

**The Langley Files: A CIA Podcast**  
**Episode 4**  
*Into the Archives: Why Does CIA Have Historians?*

**Host #1 – Dee**

**Host #2 – Walter**

**Guest #1 – David**

(music begins)

**Narrator:** Decades ago, a quote was carved into a marble wall at headquarters. “And ye shall know the truth,” it reads, “and the truth shall make you free.” At CIA, there are truths we can share and stories we can tell. Stories of duty and dedication. Stories of ingenuity and mission. Stories beyond those of Hollywood scripts and shadowed whispers. Today we're taking a step out from behind those shadows, sharing what we can, and offering a glimpse into the world of the Central Intelligence Agency. This is The Langley Files.

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**David:** And we're happy to do that because to us, it's really key to getting the message out about what the Agency really has done and avoiding some of these misconceptions and myths that permeate the American culture. One of the problems that we always have is most people don't understand or study intelligence history. They get their history and quotes from novels and movies. It's the old case of you know, the vacuum is filled with the fiction when the facts aren't there. So it's very important for the history staff to get the facts out to not only the workforce but in a large measure to the American public as well.

(music fades out)

**Walter:** Welcome back to The Langley Files: A CIA Podcast. I'm Walter, joined as ever by my cohost, Dee.

**Dee:** Hey everyone, and Walter, I'm gonna start off with a question directed right towards you.

**Walter:** Shoot.

**Dee:** If I were to say the phrase “CIA occupation,” what do you think is the first thing that comes to people's minds is?

**Walter:** Spies? Or analysts?

**Dee:** Probably. How about, um, gadget makers?

**Walter:** For sure. Them, too.

**Dee:** But do you think anyone out there is immediately thinking of historians?

**Walter:** Probably no one who hasn't read the title to this episode.

**Dee:** That is a very valid point, my friend.

**Walter:** But as Mike said on our last episode, there are a wide range of specialties here at CIA.

**Dee:** And among those specialties is, in fact, in-house historians.

**Walter:** But what's their role here at Langley? And how does their work studying the past shape what the Agency does today and in the future? We have with us here today CIA's lead Historian, David Robarge, to discuss that and much more. David, thank you for joining us today.

**David:** This is great. And I really enjoyed listening to your previous podcasts. And I'm very happy to be here to share with the listeners what the history staff does, what the function of the history staff is in an intelligence agency and how we support the Agency's mission.

**Dee:** Great thank you.

**Walter:** Well, that's a great place to start. Uh so, David, tell us about the role of the CIA's history staff and what being a historian at CIA entails.

**David:** The Agency has had a history function since 1951. It's one of the oldest support functions that the Agency has, and it suggests that we've always really been interested in documenting our history and conveying it to the workforce. And increasingly, as we opened up in latter decades to the American public as well. I go back to an observation that a historian who later became one of our most important analysts, Sherman Kent, made some years ago. He says "history in a government agency doesn't exist for history's sake. It exists to improve the operational efficiency of that agency." In other words, we're not ivory tower historians with PhDs and advanced degrees who sit out in some obscure location and produce books and articles that nobody reads. We are intricately involved with, especially in recent years, with the mainstream activities and core missions of the Agency. Our writings, our teachings, our briefings, they are commissioned in the main. Most of it comes from requests for information and histories of office projects and operations. And the whole idea is to instruct intelligence professionals about what's happened before so they can not only learn from it but also use lessons from that past to build an information base that will enable them to avoid shortcomings and failures and replicate successes. In other words, we're there to make the Agency a better place, a more efficient and more functional, a more dynamic and more effective organization.

**Walter:** And David, can you speak a bit more about how your team's work is incorporated by CIA. Are you consulted regularly, or how does that work?

**David:** Oh yes, we're extremely busy. We daily handle at least a half a dozen requests for information from all over the Agency. Whether it's just, I forgot a date, or when did this office get created or something more elaborate, like, can you tell me what happened 20 years ago in this particular country that might be of interest today. Uh, we do that on an ad hoc basis. We also have more formal types of products. We write books, we write articles. We do book reviews to tell people what literature is worth looking at and not looking at. Anytime we do a publication, we brief it to interested audiences. We do public events, uh, inside the Agency. That is for the workforce. We have two websites that we put material out. One is Agency focused. One is community focused because one of my historians is a dedicated community historian, a slot that came over from the DNI's office, for example.

**Walter:** And that the intelligence community, you're referring to?

**David:** Right, right. The intelligence community, right. And beyond that, we have a variety of other activities. We produce videos, we have classified and unclassified movies. We do press interviews, and we're happy to do that because to us it's really key to getting the message out about what the Agency really has done and avoiding some of these misconceptions and myths that permeate the American culture. One of the problems that we always have is most people don't understand or study intelligence history. They get their history and quotes from novels and movies. It's the old case of you know, the

vacuum is filled with the fiction when the facts aren't there. So it's very important for the history staff to get the facts out to not only the workforce, but in a large measure to the American public as well. When we look back on our briefings and teaching schedule, for example, we noticed that about 20% of our time on stage, if you will, is in public events outside events with university audiences, Heritage Societies, civic organizations. And we find that that has a good payback in improving people's knowledge about what the Agency does.

**Dee:** A lot, a lot to talk about right there. I think one of the things I want to preemptively just kind of get out there before we maybe dive a little deeper into some of those topics. You obviously work for the CIA. So you're internally with the organization. So how do you and your staff objectively either write or present or talk about things from the Agency's past, lessons learned, while actually being an Agency officer yourself?

**David:** Right. We do encounter occasionally some skepticism that we are essentially propagandists for the Agency. Our immediate retort to that is read what we've done. Uh, many, many products of ours are available on the public website or even in some publications. If people simply read that, they will understand that we are very objective. We tell it like it is. We don't hold our punches. We do tell positive stories, but we also tell negative ones. And we think that's the way to get public buy-in into our function. The history staff has always been a separate entity and independent entity. I currently work in the Center for the Study of Intelligence. We, as they say, do it straight up. Honest. Uh, good, bad, ugly, everything. That's just our important function.

**Dee:** And again, I think we do want to dig into some of the things about misconceptions and things that are misunderstood about the Agency, but just curious about the personal side of things. What, for you personally, made you want to step into this role either as a historian or the actual Chief Historian here at CIA?

**David:** Well, I was trained as an historian. I have a PhD in American history from Columbia. I earned it after coming to the Agency. I was originally a political and leadership analyst working on Middle Eastern affairs. And around 1995 I finished my degree, and I had been on some high profile high pressure accounts for a number of years. So the family was growing. I needed a bit of a change of pace, and a position opened up on the history staff, and I jumped. That was in 1996. I worked as a staff historian for nine years, and then in 2005, the Chief position opened up and I competed for it and thankfully, was given the job. It's a great job because I have an administrative role as Chief of the History Staff, but the administrative burden is very light. The bulk of my work is not only producing my own histories and presentations but reviewing the material that my staff historians write. And for me, that's really one of the most interesting parts of the job, because I'm always learning. Every day I leave the workplace smarter than I was before. It's a never ending, exciting intellectual experience, and to me, as a professional historian, it's the best job one could possibly have.

**Walter:** Could we pull on that thread for just a second and maybe have you tell us about a day in the life of being historian at the CIA?

**David:** One thing we do is we try to keep track of what the agency is currently interested in, which gives us ideas about things we can write about from the past to make that connection. We also have lots of emails to answer, requests for information, as I mentioned. If one of us is working on a specific project, they will devote their time to that. They might be writing, researching, getting documents from the archives, interviewing people. A lot of our material comes from sit down interviews with current or former officers involved in whatever the history project is. The phone is always ringing and so we have a steady daily grind, if you will. That's the wrong word. It's actually fun, uh, for answering these kinds of

requests for information. Then we might have a calendar full of briefings. We might have to travel. We do get around both nationally and internationally to attend conferences or deal with people overseas if they're interested in some of our projects.

Um, a day in the life of a historian might sound pretty dreary. You sit at your desk looking at all documents and pecking away at your computer, but actually it's very, very exciting because it's the intellectual challenge. And we're always engaging with other people.

**Walter:** What's it like when you open up a box from the CIA's archives?

**David:** After we blow the dust off it, uh, the excitement begins because usually we've ordered the box of documents to pull out one particular folder. Uh, we have a very good archival resource at the Agency databases that allow us to troll through the shelf list and figure out exactly what we want when that box comes in and we open it up and we take care of what we're interested in, we just can't resist getting into those other folders. And that's really the fun part of the job because you're learning something new all the time. You open up a folder and you see old style carbon copies that secretaries typed page after page after page with no errors. Uh, you see, real life documents, originals with a wet signature on them from Allen Dulles or Richard Helms. You might find an old Mylar map that was made pre-computers, big sheet of plastic with decals and calligraphy and tape and colored pencil marks and all that. In doing the work, you're not only traveling back intellectually in the past, but sometimes you're physically doing it. It's like a documentary time machine almost, and that that's a real thrill for for us.

**Walter:** Obviously. This year marks the 75th anniversary of the CIA, and so we've been particularly focused on looking back across our history at those milestones that have shaped our organization and its mission. And you're the perfect person to ask, if you had to narrow it down to, say, three top moments in CIA history that really bent the arc of that trajectory and had a lasting impact on this organization, which would you choose?

**David:** It's hard to think of specific events, but let's go back to, for example, the Cuban missile crisis. Here you have a case in which the Agency pooled its intelligence resources, collection, analysis, and its relationship with the policymakers to provide crisis timely information that potentially staved off a nuclear exchange, or at least was able to lessen the tensions in that 13 days of crisis. We had human intelligence that told us likely where in Cuba the missiles were. That prompted the famous U-2 overflight that produced the photographs that showed the missiles were there. The photographs were taken to the president. Because of information from one of our best human sources ever, Oleg Penkovsky, a Soviet military officer, we knew all about the missiles ahead of time. That is, we knew what made them work, how fast they flew, how long it took them to fly from A to B. How long it took them to get operationally ready, how long we had, in other words, to figure out when we really needed to go in and take them out. This gave the administration the wiggle room it needed to get into negotiations that eventually defused the crisis.

Another big inflection point in our history was the 1970s, when a lot of stories about the Agency emerged from the secret world through leaks and required declassifications. That was the period of the congressional hearings, the Church and Pike Committee Hearings, and a lot of information came out about the Agency that dealt with certain controversial covert actions, assassination plots, uh, the drug testing program, domestic espionage, mail opening, things like that, and what that caused was temporarily a public backlash against the Agency. Congress was very skeptical about us - cut our budget, restricted our activities. The public started to think that intelligence was instead of James Bond, sexy and glam and cool and heroic, rather, it was evil and wicked and ought to be dispensed with if possible. Eventually, that cloud lifted, and we gained much more public support in the 1980s during the Reagan administration.

Then of course, 9/11 in which the Agency did a very fast pivot from being the old style Agency that was broadly global to being very focused on counterterrorism. And though I can't get into the details here, a lot of internal realignment, shifting of resources, focus on getting the terrorist enemy. Uh, the "C" in CIA was counterterrorism intelligence agency, as some people thought, or covert action intelligence agency. We had to change our tradecraft because we were involved in war zones and military support. And now that China and Russia and Iran are our major focuses, we're shifting tradecraft.

**Dee:** I think it really speaks to how we here as Agency officers understand the importance of lessons learned. So how would you say your staff plays into ensuring that our history is accurately portrayed, not only for the internal workforce but for the general public, for the purposes of lessons learned?

**David:** That's really the core function of the history staff is, as I mentioned with Sherman Kent's observation. It's not history for history's sake, it's applied history, and what good is it if it just sits on the shelf and somebody reads it when they have time, which they usually don't. We try to make sure that wherever possible we are tying ourselves into the main areas of concern of the Agency. We have very good customers in all the directorates. We get involved with their training programs. And we have this broad community function that I mentioned earlier in which, in conjunction with not only the ODNI, Office of Director of National Intelligence, but other members of the community.

**Walter:** And David, you've talked about engaging with the public. What events from CIA is history do you get asked about the most? Is there a major misconception about any one in particular that you want to talk about right now?

**David:** Aside from the ones you might expect, like, were we involved in the Kennedy assassination, or are we hiding UFOs and aliens out at Area 51?

**Dee:** Are we?

**David:** I can't. I can neither confirm nor deny.

**Dee:** Neither confirm nor deny. Understood, understood.

**David:** I would say the misconceptions probably arise largely out of people's skewed conceptions of certain things that we haven't done in our past. But they believe that because that's all they've heard about either in their limited forays into the nonfiction literature or because they get their information from novels and movies. I think one huge misconception, it, falls in the area of covert action, which really is the most controversial undertaking that the Agency engages in. It's the only part of our core missions where we're implementing, helping implement policy as opposed to informing it. And covert action can only be as sound as the policy that it's meant to assist is sound. And too often in our history, foreign policies have been quickly thought out, not strategically implemented. They are thrown into a crisis situation, and the Agency gets dragged along into that, and as a result, you have, in those cases a high level of failure in covert action.

Another big misconception about covert action is that it's fundamentally undemocratic, that the only reason the CIA does it is because the president tells us to go overthrow a government it doesn't like or to protect some authoritarian regime it does like, and maybe on the side, help out U.S. multinational corporations that might be invested in those countries. That is a totally erroneous statement because if you think about more than the small sample of covert actions that were revealed in the 1970s through the Church and Pike Committees, if you take starting out with the roughly four dozen plus covert actions we have officially acknowledged. I wish we would acknowledge more because the good news story here is that by my analysis, roughly seven out of eight of the covert actions we've engaged in have been either to

promote democracy where it's under siege, where it's being repressed, or to protect it where it's being potentially subverted by outside actors. I don't think anybody would argue that that isn't pro democratic. Yes, if you look at assassination plots - Iran, Guatemala, Indonesia, Cuba, a few other places, yes, those are arguably undemocratic because the rulers of those countries either were popular or they were democratically elected, but for various reasons, our presidents didn't want them to stay in power. The CIA, as you know, is the only organization in the US Government that is authorized to do covert action. So unless you're going to invade a country and take it over, if the president says, do something to get that person out of power, whether it's some kind of election operation or an insurgency or something like that, the Agency might argue against it, but it will respond because it works for the president.

**Walter:** Is there a specific event, David, that your understanding of shifted over time as you've studied it in your role as a CIA historian?

**David:** Well, the covert action was one of those I have to say. Uh, my first big project when I came to the history staff was to write a biography of Director of Central Intelligence John McCone, who served from 1961 to 65 under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. McCone was involved in so many different things in his three and a half years as Director that I got to understand pretty much the entire range of what the Agency did, and that's a crucial time period where we're talking about bad relations with the Soviet Union, the emerging Chinese threat, uh, the Cuban missile crisis, the Vietnam War is heating up and you have a whole variety of other issues operationally, analytically. McCone was in on all of them. And though I went in with relatively little knowledge of any of them, when I came out from finishing that book after longer than I care to admit, uh, it turned out to be amazingly eye opening for me. I got a much better appreciation of the complexity of what the Agency does, how difficult it's work is, as George Tenet used to say, "we do hard," and that was a real example of it, uh, during that period of time.

**Dee:** And just maybe switching gears just slightly here. From my perspective, I think one of the more common misconceptions is the idea of classified versus declassified versus unclassified. And I'm wondering if you might be able to speak a little bit about why it is important for us to be able to declassify something in time. And if there is actually something that was recently declassified that you'd be willing to chat about in terms of the importance of that declassification.

**David:** We declassify material for a number of reasons. In some cases, it's statutorily mandated through for example Freedom of Information Act or Privacy Act. We also support the State Department's Foreign Relations of the United States Documentary series. The official documentary record of U.S. Foreign policy. Uh, if you still go to libraries, you'll see them - these big red volumes. They're all online as well, and a lot of that material is intelligence related. It's analytical, in some cases operational, particularly in recent years we've acknowledged more covert actions because of the foreign relations of the U.S. Mandate. The idea of an official acknowledgement is important because just because some material appears in the public domain, whether it's press or television, does not mean it's been declassified. And the Agency has to be very careful about picking up on those ideas and circulating them as if they are an official acknowledgement.

Some of our acknowledgments can have a big impact. The one that had the most personal impact on me was, after many years, we declassified the A-12 supersonic reconnaissance aircraft program in 2007 and acquired an aircraft courtesy of the Air Force. You can see it on display out in the Agency parking lot. I was tasked to write the official history of that, and you can find that out on the Agency's public website. We also declassified hundreds and hundreds of documents related to the program, and it served to impress people about the technological innovativeness of the Agency. And this this aircraft is astounding, it still remains to this day, it was designed in the late fifties and early sixties, it still remains, to this day, the

fastest, highest flying operational jet aircraft ever made. It is literally a speeding bullet at the edge of space, and it holds the aviation speed records of Mach 3.3. That's 2150 miles an hour, depending on the altitude. Uh, it was a fascinating story. It had major impact because the A-12 eventually became, through the Air Force, the SR-71 which people know much more about because that's overt and it's been on display around the country for a number of years. That aircraft wound up flying over 3500 missions for over a 20-year period, but that wouldn't have occurred without the A-12. Now that the A-12 material has all been declassified, everybody can get a much better appreciation for the importance of that aviation innovation and the impact that it had in collection and ultimately analysis and informing policy makers.

**Dee:** So the new Top Gun: Maverick movie just really fictional is what you are saying? I mean, recognizing that it's probably an experimental aircraft, but he's supposedly going like Mach 10 in that. I mean, I think it's fair to point that we technically have that the fastest, highest flying operational jet aircraft sitting right here in the parking lot.

**Walter:** In the parking lot. Literally in the parking lot. It's parked at CIA ... So all that we've been chatting about is as part of our history, and these are many of them topics that you're saying have been shared with the public and have been declassified. Can you speak to the resources available on our website or elsewhere in the public domain that folks can check out if they have an interest in learning more?

**David:** A lot of Agencies, the Agency's declassified histories are out there on the CIA.gov website. I would flag, for example, not only my McCone book which was declassified a number of years ago, but an entire collection of studies of our involvement in Southeast Asia, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, produced by a former operations officer who served in that region during that period of time. We have declassified all of our studies of the directors, which are very useful as leadership analyses and just enormous numbers of documents in the Freedom of Information Act reading room that people can use. The Center for the Study of Intelligence has also partnered with some of our records management offices to produce various topical publications. Those are all available to the public, to scholars for research purposes. I teach a counterintelligence and covert action class at Georgetown's Security Studies program for graduate students, and we use our material all the time because I asked them to do analyses of counterintelligence cases and covert action operations. And much of the material that they can use is out there on the CIA.gov website or it's in the foreign relations of the U.S. Series that we have contributed declassified documents to. There's a wealth of material out there and the more people use it, the more they will be able to dispel these misconceptions that I've been talking about.

**Walter:** Well, David, it's clear that there's a lot we could talk about, and so I was wondering, would you or maybe another member of your history staff, people want to come back for a future episode, or for a series of future episodes, to discuss more notable figures and episodes from CIA's history?

**David:** We'd be happy to. I've enjoyed this very much. And I know my staff would be anxious to assist with you, assist you and other things because we have a lot of specific expertise on the staff. They'd be happy to come in and talk about what makes them excited about history.

**Dee:** I'm excited to have folks come back. It's always great to listen from the experts here. So we really appreciate you being here, David. I think Walter might have one more question for you though, Walter.

**Walter:** Oh yea. We like to end each episode, David, with a trivia question from CIA's history, where our audience has to tune into the next episode to get the answer. And since you are the master of all CIA trivia, um, or the master of the archives from which you could pull it. Do you want to do the honors this week and give us a good trivia question for the audience?

**David:** Yes, I'll do that. One thing that I've studied a lot at, uh, the history staff is our leadership, our directors. And so let me pose this one. Who is the longest serving director and who is the shortest serving director?

**Dee:** Good questions. I'm not sure I even know the answer to that one right now.

**Walter:** I'm trying to think through it right now, myself.

**Dee:** Shameful on me, I think. I guess folks will have to tune in next time to figure out that answer. In the meantime, Walter and I are going to go look up the answer. So thank you for that, David. And we look forward to having you or staff member back to chat with us further. So thank you again.

**Walter:** Thanks David.

**David:** Thank you.

**Walter:** Well, he is a wealth of information.

**Dee:** He is the Chief Historian. So makes sense.

**Walter:** That's true. That's true.

**Dee:** Well, Walter, I have to be honest with you. I don't think I really appreciated the importance of learning about history until I got a little bit older in life. In fact, when I was a kid, history was like my least favorite subject in school.

**Walter:** Least favorite subject?

**Dee:** It was. But I think that changed when I got a little older and started working here at the CIA, and I really saw how much historical lessons really were incorporated here at the Agency. And, you know after chatting with David today, how can you not love history? I think I'm, I'm there. I'm a history fan now.

**Walter:** Well I'm sure David would be honored. And my hope is that we're just getting started with him and the other historians here at CIA.

**Dee:** I agree with that, and I know we actually went a little bit out of order here. I think we need to give our listeners the answer to our last episode's trivia question. Hit it.

(music interlude)

**Walter:** And for those wondering, the question asked last time was - during the 1970s, the CIA's Office of Research and Development built a micro-sized unmanned aerial vehicle, or UAV, with specs six centimeters by nine centimeters by 1.5 centimeters, and it was disguised as something to blend into the everyday world. The question was, what was it disguised as?

**Dee:** Can I take a guess?

**Walter:** Yea.

**Dee:** Was it a dragonfly? Gadget name Insectothopter? Which is very hard to say.

**Walter:** Oh, no, very good. So it was the Insectothopter, you're right, that is hard to say, was originally designed as a bumblebee, but the dragonfly design proved easier to maneuver.



**Dee:** And if folks are interested in learning more about the Insectothopter and for a treasure trove of other CIA history, check out our website at CIA.gov.

**Walter:** They can also check out our YouTube series, The Debrief: Behind the Artifact for a closer look at the dragonfly-turned-robo-spy as well as other interesting artifacts from our museum.

**Dee:** Hey, Walter, we're talking about trivia right now. I think we actually need to make an update to one of our previous trivia questions. Thanks to some astute listeners out there, it was pointed out that the answer to the question about which major U.S. Airport shares the last name with a former Director of Central Intelligence does in fact have two answers.

**Walter:** Indeed. So while Dulles International Airport, code IAD, is still one of the correct answers so is IAH, the Bush Intercontinental Airport out of Houston, Texas, which was named after President George H. W. Bush. Bush also served as the Director of Central Intelligence from January 1976 to 1977. And in fact, our headquarters here at Langley is named after him.

**Dee:** So we apologize for our own omission, but thank everybody out there for calling us out on it. We appreciate it.

**Walter:** Well, that's it for us for now. So please join us next time on The Langley Files.

**Dee:** Thanks, everyone, for tuning in.

**Walter:** We'll be seeing you.

(music begins)

**Dee:** Hey, Walter, can you spell Insectothopter?

**Walter:** You want me to try and do this on air?

**Dee:** Ha

(music ends)