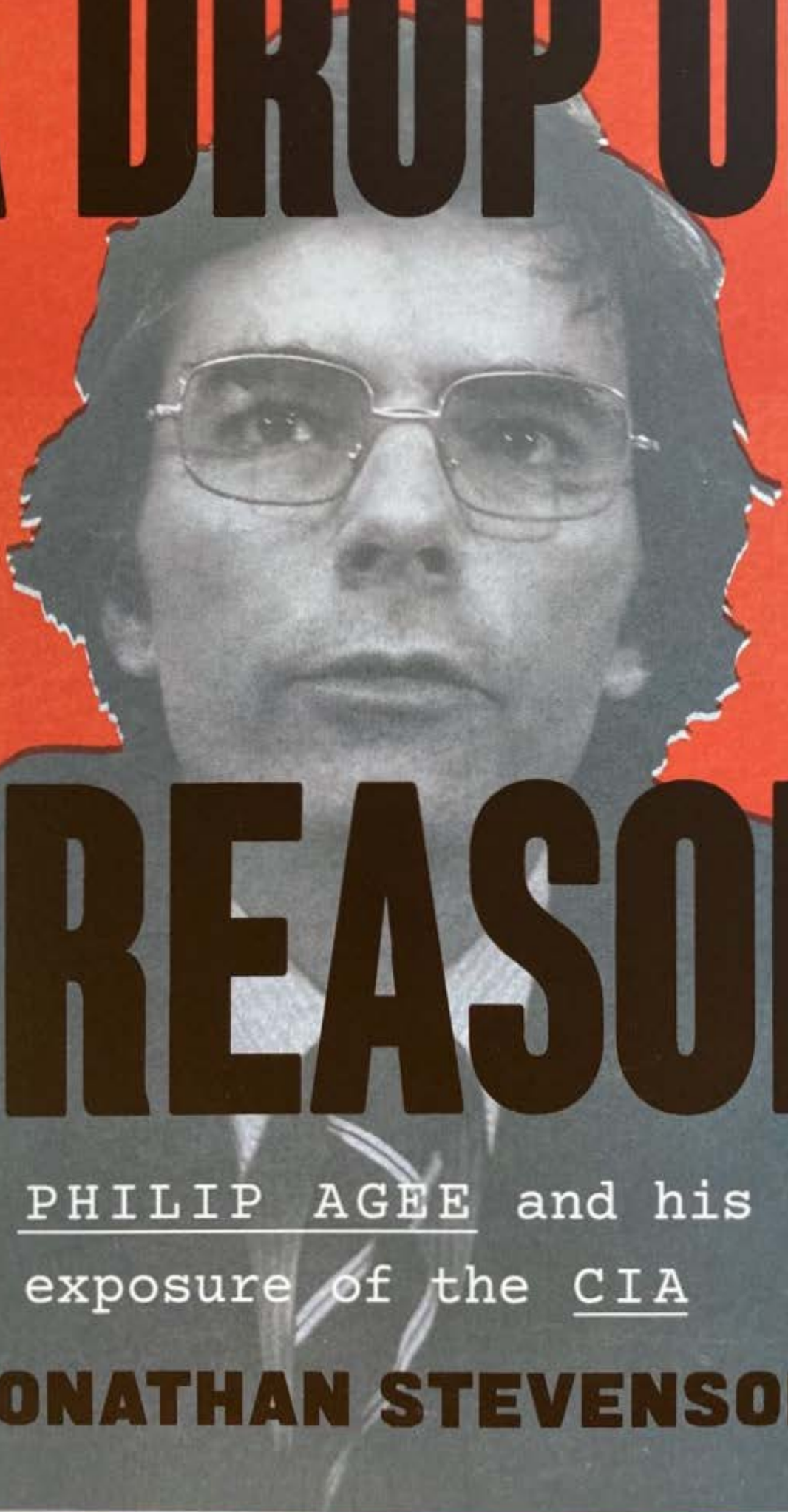
A DROP OF TREASON



PHILIP AGEE and his exposure of the CIA

JONATHAN STEVENSON

and received—his datebooks indicate that during this period he exchanged mail with John Stockwell, which would have interested the government—but it's not likely that they would have seized all of his letters for a single year.[66]

The more probable explanation is that his conscientiousness about being a political interlocutor was flagging. He had developed an armchair interest in Australia and New Zealand's domestic affairs, and his contacts included Murray Horton, who was secretary of a nongovernmental organization called the Campaign against Foreign Control in New Zealand, based in Christchurch. Horton suspected that the CIA was involved in advancing better-than-market loans to officials of the Maori Affairs Department of the New Zealand Labor government of Prime Minister David Lange. The transactions were linked to a Hawaiian native rights group that the CIA had penetrated. Ex-Australian minister Clyde Cameron believed that the CIA was similarly seeking to disrupt the Australian Labor government of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam.[67] Agee shared Horton's suspicions. With his encouragement, the Campaign against Foreign Control in New Zealand arranged for Agee a paid and sponsored trip to New Zealand and a speaking tour there. To Horton's considerable annoyance, however, Agee summarily canceled the trip.[68] He seemed enervated. Potential libel problems with *On the Run* cropped up, perhaps further subduing him.[69]

SETTLING

One probative indicator of Agee's mindset in the mid-1980s comes from his interview with Frank Deese, whom Tri-Star Pictures had retained to write and direct a film about the life of a CIA case officer, from college recruitment to field operations.* CIA public rela-

*Deese did in fact write the film, which had the working title "The Company Man," and its development went fairly far. Tri-Star enlisted Kevin Reynolds, then an up-and-comer, to direct the film. When the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union collapsed, however, the studio killed the project. But Hollywood did not appear to completely bypass Agee. In 1980, AVCO Embassy Pictures released *Hopscotch*, an action comedy starring Walter Matthau as Miles Kendig, a disgruntled former CIA

tions were unwilling to assist Deese—they wouldn't even tell him "the color of the linoleum at Langley"—so he went directly to Agee, initially contacting him by telephone. Tri-Star hired Agee at $100 an hour to act as a consultant on the movie.[70] An intent Deese, who was only twenty-five at the time and somewhat "nervous" about talking to someone who was likely being watched by several intelligence services, spent two days with him in early April 1986 at a house in Ulm, West Germany, a small, scenic city on the Danube near the western foothills of the Alps, where Albert Einstein was born.[71] The Agees were living there while Giselle completed a stint with the city ballet.

On their first encounter, "he invited me in, introduced me to his wife, sat me down, and I was like, wow, this guy is so nice, he's really making me feel at ease," Deese recalled in 2016. "Then he said, 'Let's take a look at the contract.' That was when I saw his paranoid streak." It wasn't that Agee thought Deese was an agency plant, though; his worry was that he would somehow lose control of his personal story to Tri-Star and Deese. "I don't know if he was on the spectrum or had a condition, because when he looked at the contract, he snapped into a different mental mode. I was like, what happened to the guy who was pouring my tea?"[72] Deese assured him that he and Tri-Star wanted only to gain background on the CIA's recruitment and training process for purposes of composing a wholly fictitious story. Still, Deese had to confirm as much with Tri-Star and secure an amendment to the contract before Agee would proceed. Deese himself wrote down Agee's requirements, phoned Tri-Star legal in Los Angeles to get approval for the exact language, typed up the amendment on a German typewriter, and to obtain the required signature mailed it global express to the Tri-Star lawyer, who signed the document and overnighted it back to Deese. He then paid Agee with travelers' checks, sitting at a table and countersigning over $2,000 worth in

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case officer intent on publishing a comprehensive exposé whom the agency unsuccessfully tries to thwart. While the film was based on Brian Garfield's novel of the same name, and Kendig's grievances involved the agency's general incompetence and its mistreatment of him in particular rather any ideological conversion, the similarities between its plot and Agee's story are palpable.

$100 denominations in front of him.[73] Once they had all those preliminaries squared away, he was "generous and thoughtful" about all and sundry, from recruitment to training to field work.[74]

In their extended, freewheeling conversation, Agee displayed disciplined circumspection in registering his political views, though Deese detected in him a strain of apologism with respect to the KGB and the DGI, about which he declined to say anything negative.[75] Intriguingly, Agee also proved an enthusiastic raconteur about tradecraft—cryptonyms, secret writing, "flaps and seals," bugs, concealed cameras, microdots, surveillance, losing a tail—and the intelligence world overall. He clinically went through various niceties, such as the distinction between official cover (for which a case officer is merely cast as a State Department or Pentagon employee) and nonofficial cover (for which the officer poses as a private-sector person unconnected with any government). Agee also manifested a fairly detached awareness of the generational challenge that the CIA was facing—and knew it was facing—in the 1960s.

> There was a problem of attrition, because so many of the people whom they recruited in the 50s were at a young age, like 21 or 22, getting their bachelor's, they didn't really know what they wanted to do. Through the course of the two-year training program, there were resignations of four, five, six, ten people. Some might stay in for one tour abroad and then they would resign. So the attrition was pretty high. And when you get into the 60s and the activism on the campus and the civil rights movement, and especially with the anti-war movement, I noticed that the people—and I'm talking now about when I went back to Washington for about six months, eight months in '66–'67. And there I noticed that—and I talked to people about this, too—that the people were being recruited were to a much lesser degree recruited out of universities when they were getting their bachelor degree. They were older people. I noticed quite a few who had served in Vietnam in the military. Through their service with the military, they had some connection with the CIA in Vietnam. Because of course the CIA was very active in Vietnam. There was a spotting and assessment program going on in Vietnam by the CIA of military people who

were working with them for possible recruitment into the CIA. For example, one person who came and worked at a desk next to me had been a Marine officer in Vietnam. He had gone through university, he had then gone into the Marine Corps, maybe he was ROTC, I can't remember, but then he'd been recruited to come into the CIA, and he was like 35. The idea then was that first they would avoid recruiting people who were so young they didn't really know what they wanted to do. And then they'd spend all this money training them, and have this person resign or go into some other kind of work. There was another factor too, and that was with the problem of political alienation among young people during the 60s. There was one good way to assess them, and that the person's reaction to Vietnam. If you had a person who was all for the intervention in Vietnam, who worked in it, like the Marine officer I just mentioned, then it was pretty certain that that person was not going to have political problems with doing CIA work. It was more like parallel or continuation of what the person's been doing in Vietnam. And so the tendency in the 60s was to get older people and people whose political convictions were quite clear and defined over the Vietnam question.[76]

Yet despite this implicit recognition of tectonic political and cultural forces that arose in the 1960s, which helped explain and at least excused and arguably vindicated his own path, Agee romanticized his friend Ernie's politically muted but strangely fitful withdrawal from the intelligence field. Ernie had been an administrator at the Montevideo CIA station, and Agee thought he'd make a fine operations man and recruited Ernie himself. After six months or so at Camp Peary, Ernie was assigned to Bolivia as a case officer. There one of his principal agents was killed, apparently owing to his connection with the agency. Ernie became despondent. After he was transferred to Mexico, his wife, morally disenchanted with his work, separated from him. He chose to resign from the CIA and reconciled with his wife. They went back to California, where she became a college professor and he a landscape painter. The agency, however, eventually reenlisted him to act as liaison between friendly, talent-spotting professors and Langley. When his wife found out, she left

him again. The agency changed his name and sent him to Portugal under nonofficial cover—he was a "NOC," pronounced "knock," in trade-speak—as, of all things, a painter.[77]

Agee's understanding was that during his eighteen months in Portugal in 1974–75, Ernie had handled the most important CIA penetration of the Armed Forces Movement (MFA), the procommunist cabal of junior Portuguese military officers who engineered the largely nonviolent "Carnation Revolution" military coup in April 1974—grateful citizens affixed carnations to the soldiers' uniforms and placed them in the muzzles of their guns—that ended the authoritarian right-wing regime that had ruled the country since 1933. The United States and its European allies were naturally uncomfortable with the MFA's ideology, and over a rocky two-year period supported moderate elements that eventually prevailed and ushered in stable democracy and swift decolonization. His work done, Ernie quit the CIA again, this time for good, reconciled with his wife one more time, and, in Agee's telling, disappeared into the mountains of Colorado.[78]

This, of course, was Agee's road not taken. In his conversation with Deese, he segues from his somewhat wistful reflections about it to a hardnosed acknowledgment that the agency had been "accurate" in judging that he "was not a good long-range prospect" because they didn't think he really knew what he wanted to do.[79] From there he moves on to the cheeky observation that the agency had failed to polygraph him over the entire course of his near-decade of fieldwork following training, which he had also noted in *Inside the Company*.[80] Especially given the assessment of Agee's tenuousness as an operations officer, overlooking routine polygraph examinations that might have revealed his ambivalence was an egregious and improbable error on the CIA's part. However comfortable it might have been for Agee to metaphorically evanesce into the Colorado Rockies, he seemed to be suggesting, his destiny must have been to do something more to thwart the agency.

Accordingly, he refocused on what he perceived as his mission. He remembered that his CIA indoctrination courses in the 1950s implanted the notion that the Soviets, "in order to retain power inter-

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nally had to continue to expand externally," which necessitated containment. A key corollary of this view was that the revolutions in Cuba and Nicaragua as well as Vietnam were all "creatures of the Soviet Union." If détente had relaxed this "right-wing interpretation of history," he said, the Reagan administration had revived and amplified it, most pointedly vis-à-vis Latin America.[81] This perception kept Agee running on at least a few cylinders. But his engagement was increasingly sporadic and selective. He focused predominantly on easy and relatively glamorous undertakings like book tours and eschewed substantively peripheral adventures like exposing CIA meddling in Australia and New Zealand. In the CIA, he told Deese, "you're always on the make. Constantly."[82] He had learned this occupational imperative well, and in fact had carried it over into his life as an anti-CIA activist.

After fifteen years, though, he was getting tired. Among the effects was a diminution of his sanctimoniousness. In his dialogue with Deese, there was little hint of wholesale distaste for CIA methods. He mentioned AVENGEFUL merely as an example of an operation for which he was responsible, making no note of the fact that it produced Bonaudi's brutal torture and sent him into slow-burning guilt and professional discomfort.[83] His talk about co-opting local telephone companies for wiretapping verged on boastful; he certainly manifested no shame.[84] He spoke nonchalantly, and crassly, of other nefarious aspects of the spy trade, such as considering a recruitment approach to a Russian diplomat he called Borizov whose wife was using her Saturday afternoons "to fuck the KGB [station] chief," which Agee knew because the station chief's "bed was bugged."[85]

Against Agee's public presentation of himself as a man of rediscovered rectitude, this kind of voyeurism and vulgarity was unexpected. Even his recollection of German intelligence's stealthily monitoring and opening his mail was dispassionate, shared for purposes of illustrating the use of a special scanner that illuminated writing through an envelope.[86] He spoke admiringly of Desmond FitzGerald, the legendary CIA deputy director for plans, referring to him as "Des" and remembering a direct encounter with him when FitzGerald visited the Montevideo station.[87] He fondly recounted

the field exercises in Baltimore that he and fellow trainees engaged in out of Camp Peary. "Most of our nights were free. I think almost every night we went down to Baltimore Street to the strip joint."[88] From a calming distance, and perhaps exhaustion, it seemed his CIA life hadn't been so bad.

Even more explicitly, Agee was proud of the initial promise he had shown as a case officer, despite the agency's earlier assessment of his long-term unsuitability. Perhaps he was also looking to repudiate its retroactive character assassination. After finishing training at Camp Peary, prior to his first field assignment as a case officer, Agee worked on the Latin America desk at CIA headquarters in Langley. There he impressed the chief of the Venezuela desk, who had been chosen to become the station chief in Quito, Ecuador. He cut through red tape and got Agee his first assignment to that station, substantially sooner that any of Agee's classmates had been give their first postings. "I was very pleased," he admitted.[89] He also took pains to burnish his credentials as a high-performing operative, noting that

> throughout the sixties the problem that caused the most difficulties in the CIA was Vietnam, because the CIA was required to provide so many bodies for Vietnam—so many per month at one point—for some years. So that had to snatch people from different area divisions and put them on the road to Vietnam. The order from the president was that the best people had to be sent to Vietnam. But it turned out in practice that the worst people were sent . . . [b]ecause the division chiefs and the station chiefs didn't want their best people sent to Vietnam, they needed these people. When I went back to Washington in 1966, after six years in Latin America, I knew that our division had a quota to fill. . . . And I asked [the deputy division chief] what are my chances of being put on that list. . . . And he said, no you won't be sent, don't worry. We won't send you.[90]

Whether these remarks were merely self-serving or genuinely felt, for all his expressed disgust with the agency's mission and activities, Agee wanted Deese to register that he, Philip Agee, had been

an elite case officer. Later that day, in brainstorming a movie plot, he alluded to his own psychological transformation when he imagined a CIA case officer under nonofficial cover who "would come to identify with the human factors in his environment, as opposed to the black-and-white anti-communism which he had been taught both before and after he went into the CIA. He would begin to develop a kind of crisis of conscience and an ideological crisis."[91] When pressed, he spoke of the case officer's occupational hazard of "falling in love" with an agent. "That's the expression," he elaborated. "And that can take many different forms. It doesn't [necessarily] mean man/woman or especially romantic. It means you fail to keep a certain emotional distance from the people you are working with, who are your agents. You have to control them, you have to be in a position to correct and criticize them. And this is all under the rubric of agent control. If you lose that sense of distance and begin to identify with the person, then your ability to handle the operation properly is compromised."[92]

This NOC, in Agee's movie scenario, would have shown great initial potential as a case officer before his humanization, whereupon he would pit himself against a more thoroughly immersed anticommunist CIA case officer insusceptible to enlightenment to undermine the recruitment of a fence-sitting target.[93] The NOC sounded an awful lot like a more valorized version of Agee himself. Still, Agee had no problem showing Deese some less than admirable carryover qualities. In particular, he seemed to relish the memory of the power a case officer brandishing a polygraph held over the prospective—and possibly desperate—agent who was about to be examined in a safe house. "The agent goes white and gets all nervous. And then you tell him it's ready right now, and then he starts shuffling and getting more nervous, and you ask him, you don't mind do you?"[94] Clinically he noted that the specter of periodic polygraph examinations was "a control and intimidating factor," and a "very good" one.[95] And while he allowed that "some case officers fought against using the polygraph because they were afraid it would spoil the rapport with certain agents," it was conspicuous that Agee—who was usually quick to stamp his ethical sensibility on a conversation—did not

mention that he was one of them.[96] He acknowledged that "blackmail in intelligence is very bad motivation, because it's negative motivation," noting that "the CIA wants people to work for them who want to work for them, and not who are doing it because they are under duress."[97] Yet he himself urged blackmailing the KGB deputy station chief who was sleeping with the Russian diplomat's wife.

If there was something about the CIA's peremptory, smug swagger and manipulativeness that Agee found off-putting, he had also to some extent internalized it. When Deese took him and Giselle out to lunch, Agee peremptorily scolded Deese for overtipping.[98] Psychological coercion was never entirely alien to Agee, not before his ideological conversion or after it. Even seventeen years after he decided to leave the agency—supposedly on principle—he was proud of his own tradecraft and not especially shy about hiding his skilled deviousness. It's fair to say that he thought that his very talents as an intelligence officer could be effectively applied in besting the CIA. Agee certainly had not been reborn, innocent of darker vocational influences. He valued his own evolved stealth and he used it—not only to advance what he considered a righteous anti-CIA cause but also to disguise plain fatigue as earned ennoblement.

REHABILITATION

As late as February 1985, the US Attorney General was unwilling to give Agee assurances that he would not be subject to prosecution if he came to the United States, maintaining the same position asserted since 1977.[99] In January 1987, however, Melvin Wulf encouraged Agee, then in Madrid, to return to the United States to promote *On the Run*, assessing the likelihood of legal action as "pretty low."[100] The Justice Department, of course, had merely indicated that it would decline to indict or prosecute Agee for the time being; it did not concede that Agee had not violated federal espionage laws or that its forbearance was necessarily permanent. But perhaps Agee's tight compliance with the injunction against exposing CIA officers and assets had moved the Justice Department to ignore him. So Agee started to visit the States, initially flying to Canada and crossing the

64. Author interview with Marc Cooper, February 19, 2016.

65. Agee-Wulf correspondence; Agee Papers, box 2, folder 34.

66. Agee datebooks; Agee Papers, box 4.

67. See Planned Tour to Australia and New Zealand, Agee Papers, box 1A, folder 8.

68. Letter to Agee from Murray Horton, dated March 30, 1987; Agee Papers, box 1A, folder 8.

69. Agee datebook, September 1, 1987; Agee Papers, box 4.

70. Author interview with Frank Deese, February 22, 2016; Letter to Agee from Frank Deese, Agee Papers, box 1A.

71. Author interview with Frank Deese, February 22, 2016.

72. Author interview with Frank Deese, February 22, 2016.

73. Frank Deese, e-mail to the author, June 29, 2017.

74. Author interview with Frank Deese, February 22, 2016.

75. Author interview with Frank Deese, February 22, 2016.

76. Transcript of Agee interview with Franklin Deese [hereafter abbreviated "Agee/Deese interview"], April 3, 1986, tape 1A, p. 8; in author's possession.

77. Agee/Deese interview, April 3, 1986, tape 1A, p. 13.

78. Agee/Deese interview, April 3, 1986, tape 1A, p. 13.

79. Agee/Deese interview, April 3, 1986, tape 1B, p. 19.

80. Agee/Deese interview, April 3, 1986, tape 2A, p. 5.

81. Agee/Deese interview, April 3, 1986, tape 2B, pp. 9–12.

82. Agee/Deese interview, April 3, 1986, tape 4B, p. 11.

83. Agee/Deese interview, April 3, 1986, tape 4B, p. 9.

84. Agee/Deese interview, April 3, 1986, tape 5B, pp. 5–6.

85. Agee/Deese interview, April 3, 1986, tape 4B, p. 12.

86. Agee/Deese interview, April 3, 1986, tape 5A, p. 6.

87. Agee/Deese interview, April 3, 1986, tape 5B, p. 3.

88. Agee/Deese interview, April 3, 1986, tape 5B, pp. 11–12.

89. Agee/Deese interview, April 3, 1986, tape 6A, pp. 3–5.

90. Agee/Deese interview, April 3, 1986, tape 6A, p. 12.

91. Agee/Deese interview, April 3, 1986, tape 7A, p. 6.

92. Agee/Deese interview, April 3, 1986, tape 7A, p. 9.

93. Agee/Deese interview, April 3, 1986, tape 7A, p. 11.

94. Agee/Deese interview, April 3, 1986, tape 7B, p. 6.

95. Agee/Deese interview, April 3, 1986, tape 7B, p. 9.

96. Agee/Deese interview, April 3, 1986, tape 7B, p. 10.

97. Agee/Deese interview, April 3, 1986, tape 7B, p. 12.

98. Frank Deese, e-mail to the author, June 29, 2017.

99. Letter to Melvin Wulf from Assistant Attorney General Stephen Trott, dated February 5, 1985; Agee Papers, box 2, folder 34.

100. Agee-Wulf correspondence; Agee Papers, box 2, folder 34.

101. Unsigned memo re: PHILIP AGEE, dated August 28, 1991; obtained by author via FOIA request to US State Department, Case No. 201000351.

102. See Thomas Powers, "The Enemy of the Agency," *New York Times*, August 2, 1987.

103. Agee Papers, box 4.

104. Agee Papers, box 18, folder 41.

105. See Beth Rhea, "Former Agent Condemns CIA Actions," *Daily Tar Heel*, November 18, 1988, 1.

106. Agee Papers, box 9, folder 28.

107. Agee Papers, box 1A.

108. Letter to Charles Betz from Agee, dated April 19, 1988; Agee Papers, box 2, folder 34.

109. Agee Papers, boxes 1A and 3.

110. Agee datebooks; Agee Papers, box 4.

111. Philip Agee, "How to Become a Non-ND Alumnus," *Common Sense*, February 1989; Agee Papers, box 1A.

112. See Keith Smart, "Agee Not the Martyr He Claims to Be," *Observer*, March 14, 1989, 8.

113. Letter to Agee from Roger K. O'Reilly, dated April 17, 1989; Agee Papers, box 3.

114. Agee Papers, box 3.

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