

The covert “selling” of anticommunism

The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America

Part 2

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This is the second in a two-part review of the 2008 book, The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America, by Hugh Wilford. Part one is published here.

Students

Deeply fearful of the attraction of young people to socialism, the CIA established its presence on campuses from the start. In 1947, the Agency organized the United States National Student Association (NSA), followed by an International Student Information Service to link the NSA with groups abroad. Wilford details the mechanisms used by the CIA to closely groom and vet all NSA officers. Quite a few of these individuals would go on to careers with the Agency.

The NSA hosted annual foreign relations seminars for Americans, while providing scholarships for those from the “developing world” and extensive travel abroad for staff members. By 1967 it had organizations on 400 US campuses.

The CIA and NSA also sponsored international youth festivals to “rescue Third World youth from the clutches of communist propagandists.” A leader in this operation was feminist icon Gloria Steinem. She accepted a paid position as director of the Independent Service for Information, “a CIA operation from beginning to end,” stated Wilford, and was made “witting.” Among her compatriots in this group was Zbigniew Brzezinski, at the time a Harvard graduate student, whom she described as “a star member of the Independent Service.”

In a highly relevant section of “The Mighty Wurlitzer” Wilford explains how professors, particularly from the elite Ivy League colleges, acted as conduits for the Agency. The author focuses on the CIA work of William Y. Elliott of Harvard, a 41-year veteran of the university’s Government Department and dean of the famous Harvard Summer School.

Elliott was active in “plugging in” specific students into CIA operations. He utilized the prestigious Summer School to expand the Agency’s international recruitment pool. Among the Harvard graduate students individually “mentored” by Elliott was Henry Kissinger, who played a prominent role in the summer program and used it to launch his government career.

In his conclusion, the author emphasizes that such university operations are clearly not over, but are increasing. He references the Church Committee’s [6] findings of the Agency’s “operational use” of individual academics, including “providing leads and making introductions for intelligence purposes, collaboration in research and analysis, intelligence collection abroad, and preparation of books and other propaganda materials.”

Labor: The “AFL-CIA”

The institutional anticommunist European operations conducted by the American Federation of Labor began in 1944 with the Free Trade Union Committee (FTUC). It was funded by the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) under David Dubinsky and run by Jay Lovestone, the former US Communist Party national secretary-turned-anticommunist, and his protégé Irving Brown. Brown had worked for the OSS during World War II. When the OSS was disbanded, Brown and Lovestone ran their own operations, boasting, “our trade union programs and relationships have penetrated every country of Europe.”

By January 1949 the FTUC was on the CIA payroll, disguised as donations from private individuals. By the end of the year, the labor portion of FTUC income was dwarfed by CIA money—laundered by Lovestone in New York and transferred via a variety of bank accounts. The money was disbursed to anticommunist labor groups all over Europe, including Force Ouvrière (a right-wing split-off from the Communist Party-dominated CGT union federation), the Mediterranean Vigilance Committee in France, socialist unionists in Italy including the Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori, the Central Organization of Finnish Trade Unions, etc. There were other operations outside of Europe, such as the All-Indonesian Central Labor Organization.

However, there was another bid for the franchise. Victor Reuther, brother of UAW president Walter, opened an office in Paris. The reputation of UAW militancy played better abroad than the discredited “business unionism” of the AFL, which meant that the UAW was better placed to supply the CIA with contacts in the European labor movement.

The beginning of the end for the AFL’s CIA patronage took place at a conference on November 20, 1950. Director of Central Intelligence Walter Bedell Smith and Frank Wisner met with AFL Secretary-Treasurer George Meany, David Dubinsky, AFL Vice President Matthew Woll and Lovestone to sort out which labor organization would continue the CIA’s covert operations.

Meany vociferously denounced the CIO, “mentioning dates, names and places” of communist infiltration of its rival, but to no avail. As CIA Deputy Director Allen Dulles put it, he was “very much interested in the labor movement” and believed that the CIO should be folded into CIA covert operations.

Wilford’s research points to the role of the CIO’s director of international Affairs Mike Ross as the conduit for tens of thousands of dollars from the Agency to Victor Reuther’s Paris operations.

African Americans

The vicious repression and murders of US civil rights workers in the early 1950s—including the broadcasting of images of police turning dogs and fire hoses on nonviolent protests—undermined US attempts to broaden its influence on the African continent.

This was a major concern under conditions where the European colonialists were being thrown out and the anti-colonial movement was spreading like wildfire. “It was against this background that the US government agencies, including the CIA, began casting around for black American leaders who might be called on to paint a positive picture of their country’s race relations and help steer newly independent African nations away from the communist camp,” explains Wilford in his chapter on the CIA recruitment of African-Americans.

The major CIA operation developed in this effort was the American Society of African Culture (AMSAC). A 1954 meeting at the home of former NAACP Executive Secretary Walter White, attended by Eleanor Roosevelt and Victor Reuther, led to the decision to found a permanent organization to “downplay socialist anti-colonialism in favor of liberal anticommunism among Africans.”

Many Americans who admire Wright for his literary honesty and willingness to lay bare the brutality of racism are surprised to find that he joined in the CIA front group. Wright approached US authorities at their Paris embassy and offered his services to “combat leftist tendencies” at an international Congress of Negro Writers and Artists to take place in 1956. He returned to the Embassy on several occasions to discuss how officials might “offset Communist influence,” as the book cites.

Wright secured funding and arranged a five-man delegation from the US to the Paris Congress. By contrast, W.E.B. Du Bois was denied a passport and issued a blistering statement to the group: “Any American Negro traveling abroad today must...say what the State Department wishes him to say.”

The Paris group created the Société Africaine de Culture (SAC); the formation of the American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) followed in June 1957. The funding was typical for CIA groups—in this case Matthew McCloskey, a Philadelphia construction magnate, and Wall Street lawyer Bethuel Webster (who in the 1950s had helped set up the American Fund for Free Jurists as a conduit for CIA funds to the International Commission of Jurists) provided the start-up cash.

AMSAC’s activities had several aims. It disseminated propaganda—including an ambitious series of publications—and held annual conferences featuring a glittering array of black intellectuals, artists and performers (Nina Simone, Lionel Hampton, etc.). It also sponsored festivals both in the US and Africa.

The CIA’s more ruthless hand in dealing with threats of African militancy was also assisted by AMSAC. Following the CIA murder of Congolese President Patrice Lumumba, AMSAC officer Ted Harris was moved from his New York office to Léopoldville to “train local politicians in western administrative techniques.”

Wright eventually became disillusioned. In November 1960 he delivered a surprising address at the American Church in Paris lambasting the US government for spying on expatriates and attempting to silence them. “I’d say that most revolutionary movements in the Western world are government-sponsored,” Wright told the crowd. “They are launched by *agents provocateurs* to organize the discontented so that the Government can keep an eye on them.” He implied further revelations to come, but died in a Parisian clinic a few weeks later at the age of 52. There were recurrent rumors, the author states, that he had been murdered.

The last successful operation conducted by AMSAC was an extensive tour of Africa by civil rights leader James Farmer, designed to counter the impact of Malcolm X’s prior visits. With the hands-on assistance of Carl T. Rowan, the first African-American to sit on the National Security Council, Farmer arrived in Africa in January 1965, staying in nine countries and meeting virtually every head of state, lecturing students,

meeting with members of parliament and addressing trade unions.

The Mighty Wurlitzer provides a glimpse into the decades-long, multimillion-dollar campaigns of the American government to undermine socialist thought and to give anticommunism a cultural, social or humanitarian facelift.

In his final chapter, the author assures the reader that CIA front groups are alive and well today. He cites the literary bestseller, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, as a recent example of this ongoing propaganda: using “women’s rights” as window dressing for preparing popular opinion for a possible US invasion of Iran.

The most important drawback of the book is the disconnect between the covert operations and their political purpose. One could read most of the book and conclude that the American government was merely hypocritical, undemocratic and manipulative.

Throughout the volume, the reader must bear in mind the horrific consequences of CIA activity throughout the world—the deaths of millions, the subversion of democracy, the installation of despots and oligarchs via regime-change—because these dirty operations are never alluded to in *The Mighty Wurlitzer*.

In other words, the author, while exposing the activities of American imperialism, continually sanitizes it. He is a journalistic partisan of the American government. His conclusion, of a piece with some sections of American liberalism, is that the covert front groups are at odds with an otherwise healthy American democracy, have “stained” the United States’ reputation, caused various forms of blowback and were/are generally ineffectual.

Nevertheless, despite these serious limitations, the author should be acknowledged for his dogged investigative journalism in light of the “shroud of official secrecy that still surrounds [the covert operations] today.” In fact, after the passage of more than 50 years, the government refuses to release the files on these operations.

Today’s readers of *The Mighty Wurlitzer* are now living through a period in which the US has gone far beyond these relatively amateurish efforts at censorship and public relations manipulation. Before our eyes, the courts and government at all levels—including the ever-growing military-intelligence apparatus—are eviscerating the entire framework of legal and democratic rights fought for over hundreds of years.

The book’s ability, therefore, to document the ferociously undemocratic and reactionary activities of the CIA in an earlier period underscores the growing and legitimate fears on the part of the bourgeoisie today of the revolutionary power of genuine socialist thought.

Notes:

6. The Senate Select Committee, chaired by US Senator Frank Church in 1975-76, investigated the illegal activities of the CIA, NSA and FBI in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal. Many of the committee reports are still classified but among the matters investigated were the US government attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro, Patrice Lumumba, Rafael Trujillo, and the Diem brothers of Vietnam. The Church Committee also exposed the FBI operation named COINTELPRO which was used to disrupt and spy on the Socialist Workers Party, the Communist Party, the Black Panther Party and countless other left-wing political groups.

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