

# The Good Shepherd

## Intelligence in Recent Public Media

### **A movie directed by Robert DeNiro; screenplay by Eric Roth. Universal Pictures. 2006**

Reviewed by David Robarge, Gary McCollim, Nicholas Dujmovic, Thomas G. Coffey

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Given the publicity surrounding the opening of Robert DeNiro's film *The Good Shepherd*, *Studies in Intelligence* invited CIA's Chief Historian, David Robarge, CIA historians Gary McCollim and Nicholas Dujmovic, and CSI Lessons-Learned Staff member Thomas Coffey to a roundtable discussion of the movie on 8 January 2007.

*David Robarge:* It's unusual for the Center for the Study of Intelligence to pay attention to a film, but *The Good Shepherd* warrants the attention because the movie markets itself as the "untold story," "the hidden history of CIA." This is unlike other movies or television shows that use the Agency as a vehicle to present what is transparently total fiction. I'm thinking of *Mission Impossible*, the two Bourne movies based on Robert Ludlum's novels, *Spy Game*, *The Recruit*, *Alias*, *The Agency*, and so forth.

By using composite or archetypal characters modeled on real CIA officers, by placing them in scenarios based on actual historical events, and by careful attention to sets, costumes, and other details, *The Good Shepherd*

has a degree of authenticity, a documentary feel, reminiscent of Oliver Stone's *JFK*. Intelligence officers should know about the many liberties the film takes with history, but those new to the profession or hoping to learn something about its history may not readily recognize the distortions.

## **The Plot**

*DR*: The basic plot centers on the Agency's early history, starting with its predecessor, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). The lead character, Edward Wilson [see next page for table of characters and actors], who is based mostly on Cold War-era counterintelligence chief James Angleton, leaves Yale in 1939, joins OSS, serves in London, and then joins CIA in 1947, when it is created. Wilson's service involves hotspots in Latin America, in Europe, and in Washington through 1961. The Bay of Pigs is the overarching real-life event from which the film moves backward, and then forward, in time to show Wilson and other Agency officers in personal and professional crises and turmoil during a roughly decade-and-a-half period before and after the establishment of the Agency.

Wilson is a kind of spy for all seasons. He's modeled after several real people: at one point he's Frank Wisner, chief of the operations directorate in the 1950s; at another time he's Richard Bissell, the Bay of Pigs planner; then maybe he's another senior officer of the time, Tracy Barnes with a bit of Bill Harvey, also of Cuba operations fame. But clearly, James Angleton, the longtime counterintelligence wizard, is the incubus lurking over them all.

In the end, *The Good Shepherd* tells a story much like John LeCarre's *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*: intelligence is inherently a sordid and corrupting business founded on deceit and betrayal and exacts heavy costs on individuals, their families, and their associates.

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### ***The Good Shepherd's* CIA and the Historical Reality**

#### **Character (Actor)**

#### **Real-life Model**

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**Edward Wilson** (*Matt Damon*)—  
*Inducted into Yale's Skull and Bones  
Society and is mentored by its members  
in CIA.*

**James Angleton**—*Went to Yale but was not a member  
of Skull and Bones.*

**Comment:** Wilson is primarily patterned after Angleton but he could be Frank Wisner (University of Virginia), William Harvey (Indiana), Richard Bissell or Tracy Barnes (Yale, but not Skull and Bones).

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**Philip Allen** (*William Hurt*)—*A Skull and Bones* hierarch.

**Allen Dulles**—*A Princeton graduate.*

**Comment:** The character who is Wilson's wife (*Angelina Jolie*) is named "Clover," the name of Allen Dulles' wife. Philip Allen's wife is called "Blossom."

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**Richard Hayes** (*Lee Pace*)—*A Skull and Bones* brother.

**Richard Helms**—*Went to Williams College.*

**Comment:** Hayes succeeds Allen as CIA director in the film, skipping over Dulles's real successor John McCone (*UC Berkeley*).

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**William Sullivan** (*Robert DeNiro*)

**William Donovan**

**Comment:** Playing the founder of OSS, De Niro alternatively is preachy, moralistic, and cynical. Donovan was none of these.

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**Ray Brocco** (*John Turturro*)

**Ray Rocca**

**Comment:** Rocca was Angleton's loyal deputy for years—as an analyst, not an operations officer

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**Sam Murach** (*Alec Baldwin*)

**Sam Papich**

**Comment:** FBI agent Papich was the long-time go-between for J. Edgar Hoover and CIA, especially to the CI staff.

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**Yuri Modin**, the false Valentin Mironov  
(*John Sessions*)

**Anatoliy Golitsyn**

**Comment:** Golitsyn was the first of two Soviet defectors. Angleton trusted him; beyond that, the film depiction bears no relationship to reality.

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**Valentin Mironov** (*Mark Ivanir*)

**Yuri Nosenko**

**Comment:** The interrogation of Mironov, with its use of violence and drugs, bears no resemblance to Nosenko's actual treatment.

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**Arch Cummings** (*Billy Crudup*)

**Harold "Kim" Philby**

**Comment:** Philby was sidelined from intelligence long before the Golitsyn/Nosenko matter, but in the film, Modin is Cummings's agent.

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**Stas Siyanko/ "Ulysses"** (*Oleg Stefan*)

**None**

**Comment:** The only "human" character in the film has no real-life counterpart.

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## The Historical Liberties

*DR:* *The Good Shepherd* is on firmest historical ground in its attention to the artifacts of the times. It gets all the little details right: the eyeglasses, the desk sets, the street signs, the newspaper boxes—much like those quality historical dramas that the British are so good at producing. But as a rendering of history writ large, the film seems to me more like the

"propagandamentaries" of Costa Gavras, such as *Z* and *State of Siege*, which use familiar, but not necessarily true-to-life, episodes and personalities to make political points.

*Gary McCollim:* I saw three major errors driving the plot, errors Agency people will notice. One—supposedly the key element in the failure of the Bay of Pigs operation—is the belief that someone leaked the name of the landing site. In reality, there were 1,500 Cubans involved—no one asks how many of them talked to friends and relatives. The *New York Times* knew about the operation; there were lots of people in the administration who knew about it; and Castro had spies in the expatriate community CIA drew its fighters from.

*Nicholas Dujmovic:* Arguably the film makes CIA look better operationally than was really the case, at least with the Bay of Pigs: it would have succeeded, the film says, if only the landing place was not leaked. We all know there were plenty of problems with the Bay of Pigs on the policy side, on the planning side, and on the execution side. There was plenty of blame on CIA's part and on the White House's part for it to have failed quite on its own.

*Thomas Coffey:* Even if the operation had initially succeeded, the idea that this paramilitary battalion would have melted into the jungles and mountains to spawn a general uprising against Castro is fatuous. CIA's own analysts judged that Castro's popular support was strong and that he controlled the army and the security services. Even if the group had secured the beachhead, its members eventually would have been hunted down. The supposed leak had nothing to do with historical reality. The idea just serves as a hook on which to hang Wilson's problems throughout his career.

*GMc:* Right. The search for the leak becomes the vehicle for focusing internally, inside the Agency, for "the stranger in our house." And it leads to flashbacks in this Angleton-character Wilson's mind to scenes of how he got involved in intelligence. This leads to the second major error: Wilson's son is born in 1941 and graduates from Yale in 1960 at the age of 19 (he must have been a prodigy of some kind) and in 1961 he is stationed in the Belgian Congo as a first-tour CIA officer. At the time, it was an important post, as the US government sought to stabilize the situation in a newly independent country. This dynamic is ignored to make the point that Wilson's son turns out to be the source of the leak, albeit inadvertently.

Most egregious is the third error: the characterization of the reason the film's CIA director, Philip Allen, was forced to resign after the Bay of Pigs. We all can see in this character Allen Dulles, the preeminent DCI of the 1950s, who indeed had to resign in 1961. What's wrong is that Philip Allen is forced out because it was found that he was squirreling away money in a Swiss bank account. Sure, the film lays the groundwork for the ouster by indicating that President Kennedy wanted CIA heads to roll after the fiasco, but the film leaves the impression that there were a lot of corrupt people at the top of the CIA leadership. No one has ever made that kind of claim against any director of CIA.

*DR:* On top of that, you have the notion that Wilson had learned of the bank account from a friend in the FBI and that he was holding the knowledge as a weapon—while his suspicions and paranoias mounted. Then, suspecting that Allen leaked the landing site, he springs the corruption charge as a way of getting rid of the director. This is, as you say, totally contrived: the only remote connection to history is that the Dulles law firm, years before, had helped United Fruit establish a monopoly in Guatemala. (In the movie it's a coffee company.) This fact has been the source of the "economic imperialism" theory for the successful CIA coup in Guatemala in 1954.

*ND:* One of the themes you see throughout the film is a proto-Marxist position that economic interests of the capitalist elite are primary, which helps establish the overall tone of cynicism.

*DR:* We need to address the tone you refer to, but there's more to say about its historical transgressions.

*GMc:* The film ends in 1961, in actual history a very important year in Agency history. The Bay of Pigs essentially made CIA a public institution. Before then, the Agency was so secret that people didn't talk very much about it. After the Bay of Pigs, everything changes. All of a sudden there are news stories, books are published, and investigative journalism flourishes.

By making 1961 the fulcrum of the film, filmmakers were forced to further twist the timelines of history. The coup in Latin America—Guatemala—happens before 1950 instead of in 1954, and instead of the use of false radio broadcasts and a few aerial bombings to scare a president into abdicating, the film shows soldiers with guns invading the presidential palace and arresting people. Never happened.

Another example of distorting history to fit the conclusion of the movie's last reel in 1961 is *The Good Shepherd's* treatment of a pair of Russian KGB officers who the movie asserts defected in the 1950s. The real defectors on which these characters are loosely based came to the United States in the early 1960s. In addition, their stories have been twisted. The first was Anatoliy Golitsyn, who defected in 1961, and the other was Yuri Nosenko, who defected in 1964. Nosenko was, in fact and as the movie indicated, incarcerated and subjected to hostile interrogation, but he was not treated violently. On top of this distortion, Director DeNiro and Screenwriter Roth conflate these events with the infamous MKULTRA experiments with LSD that led to the unfortunate death of a US Army scientist.

*TC:* I'd point to a few more details: The Angleton figure, Wilson, goes to London as an OSS officer in 1941. The blitz makes a great backdrop, but the OSS wasn't created for another year, and Angleton didn't get to London until 1943. The blitz was over by then. He was there only briefly and spent most of his OSS service in Rome, which was relatively quiet after the Allies pushed through it. Had DeNiro and Roth put Wilson in Rome, they would have missed an English angle: they appear to have wanted to establish the British as the masters from whom we learned the "black arts" of intelligence.

*DR:* By ending the movie in 1961, De Niro and Roth, indeed, created all sorts of historical train wrecks. Angleton, for example, did not start to become unhinged until the early 1960s; he was most effective in the 1950s, when the Wilson character is becoming paranoid. It's just a fundamental misstatement.

*TC:* The film's treatment of Kim Philby—Arch Cummings in the film—is also very wrong. Philby's problems were evident by the early 1950s. Angleton was one of the very few Agency officers who was read into the VENONA material pointing to Philby's treachery. Philby was largely out of intelligence work by 1953, and Angleton knew why. The whole relationship as portrayed in the film is much too Hollywood: you have the double game within the double game, which creates unnecessary and unhistorical complexity. By having Richard Hayes ( i.e., Richard Helms) taking over the Agency in 1961, the film also overlooks the fact that a West Coast industrialist—an outsider—John McCone, ran CIA after Dulles. Helms didn't become director until 1966.

Real history should be interesting enough. For example, the Guatemala coup is a great story. The covert operation in Iran in 1953 leading to the

overthrow of the Iranian prime minister, another good story, doesn't even play in this movie.

*ND:* And the real characters! The real Angleton, the real Frank Wisner, the real Bill Harvey are stories in their own right.

Another historical falsehood is that becoming a leader at CIA hinges on membership in Skull and Bones, the secret society at Yale. No senior figure of the time at CIA ever had anything to do with that organization.

*DR:* In a sense, *The Good Shepherd* is a *Godfather*-type tale told through the imagined lens of the Eastern establishment elite. There are lots of problems with that approach: Angleton went to Yale, but he did not belong to Skull and Bones. Richard Bissell (Edward Wilson in the Bay of Pigs context) rejected an invitation to join the society because he thought it was too weird. Allen Dulles (the Skull and Bones hierarch Philip Allen) went to Princeton. And Richard Helms (Richard Hayes in the movie), another supposed Skull and Bones guy, went to Williams College and was temperamentally unsuited for that kind of organization.

The real characters involved in these events are described in *The Very Best Men*, by Evan Thomas, and *The Wilderness of Mirrors*, by David Martin—books that are referenced on the movie's Web site but don't seem to have been used in the making of the film. A former Agency officer, Milt Bearden, served as a technical consultant. He is not a historian, and it's unclear what his specific role was. He apparently provided little, if anything, more than insights into operational details. Full disclosure: the CIA History Staff was never consulted.

*ND:* Bearden has publicly defended the interrogation scene in which the CIA interrogator abuses, beats, and then waterboards the second defector. In truth, when the second defector, Nosenko, came out shortly after the Kennedy assassination, the United States needed to know all that he could provide about possible Soviet involvement. The stakes were very high—certainly higher than that shown in the film. You could not have had a more volatile situation in which the truth was needed. And yet the "hostile interrogation" Nosenko was subjected to did not include physical violence, and he was never drugged. There certainly was no waterboarding. The movie's interrogation scene is clearly not a commentary on history but on recent events, and it's an injustice to CIA.

## **Truth in Storytelling?**

TC: The film is also provides a distorted view of Agency life. By depicting service in the Agency as a life of lies, secrets, and the dirty business of operations and counterintelligence, it suggests that people who work in CIA turn into monsters like the Angleton character. In short, by working in CIA you live a life of deception, can't trust anyone, and lose your soul. But these are incompatible themes. For example, in reality, keeping secrets bolsters the sense that you have to trust others, it fosters comradeship. There's a sense of community in CIA culture and history that is belied by the film's dog-eat-dog atmosphere.

ND: A film can take a strictly documentary approach in trying to take a photograph of history as it happened. If that's the standard, then anyone with historical sense is going to dislike the liberties *The Good Shepherd* takes. If one approaches the film as a work of art, one must still ask if there is truth in the story-telling. Does it convey the sense of the time: the atmosphere, the motivations, the tone, and the challenges? I think we all agree that the film fails that test as well. It fails because it inserts themes we know from our studies of the period were not there: the overarching economic interest, the WASP mafia dominance, the cynicism, the dark perspective. In reality, the stakes were high during the Cold War; the Soviets were seen to be on the march and very dangerous. It was serious business, and there were many personal costs. And yet, most CIA people were enjoying their work at the same time, as any number of oral history interviews and memoirs will attest.

TC: The film also does not mention any long-term successes. There's nothing to show that work in CIA was worth anything in a strategic sense.

GMc: It does show technical analysis in a positive light, making sense of a fuzzy picture and reading an audio tape. But there's no mention of the U-2 spyplane, a huge CIA technical success. Or the satellite program. Or the Berlin Tunnel. Those were significant successes.

And speaking of omissions, where's the Korean war? It was the experience of US servicemen imprisoned by the North Koreans and Chinese that made us think the enemy could brainwash our people and get them to spill secrets. That concern led to CIA investigations of LSD and other drugs. That is a story in its own right, but this movie suggests LSD came up as a truth serum out of the blue. The picture painted here is that CIA officers were sloppy in administering drugs during an interrogation and allowing a defector to jump out the window while they just stand there.

And there's the ahistorical way in which the CIA elite are portrayed as bloodless and stoical. Many of CIA's leaders in the 1950s were quite temperamental and emotional. They screamed and yelled and pounded the table; they were even party animals, and all that is completely omitted.

*ND:* Frank Wisner was famous, well before his nervous breakdown and suicide, for his mercurial temperament. He was a romantic at heart, like many of them. On the film's tone, what DeNiro and Roth have done is to take a perceived aspect of Angleton's character—from later in his life, the paranoid, suspicious, trust-no-one mentality—and work it backwards throughout his whole life and expand it horizontally to everyone else in intelligence, in OSS, in British intelligence, and in CIA, with one exception. Everyone in this film is paranoid, cynical, and not very likeable, except—and this is hugely telling—the Russians! The Soviets, for heaven's sake. The most likeable and human person in the movie is the KGB spymaster "Ulysses."

*DR:* A clear knockoff of John LeCarre's "Karla," who in fact has no historical counterpart because the Soviets kept killing off their spymasters.

### **On the Up Side?**

*DR:* Is there something right about this movie or something of value in it? Historically, operationally, atmospherically, institutionally? Can people learn something from the film?

*GMc:* The film did portray how the work put stress on marriages. The truth is that work for this Agency requires a great deal of time and effort, and seemingly solid marriages have fallen apart.

*ND:* Memoirs of the period, by David Atlee Phillips or Richard Helms, for example, show the stress of the job, particularly on the operational side, that led to divorces and remarriages. But to answer David's question, I would have to say no, other than that this film offers a good explanation of why there is so much public misunderstanding of the CIA, its history, and the profession of intelligence.

*TC:* I can't find much in it to recommend. It's a disservice to the pioneers of the Agency, who certainly don't deserve this kind of treatment. They were real patriots, interested in the mission of fighting the Soviets, not in who's backstabbing whom, and keeping the secrets. There were mistakes during this period, but they engineered successes as well. And our people enjoyed what they did. But the movie doesn't suggest that at all; it's way

too cynical and nasty.

*ND*: It's interesting that the historical works recommended for further reading on the movie's Web site include Evan Thomas's very good history of the period, *The Very Best Men*, and Thomas has publicly disagreed with the film's facts and tone. Tom Mangold's very harsh book on Angleton, *Cold Warrior*, is also cited, but the Angleton that Mangold writes about, bizarre though he became later on, is far from the movie version of him.

*GMc*: I don't think I would recommend this film to students, unless I wanted to use it in a classroom as a foil to explain the reality.

*DR*: There are many great Agency stories yet to hit the screen. One that comes to mind is the Congo episode, from 1960 through 1965 or so. From decolonization, you have the Agency's efforts to get rid of Patrice Lumumba, the Simba uprising, the capture of hostages in two Congolese cities, the mounting of a major paramilitary effort to rescue them that included CIA officers, and then after a civil war, the establishment of a pliant dictator—an archetype of the sort of leader we've used many time elsewhere in the world—this is a great story. The closest thing Hollywood has done is *Tears in the Sun* with Bruce Willis, but that's just Rambo in the jungle.

So, lacking alternatives, *The Good Shepherd* is probably as good as any film on the Agency. For the intelligence professional it's probably worth seeing, at least to be able to discuss it intelligently in social and professional settings.

*ND*: I agree. But if we could prescribe reading beforehand to prepare one to recognize the movie's distortions and falsehoods, I would say read *The Very Best Men* or John Ranelagh's history of the Agency, not to mention the contributions of the History Staff that are available on Agency Web sites.

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