

Celebrating the Life of Walter Pforzheimer

In Memoriam

Timothy Naftali

Editor's Note: Dr. Naftali delivered these remarks on 11 March 2003 at a memorial service attended by many colleagues from the intelligence world that Walter Pforzheimer helped to shape. To honor this distinguished CIA trailblazer, Studies in Intelligence awards a prize in his name each year for the best article on an intelligence-related subject submitted by a graduate or undergraduate student.



Walter L. Pforzheimer, CIA "Trailblazer."

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I asked Walter how he wanted me to start his eulogy. “Say ‘Hello,’” he suggested.

Well, “Hello.”

In his beloved curmudgeonly way, Walter could be a tough taskmaster, and I want to be sure to get at least that part right.

The Early Years

Walter Lionel Pforzheimer was a man of serious passions. He loved his country, he loved his books, he loved his Yale; he loved his Agency; and he loved his extended intellectual and blood family. In short, he loved life. Not that his passions were always positive. He hated his middle name, Lionel, and he didn’t like being a lawyer, though he was much better at it than he pretended. Walter’s genius was to make something lasting out of each of these passions: great friends; two great libraries, one public, one private; and a lifetime of exemplary public service.

Walter seemed to know early on that he had much to accomplish. He arrived two months prematurely, just in time to witness the guns of August 1914—Walter loved a good show. It was such a difficult birth that the attending physician announced that a choice would have to be made: “Shall I save the baby or the mother?” In response, Walter’s father fainted. From the womb—at least as Walter later told us—the little fellow screamed, “Save us both, you idiot!” And indeed the doctor did. Walter, as always, was very present at Creation.

It can certainly be said that Walter was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, but he’s the one who turned it into gold. Seeing the joy that book collecting brought his father and his uncles, Walter began using his 50-cents-a-week allowance to acquire first editions of the adolescent literary favorite, Frank R. Stockton. Having inherited the nose of a great collector, young Walter quickly exhibited a sense of which book to buy and which deserved a pass. Most collectors are happy if they create one unique collection. The Stockton was merely Walter’s first.

Yale College nurtured this love of books. By his junior year in 1934, Walter

had organized the first undergraduate book club. Two years later, while at the Yale Law School, he became the youngest trustee of the Yale Library Associates. Thus began an unprecedented sixty-nine year relationship that would much enrich Yale's library system and bring Walter some of his dearest friends. But the years in New Haven also lit a new fire in the young Mr. Pforzheimer.

Dedication to Public Service

For Walter's generation of Yale men, the depression at home and tensions abroad bred a deep sense of civic responsibility. Walter, who liked to quote Wendell Willkie's phrase that "America is the Land of the Free because it is also the Home of the Brave," became a championship debater and tried his hand at the Yale Political Union. Yale connections ensured that when he answered the call for public service, it would be in the new field of foreign intelligence. In 1942, before he enlisted in the US Army Air Corps, Walter was tapped to launder money for an OSS operation that used Sterling Library as a cover. Later that year, he found his way into Air Intelligence. This took him overseas, where under the patronage of fellow Yale Col. Huntington "Ting" Sheldon, he discovered a talent for briefing senior officers. In Germany, he would earn a Bronze Star helping the airmen make sense of documents captured from the defeated Luftwaffe. And it was yet another "Eli," who, in 1946, would help recruit Walter for the Central Intelligence Group, a successor to the OSS and the precursor to the CIA.

What Yale had started, the Central Intelligence Agency would complete. It was always a toss-up whether Walter felt more at home at Langley than in New Haven. Next to Yale, no community would benefit as much from Walter's energy, intelligence, and generosity.

As the junior member of the magnificent in-house firm of Houston, Warner, and Pforzheimer, Walter helped craft the charter for the new CIA. Becoming the Agency's first legislative counsel, Walter then drew on all of his skills to establish support on the Hill for intelligence activities. He never took credit for being the CIA's legislative counsel at a time of Congressional deference—no doubt considered a golden age by all of Walter's successors. "Many congressmen were afraid of intelligence," Walter would later recall. But Walter cannot escape his share of the credit. A master cultivator, he built lasting relationships with often remarkably ornery committee chairmen. At the same time, he managed to earn the respect of equally ornery Directors of Central Intelligence. The

high point of his legislative career came when Walter Bedell Smith, the boss he most revered, assured Congress that “Mr. Pforzheimer speaks for me on Capitol Hill, and I stand behind whatever he says.” Walter wore no badge more proudly.

Providence truly smiled on Walter in the early postwar period. As he was doing his part in building the CIA, Walter came across a rare letter from the American Revolution that revealed the thoughts on intelligence of a much earlier founding father. “The necessity of procuring good intelligence is appar-ent,” wrote George Washington in 1777, “and need not be further urged.” Acquiring that letter was a rite of passage for Walter. It launched him into collecting intelligence books and laid the foundation for his reputation as a man who understood the place of espionage and counterespionage in the American experience. It was only a matter of time before a DCI would enlist Walter to help current practitioners understand the roots of their tradecraft. In 1956, Allen Dulles created the CIA’s Historical Intelligence Collection, with Walter as its first curator. For the next 18 years, he would be its guiding force. By the time of Walter’s retirement in 1974, the HIC had grown to 22,000 volumes, the largest professional intelligence collection in the world.

Retirement brought new outlets for Walter to share his deep knowledge of intelligence history. Over the course of the last third of his long life, Walter dedicated himself to preserving and shaping the burgeoning public literature on intelligence. I’d love to use some of the words that Walter chose to describe the earliest works of this genre. But we are, after all, in a chapel. Fortunately, by the mid-1980s, Walter could delight in the growing professionalism of academic and journal writing about intelligence. He cultivated the new practitioners of this art: Chris Andrew, John Costello, David Kahn, Dan Mulvenna, Keith Melton, Hayden Peake, John Ranelagh, Wesley Wark, and Nigel West. Besides the HIC and the collections now at Yale, these protégées and their work would be Walter’s most enduring legacy. Today, there is not a single course taught on intelligence in the English-speaking world that does not reflect his patronage.

Generous Nature

Besides being a good teacher, Walter was a fine friend and generous host. There were countless invitations to be Walter’s guest for a fine meal at the Watergate or Tivoli, or for a resolutely mediocre, but festive Baker’s Soup at Mory’s. What most people don’t know is that Walter exhibited small acts

of spontaneous generosity throughout his life. As a recent graduate of Yale, Walter donated money for an annual prize for the finest freshman debater. We talk about the intelligence collection and Stockton and Moliere. But Walter also created a magnificent collection of legal textbooks on copyright for the Yale Law Library. Like so many of you, I experienced this generosity firsthand. Having returned to New Haven for a short stint as a visiting professor in the late 1990s, I discovered that a benefactor had paid my dues for a three-year membership in the Yale Library Associates. It was Walter, of course.



Pforzheimer, in conversation with Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet, at the CIA's 50th Anniversary celebration in 1997. Pforzheimer was honored as a "Trailblazer" during the celebration.

Walter had a partner in these acts of generosity. Since 1966, Alice d'Angelo shared his life as a companion, debating partner, and minder.

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Walter loved her intelligence and respected her sense of irony. She coined the tongue-in-cheek title used by many of us for him. He was OGO, or Oh Great One. As with any outsized character, Walter occasionally needed a little grounding. Alice, dear Alice, always provided that.

Walter, you never expected to live to be 65, or 75, or 85, for that matter. We were fortunate to have you as long as we did. I will miss your salon: the puckish comments on the newest spy book or the latest DCI, always served up with brandy and cigars. Most of all, I will miss your friendship. There is some solace for me in the fact that so long as there are American intelligence officers at work and the scribblers to study them, you will remain a forceful presence. Thank you, Walter.

Ave Atque Vale . . . OGO.

Dr. Timothy Naftali is an Associate Professor at the University of Virginia, where he directs the Presidential Recording Program and the Kremlin Decisionmaking Project at the Miller Center of Public Affairs. He first met Walter Pforzheimer in 1982 while working on an OSS-related paper as an undergraduate at Yale.

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