



## Donald Morris / an analysis

### CIA 'covers' range from official to deep

Part 3 of a 4-part series. Donald Morris served with the CIA 17 years. He has been a columnist for *The Houston Post* since his retirement from government service in 1972.

The great majority of CIA officers overseas serve in their true names, using documentation which indicates they are civilian employees of the government. A large number of these will be civilian employees of the Army; only on the rarest of occasions will a CIA official be in uniform. (In such cases he is usually an actual military officer "lent" to the CIA for a tour.)

Such "official" cover does not — and is not intended to — fool anyone in our government, the host government or any foreigners who have much to do with our official colony. The Soviets, for example, can easily identify about 95 percent of CIA officials under such cover. The "cover" isn't supposed to "hide" anyone, contrary to popular belief; it is only supposed to give the official "cover for status," or a valid excuse to be in the country.

At the outside, one in 50 CIA officers may be under "unofficial" cover, still using true identity and American citizenship, but no longer having any overt connection with the U.S. government. Such cover makes the officer harder to identify as an intelligence official (especially if he has never served under official cover), although it limits his utility — he no longer has direct access to communications in the embassy or to the files, and he must be supported by clandestine contacts with officers under official cover.

"Deep cover," in which someone is stationed overseas under a false identity, is so rare as to be almost non-existent. I have known of two cases only, both in Western Europe. It is used to bring someone back into a country he

The usual CIA "official" cover overseas is simply a valid excuse to be in the country, and is not intended to fool anyone. "Unofficial" cover may be used in only one out of 50 cases involving CIA officers, and such cover limits an intelligence official's utility. "Deep cover" is almost non-existent.

served in long ago under his true identity, for a second tour without alerting the local government to the fact that he has returned.

The CIA maintains a "Central Cover" division to arrange for unofficial cover. In cities like Paris, where there are scores of "self-employed" Americans, this is little trouble — any occupation which doesn't take too much talent, time or training but will account for a modest income will do. Everything from a rich wife to a legacy from a notional deceased uncle ("Sam," one officer claimed when pressed) has been used.

Writing is obviously popular, especially if the officer has actually published something. He can always claim he is researching traces of Viking influence in the Seine valley, or some such. He may refer to himself as a "free-lance" writer, but he will hardly claim to be a "stringer" for a specific paper.

In cities not noted for great numbers of permanent unofficial American residents, "unofficial" cover requires an actual corporate sponsor. Central Cover arranges for "employment" with National Widget, or whatever, starting at the top. The boss approves and will designate what other officials are to be notified — usually the head of the personnel section and the manager of the overseas office. The CIA official is then "hired" and goes overseas as a company man, with the CIA covertly reimbursing the company for his salary and expenses.

Such an unofficial cover is a little tricky. If

National Widget has — say — 200 employees in the Karachi office, there is little problem; our friend is an insurance investigator or something which keeps him out of the office most of the time. In some cases the man may have to devote a proportion of his time to "maintaining cover," at which he may or may not be very good.

Over the years, the CIA has put a number of its overseas officers under unofficial cover as journalists, or on the fringes of the journalist world. All such arrangements were laid on with the appropriate officials at the top of the ladder, and most of them worked out very well. They included one or two actual news bureaus and at least one major news weekly, and a number of national enterprises were created and existed only to provide the cover.

In all these cases, the cover was handy, and provided a natural bridge to foreign journalistic circles. In no case was such cover used to write stories and insert them in the American newspapers.

One CIA official, serving under official cover in Germany, was Henry Pleasants, whose hobby is music. Pleasants is extraordinarily knowledgeable and a gifted writer and has written a number of best-selling works about the musical world. The *New York Times*, over the years, published his articles and reviews. The paper then discovered Pleasants was a CIA official. It no longer publishes him — apparently you can't be too careful these days.