

# Through a Glass, Darkly: The CIA and Oral History

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## Abstract

This article broaches the thorny issue of how we may study the history of the CIA by utilizing oral history interviews. This article argues that while oral history interviews impose particular demands upon the researcher, they are particularly pronounced in relation to studying the history of intelligence services. This article, nevertheless, also argues that while intelligence history and oral history each harbour their own epistemological perils and biases, pitfalls which may in fact be pronounced when they are conjoined, the relationship between them may nevertheless be a productive one. Indeed, each field may enrich the other provided we have thought carefully about the linkages between them: this article's point of departure. The first part of this article outlines some of the problems encountered in studying the CIA by relating them to the author's own work. This involved researching the CIA's role in US foreign policy towards Afghanistan since a landmark year in the history of the late Cold War, 1979 (i.e. the year the Soviet Union invaded that country). The second part of this article then considers some of the issues historians must confront when applying oral history to the study of the CIA. To bring this within the sphere of cognition of the reader the author recounts some of his own experiences interviewing CIA officers in and around Washington DC. The third part then looks at some of the contributions oral history in particular can make towards a better understanding of the history of intelligence services and the CIA.

For now we see through a glass darkly;  
but then face-to-face: now I know in part.  
1 Corinthians, 13:12

Studying history, it has been said, may be compared to viewing the Château de Versailles by looking through the keyholes. Some parts seem clear to us; some are fragmentary, opaque and hard to decipher; while others remain totally invisible and beyond reach. Whereas it originated with the study of the ancient world, the metaphor is particularly apt with reference to the study of a much more modern institution which in turn is embedded within a much more contemporaneous culture: the US Central Intelligence Agency.

Although intelligence has remained the subject of much popular and journalistic titillation, not to mention an ever-increasing number of memoirs and exposes,<sup>1</sup> the academic study of the subject has seen a

<sup>1</sup> See for example: Philip Agee, *Inside the Company: CIA Diary* (New York, 1975); Duane R. Clarridge, *A Spy for All Seasons: My Life in the CIA* (New York, 1997); Richard Helms, *A Look Over My Shoulder: A Life in the CIA* (New York, 2003); Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval: An Insider's*

steady upswing over a number of years on both sides of the Atlantic. Scholars have constructed an impressive body of scholarship and have been exploring *inter alia*: intelligence services, intelligence leaders, covert action, intelligence collection and analysis, and the ethics of intelligence.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a disproportionate share of the output in ‘the Anglosphere’ has focused upon the United States and the CIA more particularly.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, certain omissions and blind-spots remain.

This article broaches the thorny issue of how we may study the CIA by utilizing oral history interviews. While the study of intelligence poses an especial set of challenges for the historian, of which more below, the application of oral history to an intelligence agency adds yet another layer of methodological and epistemological intricacy – one which must be carefully negotiated. Consequently, this article argues that while oral history interviews impose particular demands upon the researcher, they are nevertheless particularly pronounced in relation to studying intelligence history and the CIA in particular. This article also argues, however, that while intelligence history and oral history each harbour their own metatheoretical perils and biases, pitfalls which may in fact may exacerbated when they are conjoined, the relationship between them may in fact be a productive, generative one. Indeed, they may inform each other’s problematic, provided we have carefully thought through the linkages between them – in many ways this article’s point of departure. Based on the author’s own experiences conducting oral history interviews with CIA officers, therefore, this article sets out some of the ways in which we may think about the relationship between intelligence history and the equally burgeoning field of oral history.

This analysis, to be sure, arises out of a broader intellectual context. History and politics traditionally conceived have been about states, the machinery of government, the paper trail left by elites, and ‘great men’. As Paul Thompson pointed out in his seminal *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*: ‘the very power structure worked as a great recording

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*Account of Saigon’s Indecent End Told by the CIA’s Chief Strategy Analyst in Vietnam* (New York, 1977); George Tenet, *At the Centre of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* (New York, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Richard J. Aldrich, *The Hidden Hand: Britain, America and Cold War Secret Intelligence* (London, 2001); Christopher Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5* (London, 2010); Ross Bellaby, *Ethics and Intelligence Collection: A New Framework* (London, 2014); Gary Bernstein, *Jawbreaker: The Attack on Bin Laden and Al Qaeda* (New York, 2006); Sarah-Jane Corke, *US Covert Operations and Cold War Strategy: Truman, Secret Warfare and the CIA, 1947–53* (London, 2008); Keith Jeffery, *MI6: The History of the Secret Intelligence Service 1909–1949* (London, 2011); Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *The CIA and American Democracy*, 2nd edn (New Haven, 1989); George O’Toole, *Honourable Treachery: A History of U.S. Intelligence, Espionage, and Covert Action from the American Revolution to the CIA* (New York, 1991); David Omand, *Securing the State* (London, 2012); Joseph E. Persico, *Casey: From the OSS to the CIA* (New York, 1990); John Prados, *Lost Crusader: The Secret Wars of CIA Director William Colby* (New York, 2003); Mark Phythian, *Understanding the Intelligence Cycle* (London, 2013); Gary Schroen, *First in: How Seven CIA Officers Opened the War on Terror in Afghanistan* (New York, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> On ‘the Anglosphere’ see Richard J. Aldrich and John Kasuku, ‘Escaping from the Anglosphere: culture, ethnocentrism and the Anglosphere’, *International Affairs*, 88/5 (2012), pp. 1009–28.

machine shaping the past in its own image'.<sup>4</sup> This having been said, movements emerged on either side of the Atlantic to challenge the prevailing 'top-down' bias, whether in terms of E. P. Thompson's attempt to rescue those who have traditionally been ignored by historians from the 'enormous condescension of posterity',<sup>5</sup> or Studs Terkel's numerous interventions to celebrate the lives of the 'uncelebrated'.<sup>6</sup> While intelligence history largely grew out of the 'top-down' tradition, much academic oral history grew out of this 'history from below' approach and attempted to give a voice to the substantial groups of people who had hitherto been ignored, such as women, ethnic and racial minorities, the working class, the poor, and LGBT communities.<sup>7</sup> Whereas intelligence history was informed by political and diplomatic history and ties to the governmental elite, oral history was informed by social and labour history and a much more distant relationship to constellations of state power;<sup>8</sup> whereas the former was driven by the elusive and elliptical quest for the written word, the latter was driven by a profusion of neglected voices; and finally, whereas the former sought epistemic transcendence in the 'smoking gun' insider document, the latter sought it in the voice of the ultimate outsider.

This article will draw upon state-of-the-art debates in oral history and intelligence history; yet ultimately it will suggest ways in which we may go beyond the extant scholarship. As the UK Parliament and US Senate Oral History Projects make clear, oral history has never been the preserve of those 'hidden from history'.<sup>9</sup> The CIA also has its own (albeit largely in-house) Oral History Program. The aforementioned notwithstanding, many of these 'top-down' programmes have largely seen oral history as an adjunct to the more 'scientifically' legitimated documentary record; a softer supplementary source to bring those areas of diffusion around the keyhole's edge into comparatively sharper focus. In other words: oral history has served as a way to finesse 'the great recording machine'. These manoeuvres, however, do not exhaust the potential of oral history. In fact, in some ways they merely stand as a testament to its obfuscation. A particularly narrow and fact-centric reading of oral history is 'added and stirred' to a set of pre-existing ideas

<sup>4</sup> Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 2000), p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York, 1970); *Working: People Talk about What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (New York, 1974); *The Good War: An Oral History of World War II* (New York, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> See for example: Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working Class Women 1890–1940* (Oxford, 1995); Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History* (New York, 2011); Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis (eds), *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> The original aim of the British-based Oral History Society was to focus on 'those sections of society who are unlikely to leave behind them any quantity of memoirs, diaries, or correspondence from which history can subsequently be written'. Anthony Seldon, *By Word of Mouth: Elite Oral History* (London, 1983), p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> See n. 8.

surrounding what constitutes ‘good research’ – an exercise which leaves intact a highly circumscribed notion of what types of questions may legitimately be asked and what types of answers may legitimately be given.

This article submits that some of the keenest insights from oral history theory and methodology lie in allowing to us to explore a broader range of research questions. This is especially true with reference to questions surrounding identity and culture, as well as those that consider meaning, memory and narrative. As one of the field’s foremost theorists and practitioners Alessandro Portelli points out in ‘The Peculiarities of Oral History’: ‘Subjectivity is just as much the business of history as the more visible “facts”. What the informant believes is indeed a historical *fact* (that is, the *fact* that he or she believes it) just as much as what “really” happened.’<sup>10</sup> Of course, and this should be stressed right here at the outset, this is not to suggest that facts are not important, or that they do not exist – it is to suggest that history encompasses more than them. In a somewhat different context, allow a quote from a speech given by Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) and history buff Bill Casey in the same year as Portelli’s paper, 1981, to underscore the point: ‘facts can confuse . . . just as houses are made of a pile of stones . . . a pile of stones is not a house.’<sup>11</sup> All of this, then, gives us a fuller and more expansive picture of the world of intelligence, or to restate this through the metaphor with which we began, it allows us to peer into more keyholes.

By way of this analysis, this article will firstly outline some of the problems encountered in studying intelligence services such as the CIA. It does so by relating them to the author’s own research. It secondly considers some of the issues historians must confront when applying oral history to the study of the CIA, once again reflecting on the author’s own experiences interviewing CIA officers while a British Research Council Library of Congress Fellow in Washington DC in 2011. Finally, it outlines some of the contributions oral history can make towards a better understanding of intelligence history and the CIA in particular.

A number of problems face the historian who wishes to turn his or her gaze to the field of intelligence history. To bring this within the sphere of cognition of the reader, consider the research project the author recently undertook, an experience that directly led to this attempt to think more systematically about the links between oral history and intelligence history. *Struggles for Freedom: Afghanistan and US Foreign Policy*, among other things, examined the CIA’s role in US

<sup>10</sup> Alessandro Portelli, ‘The peculiarities of oral history’, *History Workshop Journal*, 12 (1981) pp. 96–107, at p. 100. Emphasis in original.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Department of State Executive Seminar in National and International Affairs – Washington D.C.’, 6 May 1981, William J. Casey Papers, 1928–1996, Box 557, Folder 4, Hoover Institution Archives.

foreign policy towards that country since the Carter administration, particularly since the Soviet invasion of that country on Christmas Day 1979. This was an event that Carter described in his January 1980 State of the Union Address to a Joint Session of the Congress as a 'radical and aggressive new step' that 'could pose the most serious threat to the peace since the Second World War'.<sup>12</sup> In private, he had outlined it in stark terms in a letter to British prime minister Margaret Thatcher not long beforehand: 'because of the broad stakes the West in general has in the region's stability and the flow of oil . . . the challenge to our common and crucial interests in this region is unprecedented'.<sup>13</sup> Former president Nixon on the other hand was less measured and prosaic, informing readers in his *cri de coeur* published not long after the invasion, *The Real War*, that: 'We awake to find that a region once celebrated largely in romantic fantasy holds the fate of the world in its hands.'<sup>14</sup> 'Basically', notes Carter's National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski (1977–81), 'it was the first time in the entire Cold War that the Soviet Union overtly used military force to effect a significant geopolitical change and to do so in a region where there were significant American interests involved.'<sup>15</sup>

On the back of the Church and Pike Committee investigations of the mid-1970s, Carter had come to office promising to control and clean up the CIA. 'The Carter administration', argued executive assistant to Carter's DCI Stansfield Turner, 'from the top down – except for Brzezinski – arrived in Washington suspicious and distrustful of the CIA.'<sup>16</sup> Carter's running mate Walter Mondale had been a member of the Church Committee; Deputy National Security Advisor David

<sup>12</sup> Jimmy Carter, 'A State of the Union Address Delivered before a Joint Session of the Congress', *The American Presidency Project*, 23 Jan. 1980, <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=33079>> [accessed 17 Aug. 2014].

<sup>13</sup> 'President Carter to Prime Minister Thatcher – Letter from President to Prime Minister on Afghanistan', 10 Jan. 1980, 'Afghanistan, 1–2/80' folder, Box 1, NSA – Brzezinski Material, Jimmy Carter Library. These sentiments were shared by President Johnson's former National Security Advisor W. W. Rostow (1966–9), who in a letter to Carter that perhaps fed into his State of the Union Address suggested that: 'the impulse to convert their hardware and logistical advantages into direct control over Middle East oil must be considerable . . . the impulse certainly represents the greatest threat of a Third World War since 1945'. 'Letter from W. W. Rostow to President Carter', 7 Jan. 1979, 'President's File of Input for 1980 State of the Union Address, 1/23/80' folder, Box 166, Office of Staff Secretary – Handwriting File, Jimmy Carter Library. In administration memoranda it was alternatively called 'a major watershed', 'an event of major political and strategic significance', and 'an extremely ominous precedent'. See: 'Michael Oksenberg to Zbigniew Brzezinski – Afghanistan', 28 Dec. 1979, 'Afghanistan, 4–12/79' folder, Box 1, NSA – Brzezinski Material, Jimmy Carter Library; 'Stephen Larabee to Zbigniew Brzezinski – Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan', 31 Dec. 1979, 'Afghanistan, 4–12/79' folder, Box 1, NSA – Brzezinski Material, Jimmy Carter Library; 'Marshall Brent and Thomas Thornton to David Aaron – Requested Remarks to Methodist Bishops and NY State Community Leaders', 8 Jan. 1980, 'Afghanistan, 1–2/80' folder, Box 1, NSA – Brzezinski Material, Jimmy Carter Library.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Nixon, *The Real War* (New York, 1980), p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, telephone interview with author, Washington DC, 23 Sept. 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York, 1996), p. 136.

Aaron and Brzezinski's executive assistant Karl Inderfurth had also been on the staff of that committee.<sup>17</sup> Turner himself, meanwhile, according to Robert Gates, was regarded with 'deep hostility and dislike by many in and out of the Agency and intelligence community'.<sup>18</sup> Although the commentary and historiography surrounding the Carter administration and that of his successor Reagan is highly politicized, debates and controversies that will continue for many years to come, Gates also notes that the aforementioned points notwithstanding and contrary to the 'conventional wisdom, the Carter administration turned almost from the outset to CIA to carry out covert actions'.<sup>19</sup> During the course of the administration, then, it could be argued that the disjuncture between Carter's public and private stance with regards to the CIA came into increasing alignment. Despite having complained 'with what security are we to mount even the most routine clandestine activity when the law requires that eight committees. Some 180 congressmen, and almost as many staff members be informed in advance?', New York Senator Daniel P. Moynihan had also remarked approvingly that 'Carter has now discovered that it is *his* CIA!'.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, as the administration went on 'Carter leaned more and more heavily on the CIA and covert action.'<sup>21</sup>

The most salient example of covert action during the Carter presidency, perhaps even in CIA history, was Afghanistan. Operation Cyclone, the code name for the CIA's routing of money and matériel to the *mujahedeen* during this final stage of the Cold War, went on under Reagan to become the longest and largest covert operation in Agency history. Indeed, the author ventures that the reader would be surprised by just how broad and deep the links are between the CIA, Afghanistan, and US foreign policy. The focus of a separate though related research paper,<sup>22</sup> here it suffices to say that if Afghanistan was woven into the mythology surrounding the Cold War's termination, it is intimately involved in the gestation, birth and life-cycle of the Global War on

<sup>17</sup> Jeffreys-Jones, *The CIA and American Democracy*, p. 216.

<sup>18</sup> Gates, *From the Shadows*, p. 136. A 'hawk's hawk' within the administration, Military Advisor to the National Security Advisor (1977–81) William E. Odom (a future head of the US National Security Agency, 1985–8), would uncharitably describe the DCI thus: 'Turner is truly dense. He is cagey at times, but for the job he has and the resources he could develop, very little of value comes from him.' As for Turner's Deputy Director (a future National Security Advisor, 1986–7 and Secretary of Defense, 1987–9): '[Frank] Carlucci is a careful and unimaginative bureaucrat. His greatest talent is surviving a Nixon hatchet man previously, now he tries to stay in step with David Aaron and that network.' While not wishing to reduce Turner and Carlucci to Odom's characterization, it nevertheless underlines the fact that there were different types of perspective within the Carter administration. William E. Odom, '22 November 1979', Box 7, William E. Odom Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

<sup>19</sup> Gates, *From the Shadows*, p. 142.

<sup>20</sup> 'Letter from Daniel P. Moynihan to President Carter', 10 Jan. 1980, 'President's File of Input for 1980 State of the Union Address, 1/23/80' folder, Box 166, Office of Staff Secretary – Handwriting File, Jimmy Carter Library; Jeffreys-Jones, *The CIA and American Democracy*, p. 226.

<sup>21</sup> Gates, *From the Shadows*, p. 155.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Hammond, 'Afghanistan, the CIA, and US foreign policy since 1979'.

Terror. The war in Afghanistan, let us not forget, went on to displace Vietnam as the longest war in US history under George W. Bush and Obama.

Nonetheless, taking this case as an example, what problems do we face in researching intelligence history? To begin, let us consider a sample of some of the titles of pertinent books in the secondary literature that a library search might lead you to: *For the President's Eyes Only*, by Christopher Andrew; *The Main Enemy: The Inside Story of the CIA's Final Showdown with the KGB*, by Milt Bearden and James Risen; *Ghost Wars*, by Steve Coll; *Executive Secrets: Covert Action and the Presidency*, by William Daugherty; *From The Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How they Won the Cold War*, by Robert Gates; *The CIA at War: The Secret Campaign against Terror*, by Ronald Kessler; *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA*, by John Prados; *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981–1987*, by Bob Woodward; and *State of War: The Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration*, by James Risen.<sup>23</sup>

Immediately it is apparent through terms like ‘ghost’ and ‘shadows’ that we are dealing with a clandestine netherworld where things are not quite as they seem. It is a world of ‘secrets’ and ‘secrecy’ – ‘secret history’, ‘secret campaign’, ‘secret wars’ – and a world where information is restricted to those on the ‘inside’ who may or who may not deem it information they can tell and, what is more, can tell to *us* – although we can of course try to penetrate this world by alternative means (of which more below). Indeed, ‘insiderism’, for want of a better phrase, is one of its defining features – taken to its logical limit of course by the sacrosanct phrase ‘for the president’s eyes only’. Popular cultural products on the world of intelligence also draw us to the type of space in which these agencies operate, a space which is not completely confined to the cultural imaginary; 2008 alone, for example, saw the release of the following films: *Body of Lies*, *Burn After Reading* and *Nothing But the Truth*.<sup>24</sup>

Alternatively and more concretely, consider some other books on intelligence, such as: *The Hidden Hand: Britain, America and Cold War Secret Intelligence*, by Richard J. Aldrich; *Spy Wars: Moles, Mysteries,*

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush* (London, 1995); Milt Bearden and James Risen, *The Main Enemy: The Inside Story of the CIA's Final Showdown with the KGB* (New York, 2004); Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden From the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (London, 2005); William Daugherty, *Executive Secrets: Covert Action and the Presidency* (Lexington, KY, 2008); Gates, *From The Shadows*; Ronald Kessler, *The CIA at War: The Secret Campaign against Terror* (New York, 2004); John Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (Chicago, 2004); Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981–1987* (New York, 2005); James Risen, *The Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration* (London, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> Ridley Scott (director), *Body of Lies* (Los Angeles, 2008); Ethan and Joel Cohen (directors), *Burn after Reading* (Los Angeles, 2008); Rod Lurie (director), *Nothing but the Truth* (Los Angeles, 2008).

and *Deadly Games*, by Tennent H. Bagley; *In the Sleep Room: The Story of the CIA Brainwashing Experiments in Canada*, by Anne Collins; *The Game Player: Confessions of the CIA's Original Political Operative*, by Miles Copeland; *Classified: Secrecy and the State in Modern Britain*, by Christopher Moran; *Honourable Treachery: A History of U.S. Intelligence, Espionage, and Covert Action from the American Revolution to the CIA*, by George J. A. O'Toole; *Gatekeeper: Memoirs of a CIA Polygraph Examiner*, by John F. Sullivan; *The Missing Dimension: Governments and Intelligence Communities in the 20th Century*, edited by Christopher Andrew and David Dilks; *Deadly Deceits: My Twenty-Five Years in the CIA*, by Ralph McGehee; and, *A Look Over My Shoulder*, by Richard Helms.<sup>25</sup> Terms like 'hidden', 'mysteries', 'brainwashing', 'game', 'classified', 'treachery', 'gatekeeper', and phrases such as 'missing dimension', 'deadly deceits' and 'look over my shoulder', underscore the point. Certainly, some of this can be put down to over-zealous publishers, editors and authors keen to shift copies of their respective books. Nonetheless, this may be a necessary condition when considering the way these titles are so named, but it is not by any means sufficient. In fact, that these titles would be deemed more marketable and alluring to their respective audiences – to peek behind the curtain, to look through the forbidden keyhole – is in and of itself an interesting point.

Most importantly, however, we have to consider the very nature of these institutions. The CIA, for example, defines its 'mission' thus: 'Preempt threats and further US national security objectives by collecting intelligence that matters, producing objective all-source analysis, conducting effective covert action as directed by the President, and safeguarding the secrets that help keep our Nation safe.'<sup>26</sup> The clandestine arm of the CIA, meanwhile, defines its own 'mission' as follows: 'The mission of the National Clandestine Service (NCS) is to strengthen national security and foreign policy objectives through the clandestine collection of human intelligence (HUMINT) and Covert Action.'<sup>27</sup> The life and well-being of the nation, then, is enmeshed and entwined in this institution's ability to procure information and secrets and to safeguard

<sup>25</sup> Aldrich, *The Hidden Hand*; Tennent H. Bagley, *Spy Wars: Moles, Mysteries, and Deadly Games* (New Haven, 2008); Anne Collins, *In the Sleep Room: The Story of the CIA Brainwashing Experiments in Canada* (Toronto, 1988); Miles Copeland, *The Game Player: Confessions of the CIA's Original Political Operative* (London, 1989); Christopher Moran, *Classified: Secrecy and the State in Modern Britain* (Cambridge, 2012); O'Toole, *Honourable Treachery*; John F. Sullivan, *Gatekeeper: Memoirs of a CIA Polygraph Examiner* (Washington DC, 2008); Christopher Andrew and David Dilks (eds), *The Missing Dimension: Governments and Intelligence Communities in the 20th Century* (London, 1984); Ralph McGehee, *Deadly Deceits: My Twenty-Five Years in the CIA* (New York, 1984); Richard Helms and William Hood, *A Look Over My Shoulder: Life in the Central Intelligence Agency* (New York, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> 'CIA Mission, Vision, Ethos and Challenges', *CIA*, 4 April 2007, <<https://www.cia.gov/about-cia/cia-vision-mission-values>> [accessed 15 Sept. 2014].

<sup>27</sup> 'Offices of CIA – National Clandestine Service', *CIA*, 23 March 2009, <<https://www.cia.gov/offices-of-cia/ clandestine-service/our-mission.html>> [accessed 15 Sept. 2014].



its own in turn.<sup>28</sup> It should be said at this point that when considered alongside other intelligence services the CIA is in fact comparatively open. Former DCI John McCone (1961–5), who oversaw the CIA during a particularly notable period that included the Cuban Missile Crisis, would complain to Casey in 1984 for example:

It is of great interest to me that of the thirty-five nations who maintain a foreign intelligence service – only two, the United States and West Germany, admit the existence of their foreign intelligence organizations. France does not, Great Britain does not, Japan does not, Israel does not, Egypt does not, and the Soviets have not admitted that the KGB is a foreign intelligence service.<sup>29</sup>

We also heard Moynihan complain above about the tension between secrecy and congressional oversight. In a recent article in *Intelligence and National Security*, meanwhile, CIA staff historian Nicholas Dujmovic opined that: ‘The wealth of material available on the CIA website, I believe, is unique for any intelligence organization in history in terms of its volume, quantity and exposure of previously held secrets.’<sup>30</sup> In the UK, on the other hand, attitudes towards intelligence, as one scholar has recently reminded us, mirrored those which the British had towards sex – that is it went on, but it was considered *jolly indecent* to bring it up (the existence of the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) was not officially confirmed until the passage of the Intelligence Services Act in 1994).<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, all of this is of course a matter of degrees. The CIA’s ‘ethos’ underlines secrecy’s inviolable status in uncharacteristically melodramatic terms: ‘we preserve our ability to obtain secrets by protecting sources and methods from the moment we enter on duty until our last breath.’<sup>32</sup> Dujmovic also points out in the same article that: ‘intelligence historians face particular challenges in making sense of what too often is history deliberately shrouded.’ CIA staff historians, on the other hand, ‘operate mostly in the secret world’.<sup>33</sup> Even the ‘Kid’s

<sup>28</sup> For a discussion about the shifting relationship between information and secrets see: Gregory F. Treverton, *Reshaping National Intelligence for an Age of Information* (New York, 2003). The British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), meanwhile, describes how ‘Intelligence is at the heart of what MI6 does. It is the secret information that the British government requires to keep the country safe and prosperous’. ‘Secret Intelligence Service – Intelligence Officers’, *SIS*, <<https://www.sis.gov.uk/careers/roles/intelligence-officers.html>> [accessed 14 Sept. 2014].

<sup>29</sup> ‘Letter from John A. McCone to William J. Casey’, 10 May 1984, William J. Casey Papers, 1928–96, Box 81, Folder 14, Hoover Institution Archives.

<sup>30</sup> Nicholas Dujmovic, ‘Getting CIA history right: The informal partnership between agency historians and outside scholars’, *Intelligence and National Security*, 26/2–3 (2011), pp. 228–45, at p. 234.

<sup>31</sup> As Christopher Moran points out, ‘Throughout much of the 20th century, the UK intelligence community was the “invisible man” of government, a state within a state, and an entity about which questions were never asked, even in parliament’ (Christopher Moran, ‘The pursuit of intelligence history: methods, sources, and trajectories in the United Kingdom’, *Studies in Intelligence*, 55/2 (2011), pp. 33–55, at p. 34).

<sup>32</sup> ‘CIA Mission, vision, Ethos and Challenges’ (see above n. 25).

<sup>33</sup> Dujmovic, ‘Getting CIA history right’, p. 228.

Zone' of the CIA website promises children that they will 'see some top secret things you won't find anywhere else'.<sup>34</sup> In other words, secrecy and differential access to information is a core part of this institution's very *raison d'être*.<sup>35</sup>

For the researcher, then, just how to we acquire information about intelligence services and the CIA more particularly? The traditional first port of call for the intelligence historian, of course, is the archive. For the author's study, a visit to, say, the Carter and Reagan libraries, The National Archives, and a look at pertinent private papers such as Bill Casey's at the Hoover Institute or Congressman Charlie Wilson's at the East Texas Research Centre, would have been a good starting point in seeking to understand the CIA's role in US foreign policy towards Afghanistan during the final stages of the Cold War – and indeed they were. Nevertheless, the archival material on intelligence is spotty to say the least, and a lack of documentary resources is often the major hurdle to further research in the field. By luck, rather than any kind of foresight of planning, the author, as far as he knows, was the first researcher to look at Bill Casey's papers at the Hoover Institute.<sup>36</sup> Despite the promise of being 'the first', the dream of many an archival historian, no 'smoking gun' was of course interned within. They were extremely useful on multiple fronts, but much of the material I sought was not available for researchers. The same was true at the National Archives and the Reagan Library, with redact sheet after redact sheet ensconced within the boxes most likely to yield material directly pertaining to US foreign policy in Afghanistan and the CIA's mission in particular.

Secrecy and the very nature of these institutions, then, militate against a full picture of the documentary record – this is true even when compared to other departments and institutions of state. As Mark Lowenthal points out, intelligence is different from other government functions: 'Intelligence exists because governments seek to hide some information from other governments, who, in turn, seek to discover hidden information by means which they wish to keep secret.'<sup>37</sup> Another

<sup>34</sup> 'CIA Kid's Zone', *CIA*, 12 April 2007, <<https://www.cia.gov/kids-page>> [accessed 10 Oct. 2014].

<sup>35</sup> Michael Warner, in one popular understanding, defines intelligence as follows: 'Intelligence is secret, state activity to understand or influence foreign entities'. 'In Want of a Definition – Understanding our Craft', *CIA*, 14 April 2007, <<https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol46no3/article02.html>> [accessed 2 Oct. 2014]. Aldrich, meanwhile, argues that: 'secret services are imperiled if they do not keep themselves hidden. Without a track record of intense secrecy, future agents will refuse to work for them, especially in countries where memories are long and allegiances are traced over generations. For the purposes of recruitment of agents, secret services know that a reputation for extreme secrecy is one of the most potent instruments in their armory'. Richard J. Aldrich, 'Policing the past: official history, secrecy and British intelligence since 1945', *English Historical Review*, 119/483 (2004), pp. 922–53, at p. 953.

<sup>36</sup> Serendipitously, he arrived at Hoover that very morning and asked about Casey's papers on the off-chance, fully expecting the answer still to be 'we are waiting for permission from the family to open them', yet was told that they had been opened an hour or so beforehand.

<sup>37</sup> Mark Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy* (London, 2012), p. 1.

scholar, meanwhile, reminds us that in virtually no other field does the state pay as much attention to what material is released – the material we want always seems tantalizingly *just* beyond our reach.<sup>38</sup> Some material on the Cuban Missile Crisis, an event which occurred over fifty years ago, for example, remains classified to this day; while within the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) series progress on incorporating CIA activities remains ‘qualified, uneven, and painfully slow’.<sup>39</sup>

If, therefore, the entrance to the CIA’s Old Headquarters Building is inscribed with the following words from scripture ‘and ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free’, how can historians of intelligence come to share these sentiments? And if the motto of the NCS is ‘*Veritatum cognoscere*’ (to know the truth), just how do we access it? We can wait patiently, of course, hoping that the mosaic of secret state activity will gradually be illuminated. Nevertheless, as Richard Aldrich points out, the past is sanitized, policed and laundered – intelligence historians are routinely offered up a ‘pre-selected menu’ in ‘the history supermarket’, a practice that can result in a culture of ‘release-dependency’.<sup>40</sup> Declassification, what is more, can be as much a process of risk management and public diplomacy as transparency and accountability. Space precludes a discussion over the political and epistemological status of ‘official histories’; nonetheless, they are hardly comprehensive in terms of subject matter. They also lack an indispensable part of that scholarly apparatus upon which historians are weaned, i.e. footnotes where we can apply Reagan’s dictum: ‘trust but verify’.<sup>41</sup> In sum, with regard to intelligence history, there are fewer keyholes here than in any other wing of the architecture of state and those which we can see through have hardly the most illuminated backdrop.

If the archival record is problematic *vis-à-vis* the study of intelligence, the nature of these institutions to a large extent prohibits scholars from other fields applying their tools and techniques to the study of the subject. If historians must wrestle with a fragmentary and opaque documentary record – interestingly, the very nature of this enterprise means that historians are kept just far enough away from the inner working of the institution, yet just close enough in terms of release dependency – the CIA as an institution is hardly conducive to

<sup>38</sup> Richard J. Aldrich, ‘Persuasion? British intelligence, the history policeman, and official information’, in Patrick Major and Christopher R. Moran (eds), *Spooked: Empire and Intelligence Since 1945* (Newcastle, 2009), pp. 29–50, at p. 32.

<sup>39</sup> Matthew Jones and Paul McGarr, ‘Real substance, not just symbolism? The CIA and the representation of covert action in the FRUS series’, in Moran and Murphy (eds), *Intelligence Studies in Britain and the United States*, pp. 65–89, at p. 82.

<sup>40</sup> See Richard J. Aldrich, ‘Grow your own: Cold War intelligence and history supermarkets’, *Intelligence and National Security*, 17/1 (2002), pp. 135–52, at p. 135. See also Aldrich, ‘Policing the past’, pp. 922–53.

<sup>41</sup> Basil Liddell Hart famously described the official British history of the First World War as ‘official but not history’. For an interesting discussion see Christopher Baxter and Keith Jeffrey, ‘Intelligence and “official history”’, in Moran and Murphy (eds), *Intelligence Studies in Britain and the United States*, pp. 289–303.

ethnographic approaches, participant observation, surveys, questionnaires, focus groups, and so forth.

‘A specter is haunting the halls of the Academy’, wrote Portelli back in 1981, ‘the specter of “oral history”.’<sup>42</sup> This brings us back to history and to the historian. If the study of intelligence services is inherently problematic via the documentary record – which of course is something *very different* from saying that we should abandon the task altogether, and a look at the some of the footnotes above betrays the fact that the author for one has not abandoned that task – then we must consider what other means are at our disposal. This brings us in turn back to Portelli’s spectre. If intelligence history, as Moran and Murphy suggest, has been characterized by ‘hardcore empiricism’,<sup>43</sup> then it has by and large merely transferred that bent onto the conceptually diverse and theoretically dynamic sub-field of oral history; a field that has presented a challenge to the historical establishment since at least as far back as the days when A. J. P. Taylor is reputed to have dismissed it as ‘old men drooling about their youth’. Indeed, it could be argued that many of the ‘top-down’ oral history programmes, to pick up on a point made above, have made quite an effort to do just that in their attempt to finesse ‘the great recording machine’.

At this juncture, it is useful to consider some of the standard critiques of oral history, but more importantly to think through some of the challenges we may face in utilizing it to study the intelligence history. The standard objections are well known. Oral history is trivial compared to the ‘great man’ approach; it is inferior to the written word; interviewing is the business of social scientists rather than historians; human memory is often faulty and unreliable, prone to the crustaceans of time; oral history interviews are unrepresentative, the results ungeneralizable; the questioning may be biased; and so forth. Oral historians have expended considerable intellectual labour in developing their responses to these charges and in refining their methodology for interpreting oral evidence. Space precludes a thorough treatment, here it is suffice to say that an equal number of criticisms can of course be extended towards archival materials and that much of the criticism derives from a particularly narrow reading of not only what sources can be used, but what they can be used for. We shall come back to this point below.

Nonetheless, what problems do we encounter when applying oral history to the field of intelligence more particularly? The immediate problem, of course is just how do we locate and recruit our interviewees?

<sup>42</sup> Portelli, ‘The peculiarities of oral history’, p. 96. Thompson also speaks to this theme: ‘The older generation of historians who hold the chairs and the purse strings are instinctively apprehensive about the advent of a new method. It implies that they are no longer in command of the techniques of their profession’ (Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, p. 81).

<sup>43</sup> Christopher Moran and Christopher Murphy, ‘Introduction: intelligence studies then and now’, in Moran and Murphy (eds), *Intelligence Studies in Britain and the United States*, pp. 1–15, at p. 3.

Providence has not been so kind to those wishing to undertake oral history interviews (or for that matter to rival intelligence services), whereby we can look up the Yellow Pages between 'ci' and 'cib' and find 'cia' with a list of intelligence operatives and CIA employees, perhaps with those who worked on Operation Cyclone, Afghanistan, or in the Directorate of Operations Near East and South Asia Division separately classified for our convenience. You will find no deputy directors, division chiefs, station chiefs or CIA officers seconded to the National Security Council there. When we eventually procure names, moreover, we have to contend with the very nature of the CIA as an institution: knowledge is compartmentalized, there are silos of secrecy; information is often shared on a need-to-know basis; many people do not want to share what they know, or may only do so if you work for an outlet such as the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times*; there may be issues you wish to know about for which they are sworn to secrecy, and so forth. With some hard research, not anything beyond the capability of any historian worth his or her salt, however, the author did nonetheless find some people who were willing to speak to him and who had very interesting and illuminating things to say with regard to the aforementioned research project (the 'smoking gun' of course remained illusory). Indeed, many of these interviewees proved willing to furnish the author with further contacts and introductions ('snowball sampling'); he also found that by interviewing enough former US foreign service officers (especially career South Asia hands) he would quite often be pointed in the direction of an Agency figure with whom they had worked in the relevant theatre.

When the interview commences, meanwhile, another question springs to mind (and it is one which anyone who has ever interviewed someone who has worked for the intelligence services has been asked): how do you know you are not being misled or lied to? The author was asked this very question after a presentation for a job interview several years back. 'These people are professional liars, how can you trust what they say?'<sup>44</sup> They are skilled at charming people, the line of questioning would continue during the lunch break, at lighting a room up with personal magnetism; they are experts in psychological seduction, trained to mislead, to deceive, to provide cover stories, to hide things; they are skilled in subversion and covert operations; they are just as likely to subvert the historical record as anything else. The world they inhabit, then, is one of information, misinformation and disinformation, of propaganda, manipulation and – as the character loosely based on former DCI Allen Dulles from *The Good Shepherd* termed them – 'the black arts'. While one of the criticisms that can be levelled against oral history concerns the extent to which the interviewer can ventriloquize the inter-

<sup>44</sup> Think of titles of the following two books on the 'cultural Cold War': Frances Stoner Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London, 1999); Hugh Wilford, *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* (London, 2008).

viewee (i.e. lead him or her in a certain direction and speak their voice through them), with regard to an intelligence officer the fear is that it will in fact be the interviewer who will be ventriloquized. In retrospect the author is glad that he was asked the question, as it forced him to think hard about the issue, an experience that was yet another factor which fed into the writing of this article.

A function of this article is to draw attention to the fact that, with regard to checking the veracity of any factual statements made, just because we must mark the map 'here be dragons' does not mean that we must abandon the voyage entirely, provided, of course, we have taken the requisite precautions. Concerning issues of fact, then, we must 'trust but verify' both the source and the information (or perhaps, with regard to intelligence officers, we should rather say, 'do not trust, seek to verify'). To what extent, we must ask, can the information be triangulated or corroborated?<sup>45</sup> If it cannot, then the obligatory qualifications must of course be drawn. We must also ask to what extent is there an institutional bias embedded in their testimony. Are they merely score-settling, axe-grinding, legacy-building or attempting to rewrite history? To what extent have we pulled our punches through not wanting to upset our interviewees, to remain in their good graces or to keep that door open for future research? These are all standard interviewer–interviewee questions and research dynamics. Obviously, they must be handled carefully; however, provided we go through standard operating procedures with regard to interviews, I think we must remember what the leading oral historian of his generation, Studs Terkel, famously said with regard to what should be on his epitaph: 'curiosity never killed the cat'. As with anything else, experience and training can go a long way. To be sure, oral history can be expensive, time-consuming and frustrating: but then so can archival research. We must also remember that even though the author mainly interviewed individuals from the NCS, and the cultural imaginary notwithstanding, not every member of the CIA is skilled in the 'black arts' or even seeking to utilize them. The interviews the author conducted were invaluable in helping him understand this issue in a much deeper way and in a way that reading documents simply could not; the interviews also informed subsequent archival research and interviews in a virtuous recursive circle.

Furthermore, oral history should not merely be seen as a means by which to 'grow your own' factual material, although it is that indeed: the author would amplify Richard Aldrich's exhortation for historians – who have often appeared 'feeble supplicants before the state' – to do so.<sup>46</sup> Oral history, to be sure, should not be limited to a fact-generating vehicle for the machinery and institutions of state; it can also help intelligence history – a field often associated with narrow realist

<sup>45</sup> See Philip H. J. Davies, 'Spies as informants: triangulation and the interpretation of elite interview data in the study of the intelligence and security services', *Politics*, 21/1 (2001), pp. 73–80.

<sup>46</sup> See Aldrich, 'Grow your own', p. 148.

approaches to history and world politics – explore a broader range of research questions. It can also facilitate, to be sure, a livelier discussion surrounding a reconsideration of the field's boundaries. Indeed, one of the areas in which oral history has come into its own is in exploring questions of cultural meaning – a broader debate within history and the human sciences more generally which has as of yet hardly permeated intelligence history's core.<sup>47</sup> Memory, for example, is more than a 'passive repository of facts', although it can and does yield facts not generated anywhere else, but it is also an 'active process in the creation of meanings'.<sup>48</sup> In other words, let us not only ask what people did, but 'what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did'.<sup>49</sup> Even if Operation Cyclone did or did not 'give the Soviet Union its Vietnam', as has been suggested to the author, the fact that this was what several CIA officers from the period *wanted* to do, what they *believed* they were doing, what they *now think* about what they did is itself of immense interest; as are the ways in which they conceptualized the CIA mission and US national identity in the late 1970s and early 1980s; as are the ways in which they believe that during the course of their careers they have been fighting 'freedom's' fight. While work has been done in intelligence history that explores culture or that utilizes interview techniques, the results, as was mentioned above, have quite often merely been 'added and stirred' to a pre-existing ethos of 'hardcore empiricism'; cultural sources and interviews have been used to provide literary flourishes and sparkles, to sketch vignettes that keep the reader interested, to supplement the dry and dusty documentary record. Subsequently, much of oral history's promise has been domesticated and rendered inert within a field with a pronounced materialist bias that, as Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones points out, feeds on a 'feeling of being unappreciated', which results in an exaggeration of its own importance.<sup>50</sup>

The point here is not to get into a 'method *x* is better than method *y*' style of argument, but to recognize that there is no holy grail with regard to research methods, merely a series of analytical trade-offs that every researcher who studies the social world must – consciously or unconsciously – make. Part of the purpose of this article is to make a contribution to the field by outlining ways in which intelligence historians can be more reflexive and question what has passed for 'common-sense' in the field for too long. Like weight-lifters who say they have no time to take a step back and rethink their approach to working out as

<sup>47</sup> See John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 3rd edn (London, 2000), esp. pp. 193–210.

<sup>48</sup> Alessandro Portelli, 'What makes oral history different?', in Robert Perks and Alasdair Thompson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London, 1998), pp. 63–74, at p. 69.

<sup>49</sup> Portelli, 'The peculiarities of oral history', pp. 99–100 (my emphasis). See also, Alasdair Thompson, 'Memory and remembering in oral history', in Donald A. Ritchie (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 77–95.

<sup>50</sup> Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, 'Preface', in Moran and Murphy (eds), *Intelligence Studies in Britain and the United States*, pp. xv–xviii, at p. xvi.

they are ‘too busy working-out’, intelligence historians, as the editors of one recent volume remind us, must think more deeply about the body of work they have constructed and how they have constructed it,<sup>51</sup> as well as considering how to take the field forward into the future and engage with broader debates within the historical profession and the human sciences. A more substantive understanding of oral history and culture, I would submit, is intelligence history’s new ‘missing dimension’ and would mark its further maturation as a field of scholarly endeavour. As with archival research in the field of intelligence, the problems any budding oral history interviewer will face in the field are especially pronounced. We will often see through a glass, darkly; although meeting face to face we will know at least a little bit more in part. This may not be ideal (what research circumstances ever are?), but intelligence institutions such as the CIA are such an essential part of the modern state machinery and so critical to history and politics that the author for one wants to peer through as many keyholes – however, imperfectly – as he possibly can.

<sup>51</sup> Moran and Murphy, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.