

# The CIA and journalism

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**Operation Mockingbird** was a secret Central Intelligence Agency campaign to influence domestic and foreign media beginning in the 1950s.

The activities, extent and even the existence of the CIA project remain in dispute: the operation was first called Mockingbird in Deborah Davis' 1979 book, *Katharine the Great: Katharine Graham and her Washington Post Empire*. But Davis' book, alleging that the media had been recruited (infiltrated) by the CIA for propaganda purposes, was itself controversial and has since been shown to have had a number of erroneous assertions.<sup>[1]</sup> More evidence of Mockingbird's existence emerged in the 2007 memoir *American Spy: My Secret History in the CIA, Watergate and Beyond*, by convicted Watergate "plumber" E. Howard Hunt and *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* by Hugh Wilford (2008).<sup>[2]</sup>

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## History

In 1948, Frank Wisner was appointed director of the Office of Special Projects (OSP). Soon afterwards OSP was renamed the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC). This became the espionage and counter-intelligence branch of the Central Intelligence Agency. Wisner was told to create an organization that concentrated on "propaganda, economic warfare; preventive direct action, including sabotage, anti-sabotage, demolition and evacuation measures; subversion against hostile states, including assistance to underground resistance groups, and support of indigenous anti-Communist elements in threatened countries of the free world."<sup>[3]</sup>

Later that year Wisner established Mockingbird, a program to influence the domestic and foreign media. Wisner recruited Philip Graham from *The Washington Post* to run the project within the industry. According to Deborah Davis in *Katharine the Great*; "By the early 1950s, Wisner 'owned' respected members of *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, CBS and other communications vehicles."<sup>[4]</sup> Wisner referred to this apparatus as a "Mighty Wurlitzer", referencing the theater organ capable of controlling diverse pipes, instruments, and sound effects from a central console.<sup>[5]</sup>

In 1951, Allen W. Dulles persuaded Cord Meyer to join the CIA. However, there is evidence that he was

recruited several years earlier and had been spying on the liberal organizations he had been a member of in the later 1940s.<sup>[6]</sup> According to Deborah Davis, Meyer became Mockingbird's "principal operative".<sup>[7]</sup>

In 1977, *Rolling Stone* alleged that one of the most important journalists under the control of Operation Mockingbird was Joseph Alsop, whose articles appeared in over 300 different newspapers. Other journalists alleged by *Rolling Stone Magazine* to have been willing to promote the views of the CIA included Stewart Alsop (*New York Herald Tribune*), Ben Bradlee (*Newsweek*), James Reston (*New York Times*), Charles Douglas Jackson (*Time Magazine*), Walter Pincus (*Washington Post*), William C. Baggs (*The Miami News*), Herb Gold (*The Miami News*) and Charles Bartlett (*Chattanooga Times*).<sup>[8]</sup> According to Nina Burleigh (*A Very Private Woman*), these journalists sometimes wrote articles that were commissioned by Frank Wisner. The CIA also provided them with classified information to help them with their work.<sup>[9]</sup>

After 1953, the network was overseen by Allen W. Dulles, director of the Central Intelligence Agency. By this time Operation Mockingbird had a major influence over 25 newspapers and wire agencies. These organizations were run by people with well-known right-wing views such as William Paley (CBS), Henry Luce (*Time* and *Life Magazine*), Arthur Hays Sulzberger (*New York Times*), Alfred Friendly (managing editor of the *Washington Post*), Jerry O'Leary (*Washington Star*), Hal Hendrix (*Miami News*), Barry Bingham, Sr., (*Louisville Courier-Journal*), James Copley (Copley News Services) and Joseph Harrison (*Christian Science Monitor*).<sup>[8]</sup>

The Office of Policy Coordination (OPC) was funded by siphoning of funds intended for the Marshall Plan. Some of this money was used to bribe journalists and publishers. Frank Wisner was constantly looking for ways to help convince the public of the dangers of communism. In 1954, Wisner arranged for the funding of the Hollywood production of *Animal Farm*, the animated allegory based on the book written by George Orwell.<sup>[10]</sup>

According to Alex Constantine (*Mockingbird: The Subversion Of The Free Press By The CIA*), in the 1950s, "some 3,000 salaried and contract CIA employees were eventually engaged in propaganda efforts". Wisner was also able to restrict newspapers from reporting about certain events. For example, the CIA plots to overthrow the governments of Iran (See: Operation Ajax) and Guatemala (See: Operation PBSUCCESS).<sup>[11]</sup>

Thomas Braden, head of the International Organizations Division (IOD), played an important role in Operation Mockingbird. Many years later he revealed his role in these events:

"If the director of CIA wanted to extend a present, say, to someone in Europe—a Labour leader—suppose he just thought, This man can use fifty thousand dollars, he's working well and doing a good job - he could hand it to him and never have to account to anybody... There was simply no limit to the money it could spend and no limit to the people it could hire and no limit to the activities it could decide were necessary to conduct the war—the secret war.... It was a multinational. Maybe it was one of the first. Journalists were a target, labor unions a particular target—that was one of the activities in which the communists spent the most money."<sup>[12]</sup>

## **Part of the Directorate for Plans**

In August 1952, the Office of Policy Coordination and the Office of Special Operations (the espionage division) were merged under the Deputy Director for Plans (DDP). Frank Wisner became head of this new organization and Richard Helms became his chief of operations. Mockingbird was now the responsibility of the DDP.<sup>[13]</sup>

J. Edgar Hoover became jealous of the CIA's growing power. He described the OPC as "Wisner's gang of weirdos" and began carrying out investigations into their past. It did not take him long to discover that some of them had been active in left-wing politics in the 1930s. This information was passed to Joseph McCarthy who

started making attacks on members of the OPC. Hoover also gave McCarthy details of an affair that Frank Wisner had with Princess Caradja in Romania during the war. Hoover claimed that Caradja was a Soviet agent.<sup>[14]</sup>

Joseph McCarthy also began accusing other senior members of the CIA as being security risks. McCarthy claimed that the CIA was a "sinkhole of communists", and claimed he intended to root out a hundred of them. One of his first targets was Cord Meyer, who was still working for Operation Mockingbird. In August, 1953, Richard Helms, Wisner's deputy at the OPC, told Meyer that Joseph McCarthy had accused him of being a communist. The Federal Bureau of Investigation added credibility to the accusation by announcing it was unwilling to give Meyer "security clearance". However, the FBI refused to explain what evidence they had against Meyer. Allen W. Dulles and Frank Wisner both came to his defense and refused to permit an FBI interrogation of Meyer.<sup>[15]</sup>

Joseph McCarthy did not realize what he was taking on. Wisner unleashed Mockingbird on McCarthy. Drew Pearson, Joe Alsop, Jack Anderson, Walter Lippmann and Ed Murrow all engaged in intensely negative coverage of McCarthy, whose political reputation was permanently damaged by the press coverage orchestrated by Wisner.<sup>[16]</sup>

## **Guatemala**

Mockingbird was very active during the overthrow of President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán in Guatemala during Operation PBSUCCESS. Allen W. Dulles was even able to keep left-wing journalists from travelling to Guatemala, including Sydney Gruson of the *New York Times*.<sup>[17]</sup>

Even in the wake of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles' 1952 presidential campaign pledge to "roll back the Iron Curtain", American covert action operations came under scrutiny almost as soon as Dwight Eisenhower was inaugurated in 1953. He soon set up an evaluation operation called Solarium, which had three committees playing analytical games to see which plans of action should be continued. In 1955, President Dwight D. Eisenhower established the 5412 Committee in order to keep more of a check on the CIA's covert activities. The committee (also called the Special Group) included the CIA director, the national security adviser, and the deputy secretaries at State and Defence and had the responsibility to decide whether covert actions were "proper" and in the national interest. It was also decided to include Richard B. Russell, chairman of the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee. However, as Allen W. Dulles was later to admit, because of "plausible deniability" planned covert actions were not referred to the 5412 Committee.

Eisenhower became concerned about CIA covert activities and in 1956 appointed David K. E. Bruce as a member of the President's Board of Consultants on Foreign Intelligence Activities (PBCFIA). Eisenhower asked Bruce to write a report on the CIA. It was presented to Eisenhower on 20 December 1956. Bruce argued that the CIA's covert actions were "responsible in great measure for stirring up the turmoil and raising the doubts about us that exists in many countries in the world today." Bruce was also highly critical of Mockingbird. He argued: "what right have we to go barging around in other countries buying newspapers and handing money to opposition parties or supporting a candidate for this, that, or the other office."<sup>[18]</sup>

After Richard M. Bissell, Jr. lost his post as Deputy Director for Plans in 1962, Tracy Barnes took over the running of Mockingbird. According to Evan Thomas (*The Very Best Men*) Barnes planted editorials about political candidates who were regarded as pro-CIA.

## **First exposure**

In 1964, Random House published *Invisible Government* by David Wise and Thomas Ross. The book exposed the role the CIA was playing in foreign policy. This included the CIA coups in Guatemala (Operation PBSUCCESS) and Iran (Operation Ajax) and the Bay of Pigs Invasion. It also revealed the CIA's attempts to overthrow President Sukarno in Indonesia and the covert operations taking place in Laos and Vietnam. The CIA considered buying up the entire printing of *Invisible Government* but this idea was rejected when Random House pointed out that if this happened they would have to print a second edition.<sup>[3]</sup>

John McCone, the new director of the CIA, also attempted to stop Edward Yates from making a documentary on the CIA for the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). This attempt at censorship failed and NBC went ahead and broadcast this critical documentary.

In June, 1965, Desmond FitzGerald was appointed as head of the Directorate for Plans. He now took charge of Mockingbird. At the end of 1966 FitzGerald found out that *Ramparts*, a left-wing publication, had discovered that the CIA had been secretly funding the National Student Association.<sup>[19]</sup> FitzGerald ordered Edgar Applewhite to organize a campaign against the magazine. Applewhite later told Evan Thomas for his book, *The Very Best Men*: "I had all sorts of dirty tricks to hurt their circulation and financing. The people running Ramparts were vulnerable to blackmail. We had awful things in mind, some of which we carried off."<sup>[20]</sup>

This dirty tricks campaign failed to stop Ramparts publishing this story in March 1967. The article, written by Sol Stern, was entitled *NSA and the CIA*. As well as reporting CIA funding of the National Student Association it exposed the whole system of anti-Communist front organizations in Europe, Asia, and South America. It named Cord Meyer as a key figure in this campaign. This included the funding of the literary journal *Encounter*.<sup>[12]</sup>

In May 1967, Thomas Braden responded to this by publishing an article entitled, "I'm Glad the CIA is Immoral", in the *Saturday Evening Post*, where he defended the activities of the International Organizations Division unit of the CIA. Braden also confessed that the activities of the CIA had to be kept secret from Congress. As he pointed out in the article: "In the early 1950s, when the Cold War was really hot, the idea that Congress would have approved many of our projects was about as likely as the John Birch Society's approving Medicare."<sup>[21]</sup>

Meyer's role in Operation Mockingbird was further exposed in 1972 when he was accused of interfering with the publication of a book, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* by Alfred W. McCoy. The book was highly critical of the CIA's dealings with the drug traffic in Southeast Asia. The publisher, who leaked the story, had been a former colleague of Meyer's when he was a liberal activist after the war.<sup>[22]</sup>

## Church Committee investigations

Further details of Operation Mockingbird were revealed as a result of the Frank Church investigations (Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities) in 1975. According to the Congress report published in 1976:

"The CIA currently maintains a network of several hundred foreign individuals around the world who provide intelligence for the CIA and at times attempt to influence opinion through the use of covert propaganda. These individuals provide the CIA with direct access to a large number of newspapers and periodicals, scores of press services and news agencies, radio and television stations, commercial book publishers, and other foreign media outlets."

Church argued that misinforming the world cost American taxpayers an estimated \$265 million a year.<sup>[23]</sup>

In February 1976, George H. W. Bush, the recently appointed Director of the CIA, announced a new policy:

"Effective immediately, the CIA will not enter into any paid or contract relationship with any full-time or part-time news correspondent accredited by any U.S. news service, newspaper, periodical, radio or television network or station." However, he added that the CIA would continue to "welcome" the voluntary, unpaid cooperation of journalists.<sup>[24]</sup>

## "Family Jewels" Report

According to the "Family Jewels" report, released by the National Security Archive on June 26, 2007, during the period from March 12, 1963 and June 15, 1963, the CIA installed telephone taps on two Washington-based news reporters.

## Books

- Joseph J. Trento, *The Secret History of the CIA*, Random House, October 2001, ISBN 978-0-7615-2562-2 ISBN 0-7615-2562-9

## Related SourceWatch Resources

- manufactured journalism
- propaganda

## External links

- The Global Intelligence News Portal: CIA: Use of journalists (<http://mprofaca.cro.net/ciapress1.html>)
- Daniel Brandt , "Journalism and the CIA: The Mighty Wurlitzer (<http://www.namebase.org/news17.html>)", NameBase NewsLine, No. 17, April-June 1997.
- Carl Bernstein, "The CIA & The Media (<http://mprofaca.cro.net/ciapress1.html>)", *Rolling Stone*, October 27, 1977. (extract)
- The Senate Intelligence Oversight Committee, "Written testimony of John M. Deutch, Director of Central Intelligence: Agency Use of Journalists, Clergy, Peace Corps and Volunteers for Intelligence Operations (<http://www.fortunecity.com/meltingpot/park/1097/ciacrlrgy.html>)", July 17, 1996.
- Kate Houghton, "Subverting Journalism: Reporters and the CIA (<http://www.cpj.org/attacks96/sreports/cia.html>)", Committee to Protect Journalists, 1996.
- Robert Parry, "Money, Media & the Mess in America (<http://www.consortiumnews.com/2005/012805.html>)", *Consortium News*, January 28, 2005.
- Jim Boyd, "Editorial Pages: Why Courage is Hard to Find," (<http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=100453>) *Nieman Reports*, Spring 2006.

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