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Books

Rosetta Stone and the code of national security

The Strength of the Pack

Douglas Valentine

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When I was a child the older daughter of my father's best friend was reading a book called *The Secret Language*.¹ I remember searching for the book in the school library, but failing to find it, begged Susan to lend me her copy. At that age I was convinced the book must have been about codes and I wanted to know everything I could about what people really meant when they said things, things maybe I didn't understand. In fact the book was not about codes and I returned the book to Susan, disappointed that there were nothing but a few slang words for things at the school described in the book.

When I was a bit older my father gave me a book I haven't forgotten either. Before I read all his Ian Fleming and

¹ Ursula Nordstrom, 1960.

Alistair McLean paperbacks, I read Stanley Lovell's *Of Spies and Stratagems*,² a humorous memoir by an OSS officer, telling more about the things 'Wild Bill' Donovan's boys screwed up than about what they really did. For years it shaped my conception of secret services and spying in America or by Americans. Even after years of reading about US government covert action throughout the world, I had this vision of well-meaning incompetence on the part of soldiers and bureaucrats trying their best to preserve and protect the USA.

It was not until the death of Philip Agee, probably the dean if not the patron saint of critics of the American national security apparatus, in 2008, that I felt compelled to read his exposé *Inside the Company*. It was Agee's memoir, followed by his book *On the Run* and the collection *Dirty Work*, which made me realise that to understand the CIA it was necessary to comprehend the secret language of national security of which it is the ultimate guardian. There is a code, if you will, an open code, at the core of the central processing unit of America's empire. Agee was the first person to publish that code and like the Rosetta stone it has allowed the rest of us – at least those who are interested – to read the hieroglyphics in which US foreign and domestic policy is written.

Douglas Valentine, author of *The Phoenix Program* and *The Strength of the Wolf*, has published a third volume in what might be called a 'Ring' cycle to elaborate the language of America's elite in its wars for the 'Rhine gold', a.k.a. 'national security'. Using the methods of a therapist and chronicler, Valentine begins his books with the apparently naive and inquisitive eyes and ears of a youth asking his elders what they did in the war. He retains a respectful tone throughout what are essentially interviews and intervenes only to provide needed background for the reader or to occasionally compare the stories of various performers in the same scene. The author only appears when it is necessary to clarify something

² Stanley P. Lovell, 1963.

either he or the reader is unlikely to understand or where confusion arises.

The *Strength of the Pack*, like its predecessor the *Strength of the Wolf*, takes its title from the Rudyard Kipling poem, 'The Law of the Jungle'. Kipling describes how the wolf and the pack complement each other. The power of one is ultimately dependent on that of the other. There is no such thing as a truly lone wolf. In *Wolf*, Valentine records the story of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics and its origin in the internal security policies of the US government at the beginning of WWI. The demise of the FBN in 1968 coincided with an interregnum in which the so-called war on drugs was managed or mismanaged just like the war in Vietnam with which it was intricately connected. Richard Nixon's attempt to recover US control in Southeast Asia and establish political hegemony at home coincided with creation of the Drug Enforcement Administration, an agency charged with continuing the US government's pursuit of international narcotics trafficking and policing of the global drug trade. The *Strength of the Pack* is the story of how the legacy of Anslinger, the FBN's boss, and the contradictions between publicly proclaimed policies of interdiction and the actual policies of the national security state, have created an apparatus based on hypocrisy and deceit which corrupts those who believe in genuine law enforcement and protects those who profit politically and economically from the clandestine control of the international drug markets.

As in *The Strength of the Wolf*, Valentine continues his story with what appears to be the plain facts: the US government determined that there was a need to control and/or prevent the trade in and consumption of narcotics and other drugs deemed dangerous. Laws were passed and agencies created to enforce those laws. Since the original agencies and the original laws seemed to be inadequate to the ostensible tasks of drug control and interdiction, new

means were sought and implemented. These in turn seem to fail as well. The 'drug problem' emerges as unsolvable. The reader for whom this narrative is an article of faith will finish the *Strength of the Pack* with the same sense of frustration found at any middle class dining table when the subject is the adequacy of the police, or just how much uniformed abuse of the poor is enough to keep those present safe in their homes and schools.

Yet at regular intervals Valentine's interviews disrupt this complacency for the critical reader. The actors in the drama of drug law enforcement describe repeatedly their preoccupation with professional advancement, bureaucratic competition, personal rivalries and ultimately the manipulation of the drug trade. Valentine has no need to speculate about conspiracies. His respondents explain in their own words the combinations of bureaucratic scheming, confidential policy directives, PR posturing, and incestuous relations between pharmaceutical manufacturers, ambitious politicians, mercenary armies, domestic law enforcement, and ultimately the American power elite.

The cast of characters Valentine has interviewed in the *Pack* may initially overwhelm the reader. There are innumerable people in the books and they all have their significance. Some of them only become important in the course of time. I had to check frequently to follow some of the events and grasp which people were important for what reasons. This could discourage the reader. On the other hand it does reflect another aspect of Valentine's narrative: these are events shaped by people and not by nature or god. The actors have long and varied interactions in the life of the two organisations and these personalities emerged at critical phases in the history of both the FBN and DEA. It is necessary to concentrate on this fabric to grasp some of the ways in which the national security system consists of personnel overlaps and not necessarily explicit policies. That is an

overwhelming cognitive challenge for a reader who expects clear and simple drama with a few primary players on the stage. The reader has to have patience and concentration to get past what may appear as an incredible number of people whose stories are all told in varying detail.

The story is a sequel to *The Strength of the Wolf* but it is written in a way that is comprehensible even if one has not read *Wolf*. One of the pleasures of Valentine's prose is that the interviews flow seamlessly creating one dramatic work of history. Although the book is carefully documented, its evidentiary approach relies on preponderance, redundancy and an emergent coherence as the participants themselves elucidate the same historical events.

The FBN and its ultimate successor, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), emerged on the basis of fundamental assumptions about the nature of drugs and drug trafficking in the US. However, these assumptions were expressed in language peculiar to US political culture. Once drug law enforcement left the shores of North America it became more clearly an instrument of US foreign policy.

First, the focus of domestic drug law enforcement, as formulated by Anslinger's FBN, was the policing of African-Americans and other racial or ethnic minorities – whereby there was no doubt that African-Americans were considered the primary target. Thus despite any and all attempts to treat addiction as a medical problem, Anslinger, the FBN and the DEA have fought successfully to criminalise addictions along race lines.

Second, enforcement strategy was 'supply-driven'. That meant agents were trained and deployed to make cases – create situations for arrest, trial and conviction – against suppliers and dealers. The main tactic for making cases was to pose as an intermediary and induce deals. Of course this meant that agents had to create credibility by actively

participating in the market they were hired to suppress. Since the drug trade is lucrative there has always been the temptation if not the incentive for agents to personally profit from this standard case-making tactic. Hence even assuming the legitimacy of the drug enforcement objectives, the potential for corruption was endemic. What was well known at local level, namely that vice squads served to give politicians and police their cut of organised crime, acquired national scale. Federal drug enforcement officers in competing jurisdictions took their 'cut' whether in political-bureaucratic advantage (e.g. competition between US Customs, IRS, and FBI) or 'in trade' by siphoning off profits and confiscated drugs or simply accepting bribes.

Third, the ultimate bureaucratic conflict emerged once federal drug enforcement became international, based on the 'supply-side' strategy. One of the consequences of US entry into World War I was the expansion of the federal government's domestic intelligence (policing) apparatus. While US Army Intelligence retained much of its authority to spy on political dissidents, the increasing industrialisation catalysed by the war mobilisation created a greater threat from organised labour. Private industry had been able to suppress unionisation with its own private police and detective agencies, like Pinkerton. The rapid expansion caused by the war effort made it expeditious for the federal government to absorb the cost and responsibility for political policing. The result was the creation of the FBI. The infamous J. Edgar Hoover exploited the emerging mass media to create a popular image of most wanted criminals and the need for G-men to capture or kill them. The twin threats of spectacular criminals and communist subversives fed the FBI director's greed for power over what became a kind of federal secret police.

At almost the same time, Harry Anslinger, previously an officer in the Pennsylvania Railroad Police who married into the

Mellon dynasty, seized the threat of post-war population shifts and mobilisation among African-Americans to promote the early phase of America's war on drugs. Then the code was drugs are a problem of African-Americans and on one hand make them dangerous to whites and, as the source of narcotic addiction, threaten white moral and racial health. Valentine points out that although Anslinger never had the same power as Hoover he was able to maintain his fiefdom in spite of Hoover's jealous and vindictive designs on anyone competing with him for police power in the US. Together these two created the mainstays of US political policing – not only in the agencies they directed but also in their abilities as propagandists. They both shaped the way Americans see threats to their security. The FBI and FBN, along with the latter's successor the DEA, have been instrumental in creating and maintaining the illusions that (a) the US is a democracy with no secret political police like in 'Old Europe' or outright dictatorships; (b) the police powers in the US are intended to preserve public health and safety, e.g. by the interdiction of production and traffic in harmful substances; and (c) that the greatest threats to the security of Americans are substances that corrupt private morals.

Without actually pointing a finger, Valentine's sources indicate some unpleasant truths behind these illusions: whatever democratic virtues the US may be said to have, its primary federal law enforcement agencies were formed to suppress political opposition, e.g. from organised labour, war resisters, civil rights activists, *et al.* Valentine documents numerous occasions when decisions by drug enforcement agencies were required to take the interests of the major pharmaceutical corporations into account. By its very strategy and tactics the case-making against drug traffickers serves to promote the threat of drugs *per se* more than to control or stop trade and consumption. To call drug law enforcement in the US selective is gross understatement since it has long

been an unspoken rule that rich, white neighbourhoods and offenders are off limits.

Finally and perhaps most devastating of all the truths Valentine documents, drug law enforcement –whether domestic or international – is subject to the control of the CIA, whose historic policy, not unlike that of the British East India Company over two centuries ago, has been to protect the manufacture and trade in narcotics for reasons of ‘national security’. Repeatedly Valentine recounts the stories of FBN and later DEA agents prevented from making cases against drug traffickers because of direct or indirect CIA intervention. Often the mere indication that a suspect or a known trafficker was working with the CIA was sufficient to stop further enforcement action. Although Valentine actually seems to avoid this conclusion, his preponderance of testimony together with the collateral evidence he provides forces one to ask the question is the CIA not in fact the primary broker of the international drug market? The reader who thinks that Valentine will feed the favourite conspiracy theory will be disappointed. Valentine does not end with a rousing plea to the jury to condemn the CIA as the great evil behind international drug trafficking. Yet those who recall the late Gary Webb’s reporting about the CIA’s role in pushing drugs into Los Angeles will find testimony in Valentine’s book that adds plausibility to Webb’s claims.³

When Allen Dulles, Harry Anslinger, and J. Edgar Hoover died, the government agencies each had left behind were powerful, entrenched bureaucratic institutions. These men were masters of public relations. Their aggressive personalities, all shaped by what might be called the particularly American Puritan hypocrisy, helped to create and sell the enduring myths that sustain the American vision of ‘national security’. This ‘national security’ relied on the suppression of anything deemed foreign, non-white, immoral,

³ See Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair, *Whiteout*, 1999.

or communist – whereby communist was rarely anything more than a catch-all term for anything nationally, racially or morally impure. Despite the legal restrictions that officially separated the CIA from domestic policing, the history of drug law enforcement as recounted by those engaged is incontrovertible testimony that these restrictions were conceptually problematic and practically a dead letter. At every turn, official action by drug enforcement officers was either compromised by cooperation with the CIA or disrupted by CIA intervention to preserve its ‘national security’ interests both in the drug trade itself and the underground channels through which intelligence, weapons, illicit funds, etc. could flow. DEA agents, like their predecessors in the FBN, did not last long if they insisted on sincere performance of what they thought were their statutory law enforcement duties.

In 1974 Agee wrote:

‘Reforms of the FBI and CIA, even removal of the President from office, cannot remove the problem. American capitalism, based as it is on exploitation of the poor, with its fundamental motivation in personal greed, simply cannot survive without force – without a secret police force. The argument is with capitalism and it is capitalism that must be opposed, with its CIA, FBI and other security agencies understood as logical, necessary manifestations of a ruling class’s determination to retain power and privilege.’⁴

The ‘war on drugs’, like its brother, ‘the war on terror’, and older cousin, ‘the war against communism’, all use essentially the same secret language. As befitting secret armies and police that must operate in the shadows, their stealth is augmented by euphemism – the mendacious words and phrases that encourage us to trust or discourage close examination. *Spying*, that is the violation of others’ privacy, is called intelligence. *Action*, whether covert or ‘executive’,

⁴ Philip Agee, *Inside the Company: CIA Diary*, 1975, p. 597.

conceals things that if done by a private person would be considered serious crimes. *Neutralising infrastructure*, whether it was 'VC' in Vietnam or 'Taliban' in Afghanistan is just another term for assassination.⁵ *Making cases*, the principal tactic of federal drug law enforcement, meant selectively feeding and maintaining the drug trade, within the propaganda priorities of the agency and with due regard for the 'national security' interests of the Company.

Of course it would be wrong to suppose that everything the DEA or its police relatives did was deleterious to public morals, health and safety – the ostensible purpose of US drug policy. There can be no doubt that criminal activity has been pursued and prosecuted by the DEA. Valentine is careful to give credit where it is due. He treats his subject seriously and those he interviewed with utmost respect. This is not a denunciation of hundreds of agents or an attack on their character. Instead Valentine gives us a critical look at an army – a secret army, not those hallowed by endless Hollywood films or TV series. Like any modern army it is also a bureaucracy subject to the same individual and collective illnesses of any large bureaucracy. But also like all armies raised by the US elite for its own protection, it is based on myths that remain largely unchallenged today. The US drug enforcement agencies have created their own version of 'the good war', except that whereas the original 'good war' was supposed to have ended in 1945, their version also promises another war without end.

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⁵ See Douglas Valentine, *The Phoenix Program*, 1992