

Of Spies and Lies: A CIA Lie Detector Remembers Vietnam

By John F. Sullivan. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2002. 239 pages.

Reviewed by Ward W. Warren

When I entered the Central Intelligence Agency, I underwent the required polygraph examination. I sat in a straight-backed chair, feet flat on the floor, while the examiner attached various wires and wraps to my body and arms. When he finished, I said to him in an agitated state: "Did the governor's call come through yet?" The examiner was perplexed. He asked me what I meant. I told him eagerly: "The Governor is supposed to call the warden with a reprieve." Apparently, Humphrey Bogart movies represented a serious flaw in the examiner's education. He still did not understand. So I said with resignation: "O.K. Go Ahead. Throw the switch."

I thought this was a clever response to the polygraph. I told the truth during the ensuing examination, and I was admitted to the CIA. For the next 30 years, I paid little attention to the polygraph. Occasionally, I was retested. Sometimes I used the polygraph in my own operations. But, in general, it had little impact on my life or my work.

Of Spies and Lies gave me an opportunity to look more closely at this investigative tool of the clandestine service. John Sullivan has explained in detail understandable to the layman how the polygraph works and how the CIA uses it. The Vietnam experience provided the perfect situation for the polygraph, and Sullivan provided the perfect examiner. An agent

appears out of the bush, gives a quick report, and disappears back into the forest. Who has time for the standard case officer subtle interrogation or diabolical elicitation to determine the validity of the agent or his information? As the Shadow used to say, more or less: “The polygraph does.” And John Sullivan with his trusty polygraph did.

The book tells the story of the polygraph and, more important, a story of the CIA’s operations in Vietnam. John Sullivan was able to cover the broad range of our operations and to delve into them deeply but quickly. He provides an interesting *mélange* of Saigon Station operations, Station management (and mismanagement), and the course of the Vietnam War in its last stages. The result is a useful addition to the growing body of work on the United States in Vietnam.

After telling his story, however, I think Sullivan slips a bit. His view of the war misses an important point. Yes, we could have fought it better. Yes, Jack Kennedy’s wish to play Special Forces soldier should have been avoided. Yes, Lyndon Johnson could have spent more time chasing secretaries instead of bomb targets. But the Vietnam War was a war that had to be fought. By the time it was over, the communists’ reach for global supremacy had become tired and bedraggled. Had it not been for the military stand of the United States, all of Southeast Asia might have been overrun by those gritty little North Vietnamese imperialists, and we would have had to stage a second Inchon landing somewhere around Vinh to break the stranglehold. And that, gentle reader, would have cost a lot more than the 58,000 names on the Wall. Maybe we could have saved some of those lives by fighting a better war, but the sacrifices should be considered a major contribution to victory in the Cold War. They were not made in vain.

So read *Of Spies and Lies* to understand the grunts of the CIA and what they did—with and without nobility—but remember that we had to be there. John Sullivan did not have to be there, but he was, and he helped us all more than he indicates in this book. CIA veterans of Vietnam generally consider John to be one of the good guys. Reading this book will give you an idea of why.

I do want to correct two impressions that Sullivan leaves, however. First, he repeats the standard Agency mantra concerning the polygraph—that it is only one of the weapons in the investigative arsenal of the CIA. Four groups in the Agency dispute this: the polygraphers, who believe that it is the definitive vessel of absolute truth; the case officers, who believe that it

is designed only to harass, impede, and frustrate their operations; field managers, who mistrust it; and Headquarters managers, who consider it to be the defining vessel of absolute truth. Deviations from the mantra lead to many of the confrontations that Sullivan describes so accurately in *Of Spies and Lies*. My own view is that if a case officer needs a polygraph to tell him whether his agent is honest, he is not much of a case officer. Like a lawyer who should never ask questions in court unless he already knows the answers, a case officer should only accept a polygraph for his agent when he knows what the answers will show. To do this, he will have to outwit a variety of imperious Headquarters managers.

Second, the author states: “For polygraph examiners, the holy grail is getting a subject to confess or to admit lying.” This may be the holy grail for the examiner, but the real holy grail should be to find the truth. Admittedly, the presence of truth is most apparent when a confession is achieved, but the goal for polygraph examiners in the CIA should still be to add benefit to the mission and the operation. And Sullivan certainly achieved that goal—even when confessions were not obtained.

My “non-reverential” view of the polygraph was shared by another officer who came out of Harlem in 1950 on a basketball scholarship that eventually led to a Marine Corps commission, a law degree, and acceptance into the CIA’s case officer training program. That, necessarily, involved a polygraph. With his ghetto background, the officer was probably somewhat more aware of the weaknesses of the flesh than the normal suburban, would-be case officer. He also had a remarkable sense of humor. As was usual at the time (1961), the polygrapher asked the officer if he had ever been involved in anything that might be considered homosexual activity. When the reply came in the affirmative, the operator asked, “How long ago?” expecting the answer to be in childhood, which was then excusable. The case officer candidate, however, looked at his watch and replied airily: “Oh, I don’t know. What time is it?” He got in regardless. And I am sure that John Sullivan would have passed him, also.

My few reservations about the book aside, *Of Spies and Lies* will give historians a useful insight into the CIA’s role in the 20-year struggle in Vietnam to blunt the communist drive for world supremacy. If it is true that the victors write the histories, we must have won the Vietnam War, because we are writing the histories. *Of Spies and Lies* is a good addition to the list.

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