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STUDIES IN INTELLIGENCE



Journal of the America Intelligence Professional

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Book Reviews

Mongoose, R.I.P. By William F. Buckley, Jr. Random House, New York; 1987; 322 pp.*

In *Mongoose, R.I.P.*, the latest of the Blackford Oakes spy novels, we are treated to the extraordinarily ingenious imagination and the facile (though in this case, the considerably restrained) prose of William F. Buckley, Jr., as he re-creates, and considerably enlarges upon, the days between the Cuban missile crisis and the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

This is one of the most exciting, rapidly paced and compelling of Mr. Buckley's novels, and the plot is such an admixture of fact and fiction that there is both an immediacy and a seriousness far more evident than in the earlier Oakes stories, which were more purely fiction.

What we have here is that exceptionally vivid imagination of the author brought to bear on historical facts, and the result is a thoroughly fascinating exploration into what might have been, or perhaps what actually was—we are never quite sure. This book is so realistic, much of it seems like revisionist history. In fact, the author feels it necessary to advise readers at the end that it is a "work of fiction."

Mr. Buckley has imagined what might have happened if the Soviets had in fact not taken all their missiles out of Cuba when they promised to do so, but instead cheated, as they have so often done with their other agreements, by leaving one missile behind, hidden even from the Cubans. The essence of the intricate plot is what effect this rogue missile has on the Central Intelligence Agency's various plans to eliminate Fidel Castro.

These plans were assigned the code name *Mongoose*, and it must be reported that our side, and in fact even the ubiquitous Blackford Oakes, does not come out of this story with very much credit. Oakes, normally urbane and quite funny, and always resourceful and skilled, is distracted much of this book by the loss of his longtime companion, and virtual fiancée, Sally Partridge, to a handsome, but not fully realized Mexican attorney named Morales, who is also involved in helping the Agency try to dispose of Castro. To be fair, Morales is not a fully realized character because he is not with us very long.

But there is a parade of Cuban resistance fighters, as well as several Castro intimates, and Castro himself, all of whom emerge from these pages as very human, flesh-and-blood characters with a few more than normal foibles.

The action races back and forth from Washington to Mexico to Cuba and Miami, and, since the author is so much at home in all these places, so is the reader.

Mr. Buckley conveys, with great deftness and economy of prose, atmosphere, attitudes and, above all, great tension and suspense. And the intermingling of fact, fiction and slightly twisted and expanded history is so extraordinarily well handled that an almost eerie sense of realism is imparted to the

* Mr. Weinberger's review is reprinted, with his permission, from the *Wall Street Journal*, 13 January 1988.

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whole work. Indeed at one point William F. Buckley, Jr. himself appears briefly, in the manner of Alfred Hitchcock's cameo appearances in his own films.

A short soliloquy, in which JFK reasons out his Cuban problems after the Bay of Pigs, is almost as authentic as a tape recording. While one is in no position to pass similar judgment on Castro's conversation as recorded here, it sounds the way one imagines Castro would talk when he is offstage.

Indeed that is the feature that makes the novel such a fine and exciting read. It is completely believable, and as fast-paced as a rapidly developing news story, with all the background usually missing from news stories filled in for us.

Castro, surprisingly enough, comes through rather better than one would have expected, although his more deplorable characteristics are not hidden and his judgment at the climactic moment is, shall we say, seriously flawed. But Castro survives all of Operation Mongoose's many facets, sometimes by what appears to be blind luck, sometimes by the operation of what we know is an intelligence service of some skill. And while Mr. Buckley fortunately is no John Le Carré, who always seems to delight in the blunders and weaknesses of our side, nevertheless *Mongoose, R.I.P* doesn't show our covert activities in the best light. But Mr. Buckley is dealing with history and, properly, he is willing only to substitute his imagination to add to history, and not to change it significantly.

Finally, a most welcome feature of this story, as has been the case with all of the Oakes series, is that the critically important, and frequently highly dangerous work that is done by our CIA and other intelligence people is treated with respect, quiet admiration, and with a full appreciation of its importance to our security. This is a first-class novel that offers the reader a generous illustration of its author's enormous skill in entertaining, instructing and ultimately fascinating us with his brilliance, which is the rare and welcome hallmark of Bill Buckley.

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