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When the Student Movement Was a CIA Front

The CIA's manipulation of the National Student Association foreshadowed other forms of Cold War blowback that compromised democracy at home.

BY ARYEH NEIER APRIL 14, 2015



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Patriotic Betrayal: The Inside Story of the CIA's Secret Campaign to Enroll American Students in the Crusade Against Communism

By Karen M. Paget

552 pp. Yale University Press \$35

In its March 1967 issue, Ramparts, a glossy West Coast muckraking periodical that expired in 1975, and that strongly opposed American involvement in the war in Vietnam, published an exposé of the close relationship between the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Student Association. This other NSA-not to be confused with the National Security Agency-was then the leading American organization representing college students, with branches on about 400 campuses. Its ties with the CIA were formed in the early years of both institutions following World War II, as the Cold War was getting under way.

According to Ramparts, the CIA had been providing much of the funding for the NSA through various "conduits." NSA officers, many of them wittingly, had served the interests of the CIA by participating actively in international youth and student movements. The NSA's activities were financed by the Agency both to counter communist influence and also to provide information on people from other countries with whom they came in contact. The disclosures about the CIA's ties to the NSA were the most sensational of a number of revelations in that era that exposed the Agency's involvement in such institutions as the Congress for Cultural Freedom; the International Commission of Jurists; the AFL-CIO; Radio Free Europe; and various leading philanthropic foundations. Karen Paget's new book, *Patriotic Betrayal*, is the most detailed account yet of the CIA's use of the National Student Association as a vehicle for intelligence gathering and covert action. (See author's endnote.)

With the passage of half a century, it may be difficult to understand why so many political and cultural organizations, led by individuals with a generally liberal or leftist outlook, covertly collaborated with the CIA in the 1950s and first half of the 1960s, before exposés in Ramparts and other publications put an end to most such arrangements. After all, many of the activities of the Agency in that era are among those that we now regard as particularly discreditable. These include the CIA's cooperation with the British intelligence services in overthrowing the democratically elected government of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953; its cooperation with the United Fruit Company in overthrowing the democratically elected government of Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954; and its cooperation with the Republic of the Congo's former colonial rulers, the Belgians, in overthrowing the

country's newly elected prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, in 1960.

Several factors seem to me to have played a part. Press reporting on these events in that era tended not to focus on the role of the CIA. It was only years later, after the Senate's 1975-1976 Church Committee investigations, after long-after-the-fact investigations by journalists and scholars, and after the mid-1980s development of the National Security Archive and its extensive and effective use of the Freedom of Information Act, that many otherwise well-informed Americans grasped the role of the CIA in these events.

Also during the 1950s and the 1960s, the CIA, paradoxically, was the federal agency that seemed most ready to enlist liberals and leftists in its activities. In contrast, the State Department, which had been the main target of Senator Joseph McCarthy's attacks on those he accused of being communist sympathizers, probably would not have risked involvement with many of the young people who collaborated with the CIA. Above all, there was the atmosphere created by the Cold War.

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It was a struggle that had to be won, not only on the military battlefield, but also in intellectual and ideological combat with the communists.

Finally, it may be that covert activities had their own appeal. Those who were in on the secret were an elite, deriving satisfaction comparable to that provided by membership in an exclusive club.

This was also a period in which many other Americans with similar views collaborated with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the CIA's counterpart in the domestic intelligence field. In this era, the Bureau relied extensively on informers to accumulate its vast dossiers on the political associations and personal lives of millions of Americans. When I was executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union in the 1970s, we discovered through documents we obtained under the Freedom of Information Act that three officials of the ACLU in the 1950s had given the FBI information on others within the ACLU they suspected of being communists. They seem to have rationalized their conduct, at least in part, on the basis that cooperation with the FBI would help protect the ACLU against irresponsible congressional investigative bodies such as the House Un-American Activities Committee. The FBI's COINTELPRO, a program the Bureau established secretly in 1956 to foster jealousies and feuds in organizations whose activities the Bureau wished to disrupt, depended in part on its ability to collect personal data from informers within those organizations. The atmosphere created by the Cold War, in which the FBI and its allies in Congress and the media portrayed domestic subversives allied with foreign enemies as being the greatest threat to the United States, probably played a large part in persuading so many Americans to act as informers.

A number of young CIA collaborators who figure in Paget's story later achieved prominence. One of the book's virtues is that we get a clear picture of how well-educated and successful young Americans got involved in clandestine activities, and how they conducted themselves. But a frustrating aspect of the book is that, in most cases, Paget does not mention their subsequent careers. At least one leading academic figure's undisclosed youthful relationship with the CIA could be considered relevant to his later published work.

One of those collaborators Paget discusses is Allard Lowenstein, president of the NSA from 1950 to 1951, who became a leading civil rights and anti-war activist, a one-term member of Congress, and the organizer of the "Dump Johnson" movement that helped deter President Lyndon Johnson from running for re-election in 1968. A charismatic figure, he inspired many others to become activists in the causes that mattered to him. In 1980, Lowenstein was assassinated in his office by a deranged gunman who had become obsessed with him. Though some have previously speculated that Lowenstein initiated the NSA relationship with the CIA, Paget's research does not support this view. She finds that he may have obstructed such a relationship, and, if it took place when he was a leader of the NSA, he was probably not aware. Following the Ramparts disclosures, when 12 former presidents of the NSA issued a press release defending the covert relationship with the Agency, Lowenstein did not sign. Among those rumored or confirmed to have covertly collaborated with the CIA, Lowenstein stands out in Paget's book as the principal figure whom she clears of suspicion.

In discussing Robert Kiley, who was vice president of the NSA from 1957 to 1958, Paget never mentions that he eventually became a leading figure in urban transit, heading New York City's Metropolitan Transportation Authority and then, on the other side of the Atlantic, heading London Regional Transport. Paget discusses only how Kiley as a student leader cooperated closely with the CIA and subsequently went to work directly for the Agency, playing a leading role in identifying Africans who might collaborate with it. During his tenure on the CIA staff, in which he rose to become an aide to Director Richard Helms, Kiley helped manage the relationship with the student organization of which he had previously been an officer, sometimes in what seems a heavy-handed way.

Of those mentioned by Paget as knowing participants in the relationship between the NSA and the CIA, the most lustrous name is that of Gloria Steinem. Her connection has long been known. She acknowledged it following the disclosures by Ramparts. Steinem then told Newsweek: "In the CIA, I finally found a group of people who understood how important it was to represent the diversity of our government's ideas at Communist festivals. If I had the choice, I would do it again." Operating through a CIA front organization, established in cooperation with former NSA officers, Steinem recruited young Americans to participate in the 1959 communist-organized World Youth Festival in Vienna, and did the same a couple of years later when another such festival was held in Helsinki. Apparently, she did her job well, choosing American participants who were very effective in countering the communists. To her credit, Steinem, unlike several others, was candid; and this history hardly implicates the CIA in the rise of feminism.

Paul Sigmund, a longtime professor of politics at Princeton, died last April at the age of 85. He was particularly known for his many books and articles on Latin America, especially Chile. Sigmund wrote extensively about the overthrow of the Salvador Allende regime in Chile, which brought General Augusto Pinochet to power. In a lengthy article in the January 1974 *Foreign Affairs*, he attributed the September 1973 coup to Allende's misdeeds. He argued: "What [the Allende government] cannot do is blame all its problems on foreign imperialists and their domestic allies, and ignore elementary principles of economic rationality and effective political legitimacy in its internal policies. No amount of foreign assistance can be a substitute for these, and no amount of foreign subversion or economic pressure can destroy them if they exist."

According to Paget, Sigmund collaborated with the CIA over a period of several years. His role included drafting a plan for a six-week summer seminar conducted by a front group through which the Agency could screen other students who might be enlisted in its activities. (Sigmund's relationship to the CIA had come to light in the wake of the Ramparts exposé, but he did not cite it years later when he wrote about these events in which the CIA played a leading role.) Paget, though, does not mention Sigmund's subsequent career. She interviewed him and says, "He explained his willingness to cooperate with the CIA in pragmatic terms: 'It kept me out of Korea.'" Whatever his motivations, the question arises whether Sigmund's relationship to the Agency in the 1950s affected his subsequent scholarly work. We learned a long time ago that the Nixon administration primarily relied on the CIA to promote the overthrow of Allende. Should the professor of politics at Princeton have acknowledged his own past relationship with the CIA in an essay rebutting allegations of a central U.S. role in what happened in Chile? How would such a disclosure have affected reader assessment of his Foreign Affairs essay and his other writing on the subject?

Among the other NSA leaders named by Paget who subsequently became prominent are James P. Grant, the longtime and widely admired executive director of UNICEF who died in 1995; James Scott, professor of political science and anthropology at Yale who is highly regarded for his writing on Southeast Asia; Crawford Young, professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin and well-known scholar of African studies; Luigi Einaudi, an American diplomat who served as acting secretary general of the Organization of American States; and Duncan Kennedy, professor of law at Harvard, whose emergence as a leading critical theorist is mentioned by Paget and who has been open about his onetime association with the CIA.

Should disclosure of such relationships be considered obligatory for those who present themselves as independent scholars? Certainly, it should be incumbent on someone like Sigmund to disclose his covert connection to the CIA. Even if that relationship was long past, writing an essay exculpating that agency from a charge of subversion without such disclosure raises ethical issues.

Aside from whether such persons should subsequently disclose that they once had a covert connection to the CIA, there is the question of whether it was appropriate to enter into such a relationship in the first place. Certainly, there was an idealistic component. Countering communism, I believed at the time and still do today, was the right thing to do. Yet doing so by covertly manipulating domestic organizations compromised American freedom of association. This contradiction, as more and more students came to oppose the Vietnam War, led to the eventual rupture of the NSA and its CIA patrons.

We don't know how the constituents of the NSA would have felt about their officers' secret relationship with the CIA. What we can surmise, however, is that some would have been strongly opposed. The NSA's members could not debate whether to enter into the relationship, and those opposed could not express their views because they were not in on the secret. Disclosure would have killed the program. Whatever one thinks about the importance of having had such means to wage the battles of the Cold War, it seems difficult to justify the deception that was central to its operation.

Author's Note: *I was not shocked by the disclosures in Ramparts. Though I lacked definite information, I had been generally aware that there was a relationship between the CIA and the NSA. In 1957, as a student at Cornell, I became national president of the Student League for Industrial*

Democracy, a small organization with a social democratic bent that had chapters on several college campuses. Paget describes SLID as "fiercely anticommunist." Yes, but we were also civil libertarians and vigorously opposed the college bans on communist speakers prevalent in that era. In 1959, I took the lead in relaunching SLID as Students for a Democratic Society, but I soon lost influence in SDS to Tom Hayden and others, who took it in a more radical direction. These activities put me in contact with some leaders of the NSA named by Paget. Though I did not know who wittingly collaborated with the Agency, I recall being quite sure that the Foundation for Youth and Student Affairs, the main source of funding for the NSA, was a CIA front.

As Karen Paget notes in her "Acknowledgments," her early work on this book was supported by a fellowship from the Open Society Institute when I was its president.

by Aryeh Neier

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