

A Personal Journey Through the National Security State. Dr. Philip M. Giraldi

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I am accustomed to opening the New York Times and The Washington Post to find laundry list articles relating to what the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has reportedly been up to. That many of the evidence free allegations are implausible or even quite contrary to known facts about international political developments does not seem to matter as using the initials CIA appears to be enough to make one's case that there is something either unseemly or even evil going on. And it serves as a convenient scapegoat for the liberal media - "It wasn't Joe Biden who dunnit, it was the CIA!"

Over the Labor Day weekend I attended an antiwar conference which included remarks by some speakers who proceeded to run through a whole litany of claimed CIA crimes against humanity. It struck me at the time that they did not always know what they were talking about and I began to think about my own 21 year-long involvement with the National Security Community and, more particularly, to what extent that CIA and to a lesser extent military intelligence were quite the out-of-control demons that they have been made out to be.

Indeed, among my generation's Agency officers who are by now retired, most I know are antiwar, as am I, though those younger officers whom I encounter on occasion that are actively serving generally are more careful about expressing their views or are outspokenly anti-Russian, which is presumably what how current CIA leadership wants them to deport themselves in public.

I spent 18 years in CIA nearly all overseas where I worked almost exclusively on counter-terrorism against groups that were initially nearly all European, starting with the Italian Red

Brigades in 1976 and ending up with the Basque and Catalan separatists in Spain in 1992.

I had also served 3 years in army intelligence during Vietnam and in both of those roles, contrary to what the media regularly suggests, I never killed anyone or coerced anyone and never carried a gun, not even in Afghanistan. Nor did I know of any Agency colleagues who had done so. To be sure there were CIA torture prisons in Thailand and Poland in the wake of 9/11, but they were in response to White House mandates and were small scale and moderate compared with what went on in military prisons like Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo.

And when the US government decided to start assassinating US citizens and “profiled” foreigners overseas using drones in 2010 it was [done on the authority of President Barack Obama](#), not as part of operations conducted by the CIA.

Image: Augusto Pinochet and Henry Kissinger (Photo credit: Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Chile / Wikimedia (CC BY 2.0 CL))



I only knew one CIA officer who was behind overthrowing a government, in Chile in 1973, colluding with the Chilean military to remove elected President Salvador Allende and replace him with General Augusto Pinochet.

The Santiago Chief of Station’s famous cable to a reluctant Agency HQs to participate in the operation asked “Is headquarters under control of the enemy?” which became a part of CIA lore, repeated and laughed over by entering training classes. Nevertheless, if one revisits what happened with Allende the conclusion that the White House and State Department were equally engaged in the driving of the operation and certainly had given the green light to what followed.

Before that time, one might also recall John F Kennedy’s assessment of what was quite possibly the Agency’s most egregious blunder, the Bay of Pigs Invasion in 1961. Kennedy stated his intention to break the CIA into 1000 pieces after the intelligence disaster, which led to the firing of its first civilian director Allen Dulles. Kennedy never quite completed the demolition job but was assassinated two years later with some investigators inevitably suggesting that CIA was involved in his death.

The [congressional commission](#) of Frank Church in 1975-6 exposed Agency engagement in multiple illegal activities, including assassination plots and domestic surveillance of Americans opposed to the Vietnam War.

There was the Famous Fidel Castro poisoned cigar plot meant to kill him and the assassination of heads of state in Africa, Asia and Latin America. CIA had also tested large

doses of LSD on unwitting subjects. It is hard to recall any other moment in American history when so much horrifying skulduggery was revealed.

A consensus on reforms and oversight after Church documented his findings led Congress to pass the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act in 1978, which for the first time imposed some limits on the government's ability to spy on American citizens. It ended the wild days and restricted any operations inside the US. CIA is also regularly accused of leaking or controlling the message coming from the US media, but the reality is that leaks to influence the media and public generally come from the White House or State Department.

My college education was at the University of Chicago, majoring in ancient and medieval history – the university was at that time the intellectual breeding ground of the neocon movement headed by Professor Leo Strauss but students were antiwar and famously occupied the university admin building in 1968 as a protest against Vietnam. I became subject to the army draft immediately upon graduation but I signed up for an extra year for the military occupation specialty (MOS) in intelligence. I went to the training school at Ft Holabird Baltimore, now closed. I was sent to West Berlin due to my one year of Russian study in college, a rare example of the Army actually doing something in personnel assignments that made sense – my classmates mostly went to Vietnam where some were killed while serving in the 521st Military Intelligence Brigade. My army unit from Berlin continues to stay in touch and has held reunions.

I obtained a PhD in European history, was hired by a CIA recruiter at a historians' conference in New York City in 1975 and served in Rome, Hamburg, as an instructor at the Agency training center in Virginia, Istanbul, Barcelona, and Afghanistan, with language courses in between tours.

But it was during my Army service that I first learned about corruption and lying in government. West Berlin's detachment of the 66th Military Intelligence Brigade was a 75 officers and enlisted men unit, of which I was the operations sergeant. We were supposed to be able to provide warning of a Soviet attack and were tasked with being able to establish stay-behind reporting if such an attack were to take place, but we were, in fact, unable to do any of that. Instead, we routinely inflated monthly reports using misleading statistics to show how active and "ready" we were. I almost went to my congressman afterwards to tell him what a fraud it all was, but did not want to interfere with my impending grad school using the GI bill, so I kept silent.



After grad school my next stop was at CIA. The Agency was during my time 20,000 strong, divided into operations (spying), analysis, admin and various special staffs focused on issues like drugs, arms control, nuclear proliferation. There is also a paramilitary branch staffed

mostly by former military special forces.

In my experience, most mid-level employees were honest and hard working. Most lived in Washington, with 2,000 or so overseas. Those at the top became, however, increasingly political and were frequently not trained intelligence officers.

Only one director since Bill Casey, former OSS, under Ronald Reagan, has been a career intelligence officer, and that was Gina Haspel in 2018-2021. Instead, they have been selected for political reasons and drawn from the ranks of ex-military like Turner, Woolsey, Petraeus and Pompeo, from retired politicians, or even from a congressional staffer like George Tenet. Currently William Burns, is a former diplomat.

As a little background, CIA was founded in 1947 through the National Security Act to correct failure to connect all the intelligence dots that preceded Pearl Harbor even though the US had broken the Japanese naval communications codes and had all the information needed to anticipate what was about to occur.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that there was still failure to connect some of the dots preceding 9/11 – Coleen Rowley, an FBI agent in Minnesota, among others, was [sounding the alarm](#) about some specific Saudis who were learning to fly large commercial airliners and might be planning a hijacking. Richard Clarke, the controversial National Coordinator for Security, Infrastructure Protection, and Counter-terrorism working for the National Security Council and at the White House, was alarmed, running around with his “hair on fire” as he put it, but could not penetrate the layers of bureaucracy that surrounded George W. Bush to warn about the threat and initiate additional security measures.

The problem with US national security is that there are too many players in the game. My personal experience example of the multiple levels operating within the intelligence community comes from Iran-contra in 1986, secretly and illegally trading arms for money to go to contra-Sandinistas in Nicaragua and to free hostages in Lebanon.

Iran Contra was run by the White House’s National Security Council and it was organized by Ollie North.

Flights by private jets for Revolutionary Guard commanders were routed through Istanbul, where I was based, and I received a secret message to make the arrangements at the airport, which I did even though it was not a CIA operation. Planes carried cash to Washington, weapons were shipped, and the money generated was routed to the Sandinista rebels to fund the mining of Nicaraguan harbors by the Pentagon, which was also illegal.

In fact, it is often noted that what used to be done by the CIA is now done by other federal agencies, often right out in the open. Recent examples of regime change are the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and State Department in Ukraine, State Department in Iraq, Pentagon in Syria, not CIA, and the war-crime destruction of the Nordstream pipeline was done quite probably by the US Navy after warnings by the president and secretary of state while the [alleged] assassination of Prigozhin in Russia was probably accomplished by British MI-6.

The [recent ousting](#) of Pakistani President Imran Khan was clearly a project of the White House and Pentagon and the increasing pressure on Hungary’s Viktor Orban derives from the State Department and president. The fact is that traditional espionage related “covert

action” is now implemented by many components of the United States government and its foreign allies, so bleating “CIA, CIA” no longer enlightening.

So where is it all going? Most former intelligence agency employees now believe that the national security system has become so politicized that it is nearly dysfunctional, telling policymakers what they want to hear instead of what they need to know. There have been reports that frustrated CIA and Defense Department analysts have been warning that Ukraine cannot win the war against Russia but the senior managers of those organizations as well as policymakers do not want to hear what hard working analysts have concluded.

The creation of the office of the Director of National Intelligence, currently held by Avril Haines, was intended to serve as a focal point for providing policy makers with the best information from all of the US government’s eighteen intelligence agencies, but it has not really worked well in practice.

The various agencies all have established constituencies and agendas that seldom fit snugly together, suggesting that the motive to create CIA in the first place, i.e. to make sure critical intelligence reaches those who “need to know” in a timely fashion, might be unattainable. To be sure, the multiple intelligence failures surrounding Afghanistan, Iraq and now Ukraine are hard to ignore.

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