

Deadly Deceits - My 25 Years in the CIA

Ralph McGehee

The arc of one man's career with the CIA, from idealism to disillusion. Could have saved much grief there in Middle East

This is a personal history of Ralph McGehee who spent 25 years with the CIA, 1950 to 75. It is a chronicle of his own disillusionment, paralleling the disillusionment of America itself.

McGehee started out as a fervent anti-Communist. The United States was proud of having won World War II and confident of its leading role in the postwar world. Americans were equally confident that they had the answer and that the Communists decidedly did not. We were only too aware of the freedoms that were being lost in Eastern Europe.

McGehee himself looked like an ideal recruit for the agency. He was a football player at Notre Dame and a decent scholar, racking up 143 points on an IQ test. That makes him somewhere between one in 100 and one in 1000 as far as intelligence goes... depending on whose measuring scheme was being used. In any case, he was pretty smart, and his intelligence comes through in the quality of his writing.

He discovered immediately upon joining the CIA the fact that is central to his book. It is not an intelligence gathering agency so much as a covert operations group. He goes into the kind of cloak and dagger activities that almost all governments seem to do, but which democracies have a hard time admitting to, and therefore do not seem to be particularly effective at.

The fact that the CIA must operate outside the ethical system espoused by our democratic system means that it has relatively little oversight. It has a "black budget" so our enemies do not know how much we are spending or what we are spending it on. This means that government oversight is minimal, and the leaders of the CIA must be trusted to dedicate themselves to the best interests of the country.

But alas... these are civil servants. They are careerists. They put their own interests above that of the government and the people, and due to the clandestine nature of the whole organization they are only very rarely called to account.

Another book I review, [Legacy of Ashes](#), offers a complete history of the CIA. It is a good companion volume, an overview of the things that McGehee saw up close. They both recount that the CIA started during World War II as the office of special services, the OSS. Roosevelt needed an intelligence operation and there was none in existence in the United States. The British helped us set it up, and Roosevelt staffed it with contacts from the East Coast establishment. The first generation of CIA was exactly that – East Coast Brahmins. The first leader was wild Bill Donovan, a Wall Street lawyer. I used to drink coffee with another of the early recruits, Hayden Estey - there is a classy WASP name for you – Harvard class of 1936 who had been a Time magazine reporter in France and was spirited out into Spain by his Jewish paramour one step ahead of the Nazis. Hayden's stories lend credence to the accounts I've read in both these books.

The CIA was growing fast when McGehee joined in 1950. His section, the paramilitary operations, was growing most quickly. Its mission was covert action, the kind of thing that led to the Bay of Pigs fiasco. McGehee's territory was Asia. He was stationed in Indonesia, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam.

The heart of the book is a retelling of the Pentagon Papers story. I had not read the Pentagon Papers in any detail, and I find this account to be succinct and riveting. The French were not kind masters in Vietnam, and the people's aspiration to be free of them was totally legitimate. The United States originally endorsed their quest for freedom, but then flip-

flopped and wound up supporting the French, ultimately taking over the funding of the war even when the French were still involved. Once having committed to it, we continually compounded the error.

McGehee's biggest career mistake was in taking his job seriously. He wanted to gain intelligence, to learn what the real attraction of the Communists was. Doing so would have been anathema to the political leadership in Washington, and hence the leadership of the CIA. They were committed to fighting a war, and they used the CIA to justify the war, not to gather real intelligence. When McGehee attempted to gather true intelligence from farmers in Thailand, he found out that he was the first to do so. But he proceeded. Then he found out why he had been the first to do so. They did not want to know the truth. The CIA, and presumably the military and political leadership in the United States, was committed to underestimating the numbers, and the attraction of the Communists in order to justify their ongoing mission.

As an aside, I spent four years in Vietnam as a technician with IBM. I wrote the Vietnamese language support for IBM computers, which was used to support the programs McGehee would say were used for the United States to lie to itself. One was the Hamlet Evaluation System, a subjective rating system that was used to rank the relative safety of each hamlet in the country, to be reported upstream. The people gathering the data to feed the system, of course, had every motivation to tell the CIA and what they wanted to hear. The other was the Land to the Tiller program which expropriated large land holdings from the rich and redistributed them to the farmers who were working the land. Such a program had worked for the British in Malaysia. McGehee does not mention the program that was eventually put in place, but does note that the need for such a program was evident to him much earlier than our efforts to implement one.

McGehee's conclusion is rather short, direct, and perhaps a bit naïve. He would probably agree with this. He says that what we need to do is to scrap the CIA and start from scratch with an organization that is truly dedicated to gathering intelligence rather than clandestine operations. As unattractive as it is, it appears that countries will always engage in clandestine activities. Whether or not they see their self-interest clearly is another issue. I now live in Ukraine, which is being threatened by Russia, led by former KGB operative Vladimir Putin. The entire assault against Ukraine has been carried out exactly the way a covert operative would do it. The level of lying is incredible. The extent to which Putin is misleading the Russian people, and attempting to sway world opinion, notably the libertarian right in the United States, is incredible. However, at the end of the day he has not won much land at all, and the land that he has taken is among the less desirable in all of Ukraine. Napoleon and Hitler, not trying to fool anybody, had much more to show for their first year's aggression.

In the 25 years since its publication, the US has witnessed many other intelligence failures. The greatest ones have been in the Middle East, the most spectacular of those being blindsided on 9/11. However, the weapons of mass destruction fiasco in Iraq and our ongoing failure to understand what is happening in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Yemen, Libya, and more countries than I can name is a direct outgrowth of the flaws that McGehee names in this book. This book is already of historical interest, and when researchers in the not-too-distant future do a postmortem on the failed democracy in the United States they may find some interesting material.