A Guide to Popular Student Books on Intelligence

What do students think they know about intelligence before they walk into the classroom?

by Edward F. Mickolus, PhD

During my decades with the Central Intelligence Agency, I had the opportunity to chat with thousands of students and applicants to the Intelligence Community. They bring with them points of view that are shaped by the news media, entertainment industry, blogs, wikis, social networks, and on occasion, even books. Professors routinely provide their charges with lists of books that are designed to give students a handle on what the intelligence business is all about.

Whatever a list of suggested readings includes, readers’ opinions will be shaped by a host of books, accurate and inaccurate, balanced and rabidly pro- or anti-intelligence. The following is a sample of what students are reading; some of these books will appear on your recommended list, and some you would not recommend under any circumstances. This list is not complete, nor an endorsement of any particular book. It rather gives an idea of what has shaped the attitudes an instructor can expect to find in the classroom and is organized by the types of questions the books address. Many of these books were written by CIA alumni and/or regarding the CIA, but are applicable to the rest of the Intelligence Community as well.

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO WORK IN THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY?

Mark M. Lowenthal, Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy, 4th edition, Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2009, 350 pp. A straightforward account of the role of the Intelligence Community in national security affairs by the former Assistant Director of Central Intelligence for Analysis and Production and Vice Chairman of the National Intelligence Council for Evaluation. [Editor’s note: Lowenthal was recommended as the one book to read if one was to read only one in “Getting Started: Initial Readings for Instructors of Intelligence,” Inteligencer, Vol. 18, No. 2, Winter/Spring 2011.]

WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO RUN THE CIA?

William Colby and Peter Forbath, Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978, 493 pp. Colby conducted behind the lines operations as one of the World War II Office of Strategic Service (OSS) Jedburghs before engaging in a sterling career with the Agency, which included stints as Chief of the East Asia Division, Director of Operations, and Director of Central Intelligence (DCI).

Allen Dulles, The Craft of Intelligence, New York: Harper and Row, 1963, 277 pp. This was the first memoir by a major Agency officer, providing an excellent historical background, particularly on key counterespionage issues.

Robert Gates, From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider’s Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996, 604 pp. Gates is the only DCI to come up through the analytical ranks.

Richard Helms with William Hood, A Look Over My Shoulder: A Life in the Central Intelligence Agency, New York: Random House, 2003, 478 pp. The author has a wonderful flair for the bon mot. The memoir gives the reader a good grasp for the high politics of running the Directorate of Operations and the Agency. He was not in the field for much of his career but rather ran large organizations with integrity.

George J. Tenet with William Harlow, At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA, New York: HarperCollins, 2007, 549 pp. Unlike other DCI memoirs, which tend to cover entire careers, Tenet concentrates on the big issues of policymakers, mostly during the Bush years, rather than dwelling on what it was like to run the Agency.

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO WORK IN THE NATIONAL CLANDESTINE SERVICE? — MEMOIRS BY OPERATIONS OFFICERS


Milt Bearden and James Risen, The Main Enemy: The Inside

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Ted Gup, The Book of Honor: Covert Lives and Classified Deaths at the CIA, New York: Doubleday, 2000, 390 pp. Gup tracked down the stories of several deceased Agency officers whose names were not officially listed in the Book because of cover or family preference.

Ronald Kessler, CIA at War: Inside the Secret Campaign Against Terror, New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2003, 378 pp. and Inside the CIA, New York: Pocket, 1994, 400 pp. CIA at War updates Inside. Kessler describes the Agency’s overall mission and structure and some of its key leaders in the 1990s. It also offers a rare look at the work of Collection Management Officers (then called Reports and Requirements Officers).


Jerrold L. Scheckter and Peter Deriabin, The Spy Who Saved the World: How a Soviet Colonel Changed the Course of the Cold War, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1992, 488 pp. This is the definitive study of the Penkovskiy case delving into the initial concerns about his bona fides.


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WHAT’S IT LIKE TO BE A FEMALE CASE OFFICER?

Melissa Boyle Mahle, Denial and Deception: An Insider’s View of the CIA from Iran-Contra to 9/11, New York: Nation Books, 2004, 352 pp. Her’s is a balanced look at a short 15-year career that included a tour as a recruiter.


WHAT’S IT LIKE TO WORK IN PARAMILITARY/COVERT ACTION?

of agency activities, beginning where the Bearden book ends and ending where Schroen begins.

Gary Schroen, First In: An Insider’s Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan, New York: Ballantine, 2005, 379 pp. While going out the door to retirement, Schroen was invited to lead the Agency's efforts to re-contact and reconstitute the Northern Alliance after 9/11. He and a small team of Agency officers funded Alliance contacts, provided targeting information for US military operations, and began the Afghan portion of the War on Terror.

Gary Berntsen and Ralph Pezzullo, Jawbreaker: The Attack on Bin Laden and al Qaeda: A Personal Account by the CIA’s Key Field Commander, New York: Crown, 2005, 328 pp. Berntsten followed Schroen as chief of the Agency’s Afghan operations; students often read these books in sequence.


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**WHAT’S IT LIKE TO WORK IN THE DIRECTORATE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY?**


Robert Wallace and H. Keith Melton with Henry R. Schlesinger, Spyecht: The Secret History of the CIA’s Spychtechs, from Communism to Al-Qaeda, New York: Plume, 2009, 576 pp. Wallace served as Director of the Office of Technical Services in the Agency’s Directorate of Science and Technology; Melton is a well-known espionage historian and collector of espionage paraphernalia. This is the definitive history of Agency gadgetry.

Jeffrey T. Richelson, The Wizards of Langley: Inside the CIA’s Directorate of Science and Technology, Boulder: Westview, 2001, 416 pp. This is a balanced history of the Directorate, ranging from micro-technology to large satellite systems.

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**WHAT’S IT LIKE TO WORK IN THE DIRECTORATE OF SUPPORT?**


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**WHAT KIND OF TRAINING WILL I GET?**

Lindsay Moran, Blowing my Cover: My Life as a CIA Spy, New York: GP Putnam’s, 2005, 297 pp. A breezy tale, entertainingly told, but ultimately readers tend to ignore it as not serious-minded.

Claire Berlinski, Loose Lips: A Novel, New York: Ballantine, 2004, 272 pp. Another entertaining bit of humor, told in the form of a novel. She spends more time than Moran on non-paramilitary aspects of the training. She also
TJ Waters, Class 11: Inside the CIA’s First Post-9/11 Spy Class, New York: Dutton, 2006, 320 pp. Despite a wealth of factual errors, this is the best of the three recent books on Agency training.


Tennent H. Bagley, Spy Wars: Moles, Mysteries, and Deadly Games, New Haven: Yale University Press, 207, 313 pp. A survey of cases from the Cold War, including a detailed defense of the “Nosenko was a plant” position of legendary CIA counterintelligence chief, James Angleton.

Are there any humorous treatments of intelligence?


Edward F. Mickolus, PhD, served for 33 years with CIA as an analyst, operations officer, manager, recruiter, and public affairs officer. He is the author of 21 books and scores of scholarly journal articles on intelligence, international terrorism, international organizations, African politics, psychology, law, education, and humor.

Al Qaeda isn’t a person or a group—it is an ideology. “...this conflict is going to be going on for a very long time on some level. Much of the world is plagued by runaway population growth, falling water tables, disease, weak governmental institutions and abject poverty. Those are conditions which are going to keep fueling fanaticism of all types for decades to come. We need to accept that and put together a mechanism for fighting these kinds of conflicts, which can be sustained indefinitely.”

“...any place on the globe with a significant Muslim population and a weak, ineffectual government is a potential breeding ground. Bangladesh, Somalia, Sudan, Nigeria, the new Libya all are potentially new fronts in this war.”

— Charles Faddis in Home Security Today as quoted by Anthony Kimery “After Awlaki - Having eliminated a key leader of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, counterterrorism authorities are seeking the organization’s remaining operatives—in the American homeland.” 1/27/2012, http://www.hstoday.us/industry-news/general/single-article/after-awlaki/8f20902eb65c12bb0d10f2d.html