

# In Memoriam

## Russell Jack Smith, Giant of CIA Analysis, Dies at 95

**Nicholas Dujmovic**

The Central Intelligence Agency lost a true exemplar of the analytic profession with the passing of Russell Jack Smith in late April at his home in McLean, Virginia. Smith had a long and stellar career from CIA's early days as an analyst, estimator, and head of the Directorate of Intelligence, and he capped his service with a prestigious foreign assignment.

Jack Smith, as he was known throughout his career, was born on the Fourth of July, 1913, into a working class Michigan family. He grew up with an appreciation for hard physical labor and was gifted with a brilliant mind, especially for writing. Although he graduated with distinction from Miami University of Ohio, he could not afford graduate school, so he spurned acceptances at Harvard and Yale to attend Cornell, which offered him a full scholarship. Smith earned his Ph.D. in English Literature and began teaching at Williams College in the fall of 1941.

After Pearl Harbor, Williams College went on a war footing, and Smith's contribution was teaching air navigation to prospective fliers before he signed on with the Research and Analysis Branch of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) for the last six months of the war. After a postwar teaching stint at Wells College in New York State, Smith was offered a position in the new Central Intelligence Group (CIG) and soon was editing the daily analytic publication that CIG and then CIA prepared for President Truman.

Smith typically downplayed his own talents, but his ability to research and to write and edit clearly, as well as his unrelenting insistence on quality and his leadership skills, were recognized early and contributed to his quick rise in the Agency. He later marveled, "In the early days, we were catch-as-catch-can.... When I came back to join [CIA], having had only six

months in OSS, and had been nothing but a professor of English prior to that, I came back as deputy [to the] chief of the current intelligence staff... and six months later, I was running [it]. I was editing the Daily Summary that went to President Truman every day.”

As a member of the elite Board of National Estimates—the predecessor to today’s National Intelligence Council—Smith worked closely with Agency legend Sherman Kent, who praised Smith as an officer of distinction: “He has the qualities which I believe are of greatest importance to a Board member: a lot of knowledge, a clear head, a judicious nature, drafting skill, and excellent presence.... He has my full confidence as a man fitted for a wide range of most responsible positions in the agency.”

Personalities and personal connections have always been supremely important in the intelligence profession, a fact that Smith recognized and to which he, with his characteristic modesty, attributed his success. Smith had been hired into OSS by Ray Cline; in the early 1960s, then-Deputy Director for Intelligence Cline made Smith first the chief of current intelligence and then his deputy. At the time, Smith told Cline he wasn’t suited to be his deputy: “What you need is someone who’s a real son of a bitch.” Cline responded, “Jack, I think you underestimate yourself.”

Jack Smith was fearless when he felt he was in the right. He once contradicted the redoubtable DCI Walter Bedell Smith to his face, saying that the director’s “fix” to a text had introduced ambiguity. Not used to being challenged, Smith the director nevertheless saw the merits of what Smith the editor had to say about the language and gave him *carte blanche* to edit as he saw fit. Years later, when Smith was head of the DI’s Office of Current Intelligence, he took umbrage at a comment DCI John McCone made during a staff meeting to the effect that Smith’s analysts were “sitting on their behinds” and not doing their jobs in making sense of a development in Soviet strategic weapons. “I don’t believe that’s true for an instant, Mr. McCone,” Smith fired back, “and I will be glad to discuss this with you on some other occasion!” McCone glared and neither fired Smith nor took him up on his offer.

Smith was grateful for his association with Richard Helms. Smith claimed that Helms revered Williams College, his alma mater, and considered anyone who had taught there to be “pretty durned smart.” It was Helms, then deputy to Director William Raborn, who recommended that Smith succeed Ray Cline as DDI in 1966. One of Smith’s first and most lasting achievements in that position was the establishment of the Office of

Strategic Research. OSR was where CIA analysts would do the all-source, independent, strategic assessment of military developments and trends that the US military found difficult to do—because it took a “worst case” rather than the “most likely” approach CIA favored—but in any case did not want a civilian agency to be doing.

Another practice Smith instituted as DDI was saying “no” to low priority requests for analysis. “I found frequently that people were working months on something for some junior officer in the State Department because he’d asked a question.” Smith established a review of such requests but found the directorate culture so accustomed to saying “yes” that he held staff meetings in which he would have his officers practice, “Now all together, say no. No.”

Five years later, Smith was ready for a change, particularly because the Nixon administration disagreed with much of his directorate’s analysis. Helms sent Smith to an important field post in South Asia, where he was highly regarded by US ambassadors for his candor and judgment.

When Smith retired in late 1973, colleagues described him as one of the best all-round substantive analysts in the Intelligence Community. He received the Distinguished Intelligence Medal for a career of significant contributions to the Agency and the analytic profession.

In retirement, Smith continued to write and eventually produced more than a dozen books. His greatest contribution was his memoir, *The Unknown CIA* (1989). Sadly now out of print, it has no peer as the best reflection on and explanation of a career in intelligence analysis. His other books included spy novels, which his friends enjoyed, except for the sex scenes his publisher insisted on including. His friends said they read as if they had been written by a retired professor of English and a leading drafter of intelligence products—precise in structure and detail but lacking electricity.

Another friend, like Smith a devotee of jazz, noted that long-running but friendly banter about the relative merits of various jazz musicians found their way into Smith’s novels but “with Jack winning the argument, as least so long as he was writing the book.” Another book recounted his building, with his own hands, his family home, *The House That Jack Built*. When Smith lost his beloved wife of 64 years, he produced *Rosemary: A Memoir*, in 2002. He was wrestling with the plot of yet another novel when he passed away.

Reflecting on his career long after he retired, Smith was asked which job was most satisfying. He responded immediately, "I must say I enjoyed it all."

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