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TRANSCRIPT

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SUBJECT Future of U.S. Intelligence #3

BROADCAST EXCERPT

ROBERT MACNEIL: Finally tonight, another in our series of conversations on the future of U.S. intelligence.

Margaret Warner has more.

MARGARET WARNER: There's a special breed of spy novelist: former spies, like John le Carre, who practiced espionage, then left the active arena to write books about it. One leading American spy-turned-author is Charles McCarry. While a magazine writer overseas in the 1950s and '60s, McCarry also served as a covert agent for the CIA. He then turned to writing full-time, producing such novels as "The Tears of Autumn," "Better Angels," and "Second Sight."

Thanks for being with us, Mr. McCarry.

CHARLES MCCARRY: Nice to be here, Margaret.

WARNER: Tell me, do you think that the United States still has a need for secret intelligence and secret intelligence agencies in this new, post-Cold War environment that we find ourselves in?

MCCARRY: Yes, of course.

WARNER: For what? Why?

MCCARRY: Well, the world is not yet a safe place, is it. The primary target of American intelligence throughout the Cold War was Russia. It's still an unpredictable place, still in possession of enough nuclear weapons to blow up the United States, and I suppose most of the world with it. There are other problems around the world. I think that intelligence-gathering is changing, economic

intelligence, intelligence about the environment. I think the government needs to know what people are likely to do.

WARNER: But why do those functions have to be carried out by a special agency like, say, the CIA? Senator Moynihan we had on this show on Monday, and he said we should just abolish the CIA. Let the State Department and the Defense Department do -- you know, divvy up the work between them.

MCCARRY: Well, the original concept was that the President would have a source of information that was unpolluted by politics and unpolluted by political agendas or bureaucratic agendas. And I think that's generally been true, in terms of the intelligence that's presented to the President. It takes up half an hour of his day in the morning and he gets this wonderful sheet of gossip that tells him what he might expect that day or that week or at some point in the future. And then he goes on with the rest of the day.

WARNER: Now, of course, since you left the agency, we've entered the age of the spy satellites and all this technical means of surveillance. What is the special role that remains, do you think, for the kind of what they call human intelligence, the kind of old-fashioned spying you write about?

MCCARRY: It's often said you can't photograph the human mind. All you can know about it is what is revealed to another human being.

Intelligence is really based on relationships. You make friends with people. You win their trust. They tell you things. Very often they have a motive for telling you. You check what they tell you against what someone else tells you. You check it against other sources.

If I remember the classification system that was in force when I was in the agency, it was: one, documentary, absolutely true; two, probably true; three, possibly true; four, possibly false. I never saw a report that wasn't labeled three, possibly true. Which of course meant that it was also possibly false.

So, you can never be sure. But if you have 80 percent of the information, then you can guess at the rest.

WARNER: Connect the dots.

MCCARRY: Yes. And make an educated guess instead of guessing in the dark.

WARNER: And then, of course, there's the most cloak-and-dagger aspect of human intelligence, covert operations. And I guess by that I mean not just collecting information or

intelligence, but actively trying to change the political situation or foil a political attempt by the target country.

Is that -- one, do you think that's still going on? And two, is there still a role for that?

MCCARRY: That's always been the rub.

WARNER: [Laughter] What do you mean?

MCCARRY: Well, I mean, as someone else pointed out, this is a very, very old profession. And in "The Book of Numbers," Chapter 13, if I may quote a little Scripture, the Lord instructs Moses to send a reconnaissance party of 12 Israelites, one from each tribe, into the Land of Canaan, the Promised Land, to make -- to spy out the land. They did so. Eleven of them came back and said, "Well, it certainly is a land of milk and honey. But the cities are well-fortified and the people are giants. We felt like grasshoppers, seeing them. And we seemed grasshoppers to them."

But one, Caleb, said, "All that may be true, but we can still conquer the Promised Land, as the Lord has instructed us to do."

The Lord was very angry at the other eleven and struck them dead, but He gave Caleb and his descendants the Land of Canaan, which was the Promised Land, in perpetuity.

I think there's a lesson in that. Caleb told the chief executive what he wanted to hear. And that's the built-in difficulty with hot-wiring, covert action in particular, to the President. I think the cases in which the agency has gotten into difficulties in the media and in the public mind have usually involved things like the Bay of Pigs or the overthrow of Diem in Vietnam or the secret war on Castro or Nixon's attempt to blame the agency for the Watergate break-in. These have been cases where Presidents have instructed the agency to do things which are: accomplish domestic political objectives for the President.

It's very difficult to resist that. So I suppose -- and this has always been. In my novels I've solved it, of course, by separating the espionage service from the rest of the agency. But in real life, of course, you have to deal with Congress and you have to deal with reality. And it may be more difficult to do that.

WARNER: So, do you think that -- what do you think appropriate targets for covert operations would be today, operations designed to foil something, to actively take some kind of a role?

MCCARRY: Well, what we know from...

WARNER: Are you talking about terrorist organizations, or who?

MCCARRY: I think what every American knows, from long experience, is that covert action on a large scale really doesn't work out. It's virtually impossible in this society to keep something that large quiet and secret.

On the other hand, as I said, intelligence work is a matter of small accomplishments achieved with great difficulty and expense. If we can -- someone once said to me when I was working, the job of an intelligence service is to stay in with the outs.

WARNER: Hmmm.

MCCARRY: I think that that sort of, that sort of covert action, in which you help people who may in the future take power in a country which is a one-party state or is ruled by a despot, is acceptable. But I think you keep it small and you keep it personal, and you remember that it may be exposed.

WARNER: And how good do you think the CIA's balance sheet is after 50 years? How good have they been at this, on balance?

MCCARRY: I think they're unquestionably the best intelligence service in the world.

WARNER: And how would you answer, again, Senator Moynihan, who says we should abolish the agency 'cause they missed major political developments, like the demise of the Soviet Union's economic system, for instance?

MCCARRY: Well, of course, you know, all of these bits and pieces come in from all over the world every day and they're put into the hopper, and it's sort of like getting a lot of parts for a watch. And if you shake the bucket hard enough, you don't necessarily get a Rolex.

Mistakes are made. You can't possibly know everything, but it's better to know something than to know nothing.

WARNER: Now, the CIA you write about in your books, or the characters in your books are these dashing, romantic figures who are also really smart, really canny, very effective. And it doesn't quite jibe with the picture we got of, say, Aldrich Ames, who came off as kind of a bumbling careerist whose drinking and sloppiness was overlooked by his superiors.

Has the CIA changed since the days you were in the agency?

MCCARRY: Well, I don't know, but I can say that I didn't know anybody like Aldrich Ames in the days that I was in the agency.

WARNER: Really.

MCCARRY: I thought it was the most intelligent group of people with whom I had ever been associated. They were devoted, they were patriotic, they were intellectually honest. And I might say, also, that it was a very humane organization in its personnel policies, probably the most humane I've ever known.

WARNER: What do you mean, humane?

MCCARRY: I mean they took care of their own. It was a wonderful atmosphere back in the '50s and the '60s, a kind of absolute freedom of speech and thought. It was a kind of Republic of IQ. I suppose that -- I would say that the men and women that I knew in the agency had -- you know, were 20 points above almost anybody else I'd ever worked with, as a group. And I think that that was Allen Dulles' recruiting. He appeared to want to recruit every bright young man in America, and I think that he pretty...

WARNER: Including you.

MCCARRY: ...nearly succeeded in that.

WARNER: Well, I'm sure, though, you've probably read, at least, the stories involving Ames and his behavior and so on. I mean, can you explain why someone like an Aldrich Ames did flourish at the CIA of the '80s and '90s?

MCCARRY: Well, he says it was the money. If I were writing a novel about it, fiction, I would make it come out slightly different.

WARNER: How?

MCCARRY: I would make it a CIA operation and I would make him a dupe of a tremendously clever control who fed him information, which he fed to the Russians.

WARNER: But I don't think that is what happened, of course, as we know.

MCCARRY: No. I don't think it is, either.

WARNER: And why, why do you think his behavior was overlooked by his superiors? I mean...

MCCARRY: I simply can't answer that. My guess is incompetence on the part of some of the people, inattention. The explanation that I've read in the press is the old boy network. You know, a kind of sense that once you're in, you're worthy of trust, and your motives and your behavior can't be questioned.

I think that there's some of that in an organization in which, theoretically, everything is known about everyone. And that's a very liberating thing, to have been investigated to a fare-thee-well and to have no secrets and to be, you know, working with people and thinking with people who also have no secrets. It relieves you of a good deal of tension.

In Ames' case, obviously, he had a secret.

WARNER: Some critics feel it's just become too big a bureaucracy. It's sort of become like any other department. Is that different from the way it was when you were there or when you were in the field?

MCCARRY: Yes. In those days it was scattered all over town. You know, they -- what is Parkinson's proposition, the first or the second? Dying institutions build monuments to themselves. You know, the British Admiralty built that great big building for itself in London at the very moment when the British Fleet ceased to count for very much, strategically.

I think the agency continues to account for a good deal. But in the old days they were scattered all over town in temporary buildings and in rented offices, and there was less propinquity and less chance to bureaucratize. And I thought that that was a good thing. It led to independent thinking and independent action and a lot of initiative, which is very difficult to achieve if you're in a row of five offices and you have to pass the piece of paper, you know, from the first to the fifth.

WARNER: So, what would be your advice to the new Director of the CIA who's coming in?

MCCARRY: [Takes deep breath]

WARNER: I mean, could he take it back to that kind of organization of like-minded but independent and scattered operators?

MCCARRY: I think they might consider breaking off the espionage services, the clandestine services from the rest of the agency -- it's a rather small part of everything that happens -- and putting it in Utah or somewhere.

[Laughter]

WARNER: You might have some major defections at that point.

Well, Mr. McCarry, I'm sorry, that's all the time we have. But thanks for being with us.

MCCARRY: Thank you very much, Margaret.