

Intelligence in Public Media

Chaos: Charles Manson, the CIA, and the Secret History of the Sixties

Tom O'Neill with Dan Piepenbring (Little, Brown and Company, 2019), 521 pages, plates and illustrations, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Leslie C.

Authors, or their agents and publishers, seem unable to resist using the word “secret” to modify that apparently pedestrian word “history.” Its use promises something the finished work invariably fails to deliver, implying as it does access to the eldritch or the gnostic, when the reality is often more mundane. Such a force is at work in Tom O'Neill's *Chaos: Charles Manson, the CIA, and the Secret History of the Sixties*.

The book has its origins in a magazine article O'Neill was commissioned to write marking the 30th anniversary of the Tate-LaBianca murders. Charles Manson, a semi-literate drifter and purported cult leader, and members of his “Family” were convicted of the killings. The episode transfixed the American public and suggested the forces unleashed by the social tides of the sixties, not least the anti-war and youth movements, had dark if not violent undertones. O'Neill never finished his article. The threads he uncovered while doing his research led him instead on a 20-year odyssey that crossed the line into obsession, as he switched editors and publishers, borrowed money from relatives, and did anything else required to unearth the truth about Manson.

Chaos is a monument to O'Neill's determination to get the story and a narrative of his efforts to track down reluctant witnesses, obtain forgotten or buried documentary evidence, and pull the pieces into a coherent picture. *Chaos* is not—at least not in the way its title suggests—a “secret history of the sixties.” With its fascinating allusions to a host of Southern California characters from Cass Elliott to the Beach Boys, it is more *Once Upon A Time In Hollywood* than *Manchurian Candidate*. This review will not summarize O'Neill's theories, though it will touch on them insofar as they are germane to the primary question for this audience, which is, of course, what did Charles Manson have to do with the CIA? But first, some housekeeping.

Over the course of August 8–10, 1969, Manson's followers, at his urging, murdered eight people during two home invasions: six at the home of actress Sharon Tate

and the director Roman Polanski, and two at the home of Leno and Rosemary LaBianca. Manson believed the killings would trigger a race war, and his followers—using the victims' blood—left behind graffiti meant to suggest the Black Panther Party was responsible. A four-month investigation, spurred by the jailhouse confession of a member of the “Family,” resulted in the arrest of Manson and his accomplices. Vincent Bugliosi, the Los Angeles district attorney who tried the case and secured the convictions, wrote a book about the crimes. Titled *Helter Skelter*—after a Beatles song Manson used a code word for the race war—it went on to become the best-selling “true crime” book in the history of American publishing.

All of this is straightforward. However, O'Neill's research uncovered a litany of problems and unanswered questions about the conduct of the investigation that might, had they been brought to light sooner, have justified a re-trial, according to one of Bugliosi's associates in the DA's office. In O'Neill's telling, Bugliosi emerges as a villain who seized his chance to profit in the wake of a terrible crime and who spent the subsequent decades consciously foiling any effort to question the methods or outcome of the investigation. O'Neill's scrupulous catalogue of the myriad omissions in Bugliosi's case certainly paints an unflattering picture of the entire process and of many of those involved.

Manson's responsibility for these crimes is not in question. O'Neill's interest is in the motivations and actions of many secondary players, together with the grip Manson continues to hold on the American imagination. Most people were horrified—yet fascinated—by the brutality of the killings, though others saw them in a different light. The leftist radical Bernardine Dohrn of the Weather Underground infamously elevated Manson to a revolutionary hero. New Left chronicler Todd Gitlin was more reasonable, and closer to the mark, when he observed that “For the mass media, the acidhead Charles Manson was readymade as the monster lurking in the heart of every longhair, the rough beast slouching to Beverly Hills to be

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born for the new millennium.” O’Neill reaches a similar conclusion, which brings us to the main point, which is the CIA’s alleged role.

If, as Gitlin suggests, Manson embodied for most Americans the darkness hard wired in the counterculture, then how did the US government benefit? O’Neill delves into the FBI’s COINTELPRO and CIA’s CHAOS, domestic surveillance programs designed to infiltrate, discredit, and neutralize civil rights, student, and anti-war organizations that first Lyndon Johnson and then Richard Nixon regarded as subversive. These programs, which in the case of CIA violated its charter, were ultimately exposed and triggered congressional hearings in the mid-1970s, in which the Intelligence Community was held to account.

And this is where O’Neill ultimately falls short. Despite what his title implies, he cannot document any compelling link between these programs and Manson. This was not for lack of effort. Extensive research and a slew of FOIA requests did not produce a smoking gun or much beyond the shadowy, ill-explained presence around these events of Reeve Whitson, an alleged “intelligence operative.” O’Neill also examines the CIA program MKULTRA, which may have gotten him closer to his goal—but not much. Conceived by Richard Helms and authorized by Allen Dulles in 1953, MKULTRA studied mind control, one possible path to which was hallucinogenic drugs.

The standard histories of the subject indicate that the CIA, through MKULTRA, spent considerable effort to understand the use and effects of LSD and other substances, and contracted with a number of researchers to that end. One was Dr. Louis Jolyon West, who is the closest O’Neill gets to tying Manson to the CIA. West, purportedly at the behest of the agency, opened an office in San Francisco, the purpose of which was “studying the hippies in their native habitat”, Haight Ashbury. Manson had, at the same time, been a denizen of the Haight before moving the “Family” to Los Angeles, and he liberally dosed his followers with LSD, which was one of his tools for bending them to his will. Indeed, defense attorneys unsuccessfully attempted to use this as a mitigating factor during the trial.

While O’Neill not unreasonably asks how a barely educated criminal like Manson could use sophisticated

methods to control his “Family,” he cannot link Manson to Dr. West. There is no evidence the two ever met, or that Manson was—in what O’Neill admits is the most “far-out” theory—the product of “an MKULTRA effort to create assassins who would kill on command.” (430) His own conclusions about CHAOS—which are less relevant to his theory of the case than MKULTRA—are dubious. He describes a program that kept tabs on 300,000 people, sharing intelligence with FBI, the Department of Justice, and the White House, but he then claims it was so well-hidden within CIA that “even those at the top of its counterintelligence division were clueless.” (233). And yet, when the program was exposed and Director William Colby admitted its existence, James Angleton, the long-time head of counterintelligence and presumably no stranger to such efforts, was the official who resigned.

O’Neill also makes the occasional odd statement. One example will illustrate the point. In untangling the web of connections surrounding the Manson case, O’Neill links one figure to former Air Force Chief of Staff General Curtis E. LeMay, who, he writes, “tried to organize a coup against Kennedy among the Joint Chiefs of Staff” during the Cuban Missile Crisis (83). This was news, as the standard Cold War history fails to mention it, as does LeMay’s biographer. LeMay did forcefully advocate for military action against the missile sites—and he was famously satirized in Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove*—but a coup? Presumably if his advocacy had reached even the level of significant insubordination Kennedy would have removed him. There was, after all, precedent for doing so.

O’Neill’s narrative is never uninteresting. His research has raised legitimate questions about the investigation and prosecution of these notorious crimes, and the actions of a number of people, from the district attorney’s office to the sheriff’s department; from the associates and relatives of the victims to the perpetrators. However compelling his determination to follow every last thread, O’Neill has not written a “secret history” of the 1960s, unless the secrets are those certain individuals wished to keep for their own reasons. The author cannot definitively tie Manson to MKULTRA or CHAOS; he can only imply it on circumstantial evidence. At least, in the end, he has the grace to acknowledge it.



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