

Interview with David MacMichael – February 13, 2006
by Richard Thieme

David MacMichael is a former CIA Analyst, US Marine and historian. He was a senior estimates officer with special responsibility for Western Hemisphere Affairs at the CIA's National Intelligence Council from 1981 to 1983. He resigned from the CIA rather than falsify reports for political reasons and testified at the World Court on the illegalities of Iran-Contra.

MacMichael started The Association of National Security Alumni, an organization to expose and curtail covert actions, and is a steering committee member of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

He and Richard Thieme, a frequent contributor to NCR, recently met at an Intelligence Ethics Conference that gathered nearly two hundred professionals from a broad spectrum of perspectives to discuss the impact of a career in intelligence on the moral and ethical life of the intelligence professional.

MacMichael discusses his background, ethical issues in intelligence, and the relevance of Iran-Contra to current national security issues.

RT: David, we discussed technology and the intelligence community—

DM: That's a term I hate! It sounds so warm and fuzzy.

RT: What do you prefer?

DM: Intelligence system.

RT: OK. Technology and the intelligence system.

DM: For years I worked at SRI (Stanford Research Institute) and Uri Geller and people like that were always floating through. I was supposed to be a voice of sanity but they did get me thinking about certain things that show up in your piece on technology (MacMichael reviewed my essay, *The Changing Context of Intelligence and Ethics: Enabling Technologies as Transformational Engines*) and what is happening there in the intelligence community. Jacques Ellul wrote of how technology defines the way the world operates and if it has an evil purpose or one that is wrong by previous standards, it will be used anyway.

I was a history professor, and I think of Diderot in the 18th century France. The Encyclopedia was really a technical manual that exposed what had previously been referred to as “the mysteries” of the craft guilds. Transforming mystery into knowledge

became a basis for the industrial revolution. That kind of change is significant and impacts the issues you raise on the ethical side about the intelligence system.

Which brings me to an important question: What has all of that got to do with “intelligence?” I think of all the crazy science they did in MKULTRA and MKSEARCH and programs like that. How did that relate to gathering intelligence in order to inform policies?

Another point you make is that transformation imposed by global multi-national corporations that transcend all national boundaries make the concept of nation states in conflict highly questionable. In the 19th and 20th centuries, conflicts were between nation states. But even so, you can go back through any historical atlas and look at the post-Roman empire and it’s like a kaleidoscope as you turn through the maps as the borders and shapes of geographical structures change.

RT: The maps in people’s minds are more permanent than the territories represented by the maps. Now neuro-science is mapping regions of the brain-

DM: Yes, and from Ellul’s perspective, that translates into control. Control is what programs like MK Ultra were about and that raises critical ethical issues.

I worked at Stanford with Harvey Weinstein a psychiatrist who headed student psychiatric services for the university. Harvey became a psychiatrist because his father was a victim of MKULTRA experimentation. His father deteriorated into depression and worse as a consequence of Ewen Cameron’s crazy science, but the family was told his father was going through this because he was not sufficiently cooperative with his treatment. That pushed Harvey into psychiatry. In the late seventies, after the revelations of the Church and Pike Committee hearings, he became aware of the real causes.

Why are those devastating techniques lumped in with intelligence at all? That goes to the more basic question of why are intelligence and covert operations lumped together? Intelligence is about information. The rule of thumb for covert operations is that there is 75% disinformation. The ethical issues are difficult to reconcile. One is based on truth and other on its opposite.

RT: Friends in one of the agencies complain of the hubris that blinds people inside to a sense of accountability toward the people i.e. citizens like us, who pay their salaries. Disinformation coming out of the agencies directed toward enemies can not be distinguished from disinformation directed toward the population. In addition, propaganda is impossible to protect from blowback because of network of the information systems we all inhabit. How do we seek the larger truth and articulate it in order to inform responsible policy discussions. Is it even possible?

DM: I like to go back before the Neocons with their Machiavellian intellectual base and quote Walter Lippman who made the same point. Matters of foreign affairs and

international policy are too far beyond the ability of the populace to understand, he said, so they have to be conducted in secret and there must be no transparency.

RT: Tell me more about your background.

DM: I was not a professional intelligence officer. I had ten years in the US Marine Corps, resigned my commission in 1959, and went back to grad school. I was an NDEA fellow at the U of Oregon and received advanced degrees in history. I taught for a few years and because of my military background and because I specialized in military history with a focus on Latin America I was contacted by SRI which had a lot of DOD contracts. Counter insurgency was the new thing. In the Corps, I went to Special Forces School. We always prepare for the last war and the whole focus was to repeat the OSS experience in the event of war with the Soviet Union. Special Forces was created because the military never wanted to see anything like OSS again. The plan was, teams would go into eastern Europe to create insurgencies, but in a few years it became obvious that the insurgencies in the colonies of post-war allies had to be “countered” – so counter insurgency was developed. DOD was letting contracts like crazy. SRI hired me to go to Central America and do classified work. They had gotten a big contract from ARPA (later DARPA) for a counter insurgency center in Thailand and I worked on that.

There was a battle going on in Thailand between the Ambassador Graham Martin and military advisors headed by Richard Stillwell. They were battling for control of our major aid programs which had to be justified in terms of security. Martin and Stillwell hated each other so the White House of course chose someone who hated both of them and was hated by them, Peer De Silva, who wrote a memoir (*Sub Rosa: The CIA and the Uses of Intelligence*. New York: New York Times Books, 1978). He was security officer on the Manhattan Project and transferred into the new CIA.

He was restricted in terms of how many people he could take to Thailand so he had to staff from what was there. My colleague, John Huxley, had been station chief in Pakistan, and told him to get me and I worked for him for four years in the US Embassy. That where I made my contacts with the agency and the branch office of the station and when I returned to the USA I did contract work for them. Then, as a consultant, I worked with John Nesbitt the technologist during the last years of Stan Turner’s control of the agency, when they were trying to reconstruct the old Board of National Estimates type of operation.

They wanted outside people with background and reputation to head the Analytic Group at the National Intelligence Council to be responsible for writing national intelligence estimates. I went to work for Harold Ford. I was responsible for western hemisphere estimates along with another and the focus came to be on the Contra war.

I was diligent. No matter who I talked to, who I pumped, I was unable to come up with anything in support of the main rationale for the Contra operation. I had serious problems with the characterization of the Sandinista government.

This tells you how the system actually works. This is relevant to what's happening now. I was asked to do an estimate on the Sandinista government and I did an assessment and a projection which all came true but did not fit the policy makers' desires. That's why it resonates with the WMD controversy. Ford backed me up but William Casey (Director of the CIA) said no, this can not go out as a special estimate. It was published as an intelligence research memorandum and went into the file and that was that.

After two years with the analytic group, I could not continue. I did not want anything else in the agency. Instead I traveled at my own expense in Central America and the more I learned the more clear it became that the operation was whacko. If I was going to speak out I had better do it because I knew of well developed US plans for an invasion of Nicaragua. I was well aware of what we had done elsewhere and if I was going to speak out it should be before the fact instead of after.

At the 1985 elections in Nicaragua, I was an observer; it was going to be verified as a fair and open election but right before the election – this is how disinformation is fed to the press – news was broken that Nicaragua was going to receive a big shipment of MIG aircraft.

RT: Was the relationship between the CIA and the media as subtle then as it is now?

DM: It was very subtle over that entire long period. The operational role of opinion control came directly out of the Second World War. It applies to any war time situation; war requires you to enlist the media to push in the best sense of the word war propaganda. This is what you want out, and you're part of the war effort, you're supporting your country, and in the Cold War, the same rationale was invoked. You have to understand that many people were involved who had been intellectually attracted to an alternative of what was seen as destructive and failed capitalism and were working with the Communist Party and were then disillusioned by events in eastern Europe. They were brought in and did this in the momentum of World War 2. They believed they were supporting our country and you had to conceal their activity—now this is very powerful, this idea of being on the inside of that effort, it is so attractive, so powerful. A big threat to any who wanted to speak up was that you would lose access, and you want so much to be on the inside. This keeps many people in the intelligence system, besides the usual reasons like salary, pension, and the like. They're afraid that if they speak up, they will lose their access.

RT: Shunning is a primitive and powerful reinforcement.

DM: You'll see this in the hearings coming up on whistle blowers. I know many of these people and what fractures a lot of them and makes them so upset is that when they raise concerns, not so much about policy but about the way it is carried out, they lose their security clearance. You have to understand how critical this is. It means everything to a person. Everything.

RT: The consequences are so serious.

DM: Oh, they are. I know prominent whistle blowers who still deal with this after many years. “These were my colleagues,” they say. “These were my friends. But suddenly I am not a colleague or a friend.” It’s like the clubbiness of the Foreign Service; when you’re no longer welcome at certain parties or in certain houses, it’s a serious blow.

Now, I had gotten some good press and I hired a lawyer, Melvin Wolfe, who was chief counsel of the ACLU and had worked with Victor Marchetti on publishing his CIA memoirs. I did not want to be prosecuted and I did not wish to go to jail. Mel said he would be able to defend me. I reviewed the form I had signed with the agency. The story was going to go out and I gave Wolfe a magazine article I wanted to publish in which I said everything I felt I had to say as well as some things I was certain they would block. I said, Mel, take this to the publications review board at the agency –and it worked out exactly as I anticipated. They passed through what I believed was necessary for me to say, who I was, the critical evidence, and blocked out the other stuff which I was certain they would not let me say. Now I had a guideline for the rest of the eighties, for speaking and helping to organize the Association of National Security Alumni. I used that action as my guideline. Occasionally Wolfe would check – there was a lot of surveillance on me as well—and the word he got was, that son of a bitch keeps going right up to the line but he never goes over.

I was not heroic or seeking martyrdom and it seemed to work. I testified at the World Court which was very important to me – that was an important event and had an impact on foreign policy. We evolved a growing community even then of former intelligence officers, John Stockwell and others who put the association together, and I became the Washington representative. We published our magazine *Unclassified* bimonthly for 5-6 years. It was a good magazine and attacked a lot of these issues and had a reasonable circulation. Lots of media people used it.

RT: Can you evaluate the impact of what you did?

DM: In terms of impact, timing is important. We broadened the conversation on the use of intelligence. The slogan I devised was: we are not opposed to intelligence but we are opposed to covert paramilitary operations which by definition are violations of international law. The timing was important because of the Iran-Contra hearings—but in fact, in terms of impact, it was discouraging to see how Congress dealt with it. It was the most significant constitutional scandal we had had and they pushed it under the rug. The facts cried out for impeachment. The emotional quality of words is important when you get involved at this level and “impeachment” is one of those words. The use of those words climaxed or I should say anti-climaxed with eleventh hour pardons from George Bush the First. It left a bad feeling, to say the least.

What was the use? What did it matter, everything we did?

RT: It creates cynicism.

DM: Oh, did it ever.

It's an old story. In the Book of Samuel, the people said they wanted a King. Samuel said, I'll tell you what will happen if you have a King: he'll take your young men and send them to war, take your money to build himself houses, take your women for his own projects, and he'll put incredible taxes on you.

And the people of Israel said, We want a King! and that was that.

How much has changed?

RT: The conference on Intelligence and Ethics is an attempt to build a context for examining these issues and what it does to intelligence professionals over a lifetime to do, to know, to hear about what you describe. Do you think the project is viable?

DM: In the most brutal organizations – in the Gestapo, for example - a miniscule proportion of the people in the organization participate in the worst barbarities. Most go home, play with their kids, are nice to their neighbors, and can deal with it. The further you are away from actually “doing it,” the less problems you have. Firing a Tomahawk missile is not hand-to-hand combat.

But we can talk about this in terms of war crimes. Attacks on civilian population centers are prohibited but in WWI we were ready to do it and then, in WW2, none of the aerial attacks in violation of those norms like incendiary bombings in Japan were ever brought up. Is that the American way of war or simply the industrial way of war? I don't know.

My background gave me some credibility when I spoke out and I hope it had some impact on members of Congress. Did that effect policy? I can't say. My greatest disappointment was in 1988 when I was asked by the Dukakis campaign and the Democratic National Committee to make presentations on how to use this issue and I was so disappointed by their response. I had been speaking all around the country and said, if you take on this issue in 1988 and say, if I'm elected, the Contra program is over, there are groups all over the country that will respond, but my God, the waffling! Oh well, they said, well, yes, but you know, and all that. The inability of people to grasp these particular nettles is one reason their campaigns deflate. Talk about impact, you can generate ten thousand letters to the editor but it does not have political impact. In those dreadful hearings, the expose went on and on—but for what?

RT: Well? Was it worth it?

DM: You find yourself in this situation maybe once in a lifetime. You only come to the plate once and had better take your swings. I took my swings. That was my one ethical plus in a lifetime of unethical behavior.

RT: You distinguish covert operations from gathering intelligence. Doesn't that go back to how the law creating the CIA was interpreted?

DM: The specific law establishing the CIA, the National Security Act of 1947, directed the CIA to carry out “other activities of an intelligence nature as the National Security Council may from time to time direct.” What the hell did that mean? The first General Counsel of the CIA, asked if it meant the behind-the-lines kinds of operations the OSS had carried out, said, “Absolutely not.” But Frank Wisner and others grabbed onto the language; Wisner with his “mighty Wurlitzer” cranking out propaganda, went adventuring. Yet you know – most of those early escapades were total disasters.

RT: So much was ill-conceived—

DM: Yes, but oh, the glamour of doing it—

RT: The Oliver North syndrome.

DM: The attraction of playing cowboys and Indians is so great. So you have to question whether we can even discuss ethics and intelligence in the same breath. The New York Times wrote an article about our conference and quoted Dewey Claridge. “Ethics? Are you crazy? You go into this line of business, you’re expected to do this.”

I recall when the General Counsel for the CIA let down her guard in an interview with AP and said, yes, we lie cheat steal and occasionally kill but overall, the people in the CIA are as fine a bunch as you’ll ever find anywhere!

RT: I am told that EO 12333 (Executive Order 12333 prohibits assassinations and other specific activities) is being rewritten. “Stand by,” were the final words of General Hayden as to whether current NSA activities were covered. But my sense is that it was always being rewritten.

DM: Of course it was. I think of the law professor at the University of Virginia who was heading a panel of the law association on ethics and intelligence in the early nineties and said, on the matter of assassination, well, that term is not really correctly used, it should not be directed at every intent to kill someone.

RT: What drove all this, David? What compelled intelligent people to get so wild?

DM: Like so much in the intelligence system, it looked sexy to some people and above all, THE MONEY WAS THERE. That drives all of this. People will do what they can fund. The lines between organizations and proprietaries and contractors and agencies are very blurred and the money is more like a transmission belt than a revolving door. When I did contract work, I did some projects I was not all that proud of, some of the work was questionable—like various interrogation technologies that have been worked on for thirty years, measuring changes in the size of the pupil of the eye to see if someone’s lying—I tend to be dismissive of those efforts but when you’re looking for “capabilities and intentions,” there is a whole lot of road to look at and not a lot of rubber. The faintest skid marks are supposed to tell you significant things but interpreting the marks is not

easy. Intelligence is divided into two parts: one is Tactical Intelligence and Related Activity (TIARA). TIARA is usually pretty good and you have the ability to know through surveillance or interceptions where various enemy units are, that's what I used and looked at in the Marine Corps. That's hard enough in the well-known fog of war. But when you take it to this other level where you're fumbling with intentions, industrial capabilities, etc. – it's useful for discussion but is it really useful for immediate action and decision making? It's questionable. The intelligence is several steps removed from the real. So how useful is it? You have to understand that once the analytic side, not the operational side, is wedded to using these techniques, you're like a tenured professor working in your area of specialty, you get enormous satisfaction from doing so, and you get funded. But how useful is it?

The only time I ever heard ethical issues raised in relationship to our work came when someone stood back and looked at what they were doing and said: what am I doing? what am I really doing?

RT: Is there realistic accountability to the citizens of the country and the Constitution? Is meaningful transparency possible?

DM: I know someone who sued the CIA because he said they did not meet the terms of their contract with him. He operated a proprietary or front organization for them and shipped various things around the world. When he told them he wanted to stop, they said he couldn't. He sued the agency under a law that applied to law enforcement and the agency actually informed the court that the individual he named in his suit was a CIA officer and therefore the case should be dismissed since they were not law enforcement.

You'll hear it said that intelligence professionals can not operate outside the law. But Lawrence Welch said, there IS a class of people who can not be held accountable under the law.

The issue of transparency raises another issue: when is it ethical to speak out? They use "national security" to cover everything now. The state secrecy issue is completely out of hand. If you accept that the citizen has a right to know information that directly impacts him, does the person who has that knowledge have the requirement to inform him? The same applies to classification and compartmentalization.

Remember how all intelligence systems operate. The operations officer in the CIA station has one primary responsibility: to recruit agents. Agents, by definition, are citizens of the government of the country in which the station chief operates. An agent is someone who provides information or services FOR A CONSIDERATION – this is important, we don't let people "volunteer" to work for us – and therefore is a traitor to his own country. We are in the business of soliciting people to betray their loyalties. That's the nature of the business.

So how can we discuss these critical ethical issues in that context?. Those early fiascoes came to a head with the Korean effort. We had an elaborate network out of Seoul

reporting exact and precise information about North Korea but when it was reviewed, we learned that 90% of the agents running out of Seoul were doubled by the North Koreans. An enormous fiasco. Beetle Smith, CIA director at the time, said, we're not going to write a report on this because if it ever gets out, it would be the end of the CIA.

The question is: given that the mission of the CIA station is to recruit agents, why would a country knowingly allow a CIA station to be established? As we said, the record of the agency in the first years was a fiasco—forget about the Italian election, that was just a good Bronx-style election that we bought.

RT: After the Italian election and the demise of Arbenz in Guatemala, they said, this is easy. It went to their heads.

DM: The penetration in hard targets, the Soviet Union, eastern Europe, and after 1949, China – that did not happen. In the fifties and sixties, at the height of the post-colonial period, the CIA turned its attention to Latin America and that's where they had success because those targets are so soft, the societies are so corrupt, and the guys in the security agencies lined up – believe me – and said, sign me up! It's a good payday. That's where so many careers were made. I saw many of these operations going on in Africa, Latin America, and in Bangkok where I worked – this in itself is an “ethical issue.” You are persuading people to do this.

RT: In and of itself, you are saying, the nature of the work breaks ethical norms as we understand them in other contexts. It's about control by nearly any means.

DM: Yes. My late colleague, Diane Kuntz, served in the station in Lima Peru. A junior officer at the Chinese embassy requested a particular prostitute. So they got the cameras in there and filmed, that was always fun, but what ticked Diane off is that all the other officers at the station watched the films on a weekly basis but they wouldn't let her watch.

After they had enough stuff on the guy, they arranged for an agency officer to storm in and see this guy, shrieking that this woman is his daughter and bad things will happen and they have these films and then they make the pitch. This guy did what any sensible person would do. He went to his superiors and told them what happened, this is what they asked, and he was on the next plane back to Beijing and went on with his career.

The point is, they're always looking for things like that to trap people, and you rationalize it, you justify it, you say, this is my job and we're obtaining information that we need, and if your skin isn't thick enough to do it—then get a different job.