

Political Booknotes

Blond Ghost: Ted Shackley and the C.I.A.'s Crusades

David Corn

Simon and Schuster, \$27.50

By Gregg Easterbrook

David Corn, Washington editor of *The Nation* magazine and an accomplished journalist, has expended enormous effort chasing down the life story of Theodore Shackley. Shackley was a leading Central Intelligence Agency figure from the onset of the Cold War until his semi-compelled retirement when Stansfield Turner purged the agency during the Carter administration, and later, Shackley's name surfaced as a secondary player in the Iran-*contra* scandal. The resulting book is an amazing compendium of C.I.A. fact and lore. Every paragraph is packed with names, dates, and specifics about the inner life of the American intelligence community. But every so often you run across a well-researched, well-written book that for some reason doesn't quite click. This is one.

Is the book a biography? Not really, since much of the text does not concern Shackley directly. Is the book a history of C.I.A. excesses? If so, the focus on Shackley becomes strained and artificial. Is the book an indictment of the (presumably now past) C.I.A. infatuation with dubious covert operations at the expense of worthwhile intelligence gathering? Not really, since *Blond Ghost* paints covert operations in a bad hue, but never makes apparent what an intelligence agency would be justified in doing. The result is an interesting book, one for which Corn should be generously credited with undertaking and that is definitely worth reading,

but one that left me feeling oddly unsatisfied.

Perhaps this result was dictated by the choice of Shackley as subject matter. In some ways he can appear to have been the personification of the C.I.A. gone bad. But in other ways Shackley's life meanders across the intelligence landscape toward no clear end beyond self-advancement, and in many of his exploits the line between bad idea from the start and good idea that got out of hand is impossible to draw. In this Shackley is like the C.I.A. itself: palpably creepy, but you can't be sure whether that stems from being sinister or just secretive. As the C.I.A. is vaporous and at many levels hard to draw conclusions about, Corn's book seems to have trouble coming to conclusions beyond straightforward ones, such as that intelligence operations should be lawful.

Joining the agency shortly after its creation following World War II, Shackley went on to become a senior C.I.A. official in pre-Wall Germany, when Berlin was the center of the espionage universe; in Miami, when the C.I.A. was preparing for the Bay of Pigs and attempting to unseat Castro (for a time the Miami bureau was the C.I.A.'s largest operation); in Laos, during the "secret war" of the late 1960s; in Saigon, during the Vietnam War; and in Washington, during the Church Committee hearings into C.I.A. malfeasance, when the American role in domestic politics in Chile was coming to light, and the first halting attempts at public scrutiny of the C.I.A. were beginning.

Shackley rose to be the C.I.A.'s associate deputy director and was, in

the 1970s, mentioned as a potential future C.I.A. director (insiders make a great show of calling this job by its formal name, "director of central intelligence"). But Shackley's career foundered on his association with the C.I.A. officer-turned-gangster Edwin Wilson, who sold arms to Muammar Qaddafi. (Wilson also often entertained C.I.A. officials at a Virginia hunt country estate, yet no one in the agency seems to have questioned how he lived far beyond the means of his government salary, a precedent missed in the Aldrich Ames coverage.) After leaving the C.I.A., Shackley started hazy consulting and "political risk analysis" businesses with so-clean-they-sound-suspicious names like Research Associates International.

As a private operator, Shackley got messed up with Thomas Clines, Richard Secord, Albert Hakim, and others involved with Iran-*contra*. Ultimately Shackley became the target of the hallucinogenic Christic Institute lawsuit, which drew considerable publicity for claiming Shackley was the evil mastermind of a globe-spanning drug and assassination conspiracy and which was taken in full seriousness by Hollywood trendy-cause donors such as Jackson Browne. Ultimately the suit was dismissed and, in a rare judgment that surely would win the *Monthly's* approval, about \$1 million in legal costs were awarded to Shackley, bankrupting Christic.

Corn acknowledges that however exotic Shackley may sound in outline, "as is true of some of the better spies, he was not a colorful man." Corn notes, "For many C.I.A. employees

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during the Cold War, the drama in the intelligence business came not from face-to-face confrontations with an armed KGB officer. It was found in the office.” Corn depicts Shackley as first and foremost a bureaucrat: obsessed with memos and performance statistics, with chains of command, with CYA. Two examples:

➤ As head of Agency operations in Laos in 1968, Shackley decided to fortify a place called Nam Bac, near the border of Laos and North Vietnam, with U.S.-backed Laotian forces. As Corn tells it, “The point was to take the war to the NVA, ‘to really bloody the nose of the North Vietnamese,’ as one embassy officer recounted.” It was a complicated logistical operation, and Shackley was warned that no Laotian commander could handle the job. Shackley ignored the warnings, believing “Washington would be ecstatic” if he could establish a presence in the North. The operation failed miserably; 2,000 Laotian soldiers were killed. “‘It was a terrible waste of people,’ remarked a senior embassy official, ‘and basically because of Ted’s ambitions.’” Shackley’s report to C.I.A. Director Richard Helms and National Security Advisor Walt Rostow on the debacle exculpated himself and blamed local commanders, who had been against the operation in the first place: one career diplomat who read it said, “It was the most dishonest piece of political-military reporting I had ever seen in my life.”

➤ Shackley’s next posting was station chief in Saigon at the height of the war. Corn reports that once when Henry Kissinger was visiting the Saigon station, a senior officer asked if he was satisfied with the intelligence he was getting. As long as it supports my policy, Kissinger replied, I am satisfied. Shackley, ever the careerist, apparently took that to heart. Shackley, according to Corn, promoted the line Washington hawks wanted to hear: the Viet Cong were

on the decline, enemy casualties were heavy, the North’s power was slipping. Officers who tried to get the real, discouraging news up the chain were shut down by Shackley. “‘You knew it wouldn’t get out of Vietnam that way, because it was bad news,’ said Bob Wall, an Agency man who was on the ground. ‘You knew Shackley wouldn’t approve it.’”

Corn presents Shackley, though often wrapping himself in the flag, as privately indifferent about whether operations resulted in the gains for the United States or were fiascos that led to the deaths of friendly agents (as happened under Shackley’s command at Berlin, Cuba, and elsewhere) or the persecution of civilians (as happened to the Hmong tribe, which the C.I.A. seduced and abandoned in Laos, and even, Corn says, occasionally bombed by mistake). In this Shackley does sound like a distillation of the C.I.A.’s worst faults. As a cross-check of Corn’s thesis I spoke to one former C.I.A. official who worked closely with Shackley: He described the subject of *Blond Ghost* as “an amoral man, interested in nothing other than himself.” This view syncs perfectly with the book’s portrayal.

Shackley also served Langley’s in-house interests. Corn writes of the period after former C.I.A. official Philip Agee had become disenchanted with the agency and declared his intention to publish a book naming agents, but had not actually done so. Shackley was in charge of the anti-Agee operation and cold-heartedly jettisoned C.I.A. operatives simply because Agee might expose them; his dismissal of many operatives without thanks or cause is ironic in light of how bitterly Shackley later complained in right-wing circles of his own dismissal by Turner, though in Shackley’s association with Wilson, Turner had very good cause. At any rate, monitoring Agee, Shackley planted two agents as friends of the former officer, then had them pass Agee both money—ostensibly as

loans from sympathetic leftists—and bugged typewriters. The money was to hook Agee to the planted “friends”: one of them the sole actually tall, shapely woman in, it seems, the entire history of real espionage. Corn suggests that instead of shutting Agee down, this agency money allowed Agee to go on writing when he was penniless.

“Without money from Shackley, Agee’s book project might have faltered and died,” Corn writes. At one point, hoping to exert remote-control over the renegade, “Shackley and his operations chief were even trying to get Agee a book contract.”

Unfortunately, *Blond Ghost* descends to anticlimax when, in an epilogue, Corn describes the one interview he was able to wrest from Shackley. Shackley acts soulless and dodges questions: Nothing comes of the confrontation.

The reader exits wondering if this is a typical C.I.A. automaton or simply a failed human being. Perhaps Shackley is both: In a sense, he is emblematic of the kind of bad guys who populated the C.I.A. in the Cold War. They weren’t necessarily evil, but the sum total of the things they did, by and large, was. There were good guys in the C.I.A., but often they were driven down to the level of the bad. And what should the good guys have stood for? One of the problems with this book is Corn’s failure to articulate what sorts of missions he thinks would have been justified.

Corn writes that he is avoiding conclusions because “good biographies tend to speak for themselves.” But in an area such as the C.I.A., where “facts” are uncertain and the footing ever-shifting, little speaks for itself. I left *Blond Ghost* thinking the book was not as interesting as the article based on the book, which this magazine published in its July/August issue, an article in which Corn simply came out and said what he thought about the C.I.A. and the culture of intelligence. *Blond Ghost* needed

more conclusions, and fewer accounts of whose names were on what memos.

Gregg Easterbrook is a contributing editor of The Washington Monthly, Newsweek, and The Atlantic Monthly.

The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War

Raymond L. Garthoff
Brookings Books, \$44.95

By Alfred Friendly, Jr.

The United States pushed the Soviet empire to its knees and won the Cold War. No, the USSR collapsed of its own rotting weight, and Japan won the Cold War. Option three: A brilliant Kremlin leader, besieged at home and long misunderstood abroad, perceived the irrelevance of superpower military competition to the overarching new challenges of global security and engineered a strategic retreat toward sanity in East-West relations.

Those who prefer Thomas Carlyle to Caspar Weinberger will lean toward the last of the summary verdicts proposed above and will find in Raymond L. Garthoff a potent ally. His latest, massive (780 pages) study of the Cold War's finale piles up a tower of evidence for the view of Mikhail Gorbachev as the catalyst and inspired conductor of this century's grandest peaceful realignment. Or, as the author concludes:

Gorbachev pressed ahead with his unilateral actions and concessionary negotiations not owing to the Reagan hard line and military buildup, but despite it. He was determined to change the name of the game. . . . He did not lose the arms race, he called it off.

Wrapping up the Moscow-Washington diplomatic record from

1981 through 1991, this analysis comes as no surprise. Gorbachev's "impact," Garthoff writes, was "the single most significant factor" in reversing superpower confrontation. "Only a Soviet leader could have ended the Cold War. . . ." and "Gorbachev set out deliberately" to do so. "His avowed acceptance of the interdependence of the world, of the priority of all-human values over class values, and of the indivisibility of common security marked a

revolutionary ideological change." Gorbachev "was the first Soviet leader to see the world in post-Leninist terms." And so on.

Whatever future analysts think of such encomiums, they will surely bless Garthoff for the thorough scholarship of *The Great Transition* and its predecessor volume, *Détente and Confrontation* (1985), out in a revised edition this year. Separately and together, the two works are authoritative contemporary history. In assem-

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