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Picture Profile

Earnest Will Open Door to Espionage

Posted June 3, 2002

By Stephen Goode

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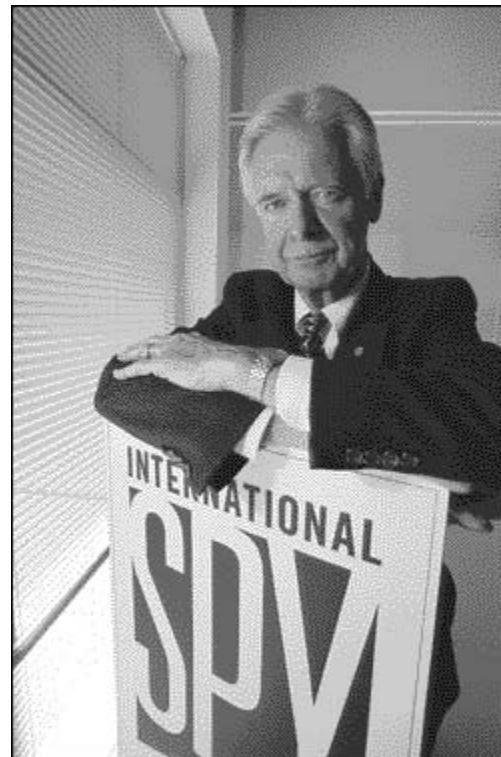
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Photograph by Rick Kozak

Espionage is a field about which E. Peter Earnest knows a great deal. He is executive director of the International Spy Museum (ISM) scheduled to open in Washington on July 19. For 36 years Earnest worked for the CIA, more than 20 years of that with the agency's clandestine service. He received the CIA's Intelligence Medal of Merit for "superior service" throughout his career.



The museum, Earnest tells Insight, will "deal with espionage around the world and through time," meaning that it will look at the whole history of international spying.

This makes the ISM one of a kind, Earnest explains. The National Security Agency (NSA), for example, has a museum at Fort Meade in Maryland that deals with spy codes, ciphers "and that sort of thing," he notes. The British Imperial War Museum has its collection of items dealing with espionage, and the KGB, the infamous secret-police and spy agency of the former Soviet Union, also has a museum.

But what will make the ISM unique is the breadth of its approach and the displays and shows it offers.

There will be a permanent collection that covers such areas as "School for Spies" about how espionage agents have been trained through the years, and "Spies Among Us," which will deal with real-life spies and include exhibits on such celebrity spies as singer and breathy, leeching

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include exhibits on such celebrity spooks as singer and kootcn Josephine Baker, renowned chef and cookbook author Julia Child, film director John Ford and movie star Marlene Dietrich.

The museum, which will be housed in renovated buildings in Penn Quarter, one of the oldest sections of downtown Washington, also will have temporary exhibits on events such as the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Earnest says. There will be a café and restaurant and all the other accessories museums offer these days.

The ISM's founder is Milton Maltz, Earnest points out, who for 42 years was principal of Malrite Communications Group Inc., which operated radio and TV stations. Maltz has had major museum experience: He also was founder of the widely admired Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland. During the Korean War, he worked at the NSA for the U.S. Navy and developed a lifelong interest in intelligence-gathering.

Insight: Intelligence and espionage have played a big part in American history from the beginning, but particularly in the 20th century. And they've played a big part in world history, too. Why hasn't there been such a museum before?

E. Peter Earnest: Intelligence people have made some effort in the past to have a museum or some other display of the part intelligence has played in America. It just never got off the ground. I think part of the explanation for the failure is that it was intelligence officers trying to advance the project and not museum fund-raisers.

Insight: What approach to espionage is the museum going to take?

EPE: We are concerned about the level of appreciation of history in this country both by adults and young folks. There's just been another study that shows the low level of knowledge of history among the young. That is distressing.

So we tell stories, and because the young often are attracted to espionage and intrigued by the smell and the glamour of it, I hope these stories awaken their interest to learn more about their own background.

We are a revolutionary country. We carried out a revolution. In the museum, we show that George Washington, one of our revolutionary leaders and the father of our country, was also the founder of U.S. intelligence-gathering. He was a very active intelligence officer, recruited and paid agents, used

Personal Bio

E. Peter Earnest: The espionage professional.

Currently: Executive director, International Spy Museum, Washington. Served 36 years in the CIA.

Born: Jan. 1, 1934; Edinburgh, Scotland.

Family: Wife, Karen Rice; four daughters from first marriage. Six grandchildren.

ciphers and dead drops. He employed many of the fundamental principles of the tradecraft of intelligence. That's an insight you don't often see described in the history books.

Insight: This museum comes at a time — after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks — when Americans have a new appreciation of our need for good intelligence.

EPE: I think Americans right now would like a very robust intelligence posture. One of the things that strikes me about the discussions in the media concerning the events of 9/11 and related intelligence issues is that it has been relatively sophisticated. One has only to review letters to the editor and listen to the call-in shows to see that the interest is very great.

There is nothing simplistic about it and it's marked by recognition of our continuing need for strong national security and a realization that intelligence gathering and analysis are very much part of that. Consider what the alternative is: Let's know nothing! That is very dangerous.

Insight: Yet there have been times when America seems to want to dismantle its intelligence-gathering capabilities and avoid all such "dirty" activities as spying.

EPE: There was a time when intelligence critics encouraged exclusive use of such means of collection as overhead satellites because they appeared to be less intrusive than sending human agents to spy on other countries. To a degree they may appear less intrusive, but actually they are quite intrusive. You're photographing the whole country from way out there.

Human intelligence [HUMINT] still is probably the only way to get at people's plans and intentions. And it is human intelligence that is largely the focus of the museum. ISM is very much about human spies and their roles in history.

Insight: How did you happen to become involved in intelligence?

EPE: My fiancée worked for an office at the CIA. Back in the early 1950s, we didn't know much about the CIA, it was quite mysterious, but the

Education: Georgetown University, B.A. in history and government, minor in philosophy.

Favorite books: "I've always enjoyed reading history, but my reading is very eclectic — mostly nonfiction and a little fiction. I try to keep up on new books on the role intelligence has played in history."

The movies that capture the world of espionage: "It's hard to beat *The Third Man* for atmospherics, and *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* is a classic. Many of the current movies are just action films, whereas intelligence on the human side is very much about relationships."

we didn't know much about the CIA, it was quite mysterious, but the people that she worked for approached me through her. Would I be interested in joining? I knew it had to do with foreign affairs. I related it to the Cold War and, like many younger folks at the time, the Soviet Union and the threat of communism were very, very much on our minds.

Sometimes people today hear the words "Red Scare" and think it was one summer of discomfiture, or even that it involved smearing people in Hollywood. But it was a very real threat and it continued for some decades. I was concerned, so I indicated interest and went into the agency in 1957.

I worked on anti-Party [Communist] operations. For many years I worked on operations involving the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, both running agents there and attempting to recruit agents inside [the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe].

Insight: In your experience over there, did it ever occur to you that the Soviet Union would collapse as rapidly as it did?

EPE: No. It didn't because I had lived with it for so long. You just didn't have any perception of either the Soviet Union as an empire dissolving or communism as a major force in the clash of world ideologies going down so fast.

Sometimes people speak of the general failure to predict the fall of the Soviet Union and of communism as an intelligence failure. The estimates show otherwise. I think the agency now has released all of its estimates dealing with military and economic aspects of the Soviet Union in the 10-year period before the collapse. My sense is that most objective observers now believe the U.S. intelligence community was right when it came to Soviet military capabilities. Indeed, in many cases, in matters relating to some of the SALT [Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty] and disarmament talks, for instance, the Soviet negotiators accepted our figures because they were more reliable than the Soviet figures, which in some cases were outright wrong or they were cooked — deliberately distorted either through wishful thinking or as scare tactics.

In terms of Soviet economics, if you go back and look at those analyses, you will see they increasingly depict a Soviet Union that could not continue. For one thing, the economy no longer could sustain the military machine. It was never a robust economy and it kept getting worse and worse. How long could that continue?

True, so far as I know, no one called the precise date on which it all would fall apart, but I don't consider that particularly relevant. When you're dealing with the fall of an empire, you're looking at the major trend lines. Nobody had a better insight into the Soviet Union than the KGB itself. They didn't call the precise date, either.

Insight: What motivates spies to do what they do and face the big dangers that are naturally a part of the job?

EPE: The idea of the spy museum isn't to celebrate or glorify espionage

as such, because after all some of the greatest rogues in history have been spies for very crass motives. On the other hand, others have been driven by very noble motives to engage in the practice of intelligence-gathering or commit espionage: the resistance fighters against Nazi Germany, for example. That includes resistance people who helped to prepare for a successful D-Day invasion.

Throughout the Cold War there were people of great nobility who chose to spy against the Soviet Union and the satellite countries. The whole idea of motive is critical for us to understand in the profession because we need to understand the people who work for us.

Insight: Communist ideology and downright greed have played their parts, too.

EPE: The Cambridge Five [spies recruited in Great Britain at Cambridge University by Anthony Blunt] were very much in the mold of ideologically motivated folks. They came to believe very early on in the cause of communism which was being advanced in the world by the Soviet Union. That, for them, was the future, and they cast their lot with the future.

In many cases they weren't paid a nickel. That was true of many of the folks in the party who ended up doing things for the Soviet Union — people like Elizabeth Bentley [an American who spied for the Soviets in the 1940s].

What we see more of these days are materialistic motives, literally doing it for the money. That was certainly true of Rick [Aldrich] Ames. He was someone I knew personally, I had supervised, and I had a very good sense of him. In fact I was talking to Ames a week before he was arrested, though I was not in on that investigation. He had talked about marrying into a wealthy family, and I had no reason to doubt him. I'd performed intelligence, counterintelligence and covert action, but I found no reason to doubt his explanation for his lifestyle.

But that said, I think, human motivation is made up of combinations of things that come together. In the case of Ames, and of [FBI turncoat Robert P.] Hanssen to a degree also, we suffered at the hands of people who thought they didn't get the recognition they deserve. It was: "This organization is not really recognizing my genius and contribution."

Insight: Who are some of the spies you regard as among the most successful in history?

EPE: If it is successful measured in terms of effectiveness, several names occur to me.

If we go back to the Cuban Missile Crisis, which brought us virtually to the brink of war, there is Oleg Penkovsky. He had provided us with an enormous amount of documentary material, and when the Cuban Missile Crisis broke out in October of 1962 the Kennedy administration knew precisely what the Soviet military capabilities were because of Penkovsky's intelligence. This knowledge enormously enhanced the administration's ability to stand up to the Soviet Union in that

administration's ability to stand up to the Soviet Union in that confrontation.

Penkovsky subsequently was executed by the Soviet Union. His motives for doing what he did were very much based on his opposition to the Soviet administration. I think he was a successful spy, and there will be a Penkovsky exhibit in the museum.

But, if we take espionage to mean effectiveness, then certainly the spy apparatus the Soviet Union ran in this country in the lead-up to World War II must be called enormously successful! It eventually allowed the Soviets to build nuclear weapons.

Often the Communist Party [U.S.A.] was used to spot people and peel them off and use them in intelligence. A lot of this is coming to light today, thanks to our ability to break Soviet codes at that time, a secret that wasn't revealed until 1995. Something on the order of 250 Soviet agents have been identified as operating in this country on the eve of the war. The number of agents we had in Moscow at the time was zero.

The Soviets showed their ability time and again to steal the secrets of our military technology. They had the advantage of Communist Party activities and the Comintern to locate and recruit people who might then be used as sleeper agents or moles.

Insight: Will espionage fantasy —James Bond, for example — be part of the museum's exhibits?

EPE: When the Cold War came there was a general perception that a lot was going on that people really didn't know much about. I think the novelists and Hollywood started filling that vacuum, saying this is the way it must be. So whether it was Dick Tracy's two-way wrist radio or the emergence of the James Bond figure, it wasn't entirely built on fantasy. James Bond's creator, Ian Fleming, had been in intelligence.

The pop art about intelligence didn't quite get into sci-fi fantasy, but I have learned from talking to my former KGB opponents that they often followed some of these programs, such as Mission: Impossible, to see if they could get insight into what American intelligence was likely to do. There was the perception in Moscow that there was some basis in real-life intelligence for what they saw in our movies and comics.

Insight: When did the novelists and Hollywood get espionage right; when did they get it wrong?

EPE: I think the novelists came very close to getting the atmospherics right when they showed how it was 98 percent boring, followed by moments of stark terror when your life was quite literally in your own hands. They also got it right when they showed that intelligence is a matter of human relationships, the development of trust with people.

I think where I'd fault them is when they sometimes depict a spy as someone with no values. I strongly disagree with that.

These people were dedicated public servants. They may not be "public" in the sense that their names are well-known, but neither do they fit the Oliver Stone approach to interpreting the intelligence community in which everything is a conspiracy, everything a plot. I spent more than 35 years in the intelligence community and the people I worked with had a very keen sense that what they were doing was for the benefit of their country.

*Stephen Goode is a senior writer for **Insight**.*

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