

Thoughts Provoked by *The Very Best Men*

Michael Thompson

“
The Very Best Men
effectively evokes the
enthusiasm, dash,
patriotism, and strong
sense of personal
commitment that
characterized the
formative years of the
Agency...
”

Michael Thompson served in the Directorate of Operations.

Evan Thomas's new book, *The Very Best Men* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), is an account of the first two decades of the CIA seen through the careers of four prominent senior officers—Frank Wisner, Tracy Barnes, Richard Bissell, and Desmond FitzGerald. Thomas necessarily focuses his attention on the Directorate of Plans (DDP), now the Directorate of Operations (DO), where his four subjects spent most of their Agency careers.¹ Well written, generally fair-minded, and in many ways an accurate reflection of the times it describes, Thomas's book is both a fascinating, if partial, depiction of a new agency of government functioning under conditions dramatically different from those that exist today and a cautionary tale for anyone interested in ensuring the long-term effectiveness of the DO.

For Thomas, Assistant Managing Editor and Washington Bureau Chief of *Newsweek*, the period he describes is one with which he was already familiar, for he is co-author of *The Wise Men*, a description of the roles of six American statesmen in rebuilding Europe and shaping the post-World War II era. His latest book also reflects the unprecedented access to its classified files granted him by the Agency.² Thomas supplemented that access by extensive reading of published works on US intelligence and interviews with a broad spectrum of former Agency personnel, including his only surviving subject, Richard Bissell, who died in 1994. He also sought out for interviews his subjects' widows and children, and their non-Agency friends and colleagues, some in the

private sector, where his subjects had begun their professional lives.³ His documentation is thorough; only one footnote of 634 cites as a source an informant he does not name. By setting his subjects so firmly in the political, professional, social, and personal environments in which they flourished, he gives his readers unusual insight into their personalities, their strengths and weaknesses, and their successes and failures at a time when the East Coast establishment (of which they were a product) still carried weight in national politics. *The Very Best Men* effectively evokes the enthusiasm, dash, patriotism, and strong sense of personal commitment that characterized the formative years of the Agency, when those engaged in secret intelligence work saw themselves—and were so seen by many other Americans—as members of an elite force specially set up to meet an unprecedented foreign threat to national security.

Born to wealthy families, educated in select private schools, and having served with distinction in World War II, Thomas's subjects brought to the Directorate of Plans energy, intellect, a profound personal commitment to “rolling back” the Soviet Union, and enormous self-confidence. Wisner, Bissell, and FitzGerald each served in succession, at the height of his career, as Deputy Director/Plans (DD/P). Barnes rose to the specially created post of Assistant DD/P for Action under Bissell before becoming the first chief of the Domestic Operations Division, a predecessor of what is now the National Resources Division.

“
**That the Agency was the
one department of
government uniquely
designed to fight the Cold
War was a source of strain
as well as of pride among
its members.**
”

Unlike the others, Bissell came to intelligence work with his reputation as a public servant already established. A member of the Shipping Adjustment Board during World War II, he had made a significant contribution to the war effort by devising a system that predicted, three months in advance and with only a 5-percent margin of error, when a ship in a given convoy would be back in the United States, repaired, and ready to load.⁴ In the early postwar period, he played a key role in the implementation of the Marshall Plan. He joined the Agency in 1952, and in 1953 became Special Assistant to the new Director of Central Intelligence (DCI), Allen Dulles. In that position, he distinguished himself first by getting the U-2 spy plane built for \$3 million under budget and “in less time than it usually takes the Pentagon to write procurement specifications for a pair of boots.”⁵

Focus on Covert Action

The primary interest of all four men was covert action (this was true even of Bissell, once the U-2 was flying), particularly its paramilitary aspect, which they felt offered a vitally important way of blocking the advance of Soviet power, given the unacceptable loss of life and physical destruction that would result from a recourse to war.⁶ A significant number of persons in high office elsewhere in the government shared their opinion. Thomas ascribes both to the extreme gravity of the international situation and to his four principals’ activist predilections the long series of covert actions that the Agency launched in those years, actions which his book reminds us were often based on inadequate information and were undertaken without those responsible having thought

through the long-term implications of what they were trying to do. There were successes, in Iran, the Philippines, and Guatemala (the last one with implications Bissell and Barnes misread in conceiving and implementing their later efforts against Castro); and a succession of failures, beginning with the attempted infiltration of agents into Albania and the Soviet Union, not one of whom escaped apprehension, and climaxing in the Bay of Pigs and various embarrassing efforts—all fortunately unsuccessful—to assassinate foreign political leaders.

In re-creating for his readers the atmosphere of crisis that fostered such activities, Thomas notes that the Department of Defense at one point actually “picked a day—July 1, 1952—for the Soviet invasion of Western Europe.” He also quotes from the then-classified Doolittle Report of 1954:

It is now clear that we are facing an implacable enemy whose avowed objective is world domination by whatever means and at whatever cost. There are no rules in such a game. Hitherto acceptable norms of human conduct do not apply. If the United States is to survive... we... must learn to subvert, sabotage and destroy our enemies by more clever, more sophisticated and

*more effective methods than those used against us.*⁷

Those who have not experienced the sense of sustained menace generated by fear of the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War and who did not have to deal with the peremptory, sometimes unrealistic, demands for unconventional action from senior levels of the government outside the Agency may not appreciate from reading Thomas’s text just how general and how profoundly held in the DDP was the assumption that one had to do one’s best, even if the task at hand was a distasteful one; for, in effect, there was no one else to undertake such tasks. That the Agency was the one department of government uniquely designed to fight the Cold War was a source of strain as well as of pride among its members.

Need for Examination

Today, free of the pressures under which Thomas’s four subjects had to perform their duties and enjoying what they as pioneers in the field necessarily lacked, that is, the benefits of almost five decades of experience in the conduct of secret intelligence operations, the Agency has an obligation—and, at last, the time—to examine critically the patterns of thought and action set by the first generation of its leaders and, where necessary, to correct them. It is an obligation made all the more pressing by DO management’s traditional reluctance to examine its failures, or, to use a favorite in-house expression, “second-guess.”

Reading *The Very Best Men* is a good way to start, and not only because its author seems to have no other

agenda than simply to present the facts as accurately as possible. His empathy for his subjects—even though an air of amused condescension filters through to an audience when he speaks of his book—points up issues that would otherwise be obscure, as does his vivid evocation of a period when, contrary to the underlying realities of American politics (as we have since learned, sometimes painfully), a dominant Executive, a compliant Congress, a complicit press, a largely unquestioning public, and almost unlimited funds allowed the DDP to function virtually without oversight or accountability.

Many of us look back on this time with nostalgia for the sense of comradeship arising out of a shared commitment to a great cause that prevailed, for the refreshing absence of bureaucratic rigidity, and for the confidence one still had in the integrity of one's colleagues. But those benefits were not unmixed. Reading Thomas's book will compel those knowledgeable of the evolution of the DO in recent years to modify that nostalgia; for, in their reading, they will come across evidence of conceptual and procedural deficiencies at a senior level—and the DO is still struggling with the consequences of these deficiencies.

For example, Thomas's text is full of evidence of the impatience, if not disdain, felt by his principals as self-assured "doers" keen to strike back at the Soviets and their surrogates, for colleagues whose professional specialty was intelligence collection—the persons whom Stewart Alsop, a friend of Thomas's four, dubbed the "Prudent Professionals."⁸ Persons not familiar

with the DDP in those years might mistakenly conclude from what Thomas writes that this attitude, and the resultant friction between those who had begun their careers in OPC and those who had done so in OSO, permeated the organization when in fact the overwhelming majority welcomed the 1952 merger. And, whatever the impatience that Thomas's principals may have experienced at the inadequacies of intelligence collection in the early years, many officers at more junior levels appreciated the need for careful planning, attention to detail, the accumulation of experience, and patience for their collection efforts to succeed. In the years following the departure from the Agency of Thomas's four, these efforts paid off as the DDP and its successor developed ingenious, sophisticated, and productive espionage operations against some of their most difficult intelligence targets.

Nevertheless, the legacy that Thomas's principals inadvertently left behind, of not taking intelligence collection seriously, lingered on. For far too many DO managers, operational activity has been what counted, both in professional discussions and as grounds for promotion, rather than the intelligence information that most operations were supposed to produce. Such information by the late 1980s had increasingly become the exclusive concern of the reports officers who processed it. As a result, well into the 1980s—and perhaps even later—the DO had not set, and therefore could not maintain, service-wide standards that reflected a consistently professional approach to its responsibilities in such areas as employee selection; the command of tradecraft, foreign languages, and

area knowledge; and evaluation of the worth of agents and the operations in which the Directorate was involved.⁹

Starting From Scratch

Had Thomas's principals joined an intelligence service already long established, had they therefore been able to draw on a body of experience acquired over decades or even longer, and under varied circumstances, they would have had a much easier time coming to grips with the fundamentals of their profession. But this was not the case: they were starting virtually from scratch, leaders—at a time of great danger and unremitting crisis—of a fledgling organization without, as yet, the record of achievement that would have enabled it to resist the unreasonable, sometimes wildly unrealistic, requirements placed on it. They had no time to think long-term, and even when, years after their departure, the danger diminished, their successors maintained a command structure that kept their mental sights fixed on the immediate future, to the point where they failed even to ensure a supply of qualified senior officers to replace those retiring.

Thomas's principals also seem to have regarded no one among the "Prudent Professionals" as their social equal and, therefore, fitted to challenge their instinctive approach to the job, a further obstacle to their developing a more comprehensive view of their mission. Allen Dulles, who was DCI from 1953 to 1961, shared their romantic outlook, disregard for detail (whether in tradecraft or management), and social prejudices. There is no better

example of this than his appointment as DD/P of Richard Bissell, a brilliant public servant with impeccable family and educational credentials, but with no professional experience in the conduct of secret intelligence operations and a confidence in his own judgment so great as to make it difficult for him to learn from others. Indeed, one of the obstacles to devising procedures that would ensure the healthy development of the new agency seems to have originated in class feeling: an assumption Thomas's principals absorbed in varying degrees from their families, education, and the anglophile social milieu in which they moved that leadership is a prerogative of gentleman amateurs.

Serious Shortcomings

We can see now that the internal and external pressures that induced Thomas's principals to authorize operations the feasibility of which they could not judge had a long-term negative influence on the culture of the Directorate. To a great extent, it was the US Government's ignorance of the political and security environments of the countries targeted that rendered futile the efforts to infiltrate covert action agents into Albania, the Soviet Union and, later, Cuba and the abortive attempt to oust President Sukarno of Indonesia.¹⁰ But at least those responsible were striking back at the enemy! Ambitious junior officers, less gifted than Thomas's four, with narrower professional horizons and their careers still ahead of them, drew from these operations the erroneous conclusion that engagement in operational activity should be their priority concern: the

“

...the runup to the Bay of Pigs would demonstrate that the leadership of the DDP had still not thought through the relationship to covert action of intelligence collection, security, and plausible denial.

”

acquisition of intelligence information was of secondary importance.

In addition to the lack of intelligence information, another obstacle to effective planning during the period Thomas describes was some muddled thinking about security and the doctrine of plausible denial. PBSUCCESS, the ramshackle covert action that overthrew President Jacobo Arbenz of Guatemala, was supposed to be deniable by the US Government; but, according to Thomas, Tracy Barnes was so intent on getting the operation going that he disregarded basic security considerations in recruiting and establishing cover for the aircrews involved.¹¹ The American public was not the target of the effort to maintain plausible denial but, given the cooperation of the US press, may have accepted the fiction that the US Government was not involved. The widespread Yankee-Go-Home riots across Latin America that Thomas cites for the week that Arbenz fell make it evident that, where it counted, plausible denial had not worked.¹²

As a reward for his prominent part in PBSUCCESS, Tracy Barnes was appointed chief of station/Germany, an ominous precedent for the service. At the time, the German

station—in part because of its size—was more intensively and extensively involved in intelligence collection operations than any other. But Thomas makes it clear that Barnes, a favorite of Allen Dulles since they worked together in OSS and an enthusiast for covert action, was not interested in collection. In addition, his cavalier attitude toward security was notorious. Thomas's text implies that although subordinates in the German station liked Barnes, they had no professional respect for him. His appointment was a prominent early example of a philosophy of personnel assignments, in both the DDP and the successor DO, that disregarded the significance of the example a senior officer sets for his subordinates. In the decades to come, Barnes was to be followed, in Germany and elsewhere, by station chiefs equally unsuited for the professional demands placed on them by their posts of assignment, posts they received in recognition of achievements elsewhere that were irrelevant, or as a result of a friendship like Dulles's for Barnes, or because of a combination of the two factors.

The Bay of Pigs

Almost a decade after PBSUCCESS, when Bissell was DD/P and Barnes was in direct charge of the operation, the runup to the Bay of Pigs would demonstrate that the leadership of the DDP had still not thought through the relationship to covert action of intelligence collection, security, and plausible denial. For example, Bissell ensured that the Cuba analysts in the then Deputy Directorate of Intelligence (DDI) were not informed of the plans for the creation of a government-in-exile

and the landing of armed guerrillas in Cuba. He thus limited the chances of basing his plans on an accurate assessment of the situation and relied instead on the misleadingly optimistic reports prepared by his own staff. According to Thomas, Bissell excluded the DDI at the request of Allen Dulles, to protect operational security. Paradoxically, at the same time massive lapses in security by the Agency personnel preparing for the landing had led the public in Florida, both American and exiled Cuban, and much of the US press to conclude that military action against Castro was imminent!¹³

Another troubled aspect of implementing the operation should have alerted the leadership of the DDP, and the DCI himself, to the need for major changes in the way the DDP was managed. When asked to supply additional officers on loan to help mount the impending invasion, the area division chiefs—who by established tradition functioned virtually autonomously (like “feudal barons,” as they were informally designated)—contributed only those officers they could be well rid of.¹⁴ Given the conceptual deficiencies that already doomed the operation, a cynic could argue it was just as well competent officers were not pulled away from good operations to waste their time on it. That the division chiefs felt free to act in bad faith and that there was no way for the DD/P to know what was going on reveals a grave organizational weakness. Nevertheless, the tradition of divisional autonomy continued. As late as the end of the 1980s, DO division chiefs were still demonstrating their independence by ignoring instructions

issued by the DDO, and still with damaging effect.

More disconcerting than the evidence Thomas provides of what today can only be described as a frivolous approach to operations in which men’s lives and the reputation of the Agency and the country were equally at risk is the number of occasions he cites when high officials, both inside and outside the Agency, failed to speak clearly to one another when reaching decisions on sensitive actions—primarily the Bay of Pigs and the assassination attempts—that the DDP had been charged to undertake. As a result, serious misunderstandings arose, and another impediment developed to the adequate consideration of the long-term consequences of proposed operations. During preparations for the landing that took place at the Bay of Pigs, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, when asked for an independent assessment, evaluated the prospects as “fair” and only when pressed explained that this meant a 30-percent chance of success.

Bissell compounded the problem by failing to pass on this clarification when he briefed President Kennedy on the Pentagon’s findings. Later, Bissell also failed to explain to the President the dangerous implications for the success of the landing of the President’s last-minute insistence that the site originally proposed be abandoned for another. He assumed mistakenly that, if the invading force faced opposition it could not overcome, the President would authorize a more overt application of American military power.¹⁵

Similarly, Tracy Barnes, instructed by Bissell to brief Adlai Stevenson,

the US Representative at the UN, on the military action the government was planning against Cuba, spoke so allusively that Stevenson misunderstood him.¹⁶ The Joint Chiefs presumably did not want to be the bearers of bad news. Bissell and Barnes, suffering from a variety of faulty assumptions, with perhaps the major one being that the successful effort to overthrow Arbenz offered a viable model for an operation to oust Castro, did not focus on the obligation for plain speaking and a full presentation of the facts to those responsible for making decisions in which human lives and the reputation of the country were at stake.

Assassination Attempts

Thomas’s account of various assassination attempts contains a plethora of additional examples. His research into the subject has left him uncertain as to exactly where responsibility lay. I suspect the lack of clarity in the records reflects—in varying degrees—a preoccupation with plausible denial, the obligation felt by senior Agency officers to protect higher levels of government, and uneasy consciences about involvement in such activities. In this connection, Thomas recounts a conversation between Bissell and Allen Dulles that reads more like an extract from one of the *Get Smart!* television parodies of secret agents popular in the 1960s than a discussion of matters of life and death by two senior officials.

In the account, Bissell is described as having “informed” [*sic*] his chief in a circumlocutory fashion of a plan to kill Castro, using alphabetical designations (“A,” “B,” and “C”) instead of the names of the persons involved.

“

**Thus, a DO officer
can only really relax
with his colleagues.**

**As the years pass,
he runs an increasing
risk of losing his
perspective on reality...**

”

Dulles presumably listened carefully but asked no questions, and yet—Bissell later insisted—understood he was authorizing an assassination attempt!¹⁷ On a different occasion, Tracy Barnes, full of “can do” spirit, approved without appropriate authorization—and sought too late to cancel—an attempt against the lives of Fidel and Raul Castro and Ernesto “Che” Guevara. Fortunately, the foreign agent involved did not act on the approval he had received.

Thomas describes how, in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs, when Dulles and Bissell had both departed the scene, the Agency, under heavy pressure from the White House, persisted in its efforts to have Castro assassinated. The new DCI, John McCone, was not informed, reportedly because of an assumption that his awareness of the efforts would have changed nothing, and because he was known not to want to be made aware of anything of the sort.¹⁸ Looking back in less fevered circumstances, I believe it fair to say that this is an odd way for a responsible government to function.

A lesson to be drawn from all this is that, at least for an open society like the United States, secret intelligence operations, particularly covert paramilitary action and assassinations, are not a “great game” no matter how appealing a read Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* may make. A lack of explicitness in discussing such matters, whether motivated by the wish to preserve plausible denial, by a concern over security, or by gentlemanly reticence, heightens the chances of disaster by obstructing the necessary weighing of anticipated benefits against the risks to be incurred.

When the Agency’s involvement in assassination attempts surfaced in the mid-1970s, a development that we now know the nature of the American government and of the society over which it presides made inevitable, thoughtful officers in the DDP not witting of what had been going on recognized immediately the questionable nature of the assumption that the United States would be strengthened by policies that led to the murder of foreign political leaders. They also recognized immediately the dangerous implications of an arm of the government turning to members of the Mafia for assistance under any circumstances, but especially in actions that the government wished never to come to the attention of the public. The fact that these judgments were made in more tranquil times and by persons subject to far less pressure than those directly involved does not invalidate them.

Negative Influence

In the introduction to *The Very Best Men* Thomas asserts of his four principals:

*... the personal cost was high....
The careers of two were ruined;
one killed himself; only one lived
past the age of sixty-two. They
could not see that the mortal
enemy was within, that they were*

*being slowly consumed by the
moral ambiguities of a “life of
secrets.”*¹⁹

One may argue legitimately that many other callings could have generated the pressures that led Frank Wisner, who suffered from manic depression, to commit suicide, and could have helped bring on the massive heart attack that caused the death of Desmond FitzGerald. But there is no doubt in my mind that the moral ambiguities of a life of secrets were a major factor in the misjudgments that ruined the careers of Richard Bissell and Tracy Barnes, just as they were later a factor in the multiple misjudgments that allowed Aldrich Ames so long a run for his money.

In making his assertion, Thomas raises an issue to which Agency, and more specifically DO, managers have so far paid too little attention: the fact that those who commit themselves to a life of secret intelligence activity run an unusually high risk of suffering from the job-induced loss of perspective that the French term *déformation professionnelle*. One factor contributing to their vulnerability is the social isolation brought on by the classified nature of the work and the difficulty of sustaining cover in an open society. Thus, a DO officer can only really relax with his colleagues. As the years pass, he runs an increasing risk of losing his perspective on reality, like the senior manager who fell into the habit of asserting, apparently in all seriousness, that the impatience with the State Department he detected as he moved about Washington on official business persuaded him that the abolition of that department was only a matter of time!

Another causative factor is the consuming nature of the work, arising out of its many unknowns and the high stakes involved, not only for the foreign agent who is risking his own and his family's welfare, if not his life, at the direction of his case officer, but also for the case officer. An error in judgment, or even blind chance, can damage his career, compromise the station, and embarrass the organization that furnishes him cover, the service to which he belongs, and even his country. More insidious over the long run are the lack of candor, disingenuousness, manipulation of the truth, and outright deceit that are all, in varying degrees depending on the specifics of a given case, necessary techniques in the recruitment, handling, and termination of agents.

This is not to say that unscrupulous individuals who misrepresent the facts and otherwise seek to deceive so as to advance their own interests or protect those of the organization to which they belong do not exist in every walk of life. What makes the problem specially acute for a secret intelligence service is that its members receive training in these techniques. Their effectiveness in recruiting and running agents depends on sound judgment in employing them to attain desired ends. But, unless service culture is firmly opposed to such a development, reliance on such techniques in one part of one's professional life can lead all too easily to an assumption on the part of those who have not thought through the consequences of their actions, or simply those who are easily influenced by others, that it

is only professional to use the same techniques in other areas.

Esprit de Corps

Thomas writes of his four principals, "Patriotic, decent, well-meaning, and brave, they were also uniquely unsuited to the grubby, necessarily devious world of intelligence."²⁰ On the contrary, such qualities in its members, and especially in the leadership, are vital if the service is to be responsive to the needs of an open society and not deteriorate into something hardly distinguishable from a gang. After nearly four decades in secret intelligence work, were I still employed I would still look for them in every young person applying to join the service and in the performance of any officer, no matter how many years he or she had been employed. These are not the only qualities required, as *The Very Best Men* makes plain, but they are essential to the health of the service.

All those I know and respect who served as I did in the DDP in the 1950s and 1960s are grateful for the confidence one could then have that a colleague would tell you the truth and do his utmost to carry out the task at hand. As a matter of course, one did not turn down assignments: one responded without careerist calculation to the needs of the service. There was a general understanding that one operated against the opposition, not against one's colleagues. Whatever the shortcomings of the gentlemen amateurs who set the tone of the DDP in those days, I—and I believe many others—owe them a debt of gratitude for their contribu-

tion to an esprit de corps higher than any that most of us experienced before or since.

It was this spirit and the initiative and informal comradeship it fostered that time and again inspired Directorate officers to achieve results with a fraction of the resources required by more conventional organizations.²¹ The attraction exerted by the unique working atmosphere in the Directorate lasted long after Thomas's principals had departed. Interviewing individually the trainee officers on temporary assignment to my component in the early 1980s, I asked them what had led them to join an organization so widely regarded as disreputable. Their responses all touched on two themes: "I am looking for adventure" and "I want to make a contribution." One, looking at his feet and speaking in a voice barely audible, said, "I guess after all I am a little bit of a patriot."

Costs of Devious Conduct

Nevertheless, Thomas is right. There *are* grubby and devious things that an intelligence officer has to do (although, at least so far as US intelligence services are concerned, the rule of law and common sense about the country's long-term interests impose limits even here). What he does not seem to understand is that it is in the national interest to keep them to a minimum. Every DO officer has to realize that indiscriminate recourse to grubby and devious conduct clouds the mind, impedes sound judgment, undercuts service effectiveness, undermines morale, and

ultimately shakes the confidence of those other agencies of government, the Congress, and the public, on whose active support a secret intelligence service in a democracy has to rely. We know this now. We have seen it all happen.

That the problem should have become more serious once the first generation of leadership in the Directorate had retired should surprise no one. Its members brought to the Agency a well-formed system of values, anchored in experience gained outside the closed world of secret intelligence activities. The laxity on the part of Aldrich Ames's supervisors that allowed a seriously flawed officer to progress to one of the most sensitive positions in the Directorate is only the most dramatic evidence of the damage incurred when those values were supplanted by a pattern of cynical careerism. The inflation of agent recruitments and information reporting, in which officers at every level were involved, that came belatedly to management's attention at the end of the 1980s, had already furnished irrefutable evidence of the extent of the problem.

By the middle of that decade, if not earlier, DO officers in growing numbers who had devoted their entire professional lives to the conduct or supervision of secret intelligence operations were applying the operational techniques they had mastered to the management of the Directorate, with a view to advancing their own career interests and shirking unpleasant responsibilities. One could say that unwittingly they were living up to the expectations of the talk-show hosts, members of Congress, and presidential hopefuls who, in recent years, have routinely deni-

grated those committed to careers of government service. There thus developed a system in which not everyone participated but far too many did so for the health of the service. Those who participated exaggerated their successes (and those of their friends), minimized failures, and, instead of confronting problems (like Mr. Ames), wrote dishonest performance reports designed to ensure that the problem—whatever it was—became someone else's responsibility.

Not the least destructive aspect of these developments was that the great majority of persons at every level, who remained conscientious, knew exactly what was going on, resented it, and felt a deep anger toward the senior officers who were allowing the system to rot. I recall a friend on the Inspection Staff, on his return from a visit in the mid-1980s to a number of overseas stations, telling me he was shocked at the lack of respect which many station personnel had for their supervisors.

Insistence on Integrity

Now the Agency—and more specifically the Directorate—is faced with the task of rebuilding confidence: confidence in itself, and the confidence of the public, of the Congress, and of those other parts of the Executive that need the secret intelligence from human sources that only the Directorate can supply. Correcting problems at once so fundamental and so many years in the making will not be easy. No regulations, however elaborate, can ensure that senior officials are persons of integrity and sound judgment; and a system of administrative reprisals for every mis-

take (even the best of us can make one), were it to be instituted, would kill the initiative and readiness to take risks without which a secret intelligence service can accomplish nothing.

The only way to achieve the desired goal is to focus on the essential issue, repairing the spirit of the organization: get that right, and the rest will follow. The level of compensation for senior government officials will never match what the private sector can offer, so the Agency will have to identify another way of attracting personnel of the quality it requires.

The simplest and most effective approach would be for it to restore the reputation it once had for offering a working atmosphere of unusual attractiveness. One does that by combining an uncompromising emphasis on excellence with administrative procedures that reflect an intelligent concern for substance rather than a pettifogging preoccupation with form.

As a starter (if it has not done so already), Agency and Directorate leadership should publicly—that is, within the Agency—pronounce the fundamental requirement for integrity and publicly enforce it, by not promoting and not assigning to key positions those who fail ethical and moral standards or who have made egregious errors of judgment.

I have heard senior officers of the Directorate, where the ability of a given officer to acquire intelligence information appeared great, dismiss as "bureaucratic nit-picking" evidence of the same officer's lying, making false certifications, and mishandling official funds. It is no

“
**An unqualified insistence
on integrity at every level
is the only way of
ensuring a secret
intelligence service of high
quality that is under
control and responsive to
the country’s needs.**
”

defense of over-regulation to identify this as an attitude that, to the extent it became general, could really transform the Agency into a “rogue elephant.”²² An unqualified insistence on integrity at every level is the only way of ensuring a secret intelligence service of high quality that is under control and responsive to the country’s needs.

Demonstrable evidence that the Agency recognizes what is wrong and is taking steps to set things right would immediately raise morale, by signaling management’s belated readiness to face the truth. Members of the service look to their leaders for honesty as well as professional competence. Even timely and accurate notice of one’s unsuitability for intelligence work is less fraught with future problems for the employee and the service than a failure to address the issue.²³

For the Directorate to recover, henceforward its leaders will have to make manifest—like officers in the combat branches of the armed forces—their commitment to the principle that career advancement brings with it heightened responsibilities, to the service and to one’s subordinates, not just expanded perquisites and heightened opportunities for ego gratification. Similarly, it must rule that “operating” against colleagues and the service is not acceptable conduct—and not on ethical grounds alone, but because it undermines the effectiveness and reputation of the Directorate and the Agency. For a change, all those in authority will have to lead by example. Training can reinforce the message but, without an example from the top, those to whom the message is directed will not pick it up. DO officers will have to jettison their time-honored dis-

dain for training. Rigorous standards have to be set and enforced regarding area knowledge and foreign language competence.

And, as a way of protecting themselves from the loss of perspective that is a risk built into the job, officers have to learn how to look beyond the confining horizons of their profession. To provide sound leadership they need to appreciate how a secret intelligence service has to function if it is truly to defend and advance the interests of a democratic society. Then, and only then, will they be able to reach sound decisions on what the service should, and should not, do in a rapidly changing world.

The task that lies ahead is complex and demanding, and not only because the Directorate must dig itself out of the hole its leaders have dug for it over the past half century. The ambiguities of the work, except where law and executive orders impose clear-cut obligations and prohibitions, place a premium on judgment, intellect, and principled leadership. Should the Agency, as seems possible, have difficulty identifying persons who meet the new standards, it would do well to shrink the Directorate rather than to let it slip back into bad habits. As a reading of *The Very Best Men* makes all too clear, secret intelligence activity

is an area where ill-considered actions do more harm than no action at all.

NOTES

1. The DDP came into existence as an organization in 1952, a merger of the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC), charged with the conduct of covert action, and the Office of Special Operations (OSO), charged with the conduct of espionage and counterespionage. In the mid-1970s, it became the Directorate of Operations.
2. The Agency gave Thomas, who signed a secrecy agreement, access to operational communications and in-house histories, and—in what seems a violation of privacy—even to his subjects’ performance reports—from two of which, on Barnes, he quotes.
3. Wisner, Barnes, and FitzGerald were Wall Street lawyers when World War II began for America in December 1941; Bissell was a professor of economics at Yale.
4. *The Very Best Men* (hereafter *VBM*), pp. 94-5.
5. *VBM*, pp. 166-67.
6. By establishing criteria that obliged him to select Tracy Barnes over Cord Meyer as one of the four subjects of his book, Thomas restricted himself to a discussion of the most sensational and least successful aspects of the Agency’s covert action operations. In so doing, he missed an opportunity to assess a category of such operations that reflected, in its promotion of freedom of opinion and representative democracy, an understanding of one of the great sources of strength of the West in its conflict with the Soviet Union, as well as a sophisticated idealism that clashes

with stereotypical assumptions about secret intelligence operations and the men and women who conduct them. I refer to the imaginative efforts of the International Organizations Division, headed by Cord Meyer, to combat the Soviet-directed exploitation of international organizations in the youth, student, labor, and cultural fields, among others. Had Thomas chosen such an approach, he would have written a different book, one requiring of its author a less simplistic rush to judgment.

7. *VBM*, pp. 12, 134. As well as reflecting the brutalizing effect of war and the threat of war, this passage shows just how difficult it was then to assess the power of attraction of representative democracy and an open society when buttressed by military might and a productive economy. Some 35 years later, the “velvet revolution” in Eastern Europe and the relatively nonviolent implosion of the Soviet Union were to bring the weight of these factors dramatically to the attention of observers throughout the world.
8. *VBM*, p. 150. In characterizing secret intelligence operations as more “passive” than covert action, Thomas seems unwittingly to have absorbed some of the biases of the persons he is writing about: cf. *VBM*, p. 42.
9. To my knowledge, at least one incoming class since 1989 of officer trainees destined for the DO included no one fluent in a foreign language, a curious approach to the staffing of a secret intelligence service.
10. The fact that Soviet agent Kim Philby was witting of the Albanian operation from the outset renders shocking Thomas’s assertion that Frank Wisner continued to send men into Albania even after he knew Philby to be working for the Soviets. *VBM*, p. 70.
11. *VBM*, p. 114.
12. *VBM*, pp. 125-6.
13. *VBM*, pp. 249-50.
14. *VBM*, p. 287, note.
15. *VBM*, p. 244, pp. 246-48.
16. *VBM*, pp. 254-56.
17. *VBM*, p. 227.
18. *VBM*, p. 227.
19. *VBM*, p. 12.
20. *VBM*, p. 11.
21. In the mid-1960s, after surveying the air operation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (now Zaire) providing support for central government forces combating Soviet- and Chinese Communist-backed rebels—an operation staffed by exiled Cuban pilots acting under the direction of a handful of DDP air operations officers—a USAF team concluded that standing operating procedures would have obliged the Air Force to use roughly eight times as many personnel.
22. An excited characterization uttered by Senator Frank Church at the outset of the investigation of the Agency by his committee in the mid-1970s.
23. Cf. the Ames case, once again.