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His Long War - American Spy: My Secret History in the CIA, Watergate, and Beyond, by E. Howard Hunt with Greg Aunapu

BYLINE: Mark Riebling

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Though espionage is supposed to be thrilling, CIA memoirs are often boring. Usually written decades after the fact, always sanitized by government censors, the typical "autospynography" has the vague, approximate effect of a police sketch drawn from the memory of a traumatized witness.

American Spy is, by happy contrast, the fiercely remembered life of the CIA's Forrest Gump.

E. Howard Hunt was a genial, incompetent genius who happened into many of the major secret operations of his time. If Robert DeNiro had really wanted to tell the story of the CIA in his recent film *The Good Shepherd*, he would have modeled his hero not on the composite who became Matt Damon's Edward Wilson, but on the more tragic and representative figure of Howard Hunt.

Fully half the book is devoted to Watergate and its aftermath. That is appropriate, not only because Hunt helped plan the burglaries there, but because post-Watergate reforms of U.S. intelligence have restricted the means by which we may know our enemies. But Hunt's well-known role in that scandal is not the soul of this book. The beating heart of *American Spy* is the Cold War; or, more exactly, the moral continuity between the Cold War and World War II.

This continuity was described by FBI deputy director William Sullivan, who ran domestic spying during the Cold War: "When a soldier in the field shot down an enemy, he did not ask himself is this legal or lawful, is it ethical? It was what he was expected to do as a soldier. . . . We never freed ourselves from that psychology that we were indoctrinated with, right after Pearl Harbor, you see."

Every sentence in this book vibrates to that iron string. "Anything I may have done," Hunt said at his trial on Watergate-related charges, "I did for what I believed to be in the best interests of my country." In fact, Hunt believed that America itself had taught and told him to burglarize the Democratic headquarters. "I cannot escape feeling," he testified to the Senate in 1973, "that the country I have served for my entire life and which directed me to carry out the Watergate entry is punishing me for doing the very things it trained and directed me to do."

The "country," of course, was not the men who directed Hunt to plan the burglary, but the ideals Hunt betrayed in planning it. Just how Hunt's moral compass malfunctioned -- with such dreadful consequences to him, to the Agency he served, and to the country he loved -- is the story he sets out to tell us in *American Spy*. In March 1943, Army private Hunt is chafing at the easy life in Orlando, Fla., when he hears whispers about a mysterious unit, the Office of Strategic Services.

Through his lobbyist father, Hunt gets a meeting with OSS director William "Wild Bill" Donovan, who, at 67, still looks like a man you want next to you in a fight. Donovan taps him for a Pacific post. After tough training, Hunt makes the dangerous flight over the Himalayas into China, where he runs guns to guerrillas fighting the Japanese.

After the war, when OSS becomes CIA, Hunt quarterbacks covert operations in Latin America, Europe, and the Far East. But as political-action chief of the project to unseat Fidel Castro, Hunt never recovers, "psychologically or operationally," from the 1961 defeat of the CIA at the Bay of Pigs. Transferred into the agency's legally dodgy Domestic Operations Division, Hunt is writing spy novels under an assumed name when he meets Nixon aide Charles Colson (whom he calls the "spiritual ancestor to Karl Rove").

In 1971, Colson hires Hunt to spy on Nixon's enemies. Hunt teams with an eccentric former FBI agent, G. Gordon Liddy, and hires anti-Castro Cubans with long CIA resumes to do the dirty work. On June 17, 1972, D.C. police catch Hunt's operatives breaking into the Democratic headquarters at the Watergate.

In the ordeal that follows, Hunt loses nearly everything. His wife, Dorothy, dies in a plane crash. The White House abandons him. The press attacks him. His two eldest children disavow him. Even so, he remains a "good soldier," perjuring himself about White House links to Watergate until, realizing that Nixon is indifferent to his fate, he resolves to tell the truth.

The effect of turning against Nixon is almost magical, "flipping the stormy climate of animosity into balmy geniality." Publishers reissue Hunt's spy novels, and pay him to write more from prison.

Yet, when he walks free after 33 months in jail, Hunt is not free of Watergate. Conspiracy buffs accuse him not only of plotting JFK's death, but of himself being the spectral "second gunman." He wins a libel case, which only draws more attention to the charges.

Through it all, one blessing is visited on Hunt: a young Georgia divorcee, Laura, who writes him admiring letters while he's in jail. He marries her, has two new children, and lives to write this book.

Yet Hunt never answers the book's central dramatic question, namely: How could he have been so dumb? The flaw in the work is the flaw in the man. Hunt can't explain why he did the wrong thing, because he doesn't think he did anything wrong. "I have no regrets," he says on page 2. "If our Watergate team had found that the Democrats were indeed being financed by Communist enemies, then our criminal actions might have been judged heroic."

Still, Hunt's shortcomings aside, *American Spy* is the only autobiography I know of that convincingly conveys what it was like to be an American spy. The ten-page mini-drama of his spy training is alone worth the price of the book. With equal grace, Hunt conjures the glittering life of a spy under embassy cover and the war of ideas waged by the CIA's book-publishing program.

It helps that Hunt was an English major who wrote more than 70 spy novels. He has a gift for evocative prose. In one of the book's most affecting scenes, a gung-ho OSS navigator persuades the captain to strafe a Japanese stronghold. While the navigator fires his tommy gun, Hunt sees the mission's photographer and captain silhouetted in the open doorway:

Just then a burst of flak rocked the plane. Blood spurted from the photographer's chest. He fell out of the doorway and pulled his ripcord. There was another spurt of flak; the captain took a bullet in the head, spun around, tried to catch the door frame, but fell out of the aircraft. . . . When we were out of enemy range, the navigator stalked aft with his weapon, chuckling. Then his face fell. . . . I could barely look at him, because I did think it was his fault. Here was an early lesson: An "action-oriented" ally could really be an enemy. It was a lesson that Hunt himself forgot, three decades later, when he hooked up with G. Gordon Liddy.

His friendship with Liddy provides a clue to Hunt's fall. "Like common drinkers, Liddy and I became covert action co-dependents. My wife and daughter thought we acted like school kids together, one feeding off the other." Room 16 of the Executive Office Building became their secret, after-school tree-house. Playing hooky from their wives, Hunt and Liddy rolled up their sleeves, drank bad coffee, and thought up crazy ways to save the world. They showed bogus documents to a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, "proving" that JFK ordered the killing of Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem. They tried to get syndicated columnist Jack Anderson, a thorn in the administration's side, "to ingest LSD through his skin from his steering wheel, so that he would crash his car."

Just what did the world need saving from, that Hunt could even think of doing such things? Though he never swivels his powers of insight fully on himself, his meditation on the Watergate worldview is the most trenchant I have read:

The administration had been elected by a majority of voters, but the minority was trying to take power in a sort of slow-speed revolution, which had been fomenting over the last few years in campus uprisings, urban bombings, and mass marches. The counterculture government was also aided by elements in the media, clergy, scientists, and lawyers. . . . Added to that were moles such as [Pentagon Papers leaker Daniel] Ellsberg who were deeply entrenched in government, with access to classified information, who took it upon themselves as judge and jury to leak matters of national security. In some ways, this was a mirror image of events, sans military, that the CIA had perpetuated in other countries such as Guatemala to effect regime change. Perhaps that's what seemed so frightening to the administration. [Emphasis added.] The book has its flaws. Hunt repeats himself (the Soviets were active in Montevideo, e.g., at pp. 95, 99, and 102). His advice in the book's last line -- to re-empower "daring amateurs" -- seems like a recipe for another Watergate.

Yet one of Hunt's main lines of thinking has merit. To him, the Cold War was not primarily a political struggle, but an intellectual one. That's why Hunt hired William F. Buckley Jr. into the CIA in 1951 to translate the memoir of a Peruvian ex-Maoist. Whether the media today are books or blogs, audio or video, human nature is the same. We are what we think. To change how people act, we must change what they believe.

"We shouldn't bomb Al Jazeera television," Hunt counsels. Instead, "we need to buy it -- through a third party, of course. Then slowly and subtly change the news slant to deprogram all the negative brainwashing that has occurred."

If the wisdom of that plan is debatable, the need for inventive propaganda is clear. In the war against head-chopping ideas, we should remember one lesson that E. Howard Hunt did learn well, before he died on January 23. "When we were fighting Communism, the most useful weapons didn't explode -- they had pages, a volume control, or a great personality. They still do."

Mr. Riebling is the author of *Wedge: From Pearl Harbor to 9/11 -- How the Secret War Between the FBI and CIA Has Endangered National Security*.

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