

**Verne Lyon, Philip Zwerling.** *Eyes on Havana: Memoir of an American Spy Betrayed by the CIA.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2018. 227 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4766-7090-4.

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In the era of Trump, attacks on intelligence agencies are commonplace and in that sense the publication of *Eyes on Havana* is most timely. Verne Lyon reminds us, in his personal memoir, that the actions of intelligence-gathering organizations, in this case the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) must be subject to external review or abuses are likely.

Lyon, with the help of Philip Zwerling, an associate professor at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, tells the story of his recruitment into the CIA as an engineering student at Iowa State University in 1965. His mission was to monitor classmates and professors and gauge their views on the Vietnam War (pp. 33-34). When he graduated the following year, Lyon thought his involvement with the agency was over and he happily went to work for an aerospace company on rocket designs.

As he tells it, everything went wrong for him in December 1966 when an explosion occurred at a St. Louis airport. Lyon claims he was framed by the CIA or another government agency as a way to get him to return to the spy trade. Desperate for a way to salvage his life he accepted an offer by the CIA to clear his name in return for agreeing to be placed in Cuba as a spy.

The CIA created a “legend” for him as a draft-dodger fleeing the war in Vietnam and he ap-

proached Cuban officials in Toronto about defecting (p. 81). He was eventually able to secure a position there as an engineer at the island’s Atmospheric Physics Institute. The Cubans recruited him to develop a program to seed clouds to increase rainfall during dry seasons and increase crop production. From 1969 to 1975, Lyon plied his trade as a low- to mid-level spy, gathering information of questionable value and performing occasional acts of sabotage such as pouring cement mix into a milk shipment destined for a secondary school (pp. 103-104).

Lyon grew tired of the spying life and after marrying a Cuban woman decided to resign his commission and seek a return to the United States along with his wife and stepson. Unfortunately, the CIA turned on him and cut off communication and the Cubans finally caught on to his real purpose and deported him to Jamaica. After some months on the run, he was kidnapped off the streets of Lima, Peru, by three unknown assailants and sent back to the United States, where he was forced to stand trial for the St. Louis bombing. He was sentenced to eleven years in a federal penitentiary in 1977 but ended up serving five. His account of the depravities of prison life is one of the most poignant and believable parts of the memoir. Upon release in 1982, Lyon dedicated much of his life to exposing the underhanded

practices of the CIA, culminating with the release of this work.

Lyon's book is an entertaining page-turner but, as with many memoirs, scholars must approach it with great trepidation. To his credit he provides scattered letters and documentation, such as his FBI Wanted Poster and a few government documents referring to his arrest. There are also about a dozen photographs, some of them taken in Cuba, that add a level of authenticity to this endeavor. Zwerling, a creative writing teacher, adds some additional credibility to the project because of his prior research on the CIA and its activities on college campuses.

The memoir sheds light on the nasty nature of the covert operations unleashed on Cuba by the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. In terms of scope and significance, this spy account is of a different magnitude than accounts of Operation Mongoose, which focused on the assassination of Fidel Castro and the overthrow of the Cuban government. *Eyes on Havana* is a more mundane, day-to-day account of the sometimes tedious, sometimes dangerous aspects of spycraft. Much of the time, as Lyon tells it, he is charged by TIO (his pejorative term for Uncle Sam) with providing information he is incapable of accessing, given his mid-level bureaucratic placement within Cuba.

There are issues of credibility with this work that readers should consider. Why, for example, did Lyon not file a Freedom of Information Act request for government files dealing with his case? At least some of the documents are subject to declassification given the passage of time. This issue is never touched upon in the memoir. There is also Lyon's questionable moral compass given his participation in a wide range of morally contemptible, or at the very least, ambiguous acts. The question arises: What has he chosen to omit from this account of CIA misdeeds?

Some aspects of his memoir strain credibility. His account of the events leading up to his arrest for the airport bombing is one such example. A

day or so after the incident, law enforcement officials came to his workplace. They asked to search his car and he willingly allowed them to do so without receiving an explanation from them as to their purpose. He then agreed to allow them to search his apartment, again with no explanation. He had bought ten sticks of dynamite and fuses for a rocket experiment he was working on with his brother. When asked by authorities if he ever purchased explosives, he admitted it and then showed them the box under his bed. An excerpt from the book reads as follows: "The older man [law enforcement official] opened it and removed the sticks of dynamite one by one. He counted only seven. I knew that I had purchased ten. Where were the other three? Who could have taken them?" (p. 44). As noted earlier, Lyon speculates that the CIA framed him (p. 50). But why would the agency take such extreme measures and break a wide range of laws to recruit a low-level spy for a mission of questionable value? This work leaves readers to ponder the likelihood of that possibility.

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