DOI: 10.1111/pech.12531

PEACE & CHANGE
A Journal of Peace Research
WILEY

BOOK REVIEW

A drop of treason: Philip Agee and his exposure of the CIA

Jonathan Stevenson

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021.

Philip Agee published ***Inside the Company: CIA Diary*** in 1975 as the first uncensored exposé of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operations by a former case officer who had become disillusioned with his role in the Cold War. His account drew both praise and condemnation for "naming names" of CIA officers and their agents. Agee's publication ignited a broad debate about the role of the CIA and the moral responsibilities of its officers, and permanently shifted public perceptions of the CIA. The more recent unauthorized disclosures of Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden highlight a continued interest in whistleblowers, so it is not incidental that earlier whistleblowers are receiving renewed attention. Jonathan Stevenson's ***A Drop of Treason*** is the first biography of this former spy. Given Agee's significance it is surprising that it took almost half a century for such a work to appear.

Stevenson begins the biography with the claim, "Agee has continued to be, with the exception of Aldrich Ames, the United States' most hated erstwhile spy" (1). While I have always found Agee to be a bit of an enigmatic character, I have never thought about him as being hated by anyone other than those in the United States national security establishment (and even then, conspiracy theories exist that the CIA played him to distract from its much more nefarious and dangerous activities). That characterization alone speaks volumes to the epistemological and political difference between Stevenson's approach to the subject and what I presume would be that of most readers of *Peace and Change*. But that, of course, does not mean that the book is without value.

Stevenson is senior fellow for U.S. defense and managing editor of *Survival* at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. He was previously professor of strategic studies at the U.S. Naval War College and worked with the National Security Council. I, in contrast, have a degree in peace studies from a school (Bethel College) that is associated with a historic peace church (the Mennonites), and have long worked in the field of Latin American studies that traditionally tilts left. As such, my interest in Agee is not how he betrayed the national security state, but how his revelations can help us understand and advance social movement struggles for a more just, peaceful, and equitable world. Thus, the distance between the perspectives of the author and reviewer is vast, and my comments on the book must be understood in that context.

A fundamental contradiction in national security state studies, and one inherent in Stevenson's biography, is a portrayal of dissidents like Agee as traitors even as they recognize that the work of spies is precisely that: to convince their agents to commit treason against their own country (3). If the problem with Agee is a moral one that he betrayed his country, then spy craft and the national

security state whose interests it serves are inherently immoral and should be roundly denounced. But if the issue is what political agenda and whose economic interests one advances, deeper and more probing possibilities open up to understand the nature of exploitation and oppression in the world which we inhabit.

This difference is reflected in which direction one's gaze faces: toward the United States and what ramifications Agee's revelations had for the imperial agenda of the United States government, or toward Latin America and what Agee's activities as a CIA case officer meant for those who were the target of his investigations. Stevenson concentrates almost entirely on the first point—which traditionally has been the tendency in diplomatic history and studies of international relations—rather than how those on the global periphery who the CIA surveilled responded to its anticommunist agenda, which is where the field is headed. An emphasis on the political context of Agee's revelations in the United States in the 1970s further marginalizes what was happening in the 1960s in Latin America when he was an active CIA agent on the scene, including the liberatory struggles across the hemisphere that emerged out of the Cuban revolution that so frightened policy makers in the United States.

Stevenson describes the imperfect and unreliable nature of Agee's narrative in *Inside the Company* (71). Agee wrote the book as if it were an extemporaneous diary, but at the same time he is completely transparent that he composed it years after he had left the agency and had quite a profound change of heart as to the CIA's activities. Although, as Stevenson notes, the result is an artificial reconstruction of the evolution of Agee's thinking, that is also what makes the book so compelling politically for gaining a deeper understanding of United States imperial adventures. Its lasting significance is reflected both in that the year of its publication—1975—came to be known as the "year of intelligence," and the influence it had the following year on the Senate's Select Committee to Study Government Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, the so-called "Church Committee" that Idaho Democratic senator Frank Church chaired.

Stevenson dedicates an entire chapter to whether Agee was a Cuban or Soviet asset, something that has been the subject of much speculation. An open question is what research Agee needed to undertake in Cuba that he could not have done elsewhere. If he was using open-source records, like newspaper reports and published material, most of the material in *Inside the Company* could have been acquired anywhere with a good library collection. For Stevenson, that factor provides evidence that Agee was not conducting research in Cuba but was there as a Cuban agent, which opponents have long used as an excuse to denigrate his account (75). Other than naming the names of CIA officers and their agents, is there anything in his book that was not already known? As Stevenson contemplates, the CIA and its supporters overreacted to the revelations in Agee's memoir. Such trepidations effectively dodge much more important concerns with the morality of spy craft, the intent of an U.S. imperial agenda, or the political projects of those the CIA sought to counter.

A tendency in much that has been written about Agee, including in *A Drop of Treason*, is an attempt to psychoanalyze his motivations. While perhaps a worthwhile endeavor, it is also one at which historical methodology falls woefully short. This, then, becomes both a strength and weakness of Stevenson's work. Stevenson presents Agee as advancing Cuban interests, whether wittingly or unwittingly, from his arrival in the mid-1970s until his death in Havana in 2008, but for the most part steers clear of the most salacious conspiracy theories concerning his motivations. Rather than definitive conclusions, or for that matter revealing any new information or

insights, Stevenson comes to what is perhaps the most logical inference: it is complicated. As with any human being, Agee had multiple and conflictual motivations, and as with all of us he was just trying to make it through life on this planet.

Marc Becker

Truman State University
Email: marc@yachana.org