

James Angleton and the Church Committee

❖ Loch K. Johnson

The Russian novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* chronicles a single 24-hour period in the life of a Soviet prisoner in the Gulag. This essay about James Angleton, the chief of counter-intelligence at the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) from 1954 to 1974, examines more than one day—but not much more. I focus on my relationship with him in 1975 and 1976, when I was a U.S. Senate investigator and he was a person of interest in a government inquiry into the CIA (known by insiders as “the Agency”). Senator Frank Church, a Democrat from Idaho, led the inquiry in response to *New York Times* allegations of illegal CIA domestic spying. I served as Senator Church's special assistant during the 16-month probe.¹

The setting in Washington at the time included a resurgent Congress, which had resolved to halt the erosion of its powers at the hands of what Arthur Schlesinger famously described as the “imperial presidency,” symbolized most conspicuously by the events known in shorthand as “Watergate” and “Vietnam.” In the lead-up to the domestic spy scandal, congressional oversight of U.S. intelligence agencies had been less than robust.² Allen

1. The research on this piece has been enriched by the author's personal experience and recollections—what political scientists refer to as “participant observation.” On this methodology, see Richard F. Fenno, Jr., *Watching Politicians: Essays on Participant Observation* (Berkeley: Institute of Governmental Studies, University of California at Berkeley, 1990.) In this sense, it has some memoir-like elements, but it is written as a scholarly article, not a memoir, and has been thoroughly cross-checked against the historical record.

2. This is not to say that Congress had no accountability over intelligence activities, just that such “oversight” was minimal. David M. Barrett, in *The CIA and Congress: The Untold Story from Truman to Kennedy* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005), provides a useful corrective to earlier literature that claims the existence of almost no intelligence accountability, such as Jerrold L. Walden, “The C.I.A.: A Study in the Arrogation of Administrative Powers,” *The George Washington Law Review* 39 (October 1970), pp. 66–101. Barrett is quick to acknowledge, however, that the reporting from the intelligence agencies and the director of central intelligence to Congress remained limited until the Church Committee inquiries in 1975–1976. As the Church Committee documented, lawmakers knew nothing or very little about (for instance) the CIA's covert action operations in Chile and elsewhere during the 1960s and 1970s, including the assassination plots revealed by the committee in 1975. See U.S. Congress, Senate, Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect

Dulles, the director of central intelligence (DCI) in the 1950s and early 1960s, once told a journalist that the only person he would tell about U.S. intelligence operations was the president himself—if he bothered to ask.³ Members of Congress were not in his equation when it came to regular briefings on CIA activities. Even when a later DCI, James R. Schlesinger, went to Capitol Hill in 1973 in a conscientious attempt to brief lawmakers on current intelligence operations, a key senator, John Stennis from Mississippi, told him: “No, no, my boy. Don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.”⁴

In response to this erosion of congressional authority, not only within the intelligence domain but across the policy agenda, lawmakers took several steps toward restoring the reputation of Congress as an equal branch of government. This rehabilitation began formally in 1972 with passage of an act sponsored by Clifford Case in the Senate and Clement Zablocki in the House of Representatives that attempted to gain some control over U.S. diplomacy by requiring full reporting from the bureaucracy on the use of executive agreements abroad.⁵ The next year, lawmakers passed the War Powers Resolution, a significant if clumsy attempt to reinstate Congress’s warmaking powers.⁶ In the middle of this institutional uprising came the stunning charges of CIA spying inside the United States.

During Schlesinger’s brief stint as DCI (which lasted only five months in 1973 before he became secretary of defense), he requested an internal listing of illegalities and improprieties perpetrated by CIA officers. This document became known internally as the “family jewels.” A consummate bureaucratic manager, Schlesinger wanted a record of problems he had inherited so that he could do something about them and forestall any charges of complicity against himself should any of the transgressions come to public light. The list, he hoped, would show that he had played no role in the transgressions and had instead tried to set things straight. Unfortunately for the CIA, the “jewels” leaked to investigative reporter Seymour Hersh of *The New York Times*. On Sunday, 22 December 1974, the newspaper’s front page fairly screamed: “Huge CIA Operation Reported in U.S. against Anti-War Forces.” The lead

to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, Interim Report, Sen. Rept. No. 94-465, 1975; and Loch K. Johnson, *America’s Secret Power: The CIA in a Democratic Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

3. Cited in Harry Howe Ransom, “Congress, Legitimacy and the Intelligence Community,” paper presented at the Western Political Science Association Annual Convention, San Francisco, 14 April 1976, p. 12.

4. James R. Schlesinger, interview, Washington, DC, 16 June 1994.

5. See Loch K. Johnson, *The Making of International Agreements: Congress Confronts the Executive* (New York: New York University Press, 1984).

6. Louis Fisher, *Congressional Abdication on War and Spending* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2000).

paragraph informed readers that “the CIA, directly violating its charter, conducted a massive illegal domestic intelligence operation against antiwar protesters and other dissident groups in the United States.”⁷

Hersh’s account gave the impression of Gestapo-like operations occurring in the United States. With Watergate and Vietnam as a backdrop, the revelation lit a “fatal spark” (as Schlesinger’s successor, DCI William Colby, recalled) and triggered investigations by the Church Committee and two other panels in Washington.⁸ Thus began the “Year of Intelligence,” or what many CIA officers would soon refer to more harshly as “The Intelligence Wars.” A rush of additional intelligence stories by Hersh and other journalists followed throughout the Christmas season. As Colby writes in his memoir: “Under the steady drumbeat, the Congress was roused to a high state of indignation, and a demand for a wide-ranging investigation of the CIA swept Washington.”⁹

At about this same time in late 1974, Colby dismissed Angleton, known for his secretive management style. According to one account, the DCI fired

7. Seymour Hersh, “Huge CIA Operation Reported in U.S. against Anti-war Forces,” *The New York Times*, 22 December 1974, p. A1.

8. William Colby and Peter Forbath, *Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA* (New York: Simon & Schuster), p. 391. In 1975, the U.S. House of Representatives launched an inquiry into the *Times* allegations. Representative Otis Pike, a Democrat of New York, led that inquiry, which ended up focusing on the agency’s analytic mistakes (“intelligence failures”). The Church Committee engaged in a far more extensive investigation. Initially the committee focused on the original charges of domestic spying, but it went on to examine CIA covert actions, including assassination plots. Not to be left behind, the White House under Republican President Gerald R. Ford established a presidential commission to probe the domestic spying allegations and named Vice President Nelson Rockefeller to guide the inquiry. These three panels produced a vast quantity of public reporting. The documents, which consisted of hearings and reports, released by the Church Committee alone stood some 6-feet high. The Rockefeller Commission released only a single report, but it was thorough and included biting criticism of domestic intelligence abuses traced to the CIA and several of its companion agencies. Members of the Pike panel voted to keep their highly classified report bottled up in committee, but it leaked to *The Village Voice* (a newspaper in New York City). Whether the leak, which revealed the report’s strong criticism of the agency’s intelligence failures, came from the committee or from a whistleblower in the intelligence community has never been resolved, despite extensive investigations by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other agencies. For the main findings of these panels, see Pike Committee, “The CIA Report the President Doesn’t Want You to Read: The Pike Papers,” *The Village Voice*, 16 and 23 February 1976; Church Committee, *Alleged Assassination Plots*, Interim Report; U.S. Congress, Senate, Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders: Final Report*, Sen. Rept. No. 94-755, 6 Vols. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1976); and Commission on CIA Activities within the United States (Rockefeller Commission), *Report to the President* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1975). Scanned versions of all the materials can be downloaded from the online Public Library of the Assassination Archives and Research Center. For accounts of these watershed investigations, see Loch K. Johnson, *A Season of Inquiry: Congress and Intelligence*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Dorsey, 1988); Frank J. Smist, Jr., *Congress Oversees the United States Intelligence Community, 1947–1989* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990); and Frederick A. O. Schwarz, Jr. and Aziz Z. Huq, *Unchecked and Unbalanced: Presidential Power in a Time of Terror* (New York: The New Press, 2007).

9. Colby and Forbath, *Honorable Men*, p. 397.

Angleton because of the latter's labeling of selected CIA officers as Soviet plants ("moles"), without adequate evidence to support his claims. Angleton's accusations against some intelligence officers amounted, in Colby's estimation, to a form of McCarthyism inside the agency that was ruining the careers of individuals who seemed to have a perfectly honorable record of service. The final straw, according to this account, occurred when Angleton informed the head of French intelligence that the CIA's new chief of station (COS) in Paris was actually a Soviet asset, a charge that (to say the least) undermined the COS's effectiveness. Colby became increasingly convinced that Angleton's overzealous hunt for Soviet moles was harming the CIA's day-to-day functioning.¹⁰

Colby and others at the CIA reached the conclusion that Angleton had become obsessed by a single idea: that the Soviet Committee of State Security (KGB) had gained control over all of the CIA's agents and contacts in the USSR and had managed to penetrate the agency with its own assets. According to Angleton's worldview, even the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s—which gave rise to enmity between the two Communist giants—was in reality a Communist disinformation operation. The split, he insisted, was merely a sham to lull the West into complacency. As Colby recalled: "Our concern over possible KGB penetration. . . . had so preoccupied us that we were devoting most of our time to protecting ourselves from the KGB and not enough to developing the new sources and operations that we needed to learn secret information about the Soviets and their allies."¹¹ A key question at the CIA became, according to Colby, "whether our operations were totally suspect, as Angleton held, or whether they were being hamstrung by overcautious suspicion."¹² Missing, in Colby's view, were aggressive activities to recruit Soviet intelligence sources to serve as CIA moles directed against Moscow, an aspiration that Angleton deemed feckless because all of the agency's attempts were likely to be discovered and turned against the United States by the wily KGB.

Another explanation for the dismissal is that Colby had become fed up with the fact that the agency's extremely important Israeli account was being handled almost exclusively by Angleton, who had strong ties to Israel that dated back to friendships he had developed with Jewish resistance leaders during the war against the Nazis. Moreover, Colby wanted to disperse authority for counterintelligence more widely throughout the agency, rather than have it concentrated in the hands of Angleton and his staff in the CIA's Directorate

10. See David C. Martin, *Wilderness of Mirrors* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), pp. 199, 213.

11. Colby and Forbath, *Honorable Men*, pp. 244–245.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 297.

of Operations (DO). As Colby later recalled, Angleton's "supersecretive style of operation had, at least in recent years, become incompatible with the one I believed essential."¹³

Probably the confluence of these factors is what prompted Colby to confront Angleton and send him into forced retirement. For several months, Angleton had managed to resist the DCI's attempts to remove him. Eventually, though, Colby concluded that either he or Angleton had to be in charge of the CIA's relations with Israel, so he moved more resolutely against him. Disgruntled, brooding, his pride injured, Angleton stepped down in December 1974, just as the CIA became engulfed in the Intelligence Wars.

The timing of Angleton's dismissal made it appear that he had become the CIA's scapegoat in response to the *Times* revelations about the agency's illegal surveillance activities against Vietnam War protesters, known as Operation CHAOS. Many assumed that Angleton's departure was tantamount to an admission of guilt for his involvement in the operation. Privately, though, Angleton blamed the CIA's Office of Security (OS) for the excesses of CHAOS that took place after Colby had transferred the operation to the OS in 1973.¹⁴ At the time of this transfer, Colby also took away from Angleton responsibility for liaison with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), leaving him with a significantly diminished counterintelligence staff.

Because I was already preparing for hearings on the Huston Plan (an illegal counterintelligence operation authorized by President Richard M. Nixon), Frederick A. O. "Fritz" Schwarz, Jr., the chief counsel of the Church Committee, asked me to assist John T. Elliff, a fellow staffer and head of our Task Force on the FBI, with the committee's examination of counterintelligence activities. Elliff was to look at the FBI, and my job was to examine the CIA's approach to counterintelligence and to prepare for a hearing in which Angleton would be the star witness. The new Angleton assignment led me to a series of lunches and interviews with him at the Army-Navy Club in downtown Washington, a favorite haunt of his at the time. We also went for drives in his top-of-the-line black Mercedes sedan on a road that bordered the C&O Canal, traveling from Georgetown in the District of Columbia into the Maryland countryside.¹⁵

In preparation for this daunting assignment—the lamb sent to interrogate the lion—I did all the research I could on the mysterious counter-

13. *Ibid.*, p. 334.

14. James Angleton, interview, Army-Navy Club, Washington, DC, 12 August 1975. See also Colby and Forbath, *Honorable Men*, p. 396.

15. He told me that he drove the seemingly block-long Mercedes instead of a preferred Rolls-Royce because he did not think the agency's chief of CI should be "conspicuous." Perhaps he also found the brand name appealing: his mother's middle name was Mercedes.

intelligence staff, a unit Colby once referred to as the “most secret of Agency crannies.”¹⁶ I learned that, like Church, Angleton was from Boise, Idaho. He had studied at Yale University as an undergraduate before spending a year at Harvard Law School, as did Church a few years later. Church subsequently transferred to Stanford University to complete his legal studies, whereas Angleton abandoned the study of law altogether after his first year and joined the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), serving in London and later in Italy during World War II. (Church spent the war years as a U.S. Army intelligence officer in China.) After the war, Angleton joined the CIA in its early days and rapidly climbed to the position of counterintelligence chief. In 1954 Angleton used that post to start (in Colby’s words) an “unrelenting campaign” to reveal and frustrate the KGB’s operations against the United States.¹⁷

The stories about Angleton that floated around the offices of the Church Committee (where he was known as “Mother,” one of the many monikers that his CIA colleagues had invented for him over the years) summed to an impressive portrait.¹⁸ He was reputedly a world-class orchid grower, an expert on trout fishing who tied his own elaborate flies, an outstanding soccer player and golfer in college who was also proficient at tennis, and a prominent literary figure at Yale as the editor of the campus magazine *Furioso*. He had arranged visits to the university by leading writers, although he turned out to be a mediocre student.¹⁹ In the OSS, Angleton was an indefatigable counterintelligence officer, often sleeping in a bunk by his desk. Moving on to the CIA, he skillfully cultivated the friendship of a succession of prominent DCIs, including Walter Bedell Smith, Allen W. Dulles, and Richard Helms. Much of Angleton’s mystique stemmed from his encyclopedic memory of counterintelligence cases through the years. He could cite chapter and verse on the names, assignments, objectives, and personal lives of every significant Soviet intelligence officer who had served around the world since the beginning of the Cold War, and he knew the finest details of every counterintelligence case that involved foreign penetration operations aimed at the CIA. His Ivy League education, coupled with the impassioned intensity with

16. Colby and Forbath, *Honorable Men*, p. 314.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 243.

18. Once I got to know Angleton, he would call me periodically at my townhouse in Southwest Washington. One evening, my wife answered the telephone and, putting her hand over the receiver, called to me, “It’s Mother.” I thought she meant my own mother, and I answered the phone enthusiastically with a “Hi, Mom!” Silence. Then, “This is Jim Angleton.” With a red face on my end of the line, I spoke with him about plans for our next lunch and interview.

19. See Robin W. Winks, “The Theorist,” in Loch K. Johnson, ed., *Intelligence: Critical Concepts in Military, Strategic and Security Studies*, Vol. 3, *Counterintelligence: Shield for National Security Intelligence* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 115–161. Winks’s essay was originally published in his *Cloak and Gown: Scholars in the Secret War, 1939–1961* (New York: William Morrow, 1987), pp. 322–372.

which he could discuss these cases, added to the aura that no one knew better than he how to guard the United States against the machinations of foreign intelligence services.

Angleton's mystique was also linked with his reputation as a man of highly refined tastes, including his luxury automobile, his elegantly tailored British suits (he was said to be an Anglophile of the first order, a bent nurtured by three years as a teenager in the British public school Malvern College), the fine wine he drank, and the operatic music he listened to while traveling from his suburban home in Arlington, Virginia, to CIA headquarters. The entire trunk of his car was fitted with an elaborate sound system, designed and installed by NASA engineers he had befriended. I discovered as we motored along the C & O Canal that the system could flood the interior of the sedan with his favorite Italian arias, a language in which he was fluent (as he was in French). During his boyhood, Angleton had spent years in Milan with his family, after his father purchased the Italian subsidiary of the National Cash Register Company. If ever there were a Renaissance man, the erstwhile counterintelligence chief seemed to fit the bill.

On a darker side, my research indicated that Angleton had also been a key figure in the Huston Plan of June 1970, targeting protesters in the anti-Vietnam War movement. Specifically, he had been in charge of the CIA's Project HT Lingual from 1955 to 1973, an element of Operation CHAOS that involved the opening of first-class mail—a criminal offense. Project HT Lingual had been initiated long before the Huston Plan, with a request for presidential authority to allow CIA mail-opening, and it continued even after Nixon rescinded that authority in the latter half of 1970. Until Colby transferred these tasks to the CIA's Office of Security in 1973, the counterintelligence staff had been involved in the broader attempt through Operation CHAOS to address Nixon's concern (and President Lyndon B. Johnson's before him) about whether the antiwar movement was being funded or manipulated by the Soviet Union. The answer turned out to be no: the antiwar movement was homegrown, fueled by youthful opposition to U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.

Through a CIA liaison officer assigned to the Church Committee, I contacted Angleton in July 1975 and explained that I had been asked by the panel's chief counsel to explore his views on counterintelligence. A week later, we met for the first time at the Army-Navy Club, and in subsequent months we had lunch together on several more occasions. In person, he reminded me of the photographs I had seen of the poet T. S. Eliot (whom Angleton had gotten to know in London during the Second World War). Angleton was lean, stooped, dark-complexioned, grim, and dressed in a somber, British-

tailored, three-piece business suit.²⁰ He selected a remote table in the dining room situated beneath a ceiling speaker that emitted pop music—including, now and then, themes from a variety of James Bond movies. “That awful noise will mask our talk,” he said to me in a furtive, whispery voice.

After we ordered lunch, I half expected him to pull from his pocket a deck of Tarot cards. Instead he began the conversation by explaining to me the central task of counterintelligence; namely, to construct a “wilderness of mirrors” (he took the phrase from T. S. Eliot’s poem “Gerontion”), in which the opponent would be confused and forever lost—exactly what he thought the KGB was achieving against the West. As he ate and drank with refined European manners, Angleton wasted no time launching into the details of some well-known counterintelligence cases from the past, beginning with Yuri Nosenko, a KGB officer who in 1962 offered to spy for the CIA and defected to the United States two years later.²¹ Now and then, he would interrupt his tutorial, offer a rare smile (all the more captivating for its rarity), and ask me something about my interests. For the most part, though, his obsession with the minutiae of counterintelligence ruled the day. As he spoke, his voice was low and flat. One never would have guessed he was from Idaho, except for an occasional “yep” for “yes” in response to some of my questions.

As he delved into past counterintelligence cases, everything he revealed seemed to suggest something concealed. The convoluted trail of spies and counterspies spun bewilderingly in my mind after listening to Angleton for a couple of hours. I have some appreciation for Colby’s verdict in his memoirs that Angleton’s “explanations were impossible to follow.”²² My conversations with him lacked all semblance of a linear narrative. Counterintelligence is a labyrinthine subject in itself, but Angleton had a way of making it even more obscure and opaque—the darkest cave within the shadow land of the CIA. To invoke a different metaphor from a book I wrote about the Church Committee: talking with Angleton was like trying to find a new planet through an earthbound telescope; it took constant probing, sensitivity to nuance, and a willingness to endure vast oceans of silence.²³ He might begin an intriguing and significant account of a counterintelligence operation, but then it would

20. A CIA historian, David Robarge, has examined a wide range of Angleton depictions from fictional and non-fictional accounts of the man, all painted in dark hues. See David Robarge, “Cunning Passages, Contrived Corridors: Wandering in the Angletonian Wilderness,” *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (December 2009), pp. 43–55.

21. For background on the Nosenko and other key counterintelligence cases, see Martin, *Wilderness of Mirrors*; Tom Mangold, *Cold Warrior* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991); and several excellent books by journalist David Wise, including *Molehunt* (New York: Random House, 1992).

22. Colby and Forbath, *Honorable Men*, p. 364.

23. This metaphor is from Johnson, *Season*, p. 82.

trail out like a vanishing comet and disappear into a black hole of ambiguity. To paraphrase Mark Twain, listening to Angleton for a half-hour could make you dizzy; listening to him for a whole hour would make you drunk.²⁴ Or as Colby once put it, Angleton's theories about Soviet intelligence operations could be "tortuous."²⁵

Moreover, just as he was well practiced at deceiving the Soviet Union, I was well aware he could deceive others. I understood that the CI chief might well view the Church Committee as just another foreign adversary. Indeed, since the recruitment of agents-in-place was a standard *modus operandi* in the discipline of counterintelligence, he might even try to recruit me. I was on guard. This attempt never came, but in our early meetings Angleton did probe constantly for information about the committee's activities and objectives—all of which I sidestepped. The staff was strictly prohibited from discussing committee matters with outsiders, and one talented staffer had already been fired for violating this important rule. Angleton eventually stopped trying to pump for information about the committee and instead settled into a pattern of tutoring me on classic counterintelligence cases. He perhaps calculated that at least I could be taught the value of this intelligence mission—an indispensable set of activities not to be interrupted by the dangerous distractions of a Senate inquiry.

Although Angleton was often indecipherable, some of his ideas were quite clear—if dated by stale rhetoric from the early years of the Cold War. After this first lunch and all the others, we would retire to overstuffed settees in the library of the Army-Navy Club, where old men—an assortment of retired admirals and generals, I assumed, although they were dressed in civilian clothing—either dozed (some rather loudly) or read newspapers. Once settled in the library, Angleton lit up a Merit cigarette and continued his tutorial, while (with his permission) I rapidly took verbatim notes. "Frank Church has never understood counterintelligence," he said one afternoon, needling me about my boss. "His innocence about the world exceeds that of an unborn child. Doesn't he realize the Soviets seek to destroy American intelligence? Moscow is behind most of the mischief in the world. What will it take to wake him up?" He chain-smoked Merits down to the filter, using the dying embers of one to light the next, which he extracted deftly from a vest pocket

24. Mark Twain, "Dinner Speech: General Grant's Grammar," in *Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, and Essays: 1952–1890* (New York: Library of America, 1967), p. 907. Twain's reference was to Matthew Arnold, the British poet and cultural critic. Former DCI and Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger has said that "listening to Jim [Angleton] was like looking at an Impressionist painting" (quoted in Mangold, *Cold Warrior*, p. 153). Cubism—or even better, surrealism—would be closer to the mark.

25. Colby and Forbath, *Honorable Men*, p. 364.

in his suit. Brushing aside my attempts at rebuttal, he went on: “Church’s objective is transparent: to fashion a statutory straitjacket for the Agency. Whose payroll is he on: KGB? GRU [Soviet military intelligence]? Or perhaps the Cubans have recruited him. I have a photograph of your Senator playing basketball with Fidel in Cuba.”

I reminded Angleton that Church had simply been a member of a congressional delegation visiting Havana for a few days. All of the lawmakers met with Castro at his villa and shot a few hoops with him.

“I know. They are all as naïve as Church,” was his clipped response.

One afternoon in September, a few weeks before the Church Committee held its public hearing on counterintelligence, Angleton drank more than his usual two kirs with lunch. As was often the case, he seemed moody, even despondent. In the library, he ordered another kir and soon became highly agitated. “Moscow’s objective is the destruction of the Capitalist states,” he said, drawing deeply on a cigarette as he peered around the room. The only other person in the library was an elderly man with the features of a well-fed walrus. He slept soundly in a club chair on the other side of the room, his fingers laced across his ample girth, his mustache twitching now and then. I pulled a notepad out of my coat pocket and jotted down Angleton’s comments as he continued. “Each day the KGB tries to infiltrate the Western intelligence services,” he fumed, “and they have had great success. Soviet agents have been used by the Kremlin to steal secrets from the United States and I have no doubt there is a well-place mole in the Agency today. And now the KGB has been given even more aggressive instructions: to destroy the CIA by sowing disruption on the inside.”

Angleton leaned forward in his chair, his dark eyes staring at me for a while behind wide-rimmed, heavy eyeglasses. Then he asked: “And what has been at the center of the Kremlin’s strategy against the West?” I knew from experience that the question was rhetorical and that his answer would soon follow. “Deception,” he went on, “a strategy that has worked all too well against the gullible liberals in this country, in the media and in Congress.” The former CI chief spoke about the Soviet nemesis with such brio that it was hard to resist being caught up in his emotional rants. His eyes glowering, Angleton continued: “The purpose of Soviet deception operations is to destabilize and weaken members of NATO. The techniques used by the KGB are penetrations and ‘active measures’ [the Soviet term for covert action]. Psychological warfare is a key element of their strategy. In the West, we use deception in military combat; in Russia, it is an integral part of everyday national strategy.” I had heard all of this before during our previous meetings, and I was growing weary of the endless diatribes against Church and his committee, as well as Angleton’s repetitive theories on Soviet deception operations. At least,

though, the counterintelligence theories were more comprehensible than his tireless—and tiresome—harangues about Nosenko, Anatolii Golitsyn (another Soviet intelligence defector from the 1960s), and other bugbears of the Red Menace that dominated his thinking.

“The CIA has been the primary target of Soviet deception,” he said, now on his fourth kir. I had lost count of the cigarettes he had smoked since lunch. “The KGB feeds disinformation into our channels of intelligence collection, which is passed on to the analysts and then to key policymakers.” He blew smoke from the side of his mouth and finished off the drink. “Certain liberals on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee,” he resumed,

have rushed to support SALT [the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty], START [the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty], and all those other phony arms-control deals, denying all the time that the Russians cheat on every one of them. My staff has uncovered Soviet manipulations of telemetry data on SS-5s, SS-7s, and other Soviet missiles. The Kremlin routinely conceals new weapons systems and encrypts their telemetry. The Soviets continue to construct underground bunkers, subways, tunnels, and caves beneath Moscow and in other locations throughout Russia—all in violation of supposedly solemn treaties with the West.

He slouched back into his chair and stared at me in silence for a full minute. “How many senior officials at the CIA are a part of their efforts?” he finally asked. I just stared back at him for a while until he stood up abruptly, put on his black trench coat and black homburg (Angleton was Gothic before Gothic came into fashion), and marched out of the library without a word.

At our next lunch, he was in a more cheerful mood but was drinking kirs with even greater enthusiasm than before, to the point where his speech began to slur as we sat in the club library. Leaving CI tradecraft and recent Soviet intelligence ploys behind for the time being, he dredged up the history of his early days at the CIA. For the first and only time, he asked me to put away my notebook. Over the next hour, he reminisced about the 1950s, claiming he had helped with DO propaganda operations and the secret supply of weaponry to encourage an uprising against Communist rule in Hungary. This support, he insisted, had helped fuel the 1956 revolution, which led to the massacre of mainly young people in the streets of Budapest by Soviet tanks.²⁶ He seemed proud of this alleged support, but I could only wonder about the morality of encouraging revolution by implying, as Angleton claimed the DO

26. Charles Gati, drawing on declassified records of CIA operations in Hungary in the mid-1950s, has thoroughly debunked Angleton’s assertions about the Hungarian revolution, showing that they could not possibly be true. See Charles Gati, *Failed Illusions: Moscow, Washington, Budapest, and the 1956 Hungarian Revolt* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2006), pp. 94–96.

did, that the United States would come to the rescue of the insurgents once shots were fired.

He spoke, too, about the CIA's acquisition of a copy of Nikita Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" in 1956, which the Soviet leader had delivered to the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In its original (Angleton said it came from Israeli intelligence²⁷), the speech was already sharply critical of the prior Stalinist regime, but Angleton wanted to make the language even more damning of the Soviet system. The CI staff's adulterated version of the text was, Angleton told me, circulated in Eastern Europe—a claim that has been subsequently discredited by others who say this initiative was halted by higher CIA authorities.²⁸ Further, he hinted at having aided the Israel nuclear weapons program but remained vague about the details.²⁹ At the time, I was unable to verify such allegations and could not even confirm his take on the various counterintelligence cases he told me about. That would have required access to reams of classified documents, along with months of research. Even then, I am not sure what I would have concluded, because I knew that several CI experts in the CIA and the FBI had done just that and had issued sharply divergent opinions about the bona fides of Nosenko, Golitsyn, and others. Here was the true wilderness of mirrors: trying to determine the veracity of Soviet defectors.

Many of Angleton's stories that afternoon went far beyond counterintelligence. They amounted to covert action, which fell outside my Church Committee responsibilities—and, one would have thought, outside Angleton's duties as chief of counterintelligence. I mentioned his remarks to some of the committee staff working on covert action, but no one had any knowledge or evidence about these matters that might encourage them to take a closer look. Moreover, their plates were already full with a host of more immediate covert action inquiries (most notably related to Chile), as well as with their investigation into alleged CIA assassination plots overseas. I was snowed under, too, a plethora of tasks for the committee, including the preparation of other hearings, writing speeches for the chairman, and keeping him informed

27. Several accounts exist of how the CIA acquired the text of the Secret Speech. Of these, either a CIA source in Poland or the Israeli Mossad (which had its own sources in Poland) is the most plausible, but no solid confirmation of either version (or others) is available.

28. Seymour Hersh, "The Angleton Story," *The New York Times Magazine*, 25 June 1978, pp. 68–69; Colby and Forbath, *Honorable Men*, p. 133; John M. Crewdson, "The C.I.A.'s 3-Decade Effort to Mold the World's Views," *The New York Times*, 25 December 1977, p. A1; and Jerry D. Ennis, "Anatoli Golitsyn: Long-time CIA Agent?" *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 21 (February 2006), p. 41.

29. Following Angleton's death, a U.S. journalist could conclude (without details or a specific source) only that "Angleton reportedly aided Israel in obtaining technical nuclear data." Glenn Frankel, "The Secret Ceremony," *The Washington Post*, 5 December 1987, p. B1.

about our staff research findings across the board. Time was running out on the life of our panel, with the final reports due in early 1976. No one was eager to take up new lines of inquiry. The validity of Angleton's kir-laced tales would have to await probes by others in the future.

A couple of weeks before the Church Committee's public hearing on counterintelligence, my assignment was to interrogate Angleton under oath for the record, so that the senators who would be asking him questions on live television would know in advance what his answers were likely to be. Such choreography is standard practice on Capitol Hill. Lawmakers do not want to be blindsided during a hearing, especially one that is broadcast on national television. On 12 September, I sat down with Angleton in a staff office building across the street from the Dirksen Senate Office Building. We were joined by a couple of aides from the Church Committee and a Senate "reporter" who kept a verbatim record of the proceedings. Angleton was accompanied by one of his assistants and by CIA counsel. Most of my questions had to do with HT Lingual, Operation CHAOS, counterintelligence methodology, and a few points about well-known CI cases, especially Nosenko and Golitsyn. After more than two hours of intense back-and-forth, both of us were running out of steam, and I wound down the session with a final question: Was the CIA bound by all of the government's overt orders, or might the agency be given one set of covert directives while the government's public agencies (say, the Department of State) operated under another overt, and possibly even contradictory, set of directives?

I had in mind the Church Committee's public hearing the previous week that had examined the CIA's storehouse of lethal chemicals, such as shellfish toxin and cobra venom—part of the agency's assassination capability. This lingering storehouse of substances violated a presidential directive from President Nixon to destroy such materials. More broadly, I was thinking of covert action. I presumed that with these kinds of operations the CIA on some occasions might be secretly directed by the White House to undermine a foreign government, while at the same time diplomats in the State Department might be attempting to improve U.S. ties with the regime (at least temporarily).

The question was large, and we needed more time to probe its dimensions. I should not have brought it up so late in the deposition. I expected Angleton to say something to the effect that this sometimes happens, although only with the clear knowledge and approval of White House officials and intelligence managers, and that such instances would be rare and closely monitored by overseers. Instead, as he was putting his papers together, Angleton replied, "It is inconceivable that a secret intelligence arm of the government has to comply with all the overt orders of the government." I thought I knew what he meant: in unusual circumstances that required some

deception, the CIA might be told to carry out Operation X even though the State Department (for example) might be offering public assurances that the United States would never engage in such an operation. Years later when he looked back at this episode, the historian Robin Winks of Yale University suggested a similar interpretation of the former CI chief's off-hand remark: "Angleton was saying that there might well be overt orders from 'the government' . . . which would be countermanded by covert ones."³⁰

Yet when this prehearing testimony was distributed to Church Committee senators and staff members the next day, some read these words as an arrogant statement that the CIA was above the law or above White House and congressional supervision—just as demonstrated in the previous hearing on the agency's continued possession of lethal substances regardless of a presidential directive to destroy them. I had not anticipated this turn of events, nor had I expected that one of the senators would latch onto this comment as a centerpiece of his questioning during the hearing.

As the day of the counterintelligence hearing approached, the media quoted Angleton as saying that by cooperating with the congressional and White House investigations "some officials"—a thinly veiled reference to Colby—had violated the sacrosanct intelligence obligation to protect "sources and methods." Angleton told me that he might refuse to appear as a witness. I replied that if he refused to appear he would surely be subpoenaed by the committee. Indeed, at the chairman's request, the committee approved a subpoena two days before the hearing just in case it would be needed. But at the last minute, Angleton told me he would come to Capitol Hill. He would now have a chance to confront the inquisitors whom he so disliked and whom he had criticized Colby for being too friendly toward.

The curtain rose on the CIA counterintelligence hearing at 10:00 A.M. on the morning of 24 September 1975 in Room 318 of the Russell Senate Office Building, known by insiders as the Senate Caucus Room and the site of such major historical events as the hearings on Pearl Harbor in the 1940s, the McCarthy hearings in the 1950s, and the Iran-contra investigation in the 1980s. Suddenly thrust into public prominence after thirty years with a concealed identity, Angleton looked dazed and acutely uncomfortable in front of all the bright lights and television cameras. He sat bent over in his chair, a scowl on his face, his dark-clad body curled into a question mark, his right hand bending an ear forward so he could hear his interrogators better in the crowded Senate Caucus Room.

Senator Church gavelled the session to order and observed that the CIA had illegally opened the mail of Hubert H. Humphrey, Richard Nixon (when

30. Winks, "The Theorist," p. 119.

he was in Congress), Linus Pauling, John Steinbeck, the Ford Foundation, Harvard University, and the Rockefeller Foundation, among many other individuals and groups, and that when Nixon rescinded the Huston Plan that had authorized this and other improper operations in 1970, the CIA had continued its mail-opening program anyway, leaving the president with the false impression that domestic spying had been fully terminated.³¹ Church asked Angleton about this chain of events, and what followed was this exchange between two men who had little more in common than an Idaho birthplace and a year at Harvard Law School:

Angleton: Mr. Chairman, I don't think anyone would have hesitated to inform the President if he had at any moment asked for a review of intelligence operations.

Church: That is what he did do. That is the very thing he asked Huston to do. That is the very reason that these agencies got together to make recommendations to him, and when they made their recommendations, they misrepresented the facts.

Angleton: I was referring, sir, to a much more restricted forum.

Church: I am referring to the mail, and what I have said is solidly based upon the evidence. The President wanted to be informed. He wanted recommendations. He wanted to decide what should be done, and he was misinformed. Not only was he misinformed, but when he reconsidered authorizing the opening of the mail five days later and revoked it, the CIA did not pay the slightest bit of attention to him, did it—the Commander-in-Chief as you say?

Angleton: I have no satisfactory answer for that.

Church: You have no satisfactory answer?

Angleton: No, I do not.

Church: I do not think there is a satisfactory answer, because having revoked the authority the CIA went ahead with the program. So that the Commander-in-Chief is not the Commander-in-Chief at all. He is just a problem. You do not want to inform him in the first place because he might say no. That is the truth of it. And when he did say no, you disregarded it. And then you called him the Commander-in-Chief.

Church had won a prestigious debating medal as a student at Stanford University and was a superb public speaker. Angleton was no match for him in this kind of exchange. Furthermore, Church was accustomed not only to debate but to crowds, public hearings, television lights, and cameras. For the reclusive Angleton, however, this was alien territory. He admitted that the mail-

31. U.S. Congress, Senate, Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee), "Huston Plan," in *Hearings on Intelligence Activities*, Vol. 2, 94th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1976, pp. 52–93.

opening was illegal, but he tried in a halting manner to defend the program anyway. “From a counterintelligence point of view,” he argued, moving his hand from his bent ear to his eyes as a shade against the harsh klieg lights in the caucus room, “it was vitally important to know everything possible about contacts between U.S. citizens and Communist countries.” In our Army-Navy Club meetings, Angleton had said to me that the CIA had opened the mail of only a fraction of letter-writers in the United States—some 215,000 instances. “That represents about 0.001 percent of the American population,” he stressed, “and it included people who were involved in criminal fraternization with the enemy.” Now, in the public hearing, he lamented that “the nature of the threat” posed by the Soviet Union was insufficiently appreciated, and he shot back at Church: “When I look at the map today and see the weakness of power of this country, that is what shocks me.”

Senator Robert B. Morgan, a Democrat from North Carolina and former state attorney general, told Angleton that what shocked him was the violation of individual rights represented by the mail-opening program. Another former state attorney general, Senator Walter F. Mondale from Minnesota, joined in the fray. He observed that the White House “talking paper” used by President Nixon at the time of the Huston Plan revealed an “enormous, unrestricted paranoid fear about the American people.” That paper, prepared by young White House aide Tom Charles Huston for use by the president in his meeting with intelligence directors to launch what became known as the Huston Plan, stated that

hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Americans—mostly under 30—are determined to destroy our society. . . . [O]ur people—perhaps as a reaction to the excesses of the McCarthy era—are unwilling to admit the possibility that their children could wish to destroy their country. This is particularly true of the media and the academic community.³²

In response to Senator Mondale, Angleton stated, “It was not, in my view, paranoia.”

Senator Richard S. Schweiker, a Republican from Pennsylvania, zeroed in on my final question to Angleton posed during the prehearing staff deposition. He asked whether Angleton had actually said that U.S. intelligence agencies did not have to comply with all the overt orders of the government.³³

“Well, if it is accurate,” Angleton replied—and it was, as recorded word-

32. Tom Charles Huston, “Presidential Talking Paper,” Oval Office meeting with J. Edgar Hoover, Richard Helms, Lt. Gen. Donald Bennett (Defense Intelligence Agency), and Adm. Noel Gayler (NSA), 5 June 1970 (declassified 28 February 1975), in Church Committee papers, “Security/FBI,” Container Number 12-1.

33. For accounts of this exchange, see Johnson, *Season*, pp. 86–88; Mangold, *Cold Warrior*, p. 351; and Winks, “The Theorist,” pp. 118–120.

by-word by the Senate stenographer, “it should not have been said. . . . I would say I had been rather imprudent in making those remarks.” When Senator Church entered into this cross-examination, Angleton replied, “I am sorry, sir, but it does not necessarily represent my views. . . . I withdraw the statement . . . the entire speculation should not have been indulged in.”

That was the extent of Angleton’s defense, and it came across as insufficient, even lame. He could have calmly explained what he had meant, along the lines of Winks’s later interpretation, but the shock of the public hearings seemed to have dulled Angleton’s capacity to engage in rebuttal.³⁴ He had evidently decided that the best strategy was to display some degree of contrition and hope for an early end to this public spectacle.

I felt some personal distress at the time that my questioning had led to Angleton’s humiliation. I thought of all the fascinating discussions we had had about counterintelligence and, less formally, about poetry, jazz, and literature; his years in Italy, his family; his hobbies of orchid-growing, fly-fishing, and photography. Angleton was a remarkable individual in so many ways, and no matter how many mistakes he may have made, he had served his country for more than thirty years to the best of his ability. During his tenure as CI chief, no Soviet mole had been able to penetrate the CIA, unlike the rash of traitors who gained a foothold in the agency in the 1980s and 1990s when counterintelligence was given less close attention. Now here he was: an object of ridicule. Well deserved, too, his critics would no doubt reply, pointing to the illegal mail-opening; his lingering belief in the Sino-Soviet schism as merely a deception operation against the West; the Lygren affair, the “HONETOL” investigations, and a host of other wrong-minded CI operations; his zealous alliance with Golitsyn; the poor treatment of Nosenko; and many other errors of counterintelligence that had tragic outcomes for the parade of individuals wrongly accused of disloyalty.³⁵ These mistakes warranted sharp criticism.

Yet lost in the critique against Angleton were the many good things he had done to emphasize the importance of counterintelligence at the CIA. Lost sight of, too, was the value to U.S. intelligence of his contacts throughout Europe and in Israel and his effective liaison ties with counterintelligence officials in the FBI—even when for a time in the 1960s FBI Director J. Edgar

34. During a recent conference on the topic of Angleton, CBS newsman David Martin, who covered the Church Committee proceedings in 1975, said during a panel discussion that Angleton told him after the hearing he had been on medication that day to help ensure he would not have to leave for the bathroom in the middle of the hearing and that the medication had affected his ability to respond well to questioning. See the video record of “Moles, Defectors, and Deceptions: James Angleton and His Influence on U.S. Counterintelligence,” conference sponsored by Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and the Georgetown University Center for Security Studies, Washington, DC, 29 March 2012.

35. See Martin, *Wilderness of Mirrors*; and Mangold, *Cold Warrior*.

Hoover and DCI Helms refused to speak to one another. Lost was all recognition of his personal charm and impressive erudition. As for our hearing, Angleton could have been legitimately grilled on a host of subjects, but the question about overt-covert directives was way down the list of importance in my book—and easily defensible by Angleton in less stressful circumstances. Or so I presumed. I was astounded both by Senator Schweiker's elevation of this subject to a status of top billing in the hearing and by Angleton's feeble reply.

A few days before the hearing, Angleton had complained to me over lunch: "The country is going to hell; there is no interest in national security these days, and your Committee is a manifestation of this." I can remember thinking about all the time I had been spending with him, as well as with Tom Charles Huston and former DCI Richard Helms, among others. They were not evil men by any stretch of the imagination, but they did have a more pronounced fear of "the enemy" than did most people. For Huston, the enemy had been the young antiwar protesters with their scraggly hair and tattered-demotion garb. For Angleton, the enemy was the KGB and other Communist intelligence services for whom the Cold War was a zero-sum game. "It is the idea of the enemy," former Attorney General Ramsey Clark once wrote, "the bad man, the sinister force that we use to deny freedom."³⁶ Or as Senator Mondale wrote in a retrospective on the origins of illegal government activities at home: "The lesson of American history is that, in threatening times, fear can overtake our better judgment . . . We have strayed from our values time and again in our history, always in times of fear, and we were almost always ashamed of ourselves when we recovered our senses."³⁷ The Church Committee found that it was also a matter of intelligence officials failing to consider the deeper, constitutional implications of their acts. I doubt that Angleton, in his well-intended efforts to fight Communism, had sufficiently considered the harm he might be inflicting on America's form of government.

A few weeks after his ordeal on Capitol Hill, Angleton publicly berated the Church Committee for "a type of McCarthyite hearing in which the denigration of the intelligence community was its goal."³⁸ I presumed that this would be the end of my visits with him, which was a disappointment. I had been learning a lot from Angleton (although I always had my radar on for his

36. Ramsey Clark, Foreword to Allan Reitman, ed., *The Pulse of Freedom* (New York: Norton, 1975), p. 18.

37. Walter F. Mondale with David Hage, *The Good Fight: A Life in Liberal Politics* (New York: Scribner, 2010), p. 136.

38. See Jay Shellely, "Former Top Spymaster Has Bitter Words for Harsh Critic of the Cloak and Dagger," *Lewiston Morning Tribune*, 6 June 1976, p. A5. (Angleton gave the interview to the Idaho newspaper while on a visit to the state.) He had been expressing similar sentiments around Washington, DC, ever since the Church Committee's counterintelligence hearing.

excesses). Moreover, I had developed an affection for him, as one might a favorite worldly uncle. And, as a neophyte to the subject of counterintelligence, I had been grateful for his patience with my endless questions about this arcane field. So I would miss my meetings with him.

However, in early 1976 he invited me back to the Army-Navy Club, I guess because he could at least verbally throttle me as a surrogate for Senator Church. After lunch, we adjourned to the library as usual and, although he was drinking less that day, he nonetheless became agitated as he reflected on the basting he had received at the hands of Senator Church and his colleagues. Angleton compared the investigation to the pillaging of intelligence services in countries that had been overrun and occupied by a foreign power. "Only we have been occupied by Congress," he said angrily, "with our files rifled, our officials humiliated, and our agents exposed." This happened, he concluded, because of an "impotent executive" that had failed to "carry out its constitutional responsibility to protect the nation's secrets." As the afternoon sun began to wane, I walked with him to his Mercedes. "Let me tell you something," he said, as he slipped behind the wheel, "Washington is a jungle."

When the Church Committee presented its final report in May 1976, Angleton responded with a critique published in a conservative newsletter, deploring the "now shaky and harassed CIA" and "the straitjacket Senator Church and the Committee's staff have brazenly tailored for it." He conceded that the intelligence agencies "did engage in some illegal and ill-advised operations," but he went on to argue that "these were by no means altogether reprehensible when weighed in light of the national security considerations prevailing at the time."³⁹ A month later, he told an Idaho newspaper reporter that the damage wrought by the Church Committee was "very far reaching" and that Senator Church had been "dishonest and demagogic." During the early days of the inquiry of 1975, the senator had become concerned about what seemed to him to be a pattern of agency disregard for supervision by the White House and the Congress, as illustrated by the shellfish toxin hearing and the committee's examination of documents on CIA assassination plots.

39. James Angleton and Charles J. V. Murphy, "On the Separation of Church and State," in *American Cause, Special Report* (Washington, DC: American Cause, June 1976), p. 2. Most of the sections on counterintelligence in the Church Committee final papers remain classified and are stored in a special section of the National Archives. The few paragraphs in the public *Final Report* devoted to CIA counterintelligence simply warn of the risks involved in what appeared to be less of an emphasis placed on this mission in the aftermath of the Angleton excesses. Angleton's successor, George T. Kalaris, a bright, tough-minded individual, had little experience in counterintelligence but possessed a warmer personality than Angleton and proved to be an outstanding leader in many ways. He cleaned up Angleton's chaotic CI filing system, so important to this tradecraft, and he brought a fresh sense of responsibility and openness to the agency's counterintelligence staff. The CI mission, though, had a diminished profile at the CIA until 1994, when the discovery of DO traitor Aldrich H. Ames renewed attention to its importance.

On a Sunday television talk show, Church referred to the CIA as a “rogue elephant.” In his newspaper interview, Angleton said that “history will show he [Church] was the rogue elephant.”⁴⁰

I never saw Angleton again, although he telephoned me now and then over the next several years to fulminate about the erosion of security in the United States. I had moved south in 1979 to take up an academic post at the University of Georgia, and one afternoon in 1987 Angleton rang me with a longer-than-usual diatribe against Church, who had passed away three years earlier from pancreatic cancer. He rambled on for a half hour about the naïveté of the panels that had investigated intelligence in 1975 and how they had harmed national security. He included the Rockefeller Commission, which was just as hard on improper counterintelligence programs as we were, as if that group had been a hotbed of radicals, with such conservatives among its membership as future president Ronald Reagan and former Navy admiral Lyman L. Lemnitzer. Just as my patience was about to run out, Angleton suddenly ended the conversation with the comment, “Remember, it ain’t over ‘til the fat lady sings. Ciao.” I have no idea what Angleton meant by that tired expression. Perhaps it was his uncharacteristically trite way of saying that eventually the merits of his unyielding struggle against Soviet penetration operations would be acknowledged.

A few weeks later, on 12 May 1987, James Angleton died of lung cancer at age 69. He was buried in Morris Hill Cemetery in Boise, Idaho, not far from the gravesite of Senator Frank Church.

40. Shelledy, “Former Top Spymaster,” p. A4.