Witness from the Inside

The Real CIA, by Lyman B. Kirkpatrick, Jr. (Macmillan. 312 pp. $6.95), is a defense of the Central Intelligence Agency by its former executive director, who served in U.S. intelligence for more than twenty-two years. Harry Howe Ransom is professor of political science at Vanderbilt University.

By HARRY HOWE RANSOM

THE MOST AMBIGUOUS ORGANIZATION of American government is the Central Intelligence Agency. Ever since its creation by Congress in 1947 this supposedly secret agency has been in and out of the headlines, causing suspicion, doubt, and confusion in the public mind. To some CIA activities resemble a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta incorporating Parkinson's Law. Others view the CIA as a sinister "invisible government" recklessly pursuing its "own" foreign policy. And there are those who see an organization operating with cool James Bond invincibility, always defending the national interest and saving the day.

Befuddled observers have long wanted to ask, "Will the real CIA please stand up?" Few are qualified to make a positive identification. Lyman B. Kirkpatrick, Jr., is qualified; indeed, his knowledge should surpass that of any person yet to publish on the subject. Kirkpatrick served in CIA's predecessor, the Office of Strategic Services, during World War II and was on hand at CIA's birth. He was executive assistant to General Walter Bedell Smith, CIA's director in its most important formative years. And Kirkpatrick rose through the agency's hierarchy, undaunted by a crippling polio attack in 1952, to become inspector general for eight years. As executive director he was No. 3 man in the agency's high command until he resigned in 1965 to teach political science at Brown University.

In *The Real CIA* Kirkpatrick traces the evolution of the U.S. intelligence system, as well as the progress of his own career. Only in America could someone with his privileged security knowledge publish such a book. Kirkpatrick's purpose is to set straight the factual record, or at least that part of it proper to disclose. He is convinced that most public information about the CIA has been inaccurate or misleading. Although not uncritical of it, he defends the CIA from its many detractors and argues against those who would alter radically the central intelligence concept or change the assignment of disparate functions to the CIA.

Most of the information Kirkpatrick provides here was already in the public record. The book's greatest value is its validation of certain facts about the CIA's rather obscure organizational history. From this insider's story much is to be learned about bureaucratic infighting and departmental jealousies. We are told, for example, how the CIA director, considered by some to be one of the two or three most powerful men in government, suffered for years because his "protocol rank" in Washington, D.C., was thirty-fourth. This, writes Kirkpatrick, "could actually affect the willingness of people to listen to him in important meetings." Although the director's rank has recently been elevated, the author tells us, vaguely, that there are still "those" who "try to reduce the role of the director of Central Intelligence. . . ."

Kirkpatrick's opinions and observations deserve serious consideration because they derive from a thoughtful mind and unique experience. Nevertheless there are important and perhaps crucial questions on which he offers little enlightenment. How did an agency set up by Congress in 1947 to perform intelligence (information) activities come to undertake secret political operations? Did Congress ever intend the CIA to overthrow foreign governments or secretly subsidize American domestic institutions? Here the book falls short of the promise of its title. In his brief discussion of covert political action Kirkpatrick makes clear that he thinks it wise to combine "action" and "intelligence" under the CIA roof. He believes, however, that covert political action should be used "only in the most serious national emergency, and as a last resort before the use of military power."

One can quickly agree with Kirkpatrick that "a strong intelligence organization is an essential element of our national security, provided that it is effective, objective and properly controlled." Less quickly would this reviewer agree that these provisos have been met, or that we have the information to so assume. It has been easier to create committees for control than to effectuate real control of secret operations. The *U.S.S. Pueblo* incident may be an example of continuing deficiencies in this regard. And with respect to effectiveness, the Southeast Asian crisis may be a tragic example of another colossal American intelligence failure.