a local market, and we had our agents on the ground in short order to positively identify him; it was seamless. With some later help from the US military, the HVT ultimately met his demise and was no longer a threat. An unforgettable moment for so many. (40–41)*

On his central theme of leadership, Polymeropoulos has chosen something at once both easy and challenging. The shelves are full of volumes on this subject, and the public has an insatiable appetite for it, but given such competition, the odds are stacked against any new entrant's ability to rise to the top of the heap. Polymeropoulos tries to stand out by creating a new niche – that of the intelligence leadership manual. Former military practitioners no doubt helped point the way, achieving success parlaying their experiences into military leadership lessons—witness *It's Your Ship* by Captain Michael Abrashoff from a decade ago. Polymeropoulos probably was particularly inspired by 2017's *Make Your Bed: Little Things That Can Change Your Life . . . And Maybe The World* by Adm. William McRaven. Similarly constructed, both are thin reads, easily digested in one sitting, and contain a comparable number of guiding leadership principles—10 key lessons for McRaven, nine core concepts for Polymeropoulos.

But the parallels only go so far. McRaven—a former SEAL and head of Special Operations Command, who went on to become chancellor of the University of Texas system—has a certain gravitas. Polymeropoulos presents himself as an Average Joe on a soapbox, conjuring images of a John Madden of the intelligence world, an outsized personality providing color commentary *Monday Night Football*. For fans of the book and movie *Charlie Wilson's War,* Gust Avrakotos, another larger-than-life CIA officer of similar background, might come to mind. Polymeropoulos proclaims, "My voice is loud, and my laughter is even louder—being of Greek heritage, that's the only tone we have, and we embrace it fully." The reader's taste for melodrama will color his enjoyment of *Clarity*.

The book also is not as polished as it could be. The chapters might have worked better as a series of magazine columns or segments over the airwaves. Here, trying to tie everything together into a unified concept is a case in which the sum is less than the parts. It exhibits signs of hasty compilation; it would have benefited, for example, from an editor's pruning of the inordinate number of references to the author's favorite dive restaurant and brand of watch. Intelligence professionals might also find discomfiting Polymeropoulos shoehorns a "Mad Minute" trope of checklists into each chapter, recognizing the term as the practice of covering the most essential items at the start of an officer's meeting with an asset. His alteration of the rubric to include longer-term thought pieces and placement at the end rather than the beginning of each section strains its meaning. To be fair, though, it might also reflect an attempt to capitalize on the success of *The One Minute Manager*, the seminal 1982 work that dispensed management advice in 60-second chunks.

What to make of the author's extensive use of baseball analogies? Forgive the pun, but it comes out of left field. The title or dust jacket offers no clue. Polymeropoulos notes in the text how his love of baseball has been on par with that for CIA and that the game has been a family affair, a shared passion with his grandfather carried over to a bond with his son. His son's adolescent adventures provide some of the stories, supplemented by episodes from the professionals. The sport hasn't featured so prominently in intelligence since the tale of Moe Berg, the major leaguer turned World War II spy. *Clarity* could have been titled *Sandlots, Spying, and the Secrets of Success.*

Polymeropoulos makes some convincing parallels between baseball and intelligence, noting that "Hitting .300 will keep you on the top of both professions." And his tale of a passing of the torch from a high school senior catcher to his freshman son helps set the scene for a chapter titled "Be a People Developer." But some of the examples are a bit more tenuous. Legendary all-time hits leader Pete Rose can be a model for many things, but it seems somewhat forced to compare his habit of daily batting practice with the need to adhere to a surveillance detection route (SDR) to determine if hostile surveillance is tracking a case officer en route to an asset meeting.

In "The Process Monkey" chapter, even though it contains the less-than-apt reference to Rose, Polymeropoulos showcases a strong operational example to drive home one of his concepts. His title is meant to encapsulate the importance of sticking to fundamental processes. With the author on his way to a meeting to gain key foreign intelligence in a Middle East location, bad traffic delays his progress, and he wrestles with abbreviating the SDR to make it in time. He chooses not to cut corners; not running a proper SDR would put the individual's life in danger and risk blowing his own cover. Even though Washington would be disappointed that the valuable information would have to wait, he knows he made the right call. He is no slave to the rules and lauds creativity and flexibility, but relying on well-established guidance helps protect all parties and ensure both he and the asset can continue their relationship over the long term rather than risking it all for short-term gain. That said, while the guidance is sound, it is not a revelation; one can quibble over whether sticking to procedure really rises to the level of a "leadership" lesson, and the application of the term "monkey," usually a term associated with denigration, undercuts the message.

Notwithstanding the above criticisms, the author exceeds expectations in his treatment of the human aspects of espionage. Polymeropoulos cares about people. He believes that CIA has a long history of doing likewise, and his stories serve as a proxy for the larger organization. He expertly conveys the crucial personal elements of the espionage business in ways that few other nonfiction authors have captured, whether discussing the seriousness of assets putting their lives in the hands of case officer, the humorous elements of a bungled recruitment attempt, or the lengths the agency will go to for its officers' families. In the latter case, Polymeropoulos describes how, on the sidelines of an awards ceremony in the early 2000s, then-CIA Director George Tenet engaged in an extended private conversation with his father, in Greek, to address concerns about the son's career choice, given the father's strong opinions about CIA's support of the Greek junta decades earlier. That the CIA director would take the time to do that for an employee well down the organizational ladder spoke volumes about where he was employed.

"Band of Brothers" has a military connotation, but it aptly describes the Polymeropoulos view of CIA. When suffering from PTSD after returning from Iraq in 2003, for instance, he relays how a senior officer took care of him, his teammates, and their families by hosting a two-week retreat on Cape Cod, allowing for some valuable decompression and family bonding, in addition to

encouraging professional help. Notwithstanding later health challenges stemming from a possible anomalous health incident of his own, his love of CIA and its people shines throughout *Clarity in Crisis*.

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