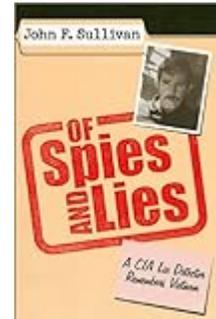


John F. Sullivan. *Of Spies and Lies: A CIA Lie Detector Remembers Vietnam.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002. xii + 248 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1168-3.



Reviewed by Susan Butler (independent scholar)

Published on H-Diplo (June, 2002)

Spiraling Downward

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Sullivan's aim in *Of Spies and Lies* is to fill in the dots on the role of the CIA in Vietnam. He states his thesis in the introduction, that he was in a unique position to view how the CIA bungled the job because as a polygraph examiner who spent four years in Vietnam, he worked with more CIA officers than anyone else and with more than 2000 CIA employees, and he tested more Vietnamese than any other CIA examiner. Sullivan was in the catbird seat every day, dealing on the one hand with the top guns of the CIA and on the other with the Vietnamese they brought in. He wrote the book because although there are countless books on the role of the military, there is a dearth of books about the role of the CIA.

Sullivan went to Vietnam in 1971 and stayed until just after the fall of Da Nang in March of 1975. He went into Laos and Cambodia also. It took him three months in Southeast Asia to realize that the CIA was not functioning as it normally did. The reason, he discovered, was that the Saigon station, the largest CIA station in the world, was staffed with incompetent people. As he chronicles here, unfortunately at too great length, the

most basic prerequisite was not met: case officers did not speak, understand or read Vietnamese—"they found it impossible to work clandestinely and, in many cases, they had not gone willingly to Vietnam" (p. 2). Therefore they failed "miserably" at their job, which was to infiltrate and get information from the Vietcong. Sullivan gives detailed information about most of the men and women he worked with, and although some of it is highly informational, a great deal of it is not. For example, do readers really need to know who met the author upon his arrival at various assignments, or what he thought of each one of them? Is it helpful to know that the CIA chief of operations in Vietnam, Theodore Shackley, told Sullivan that when he visited General Westmoreland the general was usually dressed in his bathrobe, because he didn't want to get his uniform wrinkled?

Sullivan's point of view is basically critical because his job was to test the veracity of the Vietnamese, on whom the CIA agents were relying for their information—essentially to separate the wheat from the chaff. Most of the time he discovered the Vietnamese faked their information; they were in it purely for the money. Sullivan

goes into great detail about polygraph testing: its procedure, its reliability, its limitations, etc. He also goes into great detail about how the CIA conducts itself, and what it expects of its staff. It is his information on the latter subject that is so disturbing.

According to Sullivan, a great deal of the blame for the CIA's failures can be attributed to recruitment policies that attracted the wrong people. There is the unexplained fact that language proficiency was not required. Essentially, according to Sullivan, the CIA was so desperate to recruit people for Vietnam that the agency resorted to bribing prospects with visions of easy living and easy money. Those who signed on for the money, naturally, never left Saigon if they could help it and, while there, some of them made more money than they ever had in their lives. A mail clerk and his wife rated a five-bedroom house completely furnished down to the glassware, plus a car, two maids and a cook.

He makes the point that "Vietnam was a cash cow for CIA employees ... a last chance for poor performers hoping to resurrect failing careers, the ultimate watering hole for those with a penchant for imbibing, a sexual playground for those so inclined, and a dumping ground to which CIA headquarters in Langley, exiled problem employees" (p. 4).

Reading the book, one realizes that much of America's dismal failure in Vietnam can be blamed on the CIA's East Asia Division Office of Personnel. It comes across as a bureaucratic nightmare, encouraging bad people while discouraging good ones. The author and his wife both suffered at its hands. Sullivan's wife, Lee, who also worked for the CIA, was forced to resign from the Agency and work on a contract basis as a condition of her accompanying her husband to Vietnam. Worse: "In addition, she had to take a pay cut and could not be guaranteed a job when we returned from Vietnam" (p. 29). When Sullivan himself was hired in 1968, the Office of Security Personnel told him he would be a GS-9 at a salary of \$8054. When he got his official papers, however, he found out to his chagrin that he was a GS-7 with a salary of \$6734. Apparently, the higher grade and salary were meant to lure Sullivan. When he queried Kirk, the Interrogation Research Division training officer who actually gave him his notice of employment, about the discrepancy, the latter laughed and said, "You goddamn fool, we would have given you anything you asked for" (p. 12).

The big question, of course, is why the CIA allowed such a state of affairs to continue. Why was there no language training or sensitivity training for CIA staff in

Saigon, as was the norm elsewhere? If the army could run a six-week immersion course as well as a twelve-month course in Vietnamese for its men at their language school, why couldn't the CIA?

Sullivan dealt with most of the major American players, as he calls them, who were in Vietnam. He accuses them all of having their heads in the sand, of being blindly optimistic, of refusing to see the handwriting on the wall. Ted Shackley, who ran the CIA in Vietnam, was typical of this mentality. According to the author, Shackley was apparently intelligent, but as he writes, "I do not understand how a man of his intellect and capability could expect our people in Vietnam to run successful, clandestine operations against the VC" (p. 43). Major Charles Timmes, retired U.S. Army and the liaison between the CIA and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, also refused to see the writing on the wall and believed everything the South Vietnamese officers told him. Sullivan heard a case officer ask Timmes how the South Vietnamese were going to win the war when they had not been able to do it when there were 500,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam. "Have you ever seen how the Vietnamese maneuver in traffic? They are very devious. They can do it," was Timmes's laughable response (p. 47). Of Thomas Polgar, the last CIA head, the author is more respectful, mainly because Polgar restored staff status to the CIA wives (including his own) who had had to take a pay cut in order to accompany their husbands to Vietnam. When it came to assessing the situation in Vietnam Polgar maintained the same incurable optimism as his predecessor. He remained convinced to the end that there would be a negotiated settlement between North and South, which leads the author to comment, "I often wished I knew the source of such information" (p. 50).

The Special Branch of the South Vietnamese National Police supplied about 90 percent of the leads upon which the CIA based their operations, but the CIA liaison officers who oversaw them were almost a joke, as Sullivan soon learned. "This was a case of the blind leading the unwilling" (p. 83). Sullivan asserts that almost every case officer he met agreed that the Special Branch "was the most impotent and corrupt entity with which the CIA worked" (p.83).

Of Spies and Lies is an interesting addition to the history of the CIA in Vietnam. It takes its place next to Frank Snepp's *Decent Interval: An Insider's Account of Saigon's Indecent End Told by the CIA's Chief Strategy Analyst in Vietnam* and *Slow Burn* by Orrin DeForest, another CIA Vietnam veteran. Reading *Of Spies and Lies* gives one the

sense of despair, disorder and corruption that existed in Vietnam; unfortunately one has to wade through a great deal of irrelevant information along the way. That is of course the weakness of a personal reminiscence. Sullivan is obsessively interested in presenting himself and his craft in a good light. He is continually vindicating his own judgments of Vietnamese assets, going through the step-by-step process by which he discovered who was telling the truth and who was fabricating. This adds to his credibility, but it also detracts from the focus of the book, because with each case, he includes the reactions of the Americans he worked with, what he thought of them, and what they thought of him, all of which the reader must wade through.

It must also be noted that Sullivan's perspective is unusual: he is low man on the totem pole, and things look decidedly different from down there. What to him looks like stupidity on the part of Shackley and Polgar, both of whom continued to believe (or appeared to) that they were making progress in the face of adverse conditions, and that they could meet the goals set out for them, makes a great deal of sense if they had no other hand to play.

In the end, one must consider this book a footnote to history, or, to use Philip Graham's phrase, the first rough draft. Students of the Vietnam War should read it, but they should judge it in that light.

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Citation: Susan Butler. Review of Sullivan, John F., *Of Spies and Lies: A CIA Lie Detector Remembers Vietnam*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. June, 2002.

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