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SUBJECT Interview with Ralph McGehee

JANE PAULEY: Challenge, responsibility, diversity. That's what the CIA offers in a career, in a recent want ad in the New York Times, an ad, appropriately, that appeared in the classified section, because the Central Intelligence Agency is the employer with the enticing copy.

Ralph McGehee was a recruit some 32 years ago for the CIA, spent 25 years with the company, retired in 1977.

And now you've written a book which, to put it mildly, is critical.

RALPH MCGEHEE: Yes, very critical.

PAULEY: What happened to you?

MCGEHEE: Well, I found out in about my 16th year that the CIA is not an intelligence agency; it is a covert action agency. As a covert action agency, its responsibility is to overthrow other governments. And misinformation is a major part of that covert action responsibility, and the American people are the primary target audience of its covert action job.

PAULEY: It took you 16 years to figure out that you were working for a spy organization?

MCGEHEE: For the first 16 years, I assumed it was an intelligence organization with some small, peripheral covert action responsibilities.

PAULEY: There's a subtle distinction there, maybe. Maybe not so subtle. But what is it, between covert action and

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intelligence gathering?

MCGEHEE: Well, there isn't really a subtle distinction. Intelligence gathering, you want to know the truth. Well, in the agency's intelligence gathering, you want, sort of, to know not to know the truth. You want to know information that supports presidential policies.

Like, we're trying to overthrow the government now in Nicaragua. Well, if you reported that the Nicaraguan government that is there is probably best for the people, your career would be cut short immediately, which I tried to do...

PAULEY: Best for the people. That's subjective. I mean if you're gathering intelligence, aren't you counting troops and taking the pulse of the...

MCGEHEE: Well, indeed, you're doing that. But every time, in every situation, particularly the Vietnam situation, where the agency's intelligence, from the very beginning, created an illusion about Vietnam that exists to this day. The war --when the agency creates the illusion and then it plants the evidence, it plants weapons shipments, it plants forged documents to provide the evidence to support national policy.

PAULEY: It plants leaks in the media, and so forth.

MCGEHEE: Leaks in the media.

PAULEY: How do you, with your trained eye, spot disinformation if you read it in the newspaper or hear it on NBC?

MCGEHEE: Well, I feel, generally, it's fairly easy. Not always, but generally it's fairly easy. You know the themes that are being pushed by the Administration, and then you see something that pops up in a foreign country and it gets picked up and relayed and relayed, where the source is a little bit obscure, and it supports presidential policies, then you assume it's disinformation.

Like the yellow rain campaign. I assume that's a major disinformation campaign.

PAULEY: What did you do for 25 years in the CIA?

MCGEHEE: I was a covert operator. I gathered intelligence. I was a paramilitary officer. I was an intelligence analyst. And I had managerial responsibilities. I served in five different countries in Asia: Vietnam, Thailand, Japan, Taiwan, Philippines.

PAULEY: Why did you stay nine years after you came to see it in a disillusioned light?

MCGEHEE: That's a good question. I stayed because I had to have a way of protesting. And I didn't all of a sudden know that the agency was different. I found out that something was wrong with the agency, and gradually I learned more and more and more and more, until I reached this stage of knowledge.

PAULEY: Tell me how the CIA allowed you to publish this book.

MCGEHEE: Well, they didn't want to allow me to publish this book. The first version that I submitted to the agency, they made 397 deletions in it. I finally talked them down, and then I went out looking for a publisher. Finally, Sheridan Square in New York agreed to publish the book, but they wanted it to be rewritten.

So, I rewrote the book, submitted it again to the agency. And they said, "Well, now he's really serious. He's going to be able to do this thing." And they tried every way, legal or illegal, to keep me from being able to publish it.

PAULEY: They have legal means. How much, as a former employee of the CIA, are you bound to keep secrets?

MCGEHEE: Well, I tried to keep every secret. I didn't try to expose any secrets at all. And -- but they just decided they weren't going to let me publish it. And what I did, I went back and compared the information in the books by Colby and Dulles, the other pro-agency authors, and they had been allowed to say the same thing. I made an appeal to the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, Robert Inman; and he said, yes, I was right in every single instance.

And they still tried, again, a third chapter that I submitted in the rewrite that they'd already approved the initial version, they said I couldn't publish any of it; it was all classified. And I went to the Washington Post, and they came out with a long article which exposed what the agency was trying to do. And this public embarrassment finally forced them to be reasonable.

PAULEY: You spent 25 years with the CIA, at least nine of it disillusioned. You must feel that, in a way, you've wasted your life. And do you feel, if so, that you have redeemed it, somehow, by writing "Deadly Deceits"?

MCGEHEE: I feel now that my life is being justified, yes. It was a very terrible nine years. But now that I've got

this book out, and I think I have quite a wide view, a good view of what the agency really is, that I can tell the American people it is, and they'll be aware that they don't have an intelligence agency. Even in such areas as Soviet nuclear capabilities, the agency slants its intelligence to accord to presidential policy.

PAULEY: Ralph McGehee, thank you for being with us this morning.