

Tempo

Within a nation's private sector, a web of 'spooks'

By Rogers Worthington

JIM HOUGAN is a haunted man. The haunting has lasted four years, seven days a week, from 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Those are the hours Hougan spent bent over his typewriter in a top floor office of a friend's townhouse in Washington D.C. But when he climbed into his battered 1969 Ford Galaxy at night and made the trek home to his rented house in Arlington, Va., the haunting didn't end.

"I'd wake up in the middle of the night, actually frightened of whether I was going to be able to pay the rent."

"Spooks, The Haunting of America—The Private Use of Secret Agents" (William Morrow & Company, \$12.95), is Hougan's just-published nonfiction book. The title is a word coined by State Department staffers abroad for the CIA case officers assigned to U.S. embassies. Their job descriptions, their comings and goings, and the nature of their work were elusive and mysterious to embassy staffers. Thus the word 'spooks.'

But Hougan's concern was with former CIA and other federal intelligence officers. For four years the subject obsessed him, isolating him from his two children and driving him into debt.

"I GOT INTO a situation that really was sort of frightening. On one hand I was obsessed with the book. On the other hand I was totally broke, owing people I was close to money. So I would stop calling them, stop seeing them, because inevitably the question would come, 'When is the book going to be done?'"

It was the classic struggling author's and investigative reporter's imbroglio. Hougan found himself immersed in a convoluted subject that seemed to stretch into infinity. "Even I became aware that I was losing perspective. Once I told my publisher it would be done in a month, and it took me another year and a half."

When he tried to focus on the spooks, they were quickly eclipsed by the events they were involved in. And the events themselves were often bizarre conspiracies that whispered and reeked of tantalizing connections to other events and their actors. It was like unraveling a hidden ball of string which at first you think is household size and then gradually come to suspect may be as big as the house itself.

The net result of "Spooks" is a tantalizing look at sub rosa world where people and events are manipulated unknowingly; where, at times, the connections:

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between organized crime, multinational corporations, the rich, heads of state, and government intelligence agencies seem to merge into one huge, phantasmic Gordian knot.

AT THE HEART of it all is a small army of former federal intelligence officers that has, in Hougan's words, "metastasized across the landscape" since World War II. Ex-CIA, FBI, and other government intelligence people always have been able to find ready work in the private sector. Their numbers have been sharply augmented in the last four years by house cleanings at the CIA that unleashed 3,000 employes from the agency's clandestine services.

But it was a well-timed exodus, for it coincided with a mushrooming demand by private industry for intelligence operatives. Some of the ex-CIA officers went directly into the employ of private industry. Others set up their own "management consultant" firms.

The huge cast of characters Hougan has selected to march and slither across the pages of his book include inventive wire tappers such as Bernard Spindel, who claimed to have once bugged conversations between Robert Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe; flamboyant and creative guns-for-hire such as Mitchell Livingston Wer-Bell III, nicknamed "The Wizard of Whispering Death" for his invention of a silencer for automatic weapons; and such sophisticated half-a-million-dollar-a-year operatives as Robert Maheu.

Even more intriguing are those who employ their services: millionaires, multinational corporations, fugitives, politicians, labor leaders, lawyers, exiles, foreign tycoons, heads of state, and domestic intelligence agencies.

The sweep of their collective activities suggests to Hougan that "there's a game going on in the United States, but that very few people know it's being played."

AND ROBERT MAHEU is one of the more adept players. The urbane and wealthy Maheu's career as a spook began during World War II when he was a founder of his own Washington-based agency, which was partially supported by a CIA retainer.

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