

Enrolling the anti-establishment: working class agents in the early spy fiction of Len Deighton and John Le Carre

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Many of the most prominent spies of the 1950s (whether the real-life defectors Burgess and MacLean or Ian Fleming's James Bond) came from within the British 'Establishment': living and working in heritage London and British embassies abroad, their lives were characterised by international travel, elite consumerism and social networks that made them part of the ruling elite. In contrast, the 1960s introduced a different reality, the new suburban spies – living in a bungalow in Ruislip like the Krogers (of the Portland Spy Ring) or in Bickley like George Blake, their convictions in 1961 showed how they had undertaken much of their spying activities in plain sight, including passing secrets on suburban railway stations.

This chapter will trace how these concerns manifested in a new wave of spy fiction, specifically in the works of Le Carré and Len Deighton. These first novels – such as Le Carré's *Call for the Dead* (1961) and Deighton's *The Ipcress File* (1962) – created the iconic outsider characters of George Smiley and Harry Palmer, who found traitors not in exotic locations but embedded unnoticed in suburban locations, and who pursued the foreign enemy in districts such as Wood Green or Walton on Thames. Equally, in contrast to the glamorous lifestyle portrayed in Bond's world, this new suburban spy fiction foregrounds the white collar reality of the professional spy trade, with irksome petty bureaucracy and organizational infighting prominent in such narratives, and Smiley and Palmer as much irritants to their own organizations as they are successful spies. Consequently, this paper will examine the ways in which these novels relocated spy fiction both physically (in disrupted suburbia) and in the genre (through the use of social realism), and in doing so will link the spy novel of this era to broader literary trends such as John Osborne and the angry young men.

The establishment and then the anti-establishment

The shock of flight of Burgess and Mclean in 1951 led to a review of the recruitment and retention of staff within the security services. Appointments that relied upon 'knowing someone's people' had introduced a genetic weakness through a form of social class inbreeding and could no longer be relied upon. The security services undertook a review of all their staff (Lownie, 2015). This resulted not only the dismissal of Philby but others close to him working in the same section of MI6. The novelist Barbara Comyns, wife of one of those dismissed, Richard Comyns Carr,

commented that ‘They said that either he must have known and therefore was a traitor or that he hadn’t spotted it and therefore must have been a fool’ Gardam, 2013).

However developing new methods of recruitment to the service were problematic. MI5 and MI6 were not in the public domain and open recruitment was not possible. New recruits, not sourced through their family connections, had to be found where potential employees could be observed and vetted by trusted old friends of the service. The stream of grammar schools pupils entering Oxbridge from the country’s grammar schools, after the 1944 Education Act, provided one such route. These were identified as highly motivated and intelligent individuals who had already been signed up to the establishment’s greatest institutions. In choosing this path for their education, these (mostly) young men recognised its power to create opportunities for them early in their lives and to develop social networks based on common experience. These networks would be substitutes for those wider family and class groupings that made up the establishment. A further opportunity to identify potential grammar school recruits was provided through National Service. Those who were already destined for Oxbridge were identified and offered the opportunity to learn Russian at the Joint Services School for Linguists^{1 2}.

However if these grammar school boys were to be accepted, a public case had to be made for this shift both inside and outside of the main state institutions of the establishment. The proposed changes in the method of recruitment to the security services may have started after the 1951 clear out, but it was not until the mid-1950s that the public debate was commenced. This was apparent on a number of fronts and was conducted by members of the establishment who had been to public school and Oxbridge, many of whom had also been in the security services (Elliott and Shukman, 2003).

¹ Those grammar school boys offered this opportunity included Michael Frayn, Alan Bennett, Dennis Potter, John Harvey Jones, Sir Peter Hall and D. M. Thomas

² The Joint Services School for Linguists was set up in 1948 to specifically identify conscripts for Russian language training. It closed at the end of National Service in 1960.

Henry Fairlie made the case for change in the *Spectator* (1955) reflecting the views of those who needed to widen the pool of the security services in the face of further suspected moles. Fairlie made a direct link to the pressure placed by the social nexus of the establishment on those immediately surrounding Burgess and Maclean to protect them on their disappearance to Russia in 1951. Fairlie pointed out that the establishment worked through the press and other personal relationships and, despite the failure of those with an interest in identifying Burgess and Maclean as spies, the establishment was by 1955 even stronger than before. The implication was that this could happen again if recruitment methods did not change.

Noel Annan, who was recruited to the security services over lunch with his father and a friend, made the case for increasing the number of grammar school boys being educated at Oxbridge to widen the establishment pool. In his role at Kings College Cambridge, Annan accepted a high percentage of grammar school boys into the college (Annan 1995; Johnson, 2000). Anthony Sampson used the argument of national efficiency to make the case for widening the access to leadership in society through the *Anatomy of Britain* (1962). He demonstrated that the establishment was not a small closed group but a large interlocking social network whose influence stretched into many spheres. Michael Shanks made the economic and political case in *The Rise of Meritocracy* (1965) and C. P. Snow extended the arguments about the need to widen the establishment's intake into decision making in *The New Men* (1954) and to science and technology in his *Two Cultures* lectures (Snow 1959).

Whilst these new grammar school recruits could gain entry to the elite and establishment through recommendations from their universities and the expanding new media institutions of the BBC, ITV, film and advertising, those that made it frequently found that old attitudes persisted and the members of the establishment remained in charge.

Although national service offered methods of identifying potential security service recruits from non-establishment backgrounds, for many conscripts it provided the means of learning 'how to duck and dive, break rules and subvert authority...and (this) chipped away at the law-abiding respectful traditions of the Britain before

peacetime conscription' (Davenport Hines, 2014). However, the issue of informing and influencing the culture of young men was to be even more problematic after national service was abolished in 1960. This had been announced as part of the 1957 Defence Review and this three year period gave some time to allow for consideration of how to instil a patriotic culture into young men. The rise of the James Bond franchise – through books and then film, was helpful in establishing a narrative where the UK was instrumental in defeating foreign enemies.

Whist James Bond succeeded by breaking the rules - something that appealed to the National Service generation - he was also an agent deployed outside the UK where the enemy could be clearly identified. This was not so useful in the heightened tensions of the cold war and increasing evidence of spies embedded in English suburban society such as Klaus Fuchs (1950), the Krogers (1961) and George Blake (1961) who lived in Bickley in suburban Kent. The solidity of the suburbs was also a host for the forces that could most undermine their undisturbed way of life. In 1961, Peter and Helen Kroger who lived in a suburban bungalow in Ruislip were part of the Portland spy ring and convicted of spying for the Russians. The security services had to engage the Kroger's neighbours to convict them as collecting evidence on their movements had been difficult because:

'the problem is – how can our people observe without being observed? In Piccadilly at rush-hour couldn't be easier – but here, in these quiet little streets, where everybody knows everybody else, it's really very difficult. The observer has to be concealed. There's no other way.' (Whitemore, *Pack of Lies*, 1983, p35).

George Blake was exposed by the same soviet defector as the Krogers (1959-61). When he first came to Britain in 1943, Blake lived with his Dutch mother in Northwood, a suburb close to Ruislip. In 1948 he was posted to the British Embassy in Seoul and in 1950 he was captured and held in North Korea for three years, during which time he became a spy for the USSR. Following his return to the UK Blake was sent to Berlin as an MI6 case officer with the role of recruiting Soviet spies, although

he was providing information to the Russians about the allies' tunnel. Blake's spying activities continued on his return to London in 1959,

'in the morning, Blake's routine was to read the papers in bed, shave and sit down to breakfast at 8.30. He would leave the house half an hour later, allowing plenty of time to catch the 9.17 from Bickley Station to Victoria. At the age of thirty-seven, to any casual onlooker, Blake would have appeared the archetypal commuting civil servant...for the return journey, the 6.24 would get home just after 7pm. For his KGB work, he might occasionally take the earlier train, the 6.18, which took him into Bromley South Station. There, or in a nearby street, he might have a brief encounter...handing over some film...under cover of a folded newspaper. He would then pick up the next train to Bickley, perhaps arriving home just after 7.30' (Hermiston, 2013, p 206).

These new spies were no longer the Oxbridge elite, secured within the networks of the centre, at home in 'Heritage London', but living life in the unassuming periphery. How could the public be encouraged to be more vigilant about their neighbours without undermining post-war social cohesion and stability? 'Careless talk costs lives' was understood in wartime and but surely the habit was no longer needed in a united and victorious Britain? Yet whilst the allies were relying on SIGINT, that is technological signals intelligence by building a tunnel under Berlin to eavesdrop on the Soviet Army's landline in 1956, their enemies had invested in HUMINT, or human intelligence, embedding their spies in quintessential England. How could neighbourliness be transformed into watchfulness without an overt public information campaign? There had to be new and softer ways of alerting and engaging suburban dwellers without disrupting their way of life.

Alerting Britain's population of the potential dangers to the state from their neighbours was a difficult counter intelligence exercise for the security services. The CIA funded support for magazines and more popular fiction for these purposes had been established in the US and extended to the UK (Stonor Saunders, 2000). Following the cases of Blake and Vassall, the Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan,

commissioned a review of security procedures in the public services (Radcliffe, 1962), that made a range of recommendations. Following this a working party was established to consider ways of alerting the public to potential cold war neighbours and this included reference to the role of Fleming together with tv series including 'Danger Man' that started in 1960 (O'Sullivan 2015).

The development and popularity of working class fiction after Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1957) suggested that a new type of fiction would be required to engage mass, largely male, readership in the UK. With the exception of Arthur Seaton in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Sillitoe, 1958), the heroes of this new fiction wanted social mobility and found ways of achieving this through local government (Braine, 1957), sport (Storey, 1960) or industry (Barstow, 1960). These working class heroes were not particularly patriotic but were focussed on hard work and social advancement. In order to achieve these ends they were not afraid to break social conventions. Their experiences were both specific to these characters but also general enough to be recognised through the lived experience of their readers. This new post-war fiction influenced by the photo journalism and television news broadcasting enhanced the tendency towards realism and encouraged a self-reflective view of readers on their own culture (Ferrebe and Hargreaves, 2012) rather than having critical opinions of what constituted culture thrust upon them.

This subaltern literature also created a new readership and could provide an opportunity to inform the wider public about the cold war. Whilst Bond provided gung ho fantasy, although affirming the role of the UK as victor, could novels written with working class, anti-establishment heroes provide a low key but nevertheless recognisable patriotism based on fighting the enemy at home rather than abroad? As the minutes of the meetings to follow up the recommendations of the 1962 Radcliffe Report demonstrate, the security services were already using a popular author, who also happened to be a serving officer, to write their training manual. When Cameron-Watt (1990) reviewed the changes in the direction of spy fiction in 1990, he considered its historic and theoretical bases. At the end of this review he

reflected on the close connection between the security services and authors of spy fiction, when all texts would be reviewed before publication. He goes on:

‘It follows, therefore, that the changes in literary fashion observable in spy fiction over the years...must be at the dictation of the intelligence authorities themselves.’ (p 223).

If this was the case then who would be the authors most likely to reflect this new anti-establishment approach that would both reflect the prevailing ideology within the service and fit with new popular reader trends? The work of Deighton and Le Carre might be considered as candidates for this role. Both authors had undertaken their national service and had been involved in intelligence-related work to a greater or lesser degree³. Both had no experience of writing before and both had reputations as having independent dispositions⁴. Both appeared to be committed to writing one book a year and neither appears to have been held back by any security clearance processes. Yet there has been little or no consideration of the emergence of these two authors at the same time and their role in alerting the public to the spies in the office and the neighbourhood. By relocating the foreign spies in suburbia and the traitors at the heart of the security organizations, both authors were representing what was already known or was emerging through defectors to Eastern Europe.

³ Le Carre was recruited in Switzerland when he was in his teens and spied on students whilst an undergraduate. He knew Maxwell Knight and later worked for him (Sisman, 2015). Deighton was a neighbour of Anna Wolkoff when he was a boy, his mother cooked meals for her and she visited their home. Wolkoff was later investigated by Maxwell Knight for handing over secrets to the enemy during 1940 and convicted. Willetts quotes Deighton ‘I was to meet many people who were spies of one sort or another, but the enigmatic Anna (Wolkoff) was at the root of my interest in espionage’ 2015 p461 note 20, 2015). Later Deighton served in photo reconnaissance as part of his national service in the RAF (Kerridge 2013).

⁴ Deighton was published by Robin Denniston, (who also published Sampson’s ‘Anatomy of Britain (1962), ‘He was the editor at Hodder & Stoughton who bought *The IPCRESS File* after it had been turned down by Jonathan Cape and Heinemann. Denniston was a talented publisher ... whose family was closely associated with the security services. His father, Alistair Denniston, set up and ran the Government Code and Cypher School, the ancestor of today’s GCHQ, and his sister at one time worked for Graham Greene, Kim Philby and Tim Milne in an MI6 London outstation’ (Edward Milward-Oliver, 2013)<http://www.jeremy-duns.com/blog/2014/5/30/the-deighton-file-an-interview-with-edward-milward-oliver>. .Denniston took over Le Carre from 1971.

Deighton's was the more obvious NCO approach. From a working class background, his early training and career in design for journalism and book jackets brought him into contact with a wide cross-section of society (Kerridge, 2009). His last work in advertising was for a new Agency, Robert Sharp and Partners, that was set up by former staff at the FCO and security services and where he lasted for six months in 1959. This was in contrast with John le Carre's parents who were middle class, although outsiders as non-conformists, whilst his father was in constant debt. His education at a public school and Oxford, followed by a short period teaching at Eton meant that his world was one of the upper classes, whilst he remained an observant outsider.

Like Deighton, Le Carre states that he 'fell' into writing with no previous experience. Deighton published six books and Le Carre published five within ten years. However, unlike Deighton, Le Carre was not as immediately successful. His first two novels were more similar to Agatha Christie's Tommy and Tuppence novels - written from the point of view of the state in wanting to stop espionage activity, rather than empathising with the spy. In *Call for the Dead* (1961) the example of the enemy hiding in plain sight within local high streets was chillingly exemplified. Smiley's role as an outsider who solves the problem was based on class nuance rather than the anti-establishment or new men – in fact Smiley was definitely one of the old men. In *A Murder of Quality* (1962), Le Carre's second novel, the victim is an outsider defined by class but the plot does not make her a sympathetic character. This is a 'who dunnit' narrative in the classic mode.

Although published after the first of Le Carre's books, the appearance of the work of Deighton in *The Ipcress File* (September 1962) immediately hit this anti-establishment spot. Here the first person narrative, by an unnamed former soldier and now temporary intelligence officer, was recognisable to all those who had been in the war or national service and who now worked in junior roles in newly widened occupations. Senior roles were always held by the older establishment elite, those who had been to public schools:

'He'd been to one of those very good schools where you meet kids with influential uncles. I imagine that's how he got into the Horse Guards and now into WOOC(P) too...He had the advantage of both a good brain and a family rich enough to save him using it.' (TIF, 8).

The Ipcress File opens at the heart of heritage London in Trafalgar Square. Its central concern is the disappearance of key scientists against the backdrop of in-fighting between sections of the security services. Harry Palmer is introduced as a temporary agent, taken on after three years in Military Intelligence whose provisional status makes his role expendable. Palmer investigates these disappearances, leading to his own capture where he is subjected to mind control techniques which he assumes are being undertaken behind the Iron Curtain. On his escape, Palmer finds that he is not in East Germany but in a suburban house in Wood Green in London. His escape raises the wrath of the neighbour, a proud gardener who is angry when Palmer damages his runner beans when climbing over the fence between the houses in his escape. *The Ipcress File* reinforces its realism through the book's paraphernalia including files, footnotes and appendices to immediately engage the reader in its own world and language, making the unknowable available in a familiar office format from the outset.

In *The Ipcress File*, the unnamed protagonist is writing in the first person, providing the reader with his own thoughts on what he is being instructed to do, those managing him and how these actions relate to his own interests in life. These interior musings are similar to the kinds of conversations that would be held between NCOs and soldiers about their officers. Although it has been argued that Harry Palmer, as we later find his name to be, is unpatriotic and only focussed on doing his job, this seems unlikely. The narrative uses Palmer's expendability to achieve a victory for the UK but he is also willing to put himself in danger. Palmer is critical of those who are his seniors because they are more interested in the trappings of their office, including the opportunity to have expensive meals and cigars, rather than to serve the state that is funding this lifestyle. This is the criticism of the ultimate patriot. Palmer's light insubordination maintains a high moral tone and a critique of others

not of insubordination for its own sake. Palmer addresses this dilemma directly to the reader in saying 'what chance did I have between the communist on one side and the establishment on the other' (Ipcress p 92).

Whilst Deighton's success with a working class hero was immediate, evidenced by a sell out of the print run and an offer of film rights on the first day of publication, this was not the case for Le Carre, from whom Deighton distinguished himself (Moffett 1966). Le Carre also situates his first novel *Call for the Dead* (1961) in the English suburbs – this is definitely a tale in the 'neighbour as spy' school. The middle middle class suburbs are represented in *Call for the Dead*. The Fennans live in Merridale Lane 'where the inhabitants wage a relentless battle against the stigma of suburbia' [p 17] and after a long description of the suburban development of Merridale as a half-hearted, un-planned development, the Fennan's house is described as a 'low Tudor-style house with bedrooms built into the gables, and a half-timbered garage'. Yet immediately, Smiley takes the view that having met Fennan, he is 'Hampstead and au-pair foreign girls' not Merridale; his life is at odds with his residential location. Immediately Le Carré is encouraging readers who live in these kinds of suburbs to consider if they have any neighbours who are somehow different or do not fit in.

Smiley solves this case through his understanding of class nuance and suburban ways of life that would not be so easy to read by those with more privileged backgrounds. Much of the plot reveals turns on Fennan's commuting habits to his office. As Smiley ponders

'of all the loose ends, that's the loosest. I brood over it, you know and there just isn't any sense in it. I've been through his train timetable. He was a punctual man – often got to the FO before anyone else...He would have caught the eight fifty-four, nine eight or at worst the nine fourteen. The eight fifty-four got him in at nine thirty-eight – he liked to be in his office by a quarter to ten. He couldn't possibly want to be woken at eight-thirty' (p73).

The activities of the spy -the official's wife - are regular using suburban rendezvous as the means of hiding the espionage like George Blake on his suburban commutes. Whilst Smiley is introduced in this novel for the first time, he is about to be pensioned off as not fitting in with the new breed of management. It is also clear that he is an outsider and something of a loner. Although he is not insubordinate he appears to be a reluctant and detached member of the establishment. Smiley recognizes the value of the working class police officer, Mendel, who works with him, showing respect for his work and also his home life in suburban south London.

Le Carre's second book, *A Murder of Quality* (1962) has only a slight spy interest and serves as a narrative device to draw Smiley into the investigation of a murder through a former war time security services colleague. In this case, the outsider is the woman who is murdered, primarily for not fitting-in and using this to distance herself from the rest of the small public school society. Her difference is class-based and like Le Carre's own mother, whom he seldom saw, she is non-conformist and from the north midlands. However she is lower middle class rather than working class and although her situation might arouse some sympathy in the reader, her character does not.

Le Carre's third attempt at fiction *The Spy who came in from the cold* was published in September 1963 and it seems that he has learned how to establish an outsider hero from Deighton. This time, like Deighton, the novel is written from the perspective of the spy and is the only Le Carre novel to include a working class hero. Although not told in the first person, the story narrative is from his point of view. Like Palmer, Leamas is an operational agent from the north of England and does not have a public school background. He has had the opportunity to move into management and a desk role ten years before the novel opens but has chosen to stay in the field. The narrative starts with the death of the last of his East German network of contacts, trying to cross the border to the west. Following this, Leamas has assumed that he would be shuffled into a desk job until retirement but as we later learn, his outsider social status and organizational expendability is used to create a new legend based on his class. Using the characteristics that would be

expected of a northerner with some Irish connections, he starts to drink, and eventually is gaoled for assaulting a shop owner in what appears characteristic to his class but uncharacteristic to the reader's experience of his behaviour in the narrative hitherto.

In his physical description, Leamas could almost be Deighton:

'he had an attractive face, muscular, and a stubborn line to his thin mouth. His eyes were small and brown. It was hard to place Leamas. If he were to walk into a London club the porter would certainly not mistake him for a member; in a Berlin night club they would usually give him the best table. He looked like a man who could make trouble, a man who looked after his money, a man who was not quite a gentleman.' (p 15).

Whilst both are working-class protagonists, Palmer and Leamas are characterised differently. Palmer is portrayed positively through his approach to criticising the establishment and managing its bureaucracy through his knowledge of it. Palmer takes care of himself and his staff, ensuring that they receive their proper expenses. However, like Leamas, Palmer is considered by the establishment to be expendable in pursuing the enemy. Whilst Leamas sacrifices his reputation in pursuit of the perpetrators of the break up of his informers' network, he is eventually used to protect a German source. Le Carre takes a more distant view of the moral position of the establishment, whilst recognising that it has used Leamas he also appears to be critical of Leamas for allowing himself to be placed in position where he can be used. The film version of the book portrayed more empathy for Leamas which has led to the book being read this way.

In the development of Alec Leamas as a working class spy, can we see if Le Carre learned anything from Deighton in the creation of an anti-establishment hero? Firstly both Palmer and Leamas were not upper class but moved away from being working class – they were the product of the new grammar school education, able to stay on at school until the sixth form and take their school certificates unlike most working class boys of their age. They could also take the NCO opportunities of national

service. This class displacement allowed them some freedom of movement but also associated them with many of their readers who found themselves in this position of being educated to expect more opportunities only to find the same establishment figures in control. Both Palmer and Leamas came vaguely from the north, Deighton locates Palmer in Burnley but nothing in either novel suggests that the authors or protagonists have ever been there.

Secondly, in comparison with their establishment bosses, both Palmer and Leamas had a less conventional home life. Both lived on their own although Leamas had been married. They live in rented accommodation close to the centre of London unlike their bosses who lived in the suburban commuter belt of Surrey and beyond. But, as the public were beginning to understand, the suburbs were dangerous despite their respectability. Thirdly, in both plots, it is the working class heroes, Palmer and Leamas who place themselves in danger and it is their establishment masters who betray them. This speaks to the anti-establishment narrative and reinforces the patriotism of the working class in serving their country despite the duplicity or treachery of the upper classes.

Whilst Le Carre continued in his later fiction to focus on social class nuances including in *The Looking Glass War* and the Tinker Tailor series, he never again chooses a member of the working class as a protagonist. This may be because the working class were primarily outside his experience or his sympathy with few examples in his fiction with the exception of Ricky Tarr. Following Harry Palmer, Bernard Samson in Deighton's triple trilogy moves into a classless mode. Class may be less of an issue for agents in the field, selected to fit into particular roles than those who combine field and desk work.

There are other similarities between the books. The attention to the geography of detail, locations in Wood Green, Putney and the Kingston Bypass all increased the reader reception of *Ipcress*. Although Le Carre used specific locations in *Call for the Dead*, these were in central London and the faux-named suburbs. Le Carre appears to be less certain of these inner city locations with passages about Bayswater, Hyde

Park and the Labour Exchange owing more to Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) than lived experience.

Unlike Palmer, Leamas does not criticise his establishment bosses openly, although the distance between them is shown in the use of expressions such as:

‘that same dreary voice, the donnish bray...courteous according to a formula miles removed from Leamas’ experience...the same milk-and-water smile, the same elaborate diffidence, the same apologetic adherence to a code of behaviour which he pretended to find ridiculous. The same banality’ (p 17).

So how far can we consider that the creation of Alec Leamas was influenced by Harry Palmer and what might Le Carre have learned from *The Ipcress File*? As Le Carre states, when *The Spy* was written he was still a serving officer in MI6 and the text had to be approved before publication, although in the introduction to the 50th anniversary edition of the book, Le Carre indicated that this was after some ‘lengthy soul-searching’ (2013). The book’s reception in 1963 was also taken as a ‘message from the other side’ (ibid) whilst the US expressed anger at the book’s content and publication. Le Carre comments that the book was successful not because it was authentic but it was credible. Le Carre’s adoption of a working class protagonist, who had problems with his upper class management and switching to the spy as the emotional heart of the plot made *The Spy* more similar to *Ipcress*, contributing to making it his most successful novel.

To return to Cameron-Watt’s scenario about the work of the Committee that he speculates might have been set up:

‘Fleming’s Bond...turned out like Frankenstein’s monster, to have a got a little out of hand...Not only would there be anti-establishment agents...but there would be a school of debunkers. Step forward Le Carre...

...Various remedies have been proposed...but all to no avail. SIS has unfortunately not been recruiting literary men for years... (p 224)

So perhaps this is why the new men, with no literary history, were so helpful in enrolling the anti-establishment to the establishment.

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