

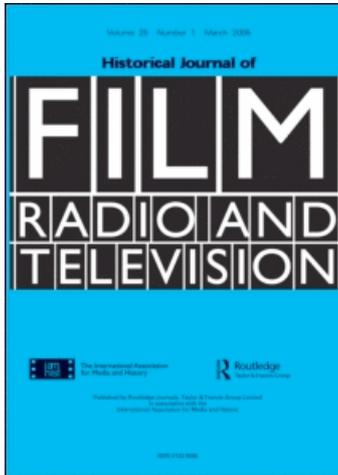
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# GET SMART: A LOOK AT THE CURRENT RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HOLLYWOOD AND THE CIA

Tricia Jenkins

Government agencies have long employed entertainment industry liaisons to work with Hollywood in order to improve their public image. For instance, the Federal Bureau of Investigation established its entertainment office in the 1930s and has used its influence to bolster the image of the bureau in radio programs, films and television shows such as *G-Men* (1935), *The Untouchables* (1959–1963), *The FBI Story* (1959), and *The F.B.I.* (1965–1979). In 1947, the Department of Defense established its first entertainment industry liaison, and now, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, the Marine Corps, the Department of Homeland Security, the Secret Service, and the US Coast Guard all have Motion Picture and Television Offices or official assistants to the media on their payroll. Even government centers are now working with Tinsel Town, as evidenced by *Hollywood, Health, and Society*—a program associated with the University of Southern California’s Annenberg Norman Lear Center and funded in part by the Center for Disease Control and the National Institute of Health to provide the entertainment industry with information for health-related story lines.

The Central Intelligence Agency, however, is relatively new to the Hollywood game, as it did not hire Chase Brandon as its first entertainment industry liaison until 1995 even though the agency has formally existed since 1947. According to Paul Barry, Brandon’s successor and the agency’s current industry liaison, the CIA was late in establishing the position because ‘culturally we have been an Agency focused on our overseas mission and most of our personnel work . . . outside of the public spotlight.’ ‘Our philosophy,’ he continued,

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seemed to dictate that we focus overseas and not pay much attention to the public perception of the Agency, which was being shaped by the entertainment industry in the United States. We eventually realized that the industry's interest in the CIA would continue whether we participated [in the creative process] or not. As a result, we determined it would be in our best interest to attempt to work with the industry to improve understanding and increase accuracy in storylines.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the agency's late entry into the Hollywood scene, Chase Brandon and Paul Barry have already worked to shape the content of popular films and television programs such as *The Agency* (2001–2003), *Alias* (2001–2006), *JAG* (1995–2005), *24* (2001–present), *In the Company of Spies* (1999), *The Recruit* (2003), *Enemy of the State* (1998), *Bad Company* (2002), and *The Sum of All Fears* (2002). However, virtually no scholarly research has been conducted on the CIA and its recent collaboration efforts. As a result, this article seeks to demystify the Hollywood–CIA partnership by explaining how the agency currently works with Hollywood creators, focusing on the historical factors that led the agency to develop an entertainment industry liaison in the first place, and then discussing some of the recent products that have resulted from that relationship before addressing the major cultural and legal concerns that have arisen from the partnership. Because little has been written on the subject, most of the information for this article comes from interviews I conducted in 2008 with Paul Barry and two former CIA employees who now work as technical consultants on Hollywood projects, as well as from previously published interviews and journalistic stories on the topic.

### The role of the CIA's entertainment industry liaison

Typically, the current role of a government entertainment industry liaison involves working with film and television companies to provide them with advice, technical consultants, shooting locations, props, and equipment. For instance, Phil Strub, the Pentagon's Special Assistant to the Media, often provides military personnel and equipment, including fighter jets, submarines, and aircraft carriers at no cost to film and television creators. But as David Robb's *Operation Hollywood* illustrates, Strub's assistance is not really free, since he often denies producers access to the Pentagon's assets when they seek to make movies that depict the American military in a negative light and leverages access to its equipment to get entertainment professionals to change facts, dialogue, and scenes according to military discretion.<sup>2</sup> Thus the role of the entertainment industry liaison is better understood as a negotiator who works to accommodate Hollywood while simultaneously bolstering his or her agency's public image.

By its own admission, the CIA, unlike the Pentagon, is unable to exert strong influence over entertainment productions, since it does not have the expensive equipment to offer film crews in return for script and production control. As Chase Brandon notes, the only thing the CIA can really barter with is its access to technical consultants and to CIA headquarters for filming.<sup>3</sup> This sentiment was also echoed in my interview with Barry who admitted that the 'only real leverage I have is the ability to grant access to our Headquarters for filming or to meet personnel or permission to

use our official seal, which incidentally is protected under the 1947 National Security Act. But the reality is that it is easier and less expensive for Hollywood to simply recreate a facsimile of our lobby elsewhere,' in order to create the spy genre's 'money shot.'

As a result, Barry believes that the CIA is most valuable when it works to offer advice to screenwriters when a film or program is in its early stages. 'From my experience,' he said, 'the added value we provide is at a story's inception. We can be a tremendous asset to writers developing characters and storylines . . . Once a story has been optioned for a movie, it's almost too late for us to participate.' This sentiment was seconded in my interview with Tony Mendez, who noted that despite the agency's limitations, Chase Brandon (the CIA's first entertainment industry liaison) was 'very adept at wielding his influence' especially during a film's early stages.<sup>4</sup>

When I asked Barry to walk me through the process that occurs when someone contacts him to request assistance for a film or television show, he stated that usually initial discussions gravitate toward the project's focus and requirements. The next step is to review the script, which is standard practice with all the agencies when the industry representative is seeking assistance outside the realm of advice or guidance. Script reviews are important to government–Hollywood liaisons because they want to ensure that the project they are supporting promotes a positive image of their agency. When Barry reviews scripts, for instance, he is looking for a project that is directly connected to the CIA's Strategic Intent, especially its elements of service, integrity, excellence, and the agency's mission to 'recruit, develop and retain individuals from a diverse talent pool.' Barry also stated that while there are no written guidelines that he follows, ultimately, he is looking for projects that will increase understanding of the Agency and instill pride in its employees. 'My guiding principles for cooperation,' he added, 'generally require that the project represents an authentic portrayal of the organization, seeks to provide a favorable impression of the organization, and suggests that there is a reasonable expectation that the project will stimulate positive interest in the organization.'

Films that depict CIA officers as rogues, murderers, or drug users are usually denied agency assistance, since these depictions disparage the reputations of CIA officers and ultimately hurt CIA objectives. For example, Barry implied that he would have denied assistance to the creators of *The Good Shepherd* (2006), a film starring Matt Damon and Angelina Jolie that focused on the early history of the agency. Barry has publicly called that film 'a lamentable piece of fiction masquerading as documentary,'<sup>5</sup> and noted in our interview that he specifically objects to the scene where the CIA tacitly consents to having a woman pushed out of an airplane and an interrogation scene that ends in a suicide. 'These types of scenes not only disparage the reputation of our officers but negatively influence the decisions of potential assets contemplating an association with the CIA,' he said.

These concerns were brought up again when I asked Barry to provide an example of a project that he has refused to support (*The Good Shepherd* used ex-CIA officer Milt Bearden as its technical consultant rather than Barry's office). The CIA liaison noted that, a few months ago, he hosted a visit for some art, set, and props people working on a film (whose title he could not disclose for proprietary reasons). After a visit to the CIA's gift store, the crew sought permission to use a number of items in the film, such as clocks and lighters containing the CIA seal. Because the screenplay was based

on a book that Barry believed treated the CIA fairly, he was initially excited about the prospect of collaboration. Before providing consent for use of the Agency seal, however, he requested the opportunity to review the script:

Unfortunately, my enthusiasm waned when I realized that the screenplay introduced a number of negative scenes which were not in the book. For instance, in the very first scene an Area Division Chief was depicted as smoking hash from a pipe in his home. Later in the screenplay, a terrorist informer is executed by a CIA officer instead of the book's description of terrorists killing one of their own after discovering he was working with the Americans. There were other negative examples, which did not appear in the book as well. It became pretty obvious that the writers had a particular point of view that was unfavorable to the Agency. I asked the studio to change the scenes, and they refused [so] they did not get the props they were looking for.

Despite this interaction and a few others like it, Barry admits that activity in his office has been slow since he took over the post from Chase Brandon in 2007. Part of this can be attributed to the Hollywood writers' strike but the problem also rests in issues of continuity with his predecessor and the office's location and human resources. More specifically, Chase Brandon served as the CIA's Entertainment Industry Liaison from the mid-1990s to 2007, when he retired from the agency. It appears that Brandon is now attempting to build an independent career as a technical advisor to Hollywood,<sup>6</sup> and thus failed to leave Barry with a single telephone number or piece of paper to help him continue Brandon's work through the CIA platform. This has forced Barry to focus his attention on establishing contacts and re-building a foundation for the agency's program, a task that is made more difficult by the fact that the CIA's Office of Public Affairs—which primarily works with the news media—is comprised of just 25 people and that Barry is the only officer managing the Entertainment Industry account. Additionally, unlike most federal government agencies, the CIA does not have a west coast office with specialized personnel working with the entertainment industry, but Barry makes monthly trips to Los Angeles for industry-related meetings and is attempting to expand the agency's outreach.

### **The CIA's image problem and the impetus to create an entertainment industry liaison**

Before one can begin to analyze the implications of the CIA's current relationship with Hollywood, it is important to understand why the agency developed the position of an entertainment industry liaison in the first place. Ultimately, the history of this position has its roots firmly planted in the end of the Cold War and the significant demise of two of the US's most prominent enemies—communism and the USSR. Because of the numerous changes in American culture wrought by the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, many questioned whether the CIA would be necessary in the new age. In fact, in November 1997, the Gerald R. Ford Library held a conference to debate the continued necessity of the CIA. The then-Director of Central Intelligence, George

Tenet, delivered the keynote address. Unsurprisingly, he argued that the agency was still necessary, reminding the audience that President Truman had created the CIA as an insurance policy against ‘the kind of surprise that caught America off guard in World War II’ and then went on to list a host of present threats, including Saddam Hussein’s attempts to build biological weapons, Iran’s plans for building intermediate range missiles, the build-up of North Korean forces near the DMZ, and the ‘vast and unfinished transformations underway in countries with large nuclear arsenals, such as Russia and China.’<sup>7</sup>

Despite the intelligence community’s awareness of new threats and the need for the continuation of intelligence gathering, the CIA nonetheless struggled to retain its power and influence in the post-Cold War era. The 1994 discovery of Aldrich Ames, a Soviet mole at Langley, led to congressional investigations in both the Senate and the House, where politicians seriously considered dismantling the agency after listening to testimony about how Ames had sold American secrets to Moscow for over nine years without arousing much suspicion amongst his colleagues.<sup>8</sup> The memory of the CIA’s misadventures in Nicaragua and the Iran–Contra scandal were also still fresh enough in the public’s mind to warrant suspicion of the agency, and without a visible, viable enemy after the Cold War, the outfit struggled to attract recruits and public support. In fact, outside intelligence analysts believe that CIA employment levels had dropped from 20,000 near the end of the Cold War to 16,000 by 1997, although recruitment levels had begun to slowly increase in 1998 due to Tenet’s attempts to re-make the agency’s image in print advertisements and at college fairs.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, the CIA knew it was in trouble much sooner than 1997. In the fall of 1991, Director of Central Intelligence, Robert Gates, created the Task Force for Greater Openness within the CIA. By his own account, Gates’ goal was to garner ‘additional proposals for making more information about the Agency available to the American people and to give greater transparency to our organization,’ or, in short, to ‘help people understand better what [the CIA] does and how it does it.’<sup>10</sup> The memorandums that were exchanged between the task force and Gates reveal the CIA was indeed trying to implement ways to make more information about the Agency available, as evidenced by its suggestions to declassify documents and make available portions of its historical archives, to create better liaisons between the agency, the legislative branch, the media and the academic and business sectors, and to change the in-house culture that for so long discouraged even small degrees of openness and transparency.

The memorandums also reveal that the CIA knew it faced a serious image problem and would need to find more media savvy ways of enhancing public support. One of the proposals put forth by the task force recognized the agency’s desperate need for a ‘visible spokesperson, such as the D/PAO, to refute [media] allegations and set the record straight. When such false allegations come from television, we need to be able to speak to them in the same forum,’ noted the task force, which then cited a 1991 episode of *Nightline* that criticized the CIA. ‘An Agency spokesperson reading our statement in response to these allegations,’ it wrote, ‘would have been more effective than Ted Koppel’s reading of it with raised eyebrows and a look of “What do you expect given the source?”’<sup>11</sup>

The task force also recognized that its relationship to Hollywood was important because of the ways it could enhance its public image through the film and television industry. The task force specifically noted that:

The PAO has also reviewed some film scripts about the Agency, documentary and fictional, at the request of filmmakers seeking guidance on accuracy and authenticity. In a few instances, we facilitated the filming of a few scenes on Agency premises. Responding positively to these requests in a limited way has provided PAO with the opportunity to help others depict the Agency and its activities accurately and without negative distortions.<sup>12</sup>

It notes, however, that except for responding to such requests, 'we do not seek to play a role in filmmaking ventures about the Agency which come to our attention. For example, although we knew that Oliver Stone's movie on *JFK* was in the works for some time, we did not contact him to volunteer an Agency viewpoint.'<sup>13</sup>

By 1995 that aspect of the CIA had changed, as it began to actively, formally, and more fully work with the Hollywood entertainment industry. This is evidenced by the fact that the agency hired Chase Brandon to transform the CIA's image of a 'negative, Machiavellian conspiratorial organization full of trench coat wearing, suspicious people who assassinated folks'<sup>14</sup> and by the fact that soon after Brandon was hired, the agency began negotiations with 20th Century Fox Television to create a weekly series based on CIA case files that would portray the agency in a positive manner.<sup>15</sup> In other words, in an era where the future of the CIA seemed uncertain, the agency finally decided to place more importance on its Hollywood endeavors and set out to revamp decades worth of film and television programs that depicted the CIA as either buffoonish (think *Get Smart*) or as a rogue agency operating with little congressional oversight and a penchant for assassinations, torture, internal conspiracies, and brainwashing (think *The Good Shepherd*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *In the Line of Fire*, the Jason Bourne trilogy, *Three Days in the Condor*, *24*, and others.) Or, as United International Press reviewer, Steve Sailer, put it: while the FBI's early relationship with Hollywood led to films 'full of heroic G-men and Marines,' the CIA's refusal to work with Tinsel Town led to films where 'CIA higher-ups were almost always portrayed as cruel, devious, and incompetent uber-WASPs with thin lips and thinning hair.'<sup>16</sup>

For Paul Barry, this cinematic history plays a role in the way he perceives his job. You cannot underestimate Hollywood's influence, he stated. 'Most Americans are content to accept Hollywood's message' about the CIA and its activities. 'Very few ever conduct any research to determine the truth. This is reinforced to us by the public e-mail we receive. In most instances, Hollywood is the only way the public learns about the Agency and Americans frequently shape their judgments about us based on films.' He then went on to state that the problem of Americans not really understanding the Agency's mission and how it carries it out is compounded 'when we are depicted as killers and rogues in the movies.' 'While I can appreciate a certain amount of artistic license,' Barry states, 'nothing could be further from the truth because we have more oversight than any other government agency.'

## Products of the CIA–Hollywood partnership: two case studies and analysis

Because the impetus to create a position for an entertainment industry liaison arose from the CIA's desires to correct its image problem and garner support for the agency, it is important to re-emphasize that the CIA is selective about which products it chooses to support and that the relationship between Hollywood and the CIA is symbiotic in nature: production companies use the CIA to get complimentary access to technical consultants, filming locations, and props, while the CIA gets a complimentary makeover by Hollywood. The benefits that the CIA derives from the nature of this relationship, however, manifest themselves in various forms that can have far-reaching effects.

A good case in point is *The Agency*, a television series that debuted on CBS in 2001 and was created by Michael Frost Beckner, the screenplay writer for the 2001 film *Spy Game*, starring Brad Pitt and Robert Redford. Debuting just two weeks after 9/11, this television series was touted as an inside look at the workings of the Central Intelligence Agency and featured Ally McBeal's Gil Bellows as 'an energetic, globe-trotting agent and Ronny Cox as his desk-bound but weary-looking boss.'<sup>17</sup>

Well before the program ever aired on CBS, entertainment critics widely noted that the program was being made with the cooperation of the CIA, and this involvement was usually framed as an effort to portray the agency as accurately as possible for the education of viewers. For instance, nearly every reviewer of the show mentioned that the series was the first television program granted permission to film at CIA headquarters and used real-life agency employees as extras for the pilot episode. The overwhelming majority of reviewers also noted that Chase Brandon had worked with Beckner on the series to provide accurate, detailed knowledge about the daily workings of the agency.

Outside of the newspaper and entertainment reports that discussed how the CIA allowed the series to shoot on its premises and use the agency's seal, little else was known about the kind of access and advice the series received. In March of 2008, I talked with Tony and Jonna Mendez at their home in Maryland. These retired CIA employees worked with Beckner and Chase Brandon on *The Agency* and offered further insights into how the CIA helped shape the content of the CBS series. According to Tony, he, Chase and Jonna were hired as technical consultants on the series and flew out to Hollywood to consult the writers, the wardrobe team, and set designers before the first season's airing. 'Our job was mainly to point them in the right direction in terms of depicting the CIA realistically,' said Tony.

From Jonna's perspective, their job was initially exciting since she believes that *The Agency* started out as an accurate portrayal of the CIA and that Beckner genuinely wanted to create a realistic program about how the agency works, although she and her husband believe that network executives eventually got in the way of that mission. Nonetheless, both Tony and Jonna noted that because of the show's original intention, its creators were granted unprecedented access to the Agency. 'Not only did they open the door to allow [Beckner] to film on the grounds of the CIA,' Jonna notes,

but they allowed him into our [Science and Technology] office, which was like Q's office in the James Bond films. It was where all the counterfeiters and document

forgers and disguise makers were working, and he was allowed to take 35 mm pictures of the area and then go back to Hollywood and recreate our office. And it was so realistic that we started getting phone calls from some of our old colleagues saying, 'Did you see how they used our old office for filming in *The Agency*?,' but of course, it was just a facsimile.

In regards to the ways in which they and Chase helped shape the scripts of the series, the Mendezes suggest that they basically tried to make the series as realistic as possible. For instance, the couple recalled laughing when they first saw the costume choices for the main stars. 'The women's outfits were all short skirts and low-cut blouses,' Jonna remarked, 'which might be the way they dress in California, but it's not the way CIA employees dress. We have one of the most conservative fashion senses in the United States.' Jonna also recalled objecting to a script that involved the CIA arresting someone—which the CIA does not have the authority to do—and to another that had officers working and entering the Washington DC metro carrying guns. 'First of all,' she states, 'the CIA doesn't work on US soil and most officers don't even carry guns. I mean I was trained to use one, but I never carried one.' According to Tony, this scene, while unrealistic, was likely prompted by budget concerns as *The Agency* sometimes set things domestically because it didn't want the expense of shooting in foreign locations.

My conversation with the Mendezes suggests that their role as CIA consultants was primarily to help *The Agency* create a more realistic program for CBS in terms of its setting and understanding of official CIA procedures, which, in turn, allowed the producers to market the show as an insider's look into the agency—a marketing tool that proved particularly beneficial to the CIA. As David Ensor noted in a CNN televised report on *The Agency*, this series' positive depictions of the agency helped the CIA 'drum up public support for its existence and create interest for new recruits' in the absence of a Cold War adversary,<sup>18</sup> but given that the *The Agency* debuted just two weeks after 9/11, the show also helped the CIA conduct damage control at a time when critics were already blaming the agency for a complete intelligence failure. More specifically, the shows' episodes featured the CIA competently defeating terrorists on a weekly basis and the tagline that was often used in its trailers—'Now, more than ever, we need the CIA'—helped the collaborative project reassure Americans that the CIA was indeed capable of stopping terrorist attacks and that the outfit was alert and ready should another occur.

The CIA received a similar boost in the post-9/11 period from its collaboration with the makers of *The Recruit* (2003). This film starred Al Pacino as Walter Burke, a veteran recruiter for the CIA, who eventually convinces an unconventional but brilliant college graduate, James Clayton (Colin Farrell), to join the agency. The film primarily focuses on the recruitment practices of the CIA, as well as the training that new recruits undergo at The Farm before Clayton is eventually assigned to root out an agency mole that later proves to be Burke himself.

According to interviews with Roger Birnbaum and the film's other producer, Jim Apple, Chase Brandon was hired as a technical consultant during the pre-production stages of the film. Apple states that Brandon was instrumental to the script's development as he gave his 'insight into the Agency's facilities, methods, and complex recruitment process: the way in which the Agency identifies suitable candidates,

recruits them, and molds them into operation officers.’<sup>19</sup> Brandon also arranged visits for the film-makers to CIA headquarters in MacLean, Virginia, and, where possible, allowed them to see how the operation works and to meet CIA employees.

Brandon’s work on the film helped *The Recruit* market itself as a realistic look at the CIA as well as endow the final product with a richer specificity in regards to dialogue, sets, and character interaction. However, Brandon’s work on the film served the agency’s interests as well. One of the film’s more important scenes during the training sequences features Pacino explaining to his students that while the CIA’s failures will almost always be publicized, no one will know of their successes—a scene which again helped to curtail criticisms of the agency which suggested it had twiddled its thumbs in the years leading up to the September 11th attacks. This sentiment was also echoed in an interview given by Birnbaum, who was asked what he hoped audience members would learn from his movie. He responded that

the CIA operatives in this country and around the world are here to protect us and it’s a very difficult job. Usually the American public only hears about their mistakes. We don’t get to hear about the great things they do every day. It’s only when they stumble do we hear about it. But probably even right now, as you and I are standing here about to enjoy this movie, someone is out there doing something good that we’ll never know about.<sup>20</sup>

Comments such as this were, undoubtedly, boosts to the agency’s public image, and even though the film does depict one of its own officers betraying the agency, the film can still be seen as a positive portrayal of the CIA since its new hires are presented as some of the sharpest minds in the country and the agency itself is presented as both competent and rigorous. Even in regards to Burke’s betrayal, Steve Sailer astutely writes that the take-home message of *The Recruit* is that ‘while the CIA does have problems with officers committing treason, it’s mostly because we don’t pay them enough’<sup>21</sup>—an angle, he remarks, Brandon would have little problem getting behind.

Perhaps the biggest boost for the agency, however, rests in the special features section of the film’s DVD release.<sup>22</sup> The first half of this 16-minute special, entitled ‘Spy School: Inside the CIA Training Program,’ features Brandon describing the recruitment and training processes undergone at the CIA, as well as the IQ tests, personality assessments, and background checks the agency conducts for potential employees. He also clarifies that while the film suggests that recruits can be subjected to torture or physical abuse at The Farm, such practices are not utilized during the CIA’s real training process. During the second-half of the film, the focus changes and becomes more of a recruitment film and marketing tool for the agency. For instance, Brandon remarks that 9/11 ‘clearly’ demonstrated that the agency is ‘more crucial than ever.’ Apple is also featured in this section of the film and argues that working for the CIA is the most thankless job in all of law enforcement and one of the most complicated. ‘We don’t realize...the risks these people take to...help our government figure out what do we have to do, is this a real threat or not? I can tell you right now that there have been many averted terrorists attacks that we’ll never know about’ [because the CIA was successful]. The film then cuts to a scene from *The Recruit*, where Al Pacino tells his trainees that CIA officers do not work for glory or money. Rather, we are here because ‘we believe. We believe in good and evil and

we choose good. We are here because we believe in right and wrong and we choose right . . . our cause is just.' The film then ends with Brandon asking why anyone would want to become a spy given the constant moving and the time it requires officers to spend away from family and loved ones. He concludes by arguing that the answer lies in the fact that the 'grandeur, the glory, the sense of purpose, the sense of accomplishment . . . the incredible sense of privilege and pride' involved in working for the CIA 'so outweighs everything else.' What the CIA ultimately gained from its relationship with the creators of *The Recruit*, then, was a favorable impression of the CIA projected through the film's narrative, the ability to deflect criticism that the CIA was incompetent and asleep at the wheel, and the additional boon of a free recruitment advertisement disguised as a special feature on the DVD release.

*The Recruit* and *The Agency*, of course, are just two examples that illustrate how the CIA has worked with Hollywood to bolster its image and the types of texts it likes to sponsor, but both highlight two key issues at stake in the CIA's collaboration with Tinsel Town. One deals with first amendment rights to the freedom of speech while the second deals with the separation of media and the state and issues of the public good. In 2004, Robb's *Operation Hollywood: how the Pentagon shapes and censors the movies* sharply criticized the Pentagon's relationship with the Hollywood entertainment industry, likening their symbiotic relationship to the giant propaganda machines of North Korea and Nazi Germany.<sup>23</sup> As mentioned in this article's introduction, Robb's book documents how Phil Strub denies film producers access to its expensive military equipment and personnel when they seek to make movies that depict the American military in a negative light, but reward film studios access to its resources when the creators create pro-military movies and/or agree to change elements of the film according to military discretion. Robb notes that this type of coercion leads to greater numbers of recruits and larger budgets for the military, but costs tax payers millions of dollars, unfairly manipulates their attitudes about the military, and infringes on film-makers' first amendment rights to the freedom of speech, which has traditionally been interpreted to mean that the government should not use its resources or give financial benefits to favor any one type of speech over another.<sup>24</sup>

While the CIA does not have as much censorship power as the Pentagon, Robb's criticisms are still applicable to the agency, which uses tax payers' money to fund their liaisons' work with Hollywood creators and uses their resources to influence media content in a way that causes the public to hold more favorable views of the agency—whether they are warranted or not. The difference is a matter of degree but not kind.<sup>25</sup> When asked to respond to the criticisms laid out by Robb, Barry argued that free speech is not abridged by a refusal to provide government resources in support of a film project:

When a filmmaker requests resource assistance from the government, the terms of acceptance are negotiated. The government preference is to work with the entertainment industry and the middle ground is almost always sought on contentious issues. Nevertheless, sometimes filmmakers are unwilling to compromise. This occurs for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the industry's desire to produce a successful commercial enterprise. By contrast, the government's primary concern is accuracy, which is not a major consideration of most filmmakers. Because of these conflicting set of priorities, 'creative

differences' occasionally result. If the differences cannot be resolved, it is merely a disagreement, not censorship or an infringement of free speech.

Barry also argues that in terms of assistance to the entertainment industry, there is a key distinction. 'Advice and guidance is available to everyone in the American entertainment industry, thereby supporting the notion of equal access. However, discretion is used in making decisions to provide government resources in support of a film project. A good analogy might be corporate sponsorship decisions (e.g. does the project align with corporate values?). One reason the government is judicious about endorsing projects is the potential impact on recruitment.'

Yale law professor Dr. Robert Post supports Barry's position and does not believe that the CIA's relationship with Hollywood violates film directors' rights to free speech. Post, who specializes in first amendment rights, notes that the constitution allows the government to 'speak' its own point of view and to use its resources in a discriminating manner in order to promote that perspective. Additionally, because the CIA is not a place of public forum, it can discriminate as to who it allows into its building to access its resources, such as the lobby for filming purposes, its employees, and even its gift store. Post notes, however, that just because the practice is constitutional does not mean that it is always used to serve the public good.<sup>26</sup>

This leads to the second point, which centers on the media's separation from the state. Media scholars have long focused on the importance of the separation of the news media from the state, so that, ideally, journalists are free to report on the government's activities, to serve as a watchdog for the American public, and to circulate information that is essential to a democracy. Television and film producers can also share this role with news organizations, for even though their products are often fictional in nature, these mediums nonetheless have the power to tell stories that will ultimately influence viewers' opinions and ideas about the government and its foreign and domestic policies. But when television and film creators rely on government agencies for pre-production and production support, how able is the entertainment industry to take a critical and independent look at government actions through storytelling? And what are the ramifications for the general viewer?

This question is particularly relevant to the CIA's relationship with Hollywood, since the average television or film viewer does not even know that the CIA employs someone to shape media content in ways that favor the agency. In most reviews of the television and films that Brandon worked on, he is simply identified as a former CIA operative. Indeed, in *The Recruit* DVD's special feature, Brandon is merely introduced as a 25-year veteran officer of the CIA, who provided the film with his expertise on the CIA's training and recruitment activities. Nowhere is he identified as a current CIA employee who, at the time, worked in its Office of Public Affairs as someone paid to paint a positive image of the agency.

What is also troublesome is that when the CIA does discuss its liaisons' work with Hollywood, it does so in a way that stresses the concept of 'accuracy.' As Barry noted when asked about the issue of free speech, 'the government's primary concern is accuracy.' Likewise, in Elaine Sciolino's review of *The Agency*, she quotes George Tenet as stating that the agency cooperates with Hollywood 'where feasible' to help 'members of the entertainment industry willing to accurately portray the work of the intelligence community,' before quoting Bill Harlow, the agency's chief spokesman, as

saying: 'If they appear to be interested in *accuracy*, if they do not misportray the role of the agency . . . we will consider providing assistance' (emphases mine).<sup>27</sup> Brandon often used this same rhetorical device when he was interviewed by the press. For example, he stated in Paula Bernstein's *New York Times* review of *The Agency* that the CIA had grown tired of being depicted on screen as a nefarious organization and was now trying to work with Hollywood to portray the agency more accurately. 'Even though the trend is toward making programs about the agency more realistic,' he stated, 'there are, in fact, still writers and producers and directors who don't want to be confused by the facts.' 'They'd rather live in their own little creative make-believe world.'<sup>28</sup>

These officers' emphasis on accuracy begs the question: who decides what is accurate? In the case of the CIA, the answer is the agency's entertainment industry liaison, since he is the one to review scripts and to decide whether to deny or grant agency resources to film and television producers. The problem is that this liaison is also being paid by the CIA to shed a more favorable light on the agency, and thus what is at stake, even by Barry's own admission, is not so much notions of historical accuracy but, rather, a version of the truth that boosts morale, attracts recruits, and elevates levels of public support. After all, if the CIA was primarily interested in issues of accuracy, it could support scripts that depict water boarding, or rendition, or the destruction of tapes of questionable interrogations in television and film productions, but it's hard to imagine that either Brandon or Barry would support these projects.

Dependence on the CIA for the production of spy-related films is also worrisome, since the CIA has one of the most questionable histories of any government agency—from issues of water boarding, to rendition, to its help in overthrowing democratically elected governments, to its experiments with LSD, and the daily exploitation and manipulation of assets in the name of national security. Precisely because the agency has and continues to engage in these types of activities, the popular media needs to take an independent look at the CIA through both fiction and journalism. As Jeff Cohen wrote about *The Agency* in 2001: 'In light of Sept. 11, Americans have a right to question how [the CIA] has performed lately and what sort of people it has been associating with, in Afghanistan and in other secret wars. These questions could be posed in a dramatic series but not on a show inclined more toward glorification than elucidation' or through a show reliant on the CIA's cooperation for script development and shooting locations. Instead, this type of relationship, writes Cohen, leads to episodes like that featured in season one of *The Agency*, where the CIA director's lying under oath to the Senate 'is portrayed as the correct and ethical choice,' as well as the series' failure to develop other 'hard-hitting episodes on the CIA's past alliance with terrorists such as Osama bin Laden or the agency's role in the bombing of a pharmaceutical factory in Sudan and the Chinese Embassy in Serbia.'<sup>29</sup>

The potential dangers of the CIA–Hollywood relationship then rest in the CIA's ability to use entertainment media to shape public support for its more questionable practices, to generate fear about international threats to bolster public and congressional support for increased budgets and power, and to prevent citizens from asking, or even knowing to ask, important questions about the ethics of CIA operations. Outside of Robb's focus on the Pentagon, however, little academic attention has been paid to the current relationship between Hollywood and government agencies, like the CIA, even though this relationship seems particularly

important in a post-9/11 world, when American government agencies are more aggressively using the media to shape public support for their policies in an age of sharp international criticism. Indeed, in April 2008, the *New York Times* ran an 11-page story on the ways the Pentagon has privileged the news media's military analysts who also have ties to military contractors and are thus financially invested in the very war policies they are asked to assess on air.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, when viewed from the CIA's perspective, the involvement with Hollywood is an important one despite these concerns, and it is not beyond reason to understand that their officers have grown tired of watching their work and their agency disparaged in the popular arts and have grown concerned for the ways these narratives have helped shape internal morale, as well as public and congressional support for the outfit. It is also understandable why these same officers wish to have more input into the creation of films and television programs that feature the CIA in order to guide those products, as best as they can, towards a more accurate and more positive portrayal of the work they do.

Perhaps the most amenable answer to the CIA's and the public's interests, then, is the one that Hollywood seems to be gravitating towards anyway: paying retired CIA operatives to work as technical advisers for film and television. These retirees have extensive knowledge of the agency but are no longer tied to an official CIA position and do not possess the power to censor a script (although they can influence creators' understanding of the agency). This type of relationship can allow popular media producers to create more accurate scripts that can better educate the public about the agency's mission and practices, but simultaneously allows the artists to depict the CIA in whatever manner they see as justified at the time.

A good case in point might be *The Good Shepherd* and *Charlie Wilson's War*—both of which used former CIA operative, Milton Bearden, as their technical advisor. Robert DeNiro involved Bearden in the script development, casting, set decoration and props used in *The Good Shepherd* but because he was not being paid to toe a party line, Bearden was able to contribute to the accuracy of the film but not control its agenda. This notion is perhaps best summarized by Bearden himself, when he said, 'When the film was finally done, I thought it was about as close to reality as we could get, bearing in mind that it was not intended as a documentary. The fact-based metaphor is the vehicle of this yarn, and though some of the old hands of CIA might not have been as happy as I was with the end product, their problem was that they were looking for some sort of a recruiting film' [whereas he was not].<sup>31</sup>

Barry has pointed out that in some ways ex-CIA operatives are the last group of people he would like representing the agency because many of them left the agency when they grew disillusioned with it and thus pitch that perspective to Hollywood film-makers (although he did not accuse Bearden of this.) However, Tony and Jonna Mendez note that while there certainly are members of the CIA who experience bitter disillusionment, there are also several other ex-CIA members who are interested in presenting a more balanced view of the agency and bringing honor to the work they engaged in for so long. It should be argued, though, that both those who valued their work at the CIA and those who became disillusioned with it, each have an important perspective to share and that is worth exploring in the popular arts, because when viewed in total, this body of work has the best chance of painting a knowledgeable, accurate and balanced portrayal of the agency for viewers.

Because so little has been written on the CIA's burgeoning relationship with Hollywood, it is important for academics to explore this topic further. Interviews with Hollywood producers and pre-production teams seem especially warranted so that media scholars not only understand how the CIA approaches its collaboration with Tinsel Town but how Hollywood creators understand and use it as well. Hopefully, this essay will lay the groundwork for those further studies by explicating the history of the CIA relationship with Hollywood, how it approaches its collaborations, and the ethical issues embedded in it.

## Notes

- 1 Paul Barry, Interview, CIA Headquarters, March 3, 2008.
- 2 David Robb, *Operation Hollywood: how the Pentagon shapes and censors the movies* (Amherst, NY, Prometheus Books, 2004).
- 3 *Ibid.*, 150.
- 4 Tony and Jonna Mendez, Interview, Mendezes' home, March 4, 2008.
- 5 Qtd. in Amy Argetsinger and Roxanne Roberts, The CIA has a New Man on a Special Mission—to Hollywood, *Washington Post*, June 5, 2007, p. C3.
- 6 This was confirmed by both Barry and the Mendezes, and the Internet Movie Database credits Brandon as the technical consultant on two films currently in pre-production: *Fard Ayn* (2009) and *Sandstorm* (2009).
- 7 George Tenet, Does America Need the CIA?, Gerald R. Ford Library, November 19, 1997, CIA.gov, [https://www.cia.gov/cia/public\\_affairs/speeches/1997/dci\\_speech\\_111997.html](https://www.cia.gov/cia/public_affairs/speeches/1997/dci_speech_111997.html).
- 8 Lewis Lapham, The Boys Next Door, *Harper's Magazine* 303.1814 (July 2001), p. 10+.
- 9 Tom Raum, CIA Recruiting Drive Paying Off, *Federation of American Scientists*, January 17, 2000, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/news/2000/01/ap011700.html>.
- 10 Robert Gates, Internal Memorandum on the Task Force for Greater Openness, Winter 1991, <http://www.cia-on-campus.org/foia/pa01.html>.
- 11 *Ibid.*, Doc 2, 5.
- 12 *Ibid.*, Doc. 2, 7–8.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Laura DiBenedetto-Kenyon, The *CSI* Factor, *Government Video*, Apr. 29, 2005, [http://governmentvideo.com/articles/publish/article\\_608.shtml](http://governmentvideo.com/articles/publish/article_608.shtml).
- 15 Because of limited space, I have restricted my discussion of Hollywood–CIA ventures to those that actually made it to the viewing public. At least two of the memorandums that were exchanged between the CIA and 20th Century Fox Television, however, are available online through the CIA's website and provide an interesting look into the thought process that guided the CIA's early dealings with the television industry. These documents, dated October 3, 1995 and April 16, 1996, can be found at [http://www.foia.cia.gov/browse\\_docs.asp](http://www.foia.cia.gov/browse_docs.asp) and are titled 'CIA Television Series Project' and 'CIA Television Series.'
- 16 Steve Sailer, The Recruit, *United Press International*, January 30, 2003.
- 17 Ken Tucker, Spy vs. Spy, *Entertainment Weekly*, 2001, <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,253293,00.html>.
- 18 Qtd. in Wesley Britton, *Spy Television* (Westport, CT, Praeger, 2005), 245.

- 19 Rebecca Murray, Roger Birnbaum and Jeff Apple Talk About 'The Recruit,' About.com: Hollywood Movies, <http://movies.about.com/library/weekly/aatherecruitintb.htm>.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Sailer.
- 22 Spy School: Inside the CIA's Training Program, *The Recruit*, Perf. Al Pacino and Colin Farrell, DVD Bonus Material, 2003.
- 23 Robb, 365–366.
- 24 Ibid., 47–48.
- 25 It should be pointed out, however, that Barry does not just work with Hollywood; he also meets with authors, documentary film-makers and academics (including this author) to provide them with information about the Central Intelligence Agency, but again, he has the power to answer these questions in a way that favorably represents the agency.
- 26 Robert Post, Interview by Tricia Jenkins, Phone, April 16, 2008.
- 27 Cameras are Being Turned on a Once-Shy Spy Agency, *New York Times*, May 6, 2001, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/news/2001/05/nyt050601.html>.
- 28 Hardest-Working Actor of the Season: the C.I.A., *New York Times*, September 2, 2001, <http://www.paulabernstein.com/portfolio/features/features1.html>.
- 29 Jeff Cohen, The Agency on CBS: Right Time but Wrong Show, *Los Angeles Times*, October 8, 2001, <http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=2464>.
- 30 David Barstow, Behind TV Analysts, Pentagon's Hidden Hand, *New York Times*, April 20, 2008, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/20/washington/20generals.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=1&hp](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/20/washington/20generals.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1&hp).
- 31 Patrick Luce, Retired CIA agent/author Milton Bearden talks *The Good Shepherd*, *Monsters&Critics*, [http://www.monstersandcritics.com/dvd/features/article\\_1285004.php](http://www.monstersandcritics.com/dvd/features/article_1285004.php).

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