A Lost Opportunity to Learn Lessons from the Cultural Cold War

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Thumbing through the June edition of Washington Lawyer, I noticed the headline “Worth Reading: When the Fourth Estate Collaborates with the State.” The review called attention to a recent book, “Finks: How the CIA Tricked the World’s Best Writers,” by Joel Whitney, that it said addressed important moral and ethical questions that arise when journalists “collude” with the government in a propaganda war against a foreign enemy. In this case, the enemy was Soviet Communism during the Cold War. As it happens, I and some colleagues at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas-Austin are designing a new graduate course on covert action as a historical, current and future tool for U.S. presidents in implementing foreign policy. So I was intrigued.

The “Cultural Cold War” is a useful, indeed clever, label for the broad range of CIA covert activities undertaken to blunt the social, cultural and intellectual appeal of Moscow’s brand of Communism in war-ravaged European societies after World War II. Over the succeeding decades of the Cold War, the competition between the U.S. and the USSR for “hearts and minds” spread from Europe to Asia, Africa and Latin America. It was a struggle to win over and retain cultural and social elites in many different places, a genuine war of ideas and ideology. The CIA’s historical role merits careful, objective exploration, including by students of today’s intelligence agencies and those training as intelligence professionals.

As a teacher assembling materials for a new course, I had hoped that “Finks” (despite its off-putting title) would provide useful materials and perspective on this understudied aspect of covert action. After all, many of the relevant government documents have been declassified, and they offer a rich trove for delving into the
operational, legal and ethical challenges inherent in covert influence programs. When the book arrived, I launched in, hoping for a well-researched take on the Cultural Cold War. I remained undaunted even by the publisher’s advertisement for its other publishing projects (“A Toolbox for Revolution,” “A Toolbox for Liberation” and “A Radical History”), along with the recent literary offerings of Julian Assange.

Alas, I would have done better to heed the warnings. “Finks” contributes little to understanding the historical record of the Cultural Cold War, those who participated in (or were affected by) the CIA’s covert programs, or the complex era in which the agency designed and implemented them. Combined with the book’s persistently unbalanced tone, “Finks” has little to offer readers who hope to learn about a major activity of the U.S. government in that period. It is not a book for serving intelligence professionals seeking a better understanding of CIA’s role in the Cold War or for professors in search of instructive course materials.

(Far better books on the Cultural Cold War include Frances Stonor Saunders’s “Who Paid the Piper” [U.S. title: “The Cultural Cold War”], which is comprehensive and thoroughly readable. Hugh Wilford’s “The Mighty Wurlitzer” reaches beyond the journalistic and literary “fronts” to describe related CIA operations that involved émigré groups, organized labor, student organizations and religious institutions. Evan Thomas’s “The Very Best Men” still offers the most insightful profile of the first generation of CIA leaders, including the principal architect of the Cultural Cold War, Frank Wisner.)

The context of the first postwar decades matters to understanding the CIA’s involvement in covert influence operations. The tasks assigned to America’s fledgling civilian intelligence service during the years of the early Cold War were varied, imprecisely defined, and inadequately supervised and overseen. Many of the resulting controversies are still hotly contested more than 25 years after the Soviet Union’s disintegration. The Cold War competition between the U.S. and the USSR ranged across political, military, diplomatic, economic and cultural dimensions.

The CIA’s Cultural Cold War was an effort to expose the widespread oppression in the Soviet Union, including the stifling of its most creative citizens in literature, arts and culture; to diminish the appeal to Western intellectuals of the USSR’s carefully curated artistic, literary and cultural achievements; and to showcase, by contrast, the West’s relative freedom of expression and tolerance across the whole of creative culture.

The CIA supported a constellation of ostensibly private entities that it secretly funded through charities and wealthy individuals who shared these goals—the most important of which was the Europe-based Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF). One beneficiary of this covert support was The Paris Review, the celebrated and highly influential literary journal co-founded by Peter Matthiessen in 1953. There were many other beneficiaries of the CIA’s indirect largess in the world of literature, arts and letters; some people in these networks knew the ultimate source of funding; others did not. Everyone found out, however, in 1967 when a former CIA officer, Tom Braden, in a newspaper article provided a list of the many journals and magazines that had received at least partial funding from the CIA through its covert network.

Many decades later, Matthiessen said that he had established The Paris Review as a cover for his clandestine work on behalf of the CIA in postwar France, denying that the journal (including its editorial content) was itself a CIA activity. He further claimed that The Paris Review had not received funding from the same network of private organizations that were revealed in 1967. The author of “Finks,” however—
himself the editor of a literary journal—did archival research that resulted in a 2012 article_published_by_Salon.com showing plainly that The Paris Review had indirectly benefited from CIA funding by selling article reprints to other magazines funded by the CCF.

Had Whitney left things there, this would have been a modest, but useful, contribution. The book, however, advances three additional theses that go much further than merely the discovery of indirect funding to The Paris Review.

First, the CIA’s relationship with The Paris Review, Whitney claims, continued long after Matthiessen’s departure as editor. The magazine’s longtime editor after Matthiessen, the widely known author (and pop icon) George Plimpton, moreover, actively concealed these links until his death in 2003. Whitney cites archived correspondence between Plimpton and the CCF; this assertion is well documented—including in the Salon essay—and strikes me as thoroughly plausible. Beyond tarnishing Plimpton’s legacy, however, the significance of all this is unclear. Indeed, there’s a question of whether tarnishing is a correct term, given that not everyone would agree it was somehow malign to accept the funds. Yet villainizing Plimpton appears to be an unarticulated subplot of “Finks.”

In sustaining his attack on Plimpton, however, Whitney goes bizarrely off the rails—suggesting that George Plimpton was culpable in some measure for al-Qaeda’s 2001 terror attacks on the U.S. homeland. It’s a long story; suffice it to say that Whitney does not, in these claims, bolster the overall credibility of the rest of the book.

Second, Whitney suggests that The Paris Review was not—as its charter proclaimed—an apolitical literary journal. According to “Finks,” the magazine’s editor and editorial counterparts at other CCF/CIA-funded media outlets were supposedly regularly “censored” by CIA officials. This point is apparently important to Whitney because it counters the defense offered by some literary figures after the 1967 revelations that, insofar as they knew that CCF’s funding originated with the CIA, and that while (in some cases) they still might knowingly have accepted covert CIA funding to expand their readership and activities, neither the CIA nor CCF interfered with their editorial judgments. To substantiate his thesis that these journal editors’ claims were not true, Whitney offers one declassified CIA memo concerning the content of a government-funded journal and characterizes it as a “confess[ion]” of such interference.

Well, maybe. I suspect the CIA official and his supervisor regarded this inquiry as a minimal exertion to ensure U.S. taxpayers were paying for literary content that advanced and did not undermine the program’s goals. Those goals were not about promoting a politically “conservative” agenda but about presenting a united intellectual front across the political spectrum in opposition to Soviet Communist ideology—opposition by intellectuals and writers from many countries, and ranging from conservative to liberal to socialist.

Not satisfied with evidence that the CIA only infrequently weighed in on the content of work it was paying to produce and distribute, Whitney asks whether, by now, the CIA had “perfected use of the media for state power” and whether the CIA’s ethos amounted to “favoring paranoid intervention into the media over adherence to democratic principle—remains with us”—presumably referring to today’s CIA. The idea that the CIA harbors a sinister capacity to manipulate American media would probably bemuse today’s intelligence leaders. They are compelled to spend an inordinate amount of time pleading with journalists and publishers to refrain from disclosing leaked national defense information with, at best, mixed results.
Third Whitney maintains that there wasn’t ever a “good CIA” promoting fine writing and cultural freedom, on the one hand, and a “bad CIA” that engaged in coups, assassinations and other unseemly political acts, on the other. Rather, Whitney argues, there was always just a single CIA that morally stained anyone who cooperated with it.

This has particular significance to Whitney because it appears to serve as his rebuttal to Peter Matthiessen’s (genuinely craven) later explanation for why he signed on with the CIA after graduating from Yale: Everyone was doing it, and the agency had not yet started with “the ugly stuff.” For Whitney, the Cold War-era editors and publishers who secretly helped their government wage the Cultural Cold War were the “Finks” of the book’s title. They duped unsuspecting (and apparently quite gullible or oddly incurious) artists and writers and used their work to promote what I would deem freedom and liberty of thought and expression. For Whitney, however, this was not the promotion of freedom of expression behind the Iron Curtain, however clumsily pursued; nor was it the promotion of a united Western intellectual and political front against Soviet Communism. It was nothing less than betrayal, by editors and publishers, of their writers’ trust and integrity.

There is, of course, an alternative explanation for why hundreds of prominent Americans and foreigners, many of whom remain anonymous, accepted physical and reputational risks to engage the Soviet Union on the cultural front. Henry Kissinger described “an aristocracy dedicated to the service of the nation on behalf of principles beyond partisanship.” The author, Frances Stonor Saunders, cited Kissinger’s assessment in concluding that the CIA’s cultural consortium was “the hidden weapon in America’s Cold War struggle.” On the question of the Cultural Cold War’s efficacy, Whitney acknowledges Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s sweeping judgment that Western broadcasting, facilitated and paid for by Western governments (principally the U.S.), was “the mighty non-military force which resides in the airwaves and whose kindling power in the midst of Communist darkness cannot even be grasped by the Western imagination.”

How consequential those programs were is, of course, fair to debate. But these assessments of the Cultural Cold War’s importance and effectiveness are consistent with my experiences in Europe at the close of the Cold War and in its immediate aftermath. The fact that the Berlin Wall fell, the “captive states” of Central Europe reclaimed their sovereignty, and the Soviet Union disintegrated without significant bloodshed is certainly among the least probable, and morally most worthy, outcomes in 20th-century history. There were countless reasons why the Cold War ended as it did, but I do not doubt that the CIA’s information and covert influence operations contributed to this outcome.

The families who occupied the U.S. Embassy in East Berlin in 1989 seeking asylum, for example, were anxious to discuss their favorite Western TV shows. Security officials in the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union recounted the excitement of reading banned classics smuggled into the USSR. The leaders of Hungary’s first non-Socialist government with whom I worked were anxious to show off an impressive fluency in English and American culture. The specific orientation of the CIA programs was toward writers, artists, and men and women of high cultural achievement and activity—toward the intelligentsia of the Soviet Union and the societies of the Warsaw Pact and beyond.

Ideas and theories of politics, government and the state played a not-inconsequential role in the emergence of essentially liberal ideas and an alternative ideology to Soviet Communism, through samizdat literature and other avenues. The emergence of
underground intellectuals in Poland, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union itself, even through their often difficult and abstract philosophical debates, helped establish at least the idea of political alternatives to communism. All these finally played a role—not so much in America “winning” the Cold War but in those societies “winning” the Cold War in their own transitions to the post-Soviet world.

“Finks” might be excused for its modest contribution to intelligence scholarship if it were more balanced and less relentlessly hostile to the U.S. government and the people who work for it. For Whitney, Americans live in a “security state” that relies on a “lawless” CIA to advance its “interventionist” policies. Toward this end, “information,” “foreign assistance,” “expertise” and “Islam,” among other things, are ruthlessly “weaponized” and deployed. The book’s leftist jargon is offensive and tedious, though tolerable in a free marketplace of ideas. What should not be allowed to stand unchallenged in that market, however, is the book’s persistent efforts to establish moral equivalence between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

Whitney writes that “Soviets and Americans were partners in violence that one instigated covertly, the other committed overtly.” He conflates as “terrorism” both the takeover of a Soviet embassy by Romanian exiles in the mid-1950s and the deadly 2012 attack on the U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya. “Stalin, Khrushchev, the CIA, and the FBI” are charged collectively with suppressing free speech. In “Finks,” the summary lesson from Che Guevara’s flight and capture in Bolivia was that “we both killed, their side and ours, with no trial.” Perhaps most fantastically, Whitney cites a comment by Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter’s national security adviser—whom the book mistakenly refers to as the secretary of state—about supporting the opponents of a pro-Moscow regime in Kabul in the summer of 1979 as evidence that “the Soviets came into Afghanistan after [emphasis in original] the United States had lured them there.”

No one seriously questions that our security agencies exceeded their charters, violated laws and infringed on the civil liberties of their fellow citizens during the Cold War. These excesses were exposed by the media and investigated in well-publicized congressional hearings in the mid-1970s. More stringent supervision and oversight mechanisms were put in place. It is, therefore, appropriate to criticize certain U.S. government actions during the Cold War and to insist that such excesses not be repeated. It is irresponsible and naive, however, to equate the goals, policies and actions of a liberal, democratic U.S. with those of the brutal Soviet dictatorship in any dimension of Cold War competition.

“Finks,” on one level, represents a lost opportunity. The Cultural Cold War offers many examples of effective, high-impact intelligence activity—and others where covert operations failed to achieve their objectives or cost more than they contributed. In some instances, that cost was borne by unwitting artists and others who were misled or actively deceived in the interest of operational security. Learning from this history is important, not least because information and covert influence operations have been ordered by every U.S. president since the end of the Cold War. It is safe to assume they are underway today.

Are writers and other creative artists entitled to greater deference than other admittedly unwitting participants in secret intelligence operations? Are operations that disseminate truthful information more effective (or defensible) than those that involve fabricated or incomplete facts? Should U.S. intelligence have any role in attempting to shape the worldviews of young Muslims judged at risk of radicalization and exploitation by terror groups? Do executive-branch supervisors and congressional overseers adequately
monitor the daily trade-offs made between efficacy and collateral harm in conducting covert influence operations? Are they prepared to articulate how these American operations differ—morally, legally and politically—from those conducted today by foreign powers against the United States? These are among the serious questions that a better book might have taken up, explicitly or implicitly, in a historical examination of the Cultural Cold War. Lost opportunity indeed.

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