

Reflections on a Life of Covering the World of Intelligence and National Security

Interviewed by Peter Usowski and Fran Moore.



Walter Pincus outside a federal courthouse on 12 February 2007 after testifying in the perjury trial of I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby, former chief of staff to US Vice President Dick Cheney in Washington. His June 2003 *Post* article on yellow cake and Iraqi WMD was said to have led to the public identification of then-undercover CIA officer Valerie Plame. Photo © UPI/Alamy Stock Photo

Walter Pincus reported for 40 years on intelligence and national security affairs for the *Washington Post*. He has won numerous awards for his work—including a Pulitzer Prize in 2002—published in several professional journals, and continues to contribute to the on-line news service CIPHER Brief. The interview took place in 2017, and Mr. Pincus reviewed it in 2018.

Editor’s Note: Italicized paragraphs or phrases in brackets reflect insertions for clarity and flow. Interviewer questions are also italicized.



Washington: A City of Relationships

In 1959 I was writing for some North Carolina papers and working for Charlie Bartlett, who was then the Washington correspondent for the *Chattanooga Times* and a friend of the Kennedys. [Among the stories Mr. Pincus covered at the time was *Fidel Castro’s overthrow on 1 January 1959 of the dictator Fulgencio Batista.*]

A Noteworthy Dinner Group

Mr. Pincus described his connections to prominent figures of the time, including membership in a monthly

dinner group. Among the members was fellow journalist Don Oberdorfer. Other friends mentioned served with Kennedy during the election and after he was elected. Future Defense Secretary Les Aspin was one. Dinner conversations were off the record, and members would bring their bosses. Mr. Pincus said he was friendly with the Kennedys through Bartlett. Mr. Pincus remembered that one night Bartlett brought Bobby Kennedy, who would himself have a lengthy engagement with CIA activities.

Such acquaintances could lead to unusual opportunities. One involved an invitation to attend a communist-sponsored youth event in Vienna, Austria, which would later, according to Mr. Pincus, become the subject of unjustified speculation that he had served in CIA. Another example came after John F. Kennedy won the 1960 election. It was during the presidential transition, just before the 20 January 1961 inauguration that he received a request from the incoming administration. As Mr. Pincus described it:

A friend of mine named Fred Holborn was working in the Kennedy transition and called me up and said, “The president-elect wants to send a letter to Prime Minister Nehru, and he doesn’t want to use the American ambassador.” The ambassador was Ellsworth Bunker, who had been

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appointed by Eisenhower. “And would you take the letter?”

I had to be in Delhi for New Year’s Eve but the [conference Nehru was attending] was in Jaipur, and so, I agreed to do it and went to Jaipur as the American representative to the Indian Youth Congress Party Conference. At the first dinner, there was a representative of the Chinese Communist Party and a representative of Russia. And before I left the United States, somebody, I’m afraid I can’t remember who, gave me a Polaroid camera and I took pictures and I made a speech. The head of the Indian Youth Congress Party was Indira Gandhi. She took me to meet her father. I had a book about him, and when we met Nehru signed it.

I can’t remember what the heck we talked about when I delivered Kennedy’s letter. While in Jaipur, I met Cherif Guellal, who was then the Algerian Independence Movement representative in India. I met him somehow, and we became friends.

Engagement with CIA and Its Leaders

My first serious connection with the agency after the widely reported and misrepresented event in Vienna began with the first investigation I did for Senator Fulbright and the Senate

Foreign Relations Committee looking at the Foreign Agent Registration Act. Without getting into any classified information, I found a situation that was obvious, a person working for an African nation’s presidential office was being paid by a US PR outfit and by the agency. And the committee agreed not to go into it. That was that.^a

Another connection was via Richard Helms. He used to have a habit of having lunch at the Occidental Restaurant with young journalists he didn’t yet know. He was a former journalist himself. I had one of those lunches with him—invited out of the blue.

Then when I was running my second investigation for Fulbright and had access to CIA personnel, I saw Helms a couple of times. And when Helms retired, I saw him socially a lot. I mean it’s always been a connection, but it’s not. . . . And Ben Bradlee knew about it.

I had the same problem [of having possibly controversial relationships] with the Kennedys. And it became worse with the Clintons. My wife, who was from Little Rock, through her family had known him since he was attorney general—and Hillary as well. . . . When George Tenet was running things, remember, I met George when he was legislative

assistant to then-Sen. John Heinz. That’s the way Washington works. Enough people here knew that I knew him. I didn’t have to talk to him. Though people thought I did. And so, they tried to help me.

Then remember I worked for Charlie Bartlett. Because everybody knew he was Kennedy’s best friend. He was being called all the time. And so he finally quit writing news stories because he knew so much and became a columnist.

But I’ve tried to stick to facts. Everybody knew I was quite conflicted, but I knew it best. That was it.

Routine Journalistic Exchanges: A Thing of the Past

We had regular interaction with CIA people—it was much more prevalent back in the 50s, 60s, 70s, probably into the 80s. What people don’t understand about the agency is that—and the Russians do the same thing—if you have a foreign trip planned to an interesting country, they [CIA analysts] would have a backgrounder for you. We met station chiefs or people in the station when you went to a country. My whole interaction with the Russians is full of that on both sides. When I first started dealing with the Russians—this is way back—I was working for Fulbright.

So, I’d done a lot of that. But such briefings are not done any more. You, as a reporter, don’t want to be considered corrupt. That’s one of the

a. “Pincus has taken two 18-month sabbaticals from journalism. Both were spent directing investigations for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee under its then-chairman, Sen. J. William Fulbright. The first was into foreign government lobbying (1962–63) and the second into US military and security commitments abroad and their effect on US foreign policy (1969–70). Both investigations led to legislation. The first in a revision of the Foreign Agents Registration Act; the second in a series of limiting amendments on defense appropriations bills that culminated in the Hatfield-McGovern legislation to end the Vietnam War.” From: <http://www.niemanwatchdog.org/index.cfm?bi-oid=81&fuseaction=about.viewContributors>

differences in the way reporters act today. I'm used to dealing with agency people. The way younger people feel today, it is a totally adversarial situation, it is totally different.

How Media Coverage of Intelligence Has Changed

It is not just the Intelligence Community. It's the way these days in journalism; everybody wants to bring down the government. And it works. And it's had an effect. We're not talking about the "whole" media. There is no single media, we're all individuals. Everybody has got their own rules. Individually you're coming in, and the institutions themselves have rules. So, it's an industry. It's a profession I think, not a trade, but a profession in which everybody makes their own rules. What's happened to it is notoriety, and electronic media now make it worse. And that is the drive. It used to be you write something that gets you on the front page. The drive now is to write something that gets clicks.

I want to say the difference is there's much more depth to the writing that gets you on the front page [*of a newspaper*] than there is in what gets you clicks. Because clicks are tracked by the hour. Every media organization now has an electronic chart that says how many people are either reading or watching what you did at that moment and who they are and how long they stay with you, and all that. It's become a pay thing. In some media organizations, reporters get paid on how many clicks they get. And that's the difference. In the past, print reporters would be looking for some media kind of impact, such as changing laws, not just trying to end officials' careers.

So, [the media is] an industry. It's a profession I think, not a trade, but a profession in which everybody makes their own rules.

On the other side of it is this idea that you can't have friends in government. And God forbid you see somebody socially. But in my case, if you keep on the same subjects like arms control or intelligence, national security issues forever, you grow up knowing people. So, I grew up with it.

The relationships today are limited to events, which is why newsmakers hold background briefings, put out press releases that would get you in the paper.

I've taught at Stanford University's Washington program for 15 years, and that's what I'm teaching my students. We're now in the PR society, and it's government by PR. We have one-dimensional relationships with sources. Each administration has gotten better at it based on control of access to their own officials.

There always will be leaks. That brings on threatening legal action against the press and all that stuff. So, it is designed to keep people in line. I'm sure the Trump administration will try to be much more successful with the investigation of leaks.

The only time I ever got leaks out of CIA was when people were unhappy with who was running it or when they thought their bosses were saying inaccurate things. Every time I got into a leak discussion with the press people at the agency I'd question why have a PR person. Deutch's PR person was very active promoting Deutch because he wanted to be defense secretary. People at CIA hated that and were willing to talk about what he was doing.

The other part is that one gets respect for the place, for me initially maybe because I went through Vienna and all that and was amazed at what was being done in the Cold War period. When [*CIA operations officer*] Cord Meyer sat there and told me the extent of what they were doing in the youth field. And then, of course, when Cord told me the extent of what the Russians were doing, it was the whole world. I couldn't imagine how it was all put together.

Growing into Knowledge of the Practice of Intelligence

I didn't want to be moved around from covering one agency and then another because I would certainly want to stay in one general area and become expert in that. And most people don't do it that way. So, I just take too much time, and I read a lot of hearings, speeches, reports, everything I can lay my hands on. That's the one thing I learned from the Army interrogator school: it was you must know as much as you can beforehand.

An interview is not questions and answers. A real interview gets you to appear to be sharing information. It's a discussion, and you bring something—whether it's convincing somebody you know everything about them so they might as well tell you, which is the way I interpreted interrogator school. You want confessions. You don't want people to help by saying, "Tell me x." You have some ideas already about x before you question persons that have information about x. They tell you because they think you already know it. And

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in this town if you read everything that you can lay your hands on before you talk to somebody, I mean, that's the way to do it, particularly if both you and your subject know it's going to be negative or confrontational.

As an investigative reporter, I was allowed to pick subjects in which generally it appeared—and then turned out—that somebody did something wrong, and it was kept secret, because in this town if something worked, somebody was going to trumpet it.

Interviewer: So, how did you go about selecting the topics about the intel business that you wrote about?

It's whatever hit me.

I teach this class on oversight of government. Each quarter I decide what issue at the beginning of the class I am going to focus on. So, this quarter [2017] I'm doing Russian propaganda. I did torture and other subjects in the past. Senator Feinstein was still mad at me for going after the Senate intelligence committee torture study and, quote, "investigation" that went with it. [*I was critical*] because having twice run investigations in the 1960s for Chairman Fulbright at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, I believed that's not the way to do it.

Reflections on Congressional Oversight

[*The quality of oversight*] depends on who is the chairman. And it depends on the party in the White House. If the committee chairman

is in the same party as the president, there is no real oversight. I mean it's going to be interesting how we're handling Russia propaganda today and particularly with this president. But if I had to make a broad, sweeping judgment, it totally depends upon who's chairman. In the old days, that was it.

I hate to quote the old days, but then the party in the White House didn't matter as much, and it was really the whim of the chairman. Now there's not the kind of independent committee investigating as was done in past decades. There may be more going on than I know about. But my view of it clearly comes out of my experience with Fulbright, which means 50 or so years ago, when investigations came if you think there's some kind of trouble. You send people out to investigate before you have an interview. You don't run here based on what's in the *Washington Post* and the *Times* the day before.

The whole hearing system these days and congressional oversight across the board totally depend on what's in the papers the week before or how do we embarrass the president. *One example:* I remember the fights over big satellites—billion-dollar satellites—and small satellites. Rep. Larry Combest was the chairman over in the House intelligence committee when this was the subject and he was fighting Sen. Dennis DeConcini, who liked big ones. For others it depended on where they were being built.

The Changed Scale and Tone of Media Coverage of Intelligence

One reason [*for less intelligence coverage today*] is that because when Helms was running intelligence, there was better control over the Intelligence Community and respect for it. You remember NSA, the National Security Agency, wouldn't admit it existed. They got away with it for a long time. [*Another example is coverage of the*] Bay of Pigs. Newspapers, the *New York Times* in particular, figured out what was happening and editors were talked out of writing the story. You didn't have the government as a punching bag back then, particularly the agency. That changed; the only publicized stories became failures and screwups, and a press competition began to find out what's going on. The good news, the agency good news, successes, however can't be pushed out to the public. Deutch tried. Once you start saying this is a "great thing we did," then when something fails you're expected to outline all the bad things.

[*With respect to recalling the CIA's greatest stories*] I really don't know. When asked, I was trying to think what is a good story? Nothing approaches the news worthiness of failure, the Bay of Pigs, Iran government overthrow, and even Saddam's weapons of mass destruction and George Tenet's statement "It's a slam dunk"—depending on the context. But in the slam dunk context, people don't understand what Bush said to him that led to that response: "Nobody ever quits." But that [*Tenet*] quote [*always gets*] repeated by itself. It's a loser and will always be repeated.

I was trying to think of a positive story that can be written, and it's really hard to think of one.

Interviewer: What about something like the Cuban missile crisis? Do you think enough information came out on the role that CIA had in informing the president that you couldn't put that in the category as a success?

It's always the photography that's remembered and not the CIA analysis made of it. It's always been in doubt what the Russians actually had in the way of nuclear warheads. From later stories I guess they had short-range missiles. But I was never convinced about that because that comes from the Russians, and you wondered if Castro would want short-range missiles to use on his own country. That's always been in the writing about that—lots of questions. The whole idea the leader of a country would bring nuclear material into his own country—to be used in his own country. That's the problem. We knew about intermediate-range missiles they were getting but not the warheads for the shorter range missiles.

Interviewer: The one event that the CIA and the Intelligence Community was at great pains to be public about in recent memory is the raid to get Usama Bin Ladin. Rather than asking the success or failure question, what were your observations as you watched that public relations event unfold in terms of how candid the agency was.

Publicly, the credit, as I remember, went to JSOC [Joint Special Operations Command]. The Pentagon has a major PR operation.

Today, people want to have people saying “this is the worst thing about x,” even before they read the facts and thus before they understand what happened.

Interviewer: But just in terms of the agency actually getting out there with information like that?

To be brutally [frank], I don't think you should because it's then that the reverse becomes true. Then you have to be honest about when it, a CIA operation, doesn't work.

The Challenges of Helping Public Understanding of Intelligence

The way I wrote about things was so detailed and therefore complex that I made it difficult for the average person to understand; I was too deep into it. And by design, I always tried to play out the facts before I wrote about who said “this is the worst thing that ever happened in the world.” Today, people want to have people saying “this is the worst thing about x,” even before they read the facts and thus before they understand what happened.

When I wrote about Iraq and the fact that there were some people at CIA who didn't think Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction—I mean the fact that there was a fight over here over the judgment. I wrote a piece about someone calling Saddam's WMD a “Potemkin village.” He says Hussein's making it appear like he's got weapons to keep control over his country. I wrote it, and George Tenet obviously got angry and had people call me up and tell me how wrong I was. But it was a very good source. And he, the source, turned out to be right. But the *Post* wasn't going to publish it because

somebody else on the staff was told there was WMD.

So, we've had a standoff, but Bob Woodward suddenly came in on a Saturday and said he was now convinced that I was right and had to convince the editor, Len Downie, that he had to publish it. He published it on page 17. I was quite proud of that. And, the agency, at least some part of the agency had it right.

I still think the most important thing I ever did was the neutron warhead story in 1977. At least that opened up the debate about nuclear weaponry. But that was after I got involved in nuclear weapons and essentially not in intelligence.

People still don't understand that the neutron “bomb” was not a bomb. It was a low-yield nuclear artillery shell and a short-range Lance missile warhead. But this was the idea: the Army wanted a new, longer-range, nuclear artillery shell and missile warhead. Because the Germans did not want American nuclear artillery detonated on their territory, they required that everything we had in the nuclear artillery had to be stored nine miles from the border, because that was their range and they didn't want any nuclear shells around them for use on German territory. And so, the Army wanted to build a longer range shell with less blast and heat but more radiation to cut down on collateral damage to German towns.

Originally the neutron idea had been designed for use in anti-missile nuclear weapons because it yielded greater-than-normal radiation and

But I think [the neutron bomb story] created a debate that got totally out of hand, and it really taught me how you can mess up a program without foreseeing, in this case, that the Russians picked it up and used it for a long time as anti-US propaganda.

could disable incoming warheads. Designers finally convinced Army generals who hated it, because if they used it on a battlefield, people inside a tank would get killed, but the tank wouldn't be blown up. It was a continuing, huge internal debate in the Army.

The Army finally agreed to do it, and people at Los Alamos and Livermore had this problem with the way the Army was selling it to towns in Germany. The towns in Germany were described to me as "two kilotons" apart, so they had to have a low-yield weapon that was less destructive so they could drop it in the middle.

The neutron device was first described to me by then-Defense Secretary Harold Brown's top nuclear assistant, who was very proud of it. It came out of Livermore National Laboratory where someone described it as a weapon that would kill people and leave buildings standing. And everybody got crazy in the Pentagon when I wrote it that way without the Pentagon people realizing it was one of their guys who told me that.

But I think it created a debate that got totally out of hand, and it really taught me how you can mess up a program without foreseeing, in this case, that the Russians picked it up and used it for a long time as anti-US propaganda. And President Carter never liked the idea of building such a weapon, but he never thought it would come to that.

The neutron device story also caused a huge fight between me and Zbig Brzezinski. Zbig's National Security Council didn't want to understand the issue. When I called before publishing the first story, they just tossed it to the Pentagon—with or without realizing, I don't know, Harold Brown was never going to take a second look at or kill production of the neutron device because it was his weapon, built at Livermore, which he had run as director.

Balancing the Public's Right to Know with Legitimate Security Protection

I give speeches on this subject. The key element is always who the person is who decides to make something classified and then has authority to declassify it. One of the things I went through during my time working for Fulbright was that we held all our hearings, even foreign lobbying hearings, in closed session. And then the question came up, "How do you get it cleared?" It was a big issue. We eventually made our own decisions, and that was because the administration was so arbitrary. There were no common rules.

I got the *Washington Post* to accept that you don't use the name of a covert case officer if it's not necessary to the story. So, we do that, and then Snowden came out, and that to me is, from the press side, the worst leaked, exposure of classified information—that and the distortions that accompanied the torture controversy.

Interviewer: Do you see a distinction between the Snowden and Manning revelations and others?

Snowden was just worse because [he and his abettors] made the newspapers a party to it by giving the *Post* and others thousands of documents, leaving it up to them what to publish. They were going to make up their own minds. As a result, the newspapers treated Snowden so differently. The same thing with Chelsea Manning.

Manning caught the *Post* by surprise; it wasn't involved. But the Snowden thing—because several media outlets had all that previously classified material—I think it became a competitive thing. They didn't care who'd done it. They just wanted to get some hot story. And then nobody wanted to pay attention to things like newsworthiness or potential harm to national security. That all got lost in the crossfire of stories. Also, nobody wanted to pay attention to Snowden, what his view of it was and why he released so much more that was classified, given that his main point—potential of government surveillance of individuals—was made in just a limited, few documents. There were also, at that point, people with access to all that material who didn't realize what he, Snowden, was doing. So, it took off and unless you've been doing this long enough, handling classified material, you didn't know what's dangerous.

Interviewer: Have you had any personal instances where our agency pushed back on something that you were going to publish, and how did those discussions go?

Well, there are a whole bunch that are public about how things the paper

wanted to publish ended up in discussions at the White House.

These were Bob Woodward stories. I don't know where CIA was. I do know there were times agency people called to respond to a question about accuracy of what I was going to write. The only time anybody ever threatened me was in Iran-Contra, when I was asking about Ollie North for a piece I wrote after his going to Tehran to get American hostages released in exchange for US antitank missiles. . . . I was writing that, in the midst of the public controversy, North had gone back to try to make one more attempt in Lebanon to meet people who were trying to get hostages out. They thought if they'd get somebody else out, some new American hostages, the whole thing would go away.

And I was told that North had gone back and was trying again, and so I called a National Security Council official. He said, "You are going to get Ollie North killed if you write about it." Ben Bradlee and I talked about it. I went back and checked my original sources, and they said, "No, it failed, and he's on his way back." So we went ahead and printed the story.

Interviewer: We do have to wrap this up, but I was intrigued by the last question here about what story about the intelligence business would you have liked to have written about but never had a chance to?

I thought about that. I never had anything, quote, "that dramatic." I always found a way to publish pretty much everything that I wanted to. In fact, I've always thought you have to. When you learn something that's really news and is important to public

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understanding of what's going on, publishing is what you're supposed to do.

Interviewer: Looking back then, how would you say you have helped? In what ways do you think you have helped the American people better understand the intelligence business?

I think by being reasonable about what I write about, understanding the implications. I think that one of the most interesting things for me that involved CIA was when I wrote about Aldrich Ames, explaining how he separated his life into three parts, the covert agency side, the Soviet spy side, and his open public side. For me it gave me insight. I've always been amazed that some people could live and have a covert life at the same time. Particularly the DO [Directorate of Operations] people who do what they do, and nobody knows about it, including their children. Your children don't fully know what you're doing.

I can't imagine how a life gets divided up that like. And Ames is not dumb, but he's not thinking about being caught. Talk about how he divided his life up in his head and played certain roles depending on which side he was helping or not helping and why. I've never had it confirmed. He was always convinced that he'd beat the system, such as a lie detector session during which he said he could totally focus his mind on that person and get away with it.

I'm writing for people who do understand the Intelligence Community and its issues so it gives you a license to delve into things that you know the general public sometimes can't possibly figure out. A newspaper to me is a mass media. It's kind of lost that in a sense, with the coming of web news sites.

On Catching Up to Something Gone Wrong

I think the hardest thing is to catch up with something that's wrong. You know, there really is an issue for setting a narrative about some story, and it's very hard once that happens and then you guys, the Intelligence Community people, get caught up in that. And there's really nothing you can do.

Interviewer: Did you ever experience with a source a time where you got caught up in information that turned out not to be accurate and you had to actually try to pull it back?

I've had it happen. I was trying to think of what it was. When I was a kid, a youngster, I wrote something wrong about somebody and saw the kind of damage it did to that person. Then, very early on I was writing for the *New Republic*. I became executive editor, it got a new owner and, I "got fired." My kids were eight, six, and three. And in a story in the *Post*, someone wrote a story that said I was fired. I convinced them, my children, I had disagreed with the new owner over an inaccurate story he was trying to publish because he

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liked what it said and did not realize the damage that it would do to the magazine. Because the *Post* news story did not have the full reason for my firing, I learned a lesson. It's part

of the reason for not naming covert intelligence people, not just because it could help the bad guys and all that, but what it does to the families. It's extraordinary.

What's happening with our political system which we in the media have played around with. This is a hell of a mess. The press has been a player. Over decades, the media have been cutting people up left and right, sometimes without having a sense that it really does have an impact on personal lives and even on our electoral system.



The interviewers: Peter Usowski is the director of the Center for the Study of Intelligence in CIA and the chairman of the Editorial Board of *Studies in Intelligence*. Fran Moore is a former senior CIA leader. Her assignments have included serving as the Director of Intelligence (now Analysis) at CIA. She is a member of the *Studies* Editorial Board. She is also currently director of intelligence at the Financial Systemic Analysis and Resilience Center.