

Three Memoirs from Former CIA Officers

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

Denial and Deception: An Insider's View of the CIA from Iran-Contra to 9/11

By Melissa Boyle Mahle. New York: Nation Books, 2004. 352 pages.

Blowing My Cover: My Life as a C.I.A. Spy

By Lindsay Moran. New York: G. P. Putnam & Sons, 2005. 295 pages.

A Spy's Journey: A CIA Memoir

By Floyd L. Paseman. St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2004. 287 pages.

Reviewed by John Hollister Hedley

As *New York Times* reporter Tim Weiner said in a review appearing in his paper, "only in America could the intelligence memoir become a literary genre."^[1] Well, make room on your bookshelf, because the genre is growing before our very eyes.

Three recent additions have benefited remarkably from media attention, good reviews, and enviable sales. Together they are illustrative of what we will see more of, unless and until the novelty wears off and the news media are less captivated with the subject of what in the world is wrong with intelligence. Inquiries, commission reports, reform legislation, hearings, and headlines have helped put a spotlight on these publications and their authors that is not likely to continue indefinitely.

There is nothing inherently wrong with authors capitalizing on publicity. What is somewhat curious is that publication has bestowed a degree of expertise on these authors that largely stems from their books appearing at a propitious time. (It is pertinent, if unkind, to observe that this also is known as luck.) For example, Lindsay Moran, with the briefest career experience of any memoir writer in memory, soon after her book was published appeared in the *New York Times* as an op-ed author critiquing reform of the clandestine service.^[2] This is after a "career" that many a veteran CIA officer would consider a cup of coffee with the Agency: five years and one overseas assignment. Melissa Boyle Mahle abbreviated her career before 15 years with an "operational mistake," best left at that. Only Floyd Paseman stayed for a career of normal duration, culminating in a highly successful stint as a CIA officer-in-residence teaching

intelligence at Marquette University.

What is annoying about the attention given these books is the suspicion that they owe it to some degree to publishers' persistence in pandering to (and therefore perpetuating) stereotypes about the CIA. A pet peeve of this reviewer is the apparent conviction on the part of the media, which of course include book publishers, that the CIA must appear sinister, stupid, or scandalous for someone to read about it. On occasion (the Rick Ames story comes notably to mind), the CIA serves up a trifecta on its own. But it should not follow that a CIA memoir will sell only if it suggests an inside revelation of something sinister, stupid, or scandalous.

Publishers cannot resist a titillating (never mind misleading) title, sometimes over the author's objections. John Ranelagh claimed that calling his seminal history of the Agency's first 40 years *The Rise and Decline of the CIA* was strictly the publisher's idea, which he argued against in vain. [3] The catchy title of *Fixing the Spy Machine* required its author, Arthur Hulnick, to devote the first part of his book to explaining that intelligence really isn't a machine, really isn't broken, and really doesn't need to be fixed. The title of the recent *Why Secret Intelligence Fails* obliged author Michael Turner to explain that it really doesn't fail.[4]

Moran may well have conceived or delighted in the catchy/sexy title *Blowing My Cover*, but Mahle insists that her publisher pressed her for the title *Denial and Deception* as well as for rewrites that would make the book less about intelligence and more about her.[5] Even the *New York Times Book Review* could not resist adorning a review of CIA memoirs with a curious illustration of a head that was half face/half bomb with a fuse protruding from the back and a pistol tucked beside the face and into a fedora from which a presumably poison pen stuck out. [6] Such sales gimmicks, if all too predictable, are regrettable because they detract from serious content. Together with a publisher's pressure on an author, they may even distort the content and thus lessen the value of writing that can in fact make a meaningful contribution to intelligence literature and to public understanding of intelligence.

Lindsay Moran probably needed no prodding. Evidently more interested in profit than perspective, her *Blowing My Cover* illustrates how a clever ex-employee can capitalize on the CIA's undeniable mystique. One looks in vain for a serious message in her one-dimensional put-down of the Agency's operational training. Moran doubtless will not endear herself to her erstwhile colleagues, but for a general readership she is a facile writer who comes across as a breezy romantic. Fresh from Harvard, she decided that joining the CIA would be really cool. Before long, she decided it was even more cool to find a boyfriend. When she did, she decided to throw over the Agency and get married. She did both. End of story. Moran's cheeky style and brisk prose makes for a good read, but don't look for her book in the libraries at CIA training sites.

Floyd Paseman's *A Spy's Journey* is a personal retrospective by a consummate nice guy, a straight arrow who recounts a life that offers helpful introductory reading for someone considering a career in the operations directorate. It contains precious little that is prescriptive, devoting only six pages out of nearly 300 to "what's wrong and what's right with the CIA." The shortcomings he cites are neither original nor surprising: To operate effectively in an overseas environment, you need to know the language and the culture and be there. What's right is "a lot," including good leadership, an analytic capability second to none, and continuing recruitment of the best and brightest from college campuses. Paseman's criticism is gentle and conventional: Noting the adverse impact of the operations directorate's dwindling numbers, foreign language deficiency, risk aversion, and cutbacks in case officers overseas before 9/11 no

longer constitutes a news bulletin, no matter how accurate.

Melissa Boyle Mahle's *Denial and Deception* is the most substantive and useful memoir of the three, being a balanced mix of personal story and thoughtful, well-researched perspective on the Agency and its leadership. She, too, laments risk aversion and draw-downs in the field, plus the lack of language competence and, at least by implication, the Agency's xenophobia that results in failing to utilize the linguistic skill and cultural understanding that hyphenated-Americans have to offer. Mahle, herself a summa-cum-laude graduate of the University of California/ Berkeley in Near Eastern studies—with fluency in Arabic; knowledge of Middle Eastern culture, traditions, and religions; and a fascination for archaeology—went from an archaeological dig in Israel to being courted as a CIA intern after beginning graduate work at Columbia.

Mahle spent fewer than 15 years at the CIA—well short of the normal career duration. Before her regrettable “operational mistake” brought separation from the Agency, she served a stint as a recruiter of would-be operations officers—an assignment that featured encounters with bright university students interested in possible careers in intelligence but understandably curious about what it is that an operations officer actually does. She shares with Paseman a desire to help satisfy this curiosity. Purely for insight into a career in operations, neither effort equals Dick Holm's *The American Agent*.^[7] But Mahle does render an educational service with a book that is at once autobiography, primer, and commentary on the Agency and its tribulations, traced by the tenure of its recent directors.

Agency readers, especially, may wonder if this burgeoning genre of intelligence memoirs is a good thing. Do such memoirs help or harm the Agency's reputation and mission? To be sure, ex-CIA authors publish memoirs at varying levels of seriousness and competence. Some are bent on sharing insights into a career in what must be acknowledged to be a closed world that is a mystery to anyone who has not worked within it. Many have a reformer's zeal: “I've been there, and I can tell you where it's gone astray and how it could be set straight.” It must be especially hard for the reading public to gauge the authority of such an author. What's more, it would appear to be difficult for some former CIA authors to gauge how limited their own knowledge of intelligence is. They may have seen the organization and its work through a very narrow prism and have a very limited perspective.

The result can be somewhat like the fable of the blind men describing an elephant. Where you touch it—and where the Agency touches you—not only forms your perception of it, but also, perhaps less obviously, limits your ability to characterize it. It is a generalization, but it seems a fair one, that the broader a CIA officer's career experience and the more perspectives gathered from inside and outside, the more balanced is the view that that author can provide. Having done only one type of work in one directorate makes characterizing the entire Agency more difficult and probably somewhat skewed by the particular prism through which the author experienced it and recalls it.

All three of these books are by former operations officers. This does not say that former operations officers are more inclined to go public with a grievance, or even that they are more likely to have a grievance. What it may say is simply that an operations career fits more readily with the public conception of the CIA as a place of mystique, romance, danger, and excitement. The operations officer commands an audience simply by having been an operations officer. Too bad there aren't books about what analysts do, but try interesting a publisher in the adrenaline rush that comes with having too little solid information to work with but needing to meet an impossible deadline anyway.

With respect to CIA memoirs generally, this reviewer has a bias—but a bias built on an experiential base as one-time chairman of the CIA’s Publications Review Board, reading scores of autobiographical efforts and thousands of pages of manuscript. The result is a conviction that we ought not bog down in finding flaws and being dismissive of this genre. For one thing, this reviewer does not know of a single recruitment pitch, operational plan, or liaison relationship that was ruined or precluded by the publication of a book.

This is not the place to discuss declassification policy at length (a subject separate from publication review), but it is worth noting that the CIA is hardly blameless for the fact that perhaps the three best-known initials in the world are weighted down by an aura of the sinister and suspicious. Would that CIA declassifiers could see that there are good-news stories yet to be told that could be and should be told without compromising sources or truly sensitive collection methods—something long since demonstrated by the landmark memoirs of Duane (“Dewey”) Clarridge and Tony and Jonna Mendez.[8]

Evidence abounds—bound and on bookshelves in growing number—that former CIA officers can offer pertinent and valuable insights without damaging national security in the slightest. Indeed, they can enhance it. Memoirs can help clear the air. They can illuminate and inform. They can correct misconceptions. They can contribute expert opinions on current issues. They provide insight into what kind of people work for the CIA—people with intellect and integrity. The authors of most intelligence memoirs clearly are smart people who obviously have ethical standards and who are concerned about how things are done and why they are done, not merely because they want them done well but because they want them to serve a high purpose.

So we members of the Agency club, past and present, ought not to be thin-skinned. Maybe a Lindsay Moran has a point. Whether she does or not, it speaks well for the Agency that she is allowed to express her view. The writing and publishing of candid CIA memoirs speaks well for our democracy. And if we are going to plant it around the globe—something this country has yearned to do since at least the days of Woodrow Wilson—we darn well better be willing to practice it. Secret organization or no, the first amendment is the cost of doing business in a free society. Honoring by exercising this freedom is why the writing of a CIA memoir is not a bad thing.

Footnotes:

[1] *New York Times Book Review*, 10 April 2005, 39.

[2] *Ibid.*, 12 April 2005, A23.

[3] Conversation with the author at CIA Headquarters in 1990.

[4] Arthur S. Hulnick, *Fixing the Spy Machine* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999); Michael Turner, *Why Secret Intelligence Fails* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2005).

[5] Conversation with the author, Tyson’s Corner, VA, 29 April 2005.

[6] *New York Times Book Review*, op. cit.

[7] Richard L. Holm, *The American Agent: My Life in the CIA* (London: St. Ermin’s, 2003). The book is reviewed in *Studies in Intelligence* 48, no. 1 (2004): 92.

[8]Duane Clarridge, *A Spy for All Seasons* (New York: Scribner, 1997); Antonio J. Mendez, *Master of Disguise* (New York: William Morrow, 1999); Antonio and Jonna Mendez, *Spy Dust* (New York: Atria Books, 2002).

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