

The Ghost:

The Secret Life of CIA Spymaster James Jesus Angleton

by Jefferson Morley

A Book Review by Brian O’Keefe

In his new biography *The Ghost: The Secret Life of CIA Spymaster James Jesus Angleton*, veteran journalist Jefferson Morley probes an enigma others have chronicled but none satisfactorily explained. Angleton, “a founding father of U.S. mass-surveillance policies,” joined the Agency’s predecessor, the OSS, in its early years and reigned as chief of its Counterintelligence Staff for an extraordinary two decades until his abrupt retirement in 1974.¹ His personal mystique and complicated tenure have given rise to a small but formidable contingent of biographies, novels, and film characters. What Morley adds to the intrigue is a refusal to be seduced by the beguiling charm of his subject, preferring instead to deliberately scrutinize Angleton’s expansive power, ideological intransigence, and lasting influence.

Morley’s timeline spans Angleton’s career, though he peppers his narrative with nods to formative experiences at Yale, post-CIA pursuits, and family affairs. The story unfolds chronologically through four tersely titled and equally distributed sections (Poetry, Power, Impunity, Legend), each of which is further demarcated under a dozen or more pithy subheadings (Mole, Oswald, Kim...). Readers might experience the rhythm as too serial for the genre, and while the chronological method is helpful in charting Angleton’s ascent, Morley rarely lingers long enough with a scene to breathe life into its cast. Save a few animated vignettes, the reader is less a participant in the sensory and internal worlds of Morley’s subjects than a recipient of his detective digging, sundry sources, and interpretive reflections.

This approach is interesting in its own right, however, and should not be dismissed out of hand. Perhaps Morley has heeded Angleton’s wife Cicely, who, in a retrospective poem, ruefully recalled falling for her husband at first sight: “Beware, she warned, of hollow cheeks, / and auras sketched in lightning”.² Morley conveys something of the man’s enchanting appeal but resists the temptation to gaze upon it. Rather, he traces the consequences of Angleton’s charisma, which serves repeatedly to achieve his will. Indeed, until Angleton’s forced exit from the CIA following Seymour Hersh’s *New York Times* surveillance exposé, Morley recounts scarcely few instances in which Angleton is overruled.³ His dominance shines through the book’s two most important clarifications to the historical record as well. Morley demonstrates that Angleton managed Lee Harvey Oswald’s case file from the time of Oswald’s defection to the Soviet Union in 1959 until his murder in 1963 and likely obstructed justice by denying knowledge of CIA plots to assassinate Castro, while securing personal control over the Agency’s investigation into the Kennedy assassination.⁴ “[S]uch was his bureaucratic genius that he managed to wind up in charge” even though the killing “had happened on Angleton’s watch.”⁵ Morley also relates how Angleton, as the Agency’s Israel desk officer, “betrayed U.S. policy on an epic scale” by turning a blind eye to the Jewish state’s secret development of atomic weapons.⁶

One realizes as the story progresses that although Angleton’s credibility began to fade within certain Agency circles, it persisted in others—and grew within Angleton himself. When major events defied his predictions, he clung to his foundational beliefs and rationalized the outcome.⁷ His greatest oversight, the duplicity of his friend Kim Philby, drove him to “repudiate uncertainty” all the more, until his erudite and polyvalent exterior belied an absolutist ideological core through which he construed the world.⁸ At his worst, “[l]ike the Shakespearean counselor [Iago], he lived by his own creed.”⁹

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Morley's strategy of distancing himself from Angleton's allure shields him from becoming lost not only in personal fascination with his subject, but also in the "wilderness of mirrors" that Angleton, invoking a phrase from his favorite T.S. Eliot poem, said constituted the essence of counterintelligence. Throughout Morley's narrative, one encounters characters who get close to Angleton, imbibe his theories, struggle to distinguish truth from falsehood, and who would seem to agree with intelligence scholar and Church Committee investigator Loch Johnson: "[L]istening to Angleton for a half-hour could make you dizzy. Listening to him for a whole hour could make you drunk."¹⁰

Nonetheless, one should not equate sober restraint with healthy suspicion. Consider Angleton's most notorious known statement—a reply to Johnson at the end of a tiring pre-testimony deposition, which became the object of unexpected scrutiny during Angleton's Church Committee appearance. The statement is damning on its face: "It is inconceivable," Angleton told Johnson, "that a secret intelligence arm of the government has to comply with all the overt orders of government." Morley readily concludes that while Angleton "tried to withdraw" his remark, "he surely believed what he said."¹¹ Yet Johnson, who interviewed Angleton frequently before and after his testimony, suspects that the spymaster was not condoning illegal activities. To the contrary, concurring with Angleton friend and Yale historian Robin Winks, Johnson posits that he actually meant there are times when government publicly professes one set of commands, while privately issuing another to its intelligence agencies—not an unreasonable interpretation.¹² Morley fails to entertain this possibility, even though he cites Johnson's 2013 article where this very explanation is articulated.¹³ To Morley's credit, he absolves Angleton of other accusations, most notably that he attempted to steal Mary Meyer's diary after her death—a charge Pulitzer Prize-winning *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee levied in a "self-serving" memoir.¹⁴ Still, one senses that Morley is, like Angleton, prone to reveling in conspiracy. When Seymour Hersh questioned Angleton about Kennedy's assailant, Angleton famously replied, "A mansion has many rooms... I'm not privy to who struck John." Morley is quick to drop in Hersh's ambivalent impression of Angleton's meaning: "I would be absolutely misleading you if I thought I had any f*****g idea," Hersh

told author David Talbot. 'But my instinct about it is he basically was laying off [blame for the assassination] on somebody else inside the CIA.'¹⁵

None of this is to say that Morley intentionally omits conflicting evidence, or that he should have refrained from dabbling in conjectures. Nor is it to argue that he interprets Angleton wrongly, especially when it comes to illegal operations. (As Wittgenstein supposedly remarked, "If you want to know whether a man is religious, don't ask him, observe him."¹⁶ Rather, it is simply to suggest that Morley's account might have been better served had he subjected himself, and certain other figures, to a bit more of the skepticism with which he judges Angleton. These criticisms notwithstanding, *The Ghost's* greatest contribution to the Angleton literature may in fact spring from the same source as its flawed suspicion—a relentless determination to distinguish "the legend of Angleton"—"the public version of his story, as recounted by Angleton himself and by those who interviewed him"—from "the legacy of Angleton: the impact of his actions on the U.S. government and the American people in the years to come."¹⁷ As the narrative draws to a close, its most haunting implication emerges: Angleton's ghost lives on less in legend than in legacy.

¹ Jefferson Morley, *The Ghost: The Secret Life of CIA Spymaster James Jesus Angleton* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017), 261

² Morley, 14.

³ Morley, 188, 208.

⁴ Morley, 264-265.

⁵ Morley, 154.

⁶ Morley, 261.

⁷ Morley, 78, 97.

⁸ Morley, 126.

⁹ Morley, 208-209.

¹⁰ Morley, 267; Loch K. Johnson, "James Angleton and the Church Committee," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 15, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 136; Loch K. Johnson, *Spy Watching: Intelligence Accountability in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 364.

¹¹ Morley, 255.

¹² Johnson, "James Angleton and the Church Committee," 140-141; Johnson, *Spy Watching: Intelligence Accountability in the United States*, 371.

¹³ Morley, 267, note 149, quoting Johnson, "James Angleton and the Church Committee."

¹⁴ Morley, 166.

¹⁵ Morley, 250.

¹⁶ David Edmonds and John Eidinow, *Wittgenstein's Poker: The Story of a Ten-Minute Argument Between Two Great Philosophers* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

¹⁷ Morley, 257.

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