

Intelligence in Public Media

Perspectives on The Sisterhood: The Secret History of Women at the CIA

Liza Mundy (Crown, 2023), 452 pages, illustrations, index.

Reviewed by Brent Geary and Linda Weissgold

*In this article, we offer two perspectives by veteran intelligence officers on Lisa Mundy's best-selling *The Sisterhood*. The first is by Brent Geary, a historian in the Center for the Study of Intelligence, which publishes this journal; the second is by Linda Weissgold, a former director of analysis at CIA. As always, we welcome readers' comments.*

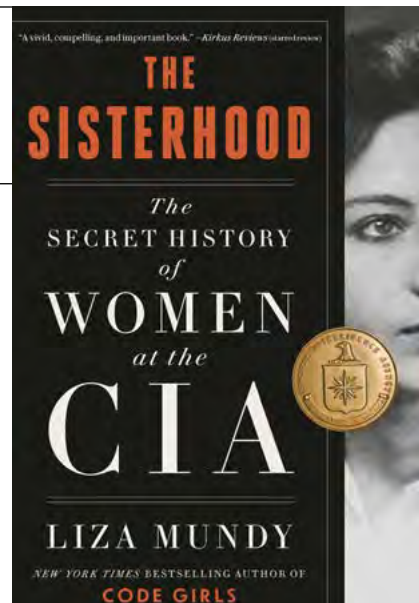
Women have always played vital roles at CIA. They were present at its creation, have served in every capacity, and have done so with distinction. With her new book, *The Sisterhood*, journalist Liza Mundy sheds light on how those women fought for better jobs, better pay, more responsibility, and more respect from an organization long dominated by men. It is a compelling, honest attempt to capture the nuances of an important slice of CIA history as told primarily through interviews with women and men who served there in the past and a few who serve there still. While *The Sisterhood* is flawed in places, Mundy clearly wanted to get the story right and to accurately portray the things she was told—down to fine details that will leave CIA veterans nodding along or sighing at the memories of mistakes made and injustices witnessed or suffered. If there was a driving theme to Mundy's work, it was that CIA women are not “better or more virtuous or more upstanding,” but that they have been part of CIA successes and failures alike and that their rise to prominence has been a hard, slow fight. (xvii)

Less a comprehensive history than a compilation of many women's individual stories, *The Sisterhood* is nevertheless uniquely valuable and timely. In some ways, it picks up where Ann Todd's *OSS Operation Black Mail* (2017), and Elizabeth McIntosh's *Sisterhood of Spies* (1998) left off, as both focused on remarkable work done by women in the Office of Strategic Services—CIA's most direct predecessor—during World War II. It is obviously also a follow-on of sorts to her own excellent earlier book, *Code Girls* (2017), which described the contributions of women in breaking Axis and Soviet codes during the same war. *The Sisterhood* brings the story of women in US intelligence from the agency's founding in 1947 to

the present day, at a time when—just recently—CIA featured its first female director and, concurrently, female directors of all four CIA directorates.

Mundy divides her book into three main parts: operations, analysis, and counterterrorism targeting—or “manhunting.” In each, she focuses on the experiences of a handful of women while providing rich details about their work and struggles. In the section on operations, she tells the story of Heidi August, a CIA clerk who—over many years and a variety of assignments and overseas postings—develops a reputation as a capable, effective operator who rose to become a case officer and station chief. Another key player is Lisa Manfull Harper, the daughter of a diplomat and herself a talented linguist who passed up a doctoral fellowship to Yale to join CIA, only to have her dream of becoming a case officer deferred for years because of sexist managers and superiors. Eventually, she became a highly successful case officer and the first female division chief in the Directorate of Operations (DO), but even then, she was treated poorly by her fellow chiefs—or “barons”—and retired early for health reasons. Thankfully, Harper appears again during the hunt for al-Qa'ida.

Mundy also describes in detail the litany of indignities routinely inflicted on women across CIA from the 1950s to the 2000s, from casual sexual harassment by colleagues and superiors to the uniquely CIA activity of sending attractive women to personally deliver cables for coordination—in the pre-email days—among many offices so the men there could ogle them in the process. “I didn't dare say anything” about the practice, said frequent victim Harper, lest they view her as being too aggressively



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feminist. She and others were openly denied jobs and training courses and promotions if they got married or became pregnant; male colleagues assumed they would leave CIA for domestic life. One man even screamed at Harper that she should refund the cost of her DO training program when she announced she was engaged. (83) “There were men who were allies and others who were predators ... and the former did not rein in the latter, in part because they did not realize how far things went,” Mundy writes. At a meeting with women DO officers in the 1980s, Dick Stolz, the head of the clandestine service, asked those in attendance to raise their hands if they had ever been sexually harassed. “Every hand went up.” (81)

Mundy also describes how the wives of case officers often worked (without pay) in supporting roles in operations. This was not unique to CIA. Soviet spy Oleg Penkovsky—famous for his role in the Cuban Missile Crisis—frequently met in Moscow with Janet Chisholm, the wife of his British handler. But for women who aspired to become case officers, this arrangement posed yet another hurdle to their advancement because agency wives were doing the work for free and male station chiefs used that as an excuse for not bringing in more women to conduct operations. Here Mundy also details two lawsuits, one a class-action representing dozens of DO women in the 1990s claiming sexual discrimination. CIA eventually settled, but that resulted in pervasive retaliation against those who sued. “They won, but they really didn’t,” said one observer. “They promoted some of them, but they never really got very far.” (166)

The second two sections are closely related in that they describe the evolution of women who worked in secured vaults as classified record keepers—so called “sneaker ladies” because they were on their feet all day retrieving files—to the founding mothers of not one but two new intelligence disciplines: leadership analysis and targeting. Behind-the-scenes jobs such as record-keeping and counterintelligence tended to feature large numbers of women, and Mundy describes in fascinating detail how these “vault women” emerged in the 1980s and 1990s to more prominent roles. Her recounting of the creation of the Office of Leadership Analysis (LDA)—headed by a woman, Helene Boatner—and the challenges its officers

faceted shows that the Directorate of Intelligence (DI) was no better than the DO in its systemic mistreatment and underestimation of women. LDA, Mundy accurately reports, was often referred to derisively by CIA men as “Ladies Doing Analysis.”^a (184)

The third and final section focuses on the roles women played in identifying Usama bin Ladin and al-Qa‘ida as serious threats to the United States and in bringing about their destruction. Counterterrorism pathfinders such as Cindy Storer, Gina Bennett, and Barbara Sude feature prominently, as do others like Jennifer Matthews and Alfreda Bikowski. Mundy describes in painstaking and frustrating detail how first Bennett and Storer, then others, tried largely in vain to convince US officials of the threat Bin Ladin posed, the creation of a dedicated team at CIA focused entirely on him and al-Qa‘ida, and the events leading up to 9/11 and the days that followed. The Bin Ladin unit, named Alec Station after the son of its founding director, Michael Scheuer, represented an uncomfortable merger between operations and analysis, and targeting—manhunting—was then something that the CIA had little experience with. It did not help that Scheuer—an ally and advocate for the women on his team—was himself an analyst, leading a DO team staffed largely by women.

To Mundy, who accurately describes some differences in the cultures of the DO and DI at that time, it was a situation that appears in retrospect almost to have been designed to fail. She is not wrong. Although Scheuer’s team located bin Ladin on a few occasions, it struggled for years to convince policymakers and CIA leaders of the unique threat al-Qa‘ida posed, likely due—in part, at least—to the absence of male operations officers who would have stood better chances of being heard. Mundy’s interviewees recount, however, that after 9/11, CIA completely reconfigured itself to focus on counterterrorism, how the prominence of women rose with it, and how divisions over the proper conduct of what became known as the global war on terrorism—especially the ethics of enhanced interrogations—divided even that closely knit group of officers, men and women alike.

a. (U//FOUO) LDA was less a new “creation” or new “discipline” than a renaming of a CIA function—maintenance of biographical records and providing reports and information on foreign leaders and figures of US interest, especially diplomatic interest—that had existed for decades. The new name, in effect, elevated the function from a supporting role to one of equal standing with the other Directorate of Intelligence analytical offices. With overlapping interests in country leaders, bureaucratic friction and some animosity was inevitable.

One criticism of Mundy’s approach is she too often makes strong assertions based on the opinions of a few interviewees. Trailblazers like Eloise Page and Helene Boatner, most notably, are accused of being at best unhelpful and at worst intentionally harsh toward the women who looked to them for mentorship. It is disappointing that Mundy did not seem to allow for the possibility that others may have had a more positive view of Page, Boatner, and a few other named officers whose reputations will now be forever tarnished based on their portrayals in this book. This tendency to give perhaps too much credence to the views of a few appears in other places. For example, no doubt some CIA veteran told Mundy that the Office of Central Reference—the a component of which would become LDA—was staffed mostly by women “or men who had dead-ended and washed up there.” (183) While true that women generally outnumbered men in OCR, it was hardly a wasteland populated by lesser lights. In fact, many noteworthy analysts—women and men—started out in OCR while learning their craft, including future DCI and Defense Secretary Robert Gates. Oral histories, while incredibly useful if deployed well, become cloudy with the passage of time and provide only one person’s point of view. Mundy should have

included more caveats that reflect this limitation to her research.

Another weakness of the book is that it focuses almost entirely on the women in CIA operations and analysis. While those two intelligence specialties tend to garner more public attention, the practical omission of agency women who served in vital support roles—logisticians and administrators, for example—or as groundbreaking scientists and engineers developing generations of technical wonders is disappointing and renders the book less complete as a result.

But these inaccuracies and omissions, while unfortunate, are but small parts of the larger story that Mundy gets mostly right about the evolution of women’s roles at CIA. There is much more to praise here than to fault, with many other engaging stories not described in this review, each with valuable lessons to impart. Because of those strengths, *The Sisterhood* deserves and demands a wide audience both within the intelligence profession and beyond, and this reviewer hopes there are others like it on the way.

The reviewer: Brent Geary is a former CIA analyst now serving on CIA’s History Staff.



The women and men of CIA work in anonymity by design, with the American public rarely hearing about their expertise, dedication, and ingenuity. So, first and foremost I offer my gratitude to Liza Mundy for sharing the tales of CIA officers in *The Sisterhood*. Telling those stories primarily through the prism of women offers unique insights into both CIA and our society. Women have contributed to CIA’s mission from the start. Jane Wallis Burrell has the distinction of being the first officer to die in the CIA’s service, only 110 days after the organization was officially established.^a The important duties entrusted to women in the early days of CIA often flew in the face of societal expectations that limited employment opportunities across our country and abroad.

Having had the honor of leading the Directorate of Analysis during the tenure of the first female Director of CIA, and a time when all five CIA Directorates were led by women, I am keenly aware that we stood on the

shoulders of unsung giantesses. Mundy focused largely on the clandestine and analytic counterterrorism mission of CIA, but there are similar stories of pioneers and “sisterhoods” in every directorate. Personally, my path to CIA started with an encounter in 1985 with a person teaching classes on women in leadership at the CIA, and I was fortunate that from the time I joined I could see female role models at every level of management. But, *The Sisterhood* and my own sporadic experiences with chauvinism show that there was, and still is, room to improve on CIA’s gender dynamics.

Good analytic tradecraft requires weighing contradictory and incomplete information and vigorously testing arguments, so I am particularly sympathetic to the challenge Mundy faced sourcing her book primarily through first person narratives. In the interest of full disclosure, I participated in one of Mundy’s interviews with officers involved in the hunt for Usama bin Ladin. I am honored

a. See <https://www.cia.gov/stories/story/the-mystery-of-jane-wallis-burrell-the-first-cia-officer-to-die-in-the-agencys-service/>

to say that I worked with many of the women included in the book, and I have great respect for the contributions they made to keeping Americans safe. Nevertheless, my recollection of events was at times at odds with those Mundy recounts. Evaluating personal recollections and perspectives is difficult under any circumstance, but in a classified environment with purposeful compartmentation, one's personal truth may not be informed by a fuller picture.

Most prominently, I take issue with the premise that warnings about the threat posed by al-Qa'ida were ignored because women were ringing the bell. CIA Director George Tenet's well-documented efforts to get policymakers to act belies claims that the analysts' warnings went unheeded. In hindsight, policymakers may not have made the wisest decisions, but they made informed choices. In my own experience, which includes decades

working on the Middle East and counterterrorism, as well as serving as a presidential briefer, I found that it is difficult to get decisionmakers to pay attention, let alone take risks, on issues that are not part of their policy objectives or contradict preconceived notions, regardless of gender.

Telling the story of CIA's amazing workforce through individuals' perspectives is also a significant strength of Mundy's book. The personal touch makes *The Sisterhood* an engaging and inspirational read. It illustrates the passion that CIA officers have for their mission despite the pressures that they face on a regular basis. It highlights the contributions that individuals can make to shaping history. Finally, it shows that CIA, like the rest of society, must continue to ensure that no demographic is excluded from contributing if we are to address successfully a mounting array of threats.

The reviewer: Linda Weissgold served as the Deputy Director of CIA for Analysis from February 2020 until April 2023. A recipient of the CIA's Distinguished Intelligence Medal, she retired after a 37-year career at CIA in June 2023.

