A~ter
Long
Silence

THE APOSTLE IN SEAT 4-F

Hayden B. Peake

I was looking forward to the flight home from Denver and did not mind the 7 a.m. departure because it was Saturday and I had an interesting book to finish. I had read the review in the Washington Post and heard Tom Braden and Pat Buchanan interview the author, Michael Straight, on their evening talk show. Each had asked him the same question: Why did he wait until 1963 to tell the Federal Bureau of Investigation that his Cambridge University friends, Guy Burgess and Anthony Blunt, were Soviet spies? He had known about Burgess since at least 1940 and had himself been recruited for service to the COMINTERN by Blunt at Cambridge in 1937. Straight responded that he had written the book to answer that question.

I was assigned to an aisle seat. The middle seat was empty and as I placed my book in it before buckling up the man in the window seat looked over, smiled, and asked what I thought of it. I realized that his was the same face that peered at me from the back dust cover. I would spend the next four hours chatting with Michael Straight, former Cambridge communist and member of the elite secret Apostles society, bomber pilot, magazine editor, deputy chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts under President Nixon, and author of After Long Silence. The picture had been retouched; the original in seat 4-F revealed a few more wrinkles. Michael Straight proved to be a friendly, articulate conversationalist and a man of many interests. He was reading a book by Solzhenitsen’s editor and he described the great emotional difficulties the experience had caused her. It was a situation he could understand.

Straight had been editor of the New Republic after World War II and during the McCarthy era. His mother Dorothy was a Whitney heiress, his father Willard, an international businessman who helped introduce the railroad to China. Together, they founded the New Republic magazine in 1914, two years before Michael’s birth on 1 September 1916. Willard Straight died of pneumonia at the end of World War I while serving in the Army in Europe. When Dorothy Straight later married an Englishman she decided to leave her Long Island home and settle in England. So it was that young Michael, his older brother (later to head Rolls Royce and British Overseas Aircraft Company) and his older sister (who would become an actress) grew up at Dartington Hall, South Devon.

1 Michael Straight, After Long Silence (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1983) 351 pp. Early in the conversation Straight asked what I did. I said I was with the CIA; he responded, "Oh, I see," and then we continued talking about his book. He answered all my questions with apparent candor; I detected no evasiveness. The conversation led me to a review of the incidents discussed and ultimately this article.
In November 1934, during his first year reading economics at Cambridge, Straight joined the University Socialist Society and then, in early 1935, a communist cell. It was at Cambridge that he met Guy Burgess and became friends with Anthony Blunt as well as a number of others who would serve the Soviet Union in one way or another. In 1936 he was accepted in the secret Cambridge Conversazione Society, which had been founded by Alfred Lord Tennyson. In addition to Burgess and Blunt, others in this elite group included John Maynard Keynes, E. M. Forester, and Victor Rothschild; members were called Apostles. After graduation in 1937 Straight followed the instructions from the COMINTERN and returned to America, eventually establishing contact with his case officer. He was to hold several government and private positions before entering the Air Corps in 1942. He did not see any of his Apostle friends again until after the war when he was editor of the New Republic. Then he met several times with Guy Burgess, once in Washington during the Korean war, when Burgess was a second secretary at the British Embassy. And though Burgess reaffirmed his continuing links to the Soviets, Straight said nothing. When Burgess defected to Russia two months later with his Cambridge classmate, fellow spy and diplomat Donald Maclean, Straight remained silent. When H. A. R. (Kim) Philby went over to the Soviets in January 1963 and there was talk of still other moles in the British Secret Intelligence Service, Straight remained silent. Then in June 1963 he learned that President Kennedy was to nominate him as chairman of the newly formed Advisory Council on the Arts. The only credential that stood in the way was the FBI security approval, a necessity for presidential appointments. Assuming the worst from an investigation, Straight talked. First he talked to the FBI in 1963 and then, in 1964 he spent many hours with MI-5 detailing his knowledge of communist activity at Cambridge in the 1930s. His role was kept from the public until 1981 when it leaked in England. Subsequently, nearly twenty years after his initial unburdening, he wrote After Long Silence.

These events bound an unusual and fascinating life much of which is revealed in his memoir. As we talked, several questions which he answers but does not fully explain in the book, at least from an intelligence viewpoint, recurred in various forms. They are summarized as follows: Was Michael Straight, as many journalists and others suggest, a Soviet spy (he says no)? Why did he wait so long to reveal those he knew to be Soviet spies? Was he a traitor (again he says no)? And finally, why did he really write the book? Michael Straight's responses to these and related questions are both provocative and not completely satisfying even to him, as our conversation and the book made clear. But they are worth considering; he is the last of the publicly identified former communists from Cambridge—the only American in the group. Thus he provides a unique opportunity to acquire insight about this period in the history of intelligence.

Was Straight a Soviet Spy?

... in the early 1930s, the NKVD ... concentrated ... on recruitment of young men of influential families. The political climate ... was very favorable ... the young generation was receptive ... to the sublime ideas of making the world safe from the menace of fas-
Apostle

cism and of abolishing exploitation of man by man. This was the theme on which the NKVD based their appeal to young men who were tired of a tedious life in the stifling atmosphere of the privileged class ... they were told they could be much more useful if they concealed their political views ... and entered the revolutionary underground. The idea of joining a "secret society" held a strong appeal.

At Cambridge, Michael Straight "... felt ashamed of the privileges that the students took for granted." (p. 59, ALS*) It was a problem he would continue to live with without effective resolution. He was shocked when he discovered waiters in the dining hall pocketing food to take home for their children. Paradoxically, he chose to deal with his relatively excessive affluence by increasing his own austerity and dismissing his gentleman's gentleman, apparently not realizing the difficulty he imposed on the gentleman concerned. As a solution for the immediate world problems of fascism and famine, he turned to the Cambridge communist cell and the Socialist Society. He was "interested in ideas, (he) wanted to believe."

Straight admits to having been spotted and assessed while attending the London School of Economics the year prior to Cambridge. He was recruited and if not trained at least instructed by Anthony Blunt while at Cambridge. Just before graduation Blunt informed him that it was his duty on behalf of the COMINTERN to fake a rejection of communism and show symptoms of a nervous breakdown over the death in the Spanish Civil war of his closest friend, John Cornford. This behavior would lay the groundwork for his return to the United States to seek a position on Wall Street where he could be of service to the COMINTERN. Straight objected to the whole idea: his plans were to become a British citizen and stand for parliament. Blunt sought guidance from his COMINTERN masters and they were unyielding. He was directed by his control in London to reiterate the instructions and tell Straight that the issue had been decided by Stalin himself! Since he had not elaborated this point in the book I asked Straight whether Blunt had actually used Stalin's name. He declared that "Blunt had indeed, it is not something one forgets." Then he added that he wondered at the time whether using Stalin's name was "pure fabrication to encourage me." 3

Ultimately Straight did as he was ordered, implicitly accepting COMINTERN control, and went home to Washington not Wall Street, a change to which the COMINTERN agreed. Before Straight left for the States, Blunt asked him for a "highly personal document." He provided a small drawing. Blunt tore it in half, giving one part to his recruit and telling him that he

---


1 This abbreviation of After Long Silence will appear throughout the article.

2 Victor Suvorov, *Soviet Military Intelligence* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), pp. 19-21. Suvorov relates an incident which suggests that the use of Stalin's name to induce cooperation was not unusual. He tells the story of potential German GRU agents who demanded CPSU membership before they would cooperate. The GRU just issued the cards, adding gratuitously they had been written out by Stalin himself; the agents were very productive.
would be contacted in America by someone with the other half. Straight left Cambridge for Washington in the fall of 1937, having graduated with first-class honors. After visiting the President “in his White House study” and with the help of Mrs. Roosevelt, he accepted (in late 1937) a position as an unpaid volunteer in the Office of the Economic Advisor in the State Department. He found rooms in the same town house as Joseph Alsop with whom he became friends, went to dinner with Charles Beard, met Dean Acheson, wrote a column for a congressman which was published in the New York Times, and began a study of Hitler’s ability to wage war.

In late April 1938, Straight received a phone call from someone with a European accent who said “... I bring greetings from your friends in Cambridge University ...” and promptly went to meet the stranger in a nearby restaurant. This was his first contact with his case officer, Michael Green, who said he had “mislaid” the other half of the drawing; Straight did not press the point. When Green suggested he take home and study any interesting documents that crossed his desk, Straight said no documents were routed to him. Green replied they would be in time and he was right. (p. 129, ALS)

In early 1939 Straight left State to take a paying job with presidential advisor Tom Corcoran writing speeches for the President and Democrats in Congress. In late 1940 he returned briefly to State in a paid position in the European Division. At that time he mentions (p. 156, ALS) handling a report on Britain’s chances for survival prepared by then Ambassador to the Court of St. James, Joseph Kennedy, and stamped “STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL,” which he told me he did not give to Green. But there would be other sensitive documents coming his way and since his return to State Green’s “interest in (him) was renewed.” Thus, he tells us, he resigned for good in early 1941 and appointed himself Washington editor of the New Republic. Nevertheless, Straight continued to meet with Green and provided at least one more document (a personal memorandum urging the Soviets to give up their revolutionary ideology) at their last meeting “early in 1942,” when he terminated the relationship to join the Army. (p. 168, ALS) Straight stressed to me that the documents he passed were “not classified ... my own opinions ... relatively harmless ... and all critical of the Soviet Union ....” Still, he admits they included the one on Hitler’s war making ability,4 on which Secretary of State Hull had written “splendid,” and for which Acheson had praised him, and about which Alger Hiss (who was a Soviet spy at the time—Straight said he did not know it) had called him to his office to discuss various points. More on this later.

In summary, in the opinion of many reviewers and journalists,5 the events in Michael Straight’s life from Cambridge to his final meeting with Green amount to spying for the Soviet Union, a charge Straight strongly denies.

4 William Rusher, “Judiciary Committee Should Probe Michael Straight,” Human Events, 12 February 1983, p. 7. Rusher argues that in the late 1930s to say that because he had no access to classified documents the information passed was harmless is “pure nonsense as anyone knows who has ever worked in Washington. Classified documents were a dime a dozen in FDR’s administration.”

Apostle

The distinction is in part semantic: a spy, says Webster, is any person who is employed by a government to clandestinely obtain secret or otherwise unobtainable material from or information about another country. In one sense of the word “employ,” as in employee, Michael Straight is correct; he was not a Soviet spy. On the other hand, in the sense of “employ” which suggests to use or make use of, there is a more apt descriptor—agent. A definition of agent is provided by Hans Moses—a tested source, usually witting, who has accepted a continuing relationship with a secret service, often on a contractual basis, and who may receive financial compensation. Moses makes a further distinction by describing a source under consideration for agent status as a “contact.” In our conversation and in the interview with the Washington Post this subject was raised directly and Straight applied a different different definition of agent. He said he was not a Soviet agent because “I never took any orders.” When it was pointed out that he met with Green when asked to do so, Straight said, “I just acknowledged his presence and didn’t repudiate him. He was aware from the very start that he couldn’t give me orders. The meetings were very irregular and it was just a matter of getting out of a very awkward situation.” He agreed that when Green asked for documents he provided some but, he said, the document that was praised by Acheson and Hull (Secretary of State) “was not information;” it just contained his opinions. When asked why he did not simply stop meeting with Green, Straight replied that it would have been the equivalent of desertion on the field of battle . . . “cutting all my ties.” However comforting, even understandable, this rationale, it does not change the facts. By his own description of events, allowing for his reluctant cooperation, and regardless of whether the documents provided were classified, one is obliged to say Michael Straight was once at least a developing Soviet agent and contact.

There is yet another category of clandestinity into which Straight’s relationship with Soviet intelligence fits rather well as Ernest Cuneo points out in his review. It is not surprising, considering the track record of the KGB in this regard (not only in Britain but in the United States as well), that Straight’s actions also qualify him as an agent of influence; i.e., a person in a position to sway opinion and/or influence behavior as directed by the case officer. By this definition, the quality and classification of the initial documents could be as innocuous as Straight claims, their primary purpose being to cement the relationship. More important, because of his many contacts with the affluent and powerful, which included the President, the Secretary of State, Supreme Court

---


7 Curt Supplee, “Setting the Record Straight,” Washington Post. Style section. 24 January 1983. p. B-1. See also: Duncan Campbell, “Coming Cleanish.” New Statesmen, March 1983; Campbell takes the opposite view, “Straight was not a Russian agent (he says; no one has disputed it) . . . Nonetheless considering the amount of blood that appears near the author’s hands throughout, he does not emerge in a pleasant light.”

Justice Frankfurter, members of the press and Congress, a cousin in the CIA, a list which would surely grow, Straight was very likely to have been viewed by Green as a most valuable potential agent of influence.

It should be noted, as Straight explained to me, he was not content with the situation regarding Green and wanted to extricate himself. He assumed he was succeeding because there was little pressure and Green was not upset with the product, even when Straight's memos were critical of the Soviet Union and he asked that they be sent to Stalin. But from Green's position, there is a more probable explanation for this situation. He was very likely trying to bring Straight along without losing him. When we remember that the COMINTERN/NKVD/GRU during that period were very demanding of the many other agents in Washington and consider what possible pressures might have been brought to bear on Straight, it is reasonable to assume that the Soviets were either waiting for the right moment, or that they applied pressure and Straight did not mention it. To a counterintelligence officer this is a loose end that requires investigation.

As a last bit relative to Straight as an agent, I asked him whether he had been used as a spotter, a point not mentioned in his book. He replied that he had been asked only once, at the last meeting with Green, and then it was to recommend a replacement. He said he gave Green only one name, Michael Greenberg (subsequently named by self-confessed spy Elizabeth Bentley as one of her agents), at one time an aide to presidential assistant Lauchlin Currie (who was named by both Bentley and Chambers as a Soviet agent). Straight said that he suspected Greenberg's sympathies were what Green was looking for.

In sum, from an intelligence officer's point of view, whether he realized it or not, Michael Straight was at minimum a contact or developing Soviet agent and a potential agent of influence—in everyday terms, a spy.

**Why The Long Silence?**

There is no summary answer to this question. The book leads the reader to this conclusion through carefully crafted, frequently eloquent, always interesting vignettes of the author's life. One answer, not articulated but strongly implied, is that he did not think being silent made much difference except to

---

9 See: Suplee, op. cit., fn #7. Straight told Suplee essentially the same thing.

10 See: Allen Weinstein, *Perjury* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978). Although focusing primarily on the Hiss-Chambers affair, Weinstein recounts the state of espionage in the US from the interwar to the postwar period of McCarthy. He discusses most of the names mentioned in this article. His source notes and his bibliography provide a good start for the scholar. Recently released Chambers documents reveal some of the information he kept from the FBI and did not include in his book, *Witness* (see fn #12), as insurance against the Soviets: he knew Walter Krivitsky, see fn #35.

11 The likelihood of this happening only once is small viewed from a case officer's perspective in light of what is known about Soviet intelligence operations. Experience suggests that Straight was either unaware of the realities or Green was more professional and subtle than Straight realized.

12 See: Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (New York: Random House, 1954); Elizabeth Bentley, *Out of Bondage* (New York: The Devin-Adair Co., 1951); Weinstein, op. cit., fn #10. There is some doubt as to whether Currie was a member of the CPSU, but these sources document that he was at least a fellow traveler. Straight said he was unaware of this at the time; apparently Greenberg's links to Currie did not suggest a similarity of views.
himself and his friends. That this was his decision to make no one argues. That he should have acted sooner is a message clearly communicated; why he did not is worth examining.

When British diplomats Burgess and Maclean defected in 1951, Straight says, "I was ready at that moment to tell the authorities all I knew." He went to see "the British official (he) knew best in Washington," and told him he had information about Burgess. His friend replied, "My dear fellow, you will have to take your place at the end of the line. And I should warn you, the line runs all the way around the block." (p. 252, ALS) After arguing the toss with himself, he decided that if he talked, Blunt's role was sure to come out. And since he believed Blunt had "given up the world of espionage" after World War II for the world of art history (he then taught at Cambridge, and was Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures), he rationalized that talking would do little good because Blunt would, "I was certain, refuse to admit his role." Still, he concludes this anecdote by saying, "I should have gone to the end of the line and waited there; I know that. Instead I told myself that Guy was gone forever, and that Anthony had been rendered harmless. With mixed feelings and uneasiness, I went back to my own work."

At about the same time a similar experience occurred with Straight's cousin, "a high official of the Central Intelligence Agency." 13 When this point came up in the conversation he said that he had been going to tell his story to Tracey Barnes (at that time a senior operations officer) during lunch at the Metropolitan club: "I did say I was fearful about infiltration of the British secret service (in the book he said "Intelligence services"), but he didn't provide the needed word or gesture of encouragement, he didn't show any interest in what I was trying to say. I let it drop." In his book he was more direct, "I lacked the resolution to carry my impulse through." Aside from the character implications, the curious thing about these comments is that Burgess was a diplomat. Why then was Straight talking about intelligence services? Perhaps he thought that Burgess was really in the secret service.

Sidney Hook, himself a former Marxist and fellow-traveler, challenges Straight on his resolution with the conviction of the converted, seeing his silence as dedication to the communist cause. Hook states, "... he had enough will to decline, he just wanted to serve the Soviet Union and the world international communist movement... a dedicated neophyte." 14 Straight disputes Hook's point candidly in the Washington Post interview, saying, "I lacked the will, I lacked the sense of self." But he in turn is challenged by his longtime liberal friend, Gus Tyler, in an open letter. "Why did it take you so long, then, to break the long silence?" Tyler asked. "You say to inform runs counter to the determination that we all share—not to inflict pain on others." Tyler concludes

---

13 Straight, op. cit., p. 313. I asked Straight whether Green knew about Tracey Barnes and if so if he had told him. He replied that he certainly had not told him, it "would have been the last thing I would have done. I was trying to get out of the relationship." He did not know if Green knew; "If he did he never mentioned it."

14 Sidney Hook, "The Incredible Story of Michael Straight." Encounter, December 1983, Vol. LXI No. 4, p. 68. Hook's article should be read with caution. He argues that not every communist is a potential espionage agent and gives the example that someone "with a stutter would be ruled out." How unfortunate that he was not the one who interviewed Philby (whose stammer was a trademark) for his MI-6 position.
that this explanation is “so human and rational” that he likens it to the street code where one does not tell on friends. But there were other more practical even more persuasive reasons for Michael Straight’s silence. If he had talked in the late 1940s or early 1950s about communists in Britain, he risked being called before Senator McCarthy to talk about himself in Washington. His magazine, his family, his political ambitions, his friends, would be jeopardized. As he put it, “These were not easy prospects to face.” The social and psychological pressures experienced by the self-confessed former Soviet agents of the late 1940s, when forced to reveal the involvement of their friends, certainly inhibited Straight as well. For all these reasons Straight contented himself with remaining silent and attacking Senator McCarthy in the New Republic.

Having survived the McCarthy era and built a reputation as a liberal Democrat, Straight was offered a position as head of President Kennedy’s new art council. This created a dilemma which he could not evade. He concluded the FBI investigation prerequisite to the job would certainly have turned up his communist past. Thus his acceptance and silence would risk embarrassing the administration and jeopardizing the long sought arts program. In the end he reluctantly asked that his name be withdrawn from consideration. I asked him why he thought his links to communism would surface if he remained silent. He replied that on two occasions, one in the United States and one in Britain, these links had become known to others, though so far overlooked generally. When he decided to run for Congress from New York City just after the war, the local Democratic committee was told he had been a communist in England (he never knew who originated the story). He withdrew and went back to the New Republic. In Britain, a short biography, which he did not mention in the book, appeared in the Cambridge magazine GRANTA (1937) in which he was identified as, inter alia, a communist. Although he could have given some other reason for not accepting, he chose to end his silence at this point (June 1963) and give the real reason. Why then? Timing was probably

---

15 Gus Tyler, “An Open Letter to Michael Straight: The Communist Who Wasn’t,” the New Leader, 21 February 1963, pp. 12-13. Tyler makes the argument that Straight was not really a communist in the true sense of the word. He was more interested in close friends and helping mankind than in Marxist-Leninist ideology, and did not know how to deal with the professionals. He points out that Straight was a Keynesian, not a Marxist economist, that he did not have a party card, or belong to the British Communist Party. Straight was candid when I mentioned these latter points. He said he was prohibited by law from joining the British Communist Party until 1951 (although he said he really dedicated did so anyway), so rather than join the Communist Youth League he joined the Cambridge cell which did not issue cards.

16 Weinstein, op. cit., fn #10. During the spy revelations of the late 1940s and early 1950s, most of those who came forward voluntarily expressed great reluctance to involve others with whom they had worked. But like Straight they eventually had no choice.

17 Straight had many overt links to known communists and fellow travelers as did those attacked by McCarthy, but for whatever reasons his name was never mentioned in that connection. He had joined the American Veterans Committee (AVC) after World War II along with Cord Meyer. Both worked to prevent a communist takeover of the AVC and both describe the same incidents in their books without mentioning the other directly. Meyer does allude to one AVC member as having “... been a controlled secret agent of the KGB.” Straight told me he was concerned that Meyer meant him, which he said would have been an error. He wrote Meyer asking for clarification but never received a reply. Ironically, it was Meyer who was investigated (and cleared) by the Agency for allegedly having had communist friends and associations (though not involving the AVC). See: Cord Meyer, Facing Reality (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1960), pp. 51-53.
the main factor. McCarthyism was a bad memory, the Kennedy administration was likely to be more understanding, and there can be little doubt that he had long had a troubled conscience. In the event, it was suggested by Arthur Schlesinger at the White House that he go to the FBI, which he did: Blunt's days were numbered.

Straight summed up the morality of his position when he told the Washington Post: "The center of the argument against me so far is that I failed to do anything with the information I had for twenty-five years, and essentially that's true. I'm not looking for praise—or justified condemnation. I'm perfectly happy for people to say I was wrong and weak." Only Gus Tyler saw it differently.

Was Michael Straight a Traitor?

While he judged the center of the argument against him to be focused on his long silence, others asked what that silence meant in terms of loyalty to the United States. These inquiries arose out of his relationship with Guy Burgess, whom he met at least four times after leaving Cambridge. The first meeting was at Straight's Olde Towne Alexandria home in 1940; Burgess was in town, called Straight, and invited himself to dinner. They spoke of their Apostle days and Burgess asked if Straight could put him in touch with their "friends." He told Burgess he could not and would not if he could. (p. 142-143, ALS) It is doubtful either was telling the truth. Burgess did not have to ask Straight, and Straight knew the emergency number Green had given him. Perhaps a little sparring; Straight learned Burgess was still associated with Soviet intelligence; Burgess left not feeling threatened.

It is worth considering what might have happened had Straight reported his knowledge to the FBI at that time (1940). Walter Krivitsky (who defected from the GRU in 1937) had told the British of a Soviet agent who was a British citizen working for the Times in Spain during the civil war, and of two other Soviet agents who were in the British Foreign Service. Krivitsky didn't know the agents' names and the British did not put it together, although they had the facts. Had MI-5 been alerted by Straight and reacted with an investigation of Burgess, Blunt, and Klugman, this would have led to others like Maclean and Alan Nunn May (Cambridge University scientist and one of the atom-bomb spies caught after the war), and in the process to Philby particularly in light of his service as a Times correspondent in Spain. In that case, Philby could not have passed to the Soviets the MI-6 organizational material during the war. And more important, neither Philby nor Blunt could have informed the

* Supplee, op. cit., fn #7.
Soviets of the ULTRA intercept intelligence from Bletchley Park.19 When Straight finally did tell the British in 1964 they told him that it was the first hard evidence they had obtained on Blunt and the others he named, although many had been under suspicion, including Blunt. Whether the FBI would have taken action in 1940 is open to conjecture. There is precedent to indicate a slow reaction. In 1939 former Soviet spymaster Whittaker Chambers first told his story (implicating Alger Hiss, Harry Dexter White, and more than twenty other highly placed administration officials as known communists) to Assistant Secretary of State Adolph Berle in the presence of journalist Isaac Don Levine. It was four years before Berle turned the report over to the FBI and another three before the FBI did anything.20

The second Straight-Burgess meeting occurred in London in 1947 when Straight was accompanying Vice President Henry Wallace on his trip to Europe and Burgess showed up "uninvited" at a party. Again they talked of intelligence but this time more specifically espionage involving former colleagues; Burgess said he was "about to leave the government for good." (p. 209. ALS) If Straight had talked at this point it could still have reduced the peacetime intelligence damage inflicted by Burgess, et. al. As to personal risk, conceivably MI-5 would have kept his role quiet, especially when the significance of his contribution became apparent. Both the Americans and the British knew there was a serious leak in the British Embassy in Washington, but they knew little else. They did not suspect that Burgess had blackmailed Maclean (in 1944), with pictures, into taking the post as first secretary at the British Embassy in Washington where he also served until 1948 as secretary of the Joint Nuclear Commission with a no-escort badge to the Atomic Energy Commission; Maclean was the leak. Furthermore, had Straight acted then Philby's role would very likely have been revealed; then he could not have betrayed the agents in Albania and Eastern Europe, among others. And of course Blunt would have been burned, too, and as he later did in return for immunity, give evidence against the others. But it does not appear that Straight long contem-

---

19 Andrew Boyle, *Climate of Treason* (London: Coronet Books, 1980), pp. 279-281. Boyle discusses how strongly Philby felt that the Soviets should be given the "Bletchley intercepts." What Boyle did not know, and what Cambridge Professor F. H. Hinsley told me during a discussion in 1991, was that Anthony Blunt had formal knowledge of ULTRA and presumably he informed the Soviets. Hinsley thinks Philby had formal knowledge of the Abwehr intercepts only, but probably put "two and two together" regarding an expanded capability at Bletchley, giving the Soviets another source. Hinsley served as liaison officer between Bletchley Park and Whitehall during the war, one of very few who had knowledge of the collection and use of ULTRA. Note: this edition of Boyle's book contains data about Blunt that was censored in the hardbound English and American versions; the latter was titled, *The Fourth Man*. Chapman Pincher, in *Too Secret Too Long* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984) states that British scientist R. V. Jones "assured" him that Philby had "complete details" of the ULTRA decrypts and told the Soviets "everything." p. 297.

20 Weinstein, op. cit., p. 64, 329-9. Berle told the President promptly, but he (the President) dismissed it as unfounded rumor. Note: Until the end of World War II the FBI was mainly interested in bank robbers and Germans. By the time Straight went to the FBI (1963), communists were more important and Hoover did not tell MI-5 about Straight's knowledge although he did convey the impression he was well informed about British spies. They found out informally from a Hoover antagonist, William Sullivan, about seven months after the fact and then made a formal request. See: Straight, op. cit., p. 324; Sanford J. Unger, *FBI* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1976), pp. 100-106.
planted this alternative. Did he accept E. M. Forster’s precept that, “betraying one’s friend is worse than betraying one’s country?”

In 1949 when Straight was in London again, he “happened” to meet Burgess for the third time, on the street near Whitehall. Burgess asked him to attend an Apostle reunion later that night; he accepted. Blunt was also at the reunion and he asked Straight to meet with him and Burgess the next day. At this meeting, again the subject was in part espionage with the primary purpose of determining whether they could rely on Straight to remain silent. Blunt said that he had left the government for art history. Burgess left the impression he “was still engaged in espionage,” although he again suggested he would leave the foreign office shortly. At one point Burgess asked him, “Are you still with us?” Straight says he replied, “You know that I am not,” but he did acknowledge that he was “not totally unfriendly” as demonstrated by his presence. Upon reflection, Straight concluded that “it was a weak, evasive answer; the sort I habitually gave when I faced a confrontation of some kind. It reflected my continuing inability to force an issue, to resolve a conflict, to make an enemy of another individual, and in this instance, to break completely with my own past.” (p. 229-230, ALS) It should be noted that Straight was least likely to speak out at this time when anti-communist fever was peaking in the US.

The critical (to this discussion) fourth meeting occurred in Washington in March 1951, when Straight again encountered Burgess “accidentally,” this time outside the British Embassy. Burgess said he had been working at the embassy in Washington on “Far Eastern affairs” since October 1950, a few months after the Korean War started. Straight says he realized that Burgess would have told the Soviets about US plans to advance into North Korea, and his spying “... could have caused the deaths of many American soldiers.” He said to Burgess, “You must have known about our plans.” Yes, Burgess said. “Everyone knew about them ... including the Chinese.” He added that the Chinese tried to warn the US not to get too close to the Yalu, but MacArthur, Acheson, and the CIA said it was a bluff. Then Straight reminded Burgess that he had said he was leaving the government in 1949; Burgess replied that “they” insisted that he accept this posting. Straight responded that being at war, “... if you aren’t out of the government within a month from now, I swear to you, I’ll turn you in.” (pp. 249-251) This exchange, when revealed in the book, was taken to mean that if the Chinese had not known our plans in

---

21 Boyle, op. cit., pp. 252-334.
22 I asked Mr. Straight if he had known about the reunion prior to meeting Burgess. He said he had probably received an invitation several months previously, but had forgotten about it because he had not then thought he would be in Britain. He said he was reluctant to go even then because he was not anxious to see either Burgess or Blunt. He added that the Apostles still exist and have annual meetings. The current president is an Oxford man. Straight said he has not been to a reunion since the one in 1949.
23 Weinstein, op. cit., pp. 3-69; H. Montgomery Hyde. The Atom Bomb Spies (New York: Athenaeum, 1980). These citations provide a good start toward an appreciation of the causes and nature of the public and official atmosphere of the period.
advance, American lives would have been saved and this brought forth cries of treason.24

William Safire attacked Straight on this point in his column, calling Burgess a "top Soviet agent." 25 But despite his concern about Burgess’ spying mentioned above, Straight replied in a letter to the Times 26 that "far from being the top Soviet agent, Burgess was a minor and discredited official with no access to highly sensitive material." Straight does not indicate how he knew Burgess’ level of access and his assessment is complicated by the fact that while Burgess was indeed considered by most Americans and British as disreputable, he was still selected as Anthony Eden’s escort while Eden was in Washington (for which he received a personal note of thanks) and allowed access to classified material.27 Pat Buchanan, on his radio show (March 1983), said neither Burgess’ reputation nor his position in the agent hierarchy makes any difference; Straight should have turned him in as a matter of loyalty and let the FBI worry about the problem, period!

I asked Straight about these articles and several others which appeared at the same time on both sides of the Atlantic, and the apparent contradiction between what he wrote in the book about concern over American lives and what he said to Safire about Burgess being only a discredited official. He explained that his initial estimate of Burgess’ role had changed and recently been confirmed by an article in the London Sunday Telegraph 28 which quoted “a reliable Soviet source” as stating that Donald Maclean claimed he had revealed to Stalin every significant decision on the war including the one where President Truman told Prime Minister Attlee the US would respect China’s borders and not use the A-bomb in the Korean War. At the time of the Truman-Attlee meeting (December 1951) Maclean headed the American desk in the British Foreign Office and would have been privy to the intelligence.29 From this information, Straight inferred that Burgess was not involved and thus that he (Straight) had not, as he once thought and others now claimed, done damage to the country by keeping silent. But had Straight acted then, he might still have prevented the defection of Burgess, Maclean, and Philby.

Clearly then, Straight’s silence was extremely costly insofar as it delayed the breaking up of the Cambridge spy ring. While acknowledging the many

27 Boyle, op. cit., p. 379.
28 John Miller, in Moscow, "Maclean coup in Korea war," London Sunday Telegraph, 29 March 1983. Miller reported that Maclean, who had died a few days earlier, boasted to Miller’s Soviet source that his spying for Russia dictated the course and outcome of the Korean war. Miller also noted that George Blake, another British spy for the Soviets who defected after escaping from jail, was at Maclean’s funeral, but Kim Philby was not.
29 Boyle, op. cit., pp. 384-5. After Maclean defected a numbered copy of the Prime Minister’s account of his meeting with President Truman regarding Korea and the A-bomb was found in his personal files. Curiously, on page 387 Boyle labels Maclean the "prime suspect in mid 1950s" and on page 384 he refers to the "still unsuspected Maclean" in April 1951.
"Ifs involved, he had at least four key opportunities (which he sensed) to break his silence, each of which could have made a tremendous difference to the history of intelligence.

With regard to the impact of any intelligence passed by the ring on the Truman-Attlee meeting, the US decision to cross the 38th parallel, and the Chinese decision to use troops in North Korea, the evidence suggests that it was nil. Joseph Goulden, in his study of the Korean War, documents that the Chinese decision to use troops in North Korea was in effect made by the United States when it crossed the 38th parallel. China had prepared for this contingency and, as Burgess told Straight, had warned the US and Britain what would happen in the event they proceeded. The US decisions to cross the 38th parallel, to limit UN troops near the Yalu to South Koreans (which MacArthur disregarded), and not to invade China were made before Burgess arrived in Washington. If they were reported to Stalin by Philby or Maclean, as they very likely were, this could have made Stalin's support of China's decision to use its troops in North Korea less risky. But, according to Adam Ulam and Dean Acheson, it is doubtful Stalin would have held back the Chinese if he had not known; he did know the UN would not support fighting in China and there was ample evidence the US wanted to avoid it also. As to the Truman-Attlee meeting and Truman's "decision" not to use the A-bomb, the record indicates this was more a gesture to Attlee than a firm policy commitment. The President later moved atomic weapons to Asia; the Chinese knew it at the time and that may have affected truce negotiations. The A-bomb decision could not have affected the Chinese decision to intervene since they did so the month before it was made. If Straight had spoken up any time prior to 1951, it would have had little effect on the Korean War, although he did not know it at the time.

"Can Michael Straight fairly be called a traitor?" asks Safire. "Not really," he says, "because no purpose or passion guided his double life." For a semanticist like Safire, this is a spongy criterion for such a crucial question. Of course, by his definition he is correct. Straight counters, and he too is right by his definition, that he is not a traitor in the sense the Constitution uses the term; he did not give aid and comfort to the enemy, nor did he commit an overt treacherous act in the present of two witnesses.

This brings us to the final two aspects of this issue which remain to be considered; one definitional the other operational. First, the word "traitor" has meaning outside the Constitution—in Webster's dictionary—a kind of everyday definition: "one who betrays another's trust or is false to an obligation or duty." In this context, regardless of the nature of the material passed to Green

---


31 Joseph C. Goulden, Korea (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1982), pp. 245, 290-295, 416-417. Goulden cites a sensitive CIA report (now declassified) received at the White House less than seventy-two hours after Truman told Attlee he would not use the A-bomb, as an indication that the Soviets knew of the decision (it also indicated there were leaks on both sides). Note: the documents on the Truman-Attlee A-bomb issue and Truman's movement of A-bombs to the Far East were found in the Truman Library by history professor Roger Dingman of the University of Southern California. He is writing a book on Truman and MacArthur which treats this point.
or the informality of his relationship to the State Department, there was an implicit obligation of loyalty which Straight did not honor. But from Straight’s point of view, this definition is not helpful for other reasons; i.e., to speak sooner would have betrayed the trust of his friends at Cambridge, been false to his obligation (if he had no obligation he would not have met with Green) to the COMINTERN, and put himself at risk at the height of the cold war. Any way he would lose; he chose the only alternatives to disclosure—delay and procrastination. Nevertheless, even in 1937-42 it was wrong, if not traitorous, to betray the trust of the State Department by dealing secretly with Soviet intelligence.

As to the operational or counterintelligence (CI) context of treason, the concern is not so much with treason itself, but rather its obverse, the agent behavior that is the essential central element in cases which lead to charges of espionage or treason. Thus if we view After Long Silence as a exercise in counterintelligence, different questions arise. In the abstract, for example, with whom did the agent associate and what was the nature of the relationship? are there patterns of activity that cannot be adequately explained? what is his world view, his background? what are his objectives and motivations? In the case of Michael Straight, we find most of these topics treated in some length in the book but not from a CI viewpoint. As a consequence some puzzles remain and two will be mentioned here. William Safire noted one:

Another puzzler: Some time after Michael Straight left his post as editor of the New Republic in the mid-50s, the magazine hired H. A. R. Philby to write a series of articles, spanning 28 months, about the Middle East . . . the Soviet spy wrote nine pieces in 1957-58 . . . (Safire finds it interesting) that of all the publications in American journalism, the New Republic—founded by Michael Straight’s family—was the one that became the outlet of, and cover for, the Soviet spy intimately linked to Mr. Burgess and Mr. Blunt.32

At the time of these articles, Philby was not a well known journalist. Yet his name was prominently displayed on the cover of at least three issues of the New Republic.33 In the 9 September 1957 issue, the Philby piece is preceded by a note which says, “The editors (emphasis mine) of the New Republic addressed some further questions to Mr. Philby . . . ” Now, while it is true as Safire indicated that Straight left his post as editor in April 1956 (judging by the masthead), it is also true that he remained as editor-at-large until September 1958, and as a contributing editor from then until January 1963. Thus he could have exerted some influence on the choice of Philby. But since he must have known Philby had been the target of press speculation that he was the “third man” who tipped off Burgess and Maclean in time to defect 34 (although officially denied in 1955), why would Straight help Philby unless obligated to do so? Straight told me he had no contact with nor did he know or even hear

---

34 D. Boyle, op. cit., pp. 443-447.
of Philby until after Burgess' defection. Granted the truth of this statement, the reason why the New Republic hired Philby remains open. In sum, these facts would stimulate a CI officer to consider Straight as a potential agent of influence in this matter. In the process he would have to deal with the data which follow.

Straight and Philby both went to Cambridge (Philby left in 1933, Straight arrived in 1934), to the same college, Trinity; both read economics and had the same tutor; they had many of the same friends (two in particular besides Burgess: John Cornford and James Klugman were close friends of Straight's and sponsored him to join them in the communist cell there). Straight and Philby both were members of the Cambridge Union Socialist Society (CUSS), of which Philby was treasurer in his final year. In November of 1934 when Straight joined the CUSS he attended the meetings regularly. (p. 60, ALS) Philby returned to Cambridge in 1934 to address the CUSS, but I was unable to determine just when. Straight told me he does not remember the event. This of course is possible. He was newly arrived, Cambridge had over a thousand undergraduates and was a club- and group-oriented institution in 1934. Still, these common links should be clarified.

Continuing a similar line of thought, still from the CI point of view, one must ask: Were the three " coincidental" meetings Straight had with Burgess really coincidence or were they planned (perhaps without Straight's knowledge) to pass instructions, make requests, activate a sleeper for a specific task? However outrageous and unjust this might seem to Straight, the question must be addressed. We know the NKVD/GRU/COMINTERN took advantage of people like Straight if they could. They were experts at using agents of influence and they employed sleepers to be activated as required; Burgess, Maclean, Philby, and Blunt had all experienced this status. Moreover they were persistent and capable of pressure to the extent of executing uncooperative agents and even former case officers. It is possible then that the fourth meeting (and perhaps earlier ones) with Burgess was operational and used to designate another contact for Straight since Burgess planned to leave soon; it could have been Philby. Burgess was living with Philby at the time. Is it reasonable to assume that Burgess would not have contacted Straight (a fellow Apostle) socially, as Straight claims, if there had not been an official requirement preventing him? Did Straight not know Burgess was stationed in Washington? They both had acquaintances in common (e.g., Joseph Alsop). After considering these questions the likelihood of Straight's influencing Philby's contract with the New Republic, at the behest of the Soviets, Philby, or others, is less remote. While this is just speculation, one precedent for enlisting help of this kind from former agents involved Anthony Blunt, cousin of Britain's queen mother. Blunt resigned from MI-5 and was " allowed" to leave the NKVD by the Soviets after World War II to pursue art history. But when Burgess and Maclean defected he was activated first by the NKVD to draft and help im-

---

35. Alexander Orlov, Handbook of Intelligence and Guerrilla Warfare. See also Weinstein, Perjury and Walter Krivitsky, In Stalin's Secret Service (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1939). Krivitsky was found shot to death on 10 February 1941 in the Hotel Bellevue in Washington. The death was ruled a suicide. But Krivitsky had told friends that if he were found dead under conditions which looked like suicide, not to believe it.
plement their escape plan, and then by an “old boy” in MI-5 to help search Burgess’ rooms. In the process of the latter cooperation he pocketed letters damaging to himself.\textsuperscript{36} Now if Blunt could be called on when needed, why could not Straight?

Overall, there can be little doubt that Michael Straight was false to an obligation and duty to his country. In the process he has left us with many unanswered questions, one more of which will be dealt with here.

Why Did He Write The Book?

He did not have to. He does not need the money. In response to the newspaper articles and telephone calls he could have said nothing, just let the turmoil dissipate. If he wanted to clarify the circumstances for his grandchildren (as he indicated to one author), why not just write them a letter, or talk to them?\textsuperscript{37} If he was compelled to go public, why not just an article? Straight knew too that writing the book would subject him to the criticism of the press, and yet he did it, a real self-inflicted wound. But he was not without support. When the book first came out, Straight told me, John Kenneth Galbraith called him to say he was glad he had written it because the 1930s are a period we should know more about today.\textsuperscript{38}

To put this question another way, if he had to say anything, would it not have been smarter to have omitted mention of any contact with the COMINTERN and Green? Why did he ever tell the FBI about this aspect in the first place? There is no indication from Straight that anyone else might have told the FBI. His decision to tell as much as he did supports several explanations. First, one could conclude that he told the whole truth, sloppy tradecraft and all, to purge his conscience, knowing it would force upon him an accredited victim status. Second, with his family’s support, Straight tells us he was compelled to “write his own epitaph” rather than live with the erroneous interpretations from journalists like Britain’s Chapman Pincher and Nigel West who published their own descriptions of these events.\textsuperscript{39} Third, as many reviewers have pointed out, there could be complex psychological explanations (suggested by Straight’s comments in the book) which may be right but do not provide any way of telling, and therefore tend to be dismissed perhaps unjustly. Finally, some combination of these possibilities may be the answer, but more likely there is no guillotine finality here. In my view, although I confess to a juggler’s confidence on this issue, aside from the fact that spy stories sell and that the book is an intensely personal and well written account of recent

\textsuperscript{36} Boyle, op. cit., p. 415.
\textsuperscript{37} Straight did record an oral history for Columbia University, but it cannot be heard nor can the transcript be read until after his death. Source: Butler Library, Columbia University, New York, oral history collection, Miss Geri Nunn.
\textsuperscript{38} Knowing that Galbraith had done graduate work at Cambridge, Straight asked him if he had been tempted by the communists. Galbraith replied that he had indeed and would have joined like everyone else but his studies took too much time. Galbraith added that Arthur Koestler had told him that he should have joined because one tends to diminish the severity of the problem unless one has experienced it.
controversial times, there is another message in After Long Silence: while Straight's perspective and perception are unique, what he experienced is not. It could happen again. Clearly the results of the Soviet penetration efforts in the 1930s, particularly those related to foreign policy and the intelligence profession, were catastrophic. Not only in Britain, but in America too. During the period discussed above, twenty-five British subjects and fifty-seven Americans were discovered working for the Soviets.40 There is adequate precedent for believing the KGB/GRU will continue what has worked well in the past.

Read in this context, After Long Silence is a good case study where what is not presented is as important as what is. Whether or not one accepts Straight's interpretation of specific events, the general description of the times he presents can be verified. Knowledge of how the communist movement operated can diminish the likelihood of successful repetition. It provides a basis for analyzing the present while illuminating some of the motivations and events which created it. Furthermore, it makes us appreciate the power of the ideological recruitment of idealists. If this be in part why Straight wrote his book, he has done a service. As to Michael Straight himself, no semantic contrivances can avoid the conclusion to which he guides us; as both man and agent he was too gullible, too idealistic, too self-serving, and too long silent.

40 Peter Hennesy and Alasdair Palmer, "Good Year for a Mole Mania Revival," the London Times, 15 February 1983. Note: not all the British spies came from Cambridge, though most of those caught studied there. In the United States the communists worked hard to recruit members and fellow-travelers at the best universities; publicly identified examples include: Donald and Alger Hiss (the latter took his undergraduate degree at Johns Hopkins), and Lauchlin Currie and Noel Field: Harvard. Whittaker Chambers and Elizabeth Bentley went to Columbia; Stanford graduated Harry Dexter White (who also attended Harvard).