

Intelligence in Public Media

Company Confessions: Revealing CIA Secrets

Christopher Moran (Biteback Publishing, 2015), 346 pp., endnotes, bibliography, photos, index.

Reviewed by Hayden Peake

The Central Intelligence Agency is a rich source of reputation-enhancing material for historians, journalists, Hollywood, and even former intelligence officers. Hence readers and viewers of today's media in all its forms have become accustomed to stories about the CIA and its activities. But it has not always been thus. In *Company Confessions: Revealing CIA Secrets*—it would be more properly subtitled “protecting” CIA secrets—University of Warwick historian Christopher Moran examines the origins and evolution of the agency's battle with secrecy and openness. And from the myriad of well-documented detail presented, the portrait constructed is a less than charitable one.

Moran begins by reviewing the precedents for maintaining secrecy in national security matters that led to the formation of the CIA's Publications Review Board (PRB) by Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) George H. W. Bush in June 1977. He then considers the results in subsequent years as the PRB acquired the degree of notoriety for which it is well known.

His benchmark example is Herbert Yardley's *The American Black Chamber*,^a a best selling exposé memoir of America's codebreaking exploits that included many official secrets. Yardley was never prosecuted, since no law covered his transgressions. But government response was firm; he received no pension, the manuscript for his sequel was impounded; and all his attempts to work again in any official capacity were actively thwarted. The second challenge was a 1958 memoir by Sylvia Press, a former OSS officer who had joined the CIA. Summarily dismissed for security reasons, she wrote *The Care of Devils*,^b a thinly disguised autobiographic novel. The agency allegedly bought all copies and Press, too, was denied a pension. (54) Moran attributes this decision to the CIA penchant for secrecy that “stemmed as much from a desire to maintain a mystique about the CIA as it did from a requirement to protect sources and methods,” a gratu-

a. Herbert Yardley, *The American Black Chamber* (Bobbs Merrill, 1931).

b. Sylvia Press, *The Care of Devils* (Beacon Press, 1958).

itous judgment that he doesn't support. (54) In any case, for the balance of the decade, Moran concludes, “the CIA had never really had to worry about employees wanting to tell stories out of school” (109) and to a large extent DCI Dulles controlled what was released to the public.

Then came the U-2 shoot down, the Bay of Pigs disaster, rumors of covert actions in Latin America and the assassination of President Kennedy. When the CIA refused to comment on its role in these matters, journalists, historians, and the KGB filled the gap with a mix of alleged wrongdoing, truth, and exaggeration. Among the many instances Moran discusses, several resulted in lasting precedents. The first was the 1962 book *CIA: The Inside Story*,^c a putative exposé that drew on Soviet sources, though that was unknown at the time. (94) From then on, the CIA was fair game. The following year, by then retired DCI Allen Dulles' attempted to place intelligence, and by implication the CIA, in a more positive light with his book, *The Craft of Intelligence*,^d a quasi-memoir published, notes Moran, without his successor's “knowledge or approval,” (100) thus setting its own precedent.

Moran's assertion is contradicted in CIA Chief Historian David Robarge's recently released study, *John McCone as Director of Central Intelligence, 1961–1965*, which indicates that Dulles's successor both acknowledged and approved of the contents of *The Craft of Intelligence*: “McCone and Dulles together formulated the terms of the consulting contract under which the ex-director would work on his proposed book on intelligence. The DCI ratified the procedures whereby Dulles would have access to CIA facilities and records, could discuss his work with Agency officials, and would not rebut open-source accounts with classified information.”^e(58)

c. Andrew Tully, *CIA: The Inside Story* (William Morrow & Co., 1962).

d. Allen Dulles, *The Craft of Intelligence* (Harper & Row, 1963).

e. In fairness to Moran, the Robarge work, which was published in 2005 by the Center for the Study of Intelligence, was in review as Moran researched and wrote his book. It can be found in the Freedom of Information Act Reading Room, <http://www.foia.cia>.

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It was *The Invisible Government*^a with its “fully-fledged attack on the myth of the CIA that sent shock waves through Washington.” (95) The agency responded with herculean and ultimately unsuccessful behind-the-scenes efforts to discredit and suppress the book. These included a failed attempt to purchase all copies. (95–96) “The CIA’s decision to stay quiet as its dirty laundry flooded the market place” (102) wasn’t working, Moran asserts, and in the 1970s it only got worse.

Then amidst the fallout from Watergate, Vietnam, charges of “domestic spying,” and congressional investigations, agency “whistleblowers” struck. For the first time, dissident former officers broke the secrecy agreement all officers signed and published memoirs attacking the CIA. Victor Marchetti’s, *The CIA and The Cult of Intelligence* (1974) set the pace. Philip Agee followed in 1975 with *Inside the Company*.^b Moran describes the self-inflicted ordeals both endured while CIA countered with its “strategy for dealing with the renegades and whistle-blowers . . . a carefully coordinated PR programme.” (179) But it didn’t work either, and the PRB was established with the objective of preventing revelations before they occurred.

The first test of the PRB and the legality of the secrecy agreement came quickly with Frank Snepp’s 1977 book, *Decent Interval*.^c Snepp, a CIA analyst, did not submit his manuscript for review. The agency, under DCI Stansfield Turner, filed a civil suit that eventually reached the US Supreme Court. Snepp lost and was denied all royalties. Moran relates two ironical consequences of the

case. First, Snepp was prosecuted, though at least three former agency officers had published memoirs without any review and gone unpunished.^d Second, when Turner wrote his memoir—another precedent setting act—he was “trapped in a maze of his own making;” the manuscript “had been gutted” in review. (214)

Moran explains how in the succeeding decades the PRB became a permanent fixture in the CIA bureaucracy. That is not to say that its relationship with agency authors was without challenges. Moran gives many detailed examples, mostly from the writer’s perspective, of the often extended conflicts that justify the “prevailing wisdom that its review procedure is inconsistent and unfair.” (279)

While *Company Confessions* is generally balanced, it is not error free. Two instances are worth mention. During a discussion of how former OSS Director William Donovan encouraged publication of individual WW II exploits, Moran notes that FBI Director Hoover circulated the rumor that Donovan “was sleeping with President Truman’s daughter-in-law Mary, a blatant lie.” (63) Indeed it was: the president did not have a daughter-in-law. The second error involves Walter Pforzheimer, who reviewed many of the early controversial books; he was never in the OSS, nor was his father a rare book dealer.

The very existence of *Company Confessions* is a measure of the change from the days of “officers don’t write memoirs or publish articles on their profession” to today’s policy of controlled openness. Christopher Moran has portrayed the process well while leaving the solution of persistent problems he identifies to the CIA.^e

gov/sites/default/files/DOC_0001262720.pdf

a. David Wise and Thomas B. Ross, *The Invisible Government* (Random House, 1964)

b. Philip Agee, *Inside the Company* (Allen Lane, 1975).

c. Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval: An Insider’s Account of Saigon’s Indecent End Told by the CIA’s Chief Strategy Analyst in Vietnam* (Random House, 1977).

d. Examples include Joseph Burkholder Smith, *Portrait of A Cold Warrior* (Putnam, 1976); Miles Copeland, *Without Cloak or Dagger* (Simon & Schuster, 1974), and Philip Agee.

e. Another perspective on the intelligence memoir can be found in a review of the separate memoirs of three former CIA officers by John Hedley in *Studies in Intelligence* 49, No. 3 (December 2005). Hedley is a former chairman of the Publications Review Board.

