Erving Goffman’s interest in spies and espionage is widely recognized in commentary on his work. Where did this interest come from? While the context of Cold War America provided the broad cultural horizon of this work, deeper roots may be found. Goffman’s contact with two University of Chicago professors, Edward A. Shils and Douglas Waples, both of whom served in U.S. intelligence organizations during World War II, also shaped Goffman’s interest in the subject. This paper explores these relationships and their connection to Goffman’s writings on spies, secrecy, and information control in postwar America. Goffman’s view of spies and espionage as analogues to American postwar lives is explored.

Keywords: Cold War, espionage, Erving Goffman, information control, OSS, spies, Edward Shils, Douglas Waples

INTRODUCTION

What would happen if sociologists took seriously Erving Goffman’s statement, in his doctoral dissertation, that social interaction is “an arrangement for pursuing a cold war” (Goffman 1953:40)? They might look at the statement as more than a metaphor — Goffman was, in fact, writing during the Cold War that followed the end of World War II. Analysts might examine differently the social and intellectual context within which Goffman wrote. In contrast to much commentary on his work, which limits Goffman’s context to an examination of his predecessors and contemporaries in sociology, commentators would examine broader settings. Doing so would lead to the discovery that Goffman was writing not only with sociologists in mind; he wrote with reference to other intellectual developments, including the rise of the theory of information, cybernetics, game theory, and other intellectual developments tied to military and government strategy in Cold War America. Doing so might open a new lens onto Goffman’s work. Goffman’s interest in spies and espionage, for
example, noted by practically all commentators, and his deep and enduring interest in secrets, noted by few, would shift from secondary to primary importance.

These considerations have led the present author to undertake an extensive investigation into the ways that secrecy concepts are woven into Goffman’s writings, from his earliest articles to his latest books, and how those concepts change and develop over time as Goffman’s theoretical models shift and change. This study confirmed that throughout his publications Goffman cited popular and scholarly literature on spies and espionage to illustrate the ideas he was developing (Goffman 1959:145–6; Goffman 1969; Goffman 1971:210–25; Goffman 1974:121, 291). What were the wellsprings of this unusual interest in secrets and spies? Goffman had not served in the armed forces or military intelligence during World War II; indeed, he may have actively avoided such service (Wrong 2011:8). According to the testimony of at least one friend, he even dodged talking about the war (Habenstein 2008). The world around him, however, was not so reticent. In the immediate post World War II period and into the Cold War era when Goffman was first writing, American and British popular culture were awash with spy thrillers in book, magazine, television, and film formats. In 1953, former British naval intelligence officer Ian Fleming introduced his character James Bond in his spy novel *Casino Royale*, followed by a quick succession of seven other novels in the 1950s alone; there followed a Bond movie franchise beginning in the early 1960s. Other spy novels followed, notably former British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) operative Graham Greene’s *Our Man in Havana* (1958), American novelist Richard Condon’s *The Manchurian Candidate* (1959), former SIS agent John le Carré’s *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963), and countless pulp fiction imitators.¹ American television continued the fascination with the genre in such shows as *The Avengers* (1961–1969), *Get Smart* (1961–1969), *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* (1964–1968), and *I Spy* (1965–1968). Though espionage storylines in British and American film dropped off a bit from the wartime high (Nash 1997:549–61), essential films, such as *5 Fingers* (1952) discussed below, added to the cultural narrative about espionage. There was, thus, a broad popular interest in spies and espionage during World War II and in the subsequent Cold War period during tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union.

But closer roots of Goffman’s interest may be found. Goffman’s contact with Thomas Schelling, the economist and defense strategist, may have been involved (Jaworski 2019). In Schelling’s conversation with sociologist Richard Swedberg (2013), the economist reveals that his own attempt to understand the principles underlying negotiation were based on close reading of both ancient history and espionage fiction, of Thucydides and le Carré. When Schelling and Goffman first met in the late 1950s, did Schelling share his enthusiasm for this literature with Goffman? Had Goffman already developed independently his own taste for the genre before they met? Though it may be impossible to answer these questions, it is certain that an interest in spies and espionage extended to students as well. Robert Jervis, for example, who holds the unique distinction of having both Schelling and Goffman serve on his dissertation committee, helped formulate “a theory of deception in
international relations” in his book *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Jervis 1989). Jervis acknowledges intellectual debts to both Goffman and Schelling and admits the importance of literature on spying and espionage as providing useful data to understanding deception, however limited that information may be from the standpoint of theory-building (Jervis 1989:10–11).2

Thus, an interest in spies and espionage was manifest in both the cultural horizon in which Goffman lived and the intellectual exchange in the networks with which he was connected. These sources, however, are unlikely to have been sufficient to shape Goffman's life-long interest. This report explores more direct sources of Goffman's interest in spies and espionage — the classrooms of the University of Chicago where Goffman took his Master's (1949) and PhD (1953) degrees. It examines, first, the conceptual foundations of Goffman's treatment of spies in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman 1959; hereafter *Presentation*); second, his most sustained reflections on spies and espionage in his book *Strategic Interaction* (Goffman 1969); third, his connections to the intelligence community through two University of Chicago professors, Edward A. Shils and Douglas Waples; and, last, the implications of this context for understanding Goffman's writings. Together, these analyses both confirm the centrality of Goffman's formative Chicago years and set new directions for the study of the history of American sociology generally and Goffman studies in particular.

### SPIES AND SECRETS IN PRESENTATION OF SELF IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Goffman’s *Presentation* gives little direct attention to spies and espionage. In fact, the word “spy” appears only once in the book (Goffman 1959:145), where it is mentioned as an example of a type of informant. Moreover, although he states there that the “political, military, industrial and criminal variants of this role are famous,” he cites no specific examples. Goffman's first book does, however, introduce terms that would enter into his analysis of this subject in later publications: information game, teams, information given and given off, front and back regions, destructive information, strategic secrets, among others. Further, Goffman (1959:80n5) reveals that the book’s focus on teams as the “fundamental point of reference,” as opposed to the perspective of individual performers, is taken from John von Neumann, whose book with Oskar Morgenstern *The Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (1947) launched game theory in the United States. This game theoretic perspective Goffman would himself critically adopt in *Strategic Interaction* (1969), the book that contains Goffman's most sustained discussion of spies and espionage.

The focus on secrecy in *Presentation* is the first link in a chain that runs through his work on this subject. In this book, Goffman presents his view of social interaction as an endless round of face-to-face performances on a “stage” with audiences of people, and often with the help of “teams” who sustain the definitions of the situation that are being fostered. This social interaction order is a moral order, where idealized impressions are offered, sustained, and occasionally threatened. Importantly, in working
together cooperatively to sustain a given definition of the situation, team members learn the “secrets of the show” (Goffman 1959:153) — information that must be concealed from an audience to pull off the performance. Because team members must conceal and keep secret this potentially destructive information, Goffman suggests, they have “something of the character of a secret society” (Goffman 1959:104). As Goffman writes, “they form a secret society, a team, in so far as a secret is kept as to how they are cooperating together to maintain a particular definition of the situation” (Goffman 1959:105). Moreover, he asserts even more provocatively, “[s]ince we all participate on teams we must all carry within ourselves something of the sweet guilt of conspirators” (Goffman 1959:105). Though not specifically referenced, Simmel’s (1950:307–76) “The Secret and the Secret Society” is here employed not as inquiry but as provocation: to shock readers into seeing themselves in a new light. It is the interrogator’s light that exposes the dark issues of Cold War secrets and collusion. Goffman would not continue this argument in later publications; he would, however, find a way to say that rather than demonstrating a kinship with conspirators, we are all very much like spies.3

The matter of secrets is introduced in Chapter Four, titled “Discrepant Roles.” Here Goffman discusses a “basic problem” for many performances as one of information control. For performances to be accepted, certain information — what Goffman now calls “destructive information” — must be excluded. “In other words,” Goffman (1959:141) writes, “a team must be able to keep its secrets and have its secrets kept.” Goffman (1959:141–3) begins by presenting a typology of secrets and, with it, a nascent sociology of information control in modern societies. “Dark secrets” refers to information that a team knows and conceals that is incompatible with the image that the team is attempting to maintain before its audiences. “Strategic secrets,” including the practices of business and the military, denotes information that a team may use in the future against the opposition. The central difference between dark and strategic secrets is that the former is a dangerous or discrediting secret that one “holds on” to, perhaps forever, and the latter is one that is used, or potentially used, in some imminent or future strategic interaction. In addition, there are “inside secrets,” the kind of information that serves the function of exclusion, helping one group to distinguish itself from others. Secrets are not, however, only about the concealed information that a group or team has about itself. They may also denote information that one group has about another. Here Goffman compares “entrusted secrets,” information that one is granted and obligated not to share, and “free secrets,” or information that one learns from sources other than entrusted sharing, such as through independent discovery or indiscreet admission (for further discussion, see Jaworski 2020).

The chapter follows with an examination of “the kinds of persons who learn about the secrets of a team and with the bases and the threats of their privileged position” (Goffman 1959:143–4). Here Goffman reprises his predissertation article on “Symbols of Class Status” (Goffman 1951), where he writes of “curator groups,” those whose work with elites — as personal assistants, hair dressers, butlers, nannies,
among many others—gives them a privileged “back stage” view. To quote Goffman (1959:53) “they learn the secrets of the show.” But in Presentation, Goffman takes these themes in a darker direction by exploring a wider range of roles with access to “destructive information.” In addition to “service specialists,” Goffman now writes of “informers,” including traitors, turncoats, and spies. He writes of “shills,” those who are secretly in league with the performer, including “protective agents” and “spotters.” He writes of the “go-between” or mediator. He writes of the “non-person,” people who are present in a region but who are treated as though they were not there. He writes of the “confidant” and of “renegades.” In all this, Goffman is signaling his engagement with weighty issues of the time.

SOCIOLOGY OF INFORMATION CONTROL IN STRATEGIC INTERACTION

When Goffman (1969) turned to develop his game-theoretic model of social interaction in Strategic Interaction, he left the typology of secrets behind and extended one of those types—“strategic secrets”—to social interaction more broadly. Strategic secrets became strategic interaction writ large.

In that book’s two essays, Goffman advances a sociology of information control beyond that which he developed in Presentation. Goffman now brings the analysis of secrets and spies to the forefront of his work: “I will draw upon the popular literature on intelligence and espionage for illustration,” Goffman writes, for no party seems more concerned than an intelligence organization with “the individual’s capacity to acquire, reveal and conceal information” (Goffman 1969:4).

In the book’s first chapter on expression games, Goffman is especially interested in one critical aspect of information control, called “expressed information,” and its difference from “communication.” Consider an interaction between an interrogator and a person under interrogation. A person may respond to questions with words that are more or less complete, more or less correct, and made with more or less candor. But the exchange is complicated by the fact that the communicated information goes beyond this “transmitted information.” It includes other types of information that are “expressed”: a person’s attitude, demeanor, or facial display, for example. Further complicating this situation is the fact that the scrutiny of such expressions and communication is two-way — both parties are scrutinizing each other — and further, that it is in the interest of one or both parties to manage or control the information the other obtains. Under these conditions one has an “expression game,” with each party engaged in an intentional effort to strategically control information. “I argue,” Goffman writes, “that this situation is so general and so central that by looking at such games and at the various restrictions and limitations placed on them, we can begin to learn about important assumptions and beliefs concerning the nature of individuals” (Goffman 1969:10–11).
The opening “moves” of an expression game include various acts of concealment or “cover moves” as Goffman calls them, such as secrecy and feinting (faked courses of action), various “uncovering moves” (efforts to expose the secrets) and “counter-uncovering moves” (efforts to shore up the cover) (Goffman 1969:11–28). Among the illustrations Goffman provides from government and military history, many of them from World War II and the Cold War that America was in at the time, include a discussion of “identity tags,” such as passports and other identity papers. Goffman’s illustrates the idea of “counter-uncovering” with an entry from the memoir of Dr. Stanley P. Lovell (1963), the biochemist who was the Director of Research and Development of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). This was the branch of the OSS responsible for equipping the Allies’ operatives, spies, and saboteurs during World War II. Because passports and other identity papers present something of an “open challenge” and an “admission that an expression game is being played” (Goffman 1969:22), the OSS employed a vast technical facility for producing those papers. In Goffman’s terms, this was a “counter-uncovering” operation, with an effort to create identity papers with such apparent authenticity that the enemy would be unable to detect their fraudulence. At stake in this game were the very lives of the operatives and agents and the mission they fought for — the Allies’ success against their adversaries.

Goffman’s discussion of secrecy in these pages is more than just an analysis of the intentional withholding of potentially “destructive information.” He routinely uses the word “secret” when referring to information that people are unwilling to share, destructive or not. And in a conceptual discussion of the word “secret” he takes on the complexities of withholding information and the slipperiness of the term. When an observer succeeds in uncovering access to another’s guarded information, but does not reveal the discovery, which is the secret? Is a secret about another’s secret itself a secret? Goffman is in the right territory here but uncharacteristically he does not come up with a term to name it. Edward A. Shils (1956) in The Torment of Secrecy employed the term “secondary secrecy” and refers to the same challenge people face: namely, the strategic value of not revealing to the other that their secret has been discovered. Military history and the history of the intelligence services are replete with examples of such “secondary secrecy” and both Goffman and Shils had wartime instances in mind, as is witnessed by the examples they cite. For Goffman, it was cryptographers breaking a code but not wanting to give away this knowledge to the other side, “lest the code be changed and the breaking have to be done all over again” (Goffman 1969:51). For Shils, it was the hard work to “penetrate the spy network, to gain the confidence of spies and to discover who their confidences were.” This sort of activity,” Shils (1956:26) writes, “had to be kept secret too, for perfectly obvious reasons.”

Near the end of “Expression Games,” Goffman questions the value of the very intelligence organizations that he has been employing for illustrative purposes. He presents an all-too brief Weberian analysis of the rationalization and growth of intelligence organizations. The problems of disloyalty, he suggests, are amplified when
organizations are rationalized. One disloyal person at the top of a hierarchical organization can render the whole establishment vulnerable, Goffman contends. Moreover, the growth of networks of spies and counterspies also creates special weaknesses. Entire networks are in danger of being undone when only one is caught. These problems render intelligence organizations “unstable.” Goffman adds another problem inherent in the intelligence community: “among all the things of the world,” he writes, “information is the hardest to guard, since it can be stolen without removing it” (Goffman 1969:78–9).

Goffman’s critique of intelligence organizations did not extend to his views on individual spies and spy-craft. He was especially impressed with the great spies of World War II: Elyesa Bazna, code named “Cicero,” and Richard Sorge, the Soviet spy. These were men of action who placed themselves in fateful situations for their respective countries. Cicero was a German agent who worked in the British Ambassador’s residence in Turkey as a valet, precisely one of Goffman’s “discrepant roles.” This position gave him access to the ambassador’s safe, which he entered and regularly copied and sold important documents to the Germans (O’Donnell 2004:69). Cicero’s story was widely known in the United States after the war, as it was turned into a Hollywood movie *5 Fingers*, directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz (1952) and starring British actor James Mason. Richard Sorge was a Russian intelligence officer working with a German military attaché in Tokyo. For 8 years he and the members of his spy ring transmitted from Japan valuable information to the Soviets. Some contemporary scholars of espionage believe that the information Sorge sent to the Soviets had likely prevented a Nazi victory and hastened the end of World War II. Two former British intelligence agents turned novelists—who disagreed on most else—agreed on Sorge. Ian Fleming, the creator of “James Bond,” considered Sorge “the most formidable spy in history,” and John Le Carré (1966) wrote of him as “the spy to end spies.” Goffman too admired the daring agent, calling him “the very great Russian spy” (Goffman 1969:79). These men, and other men and women like them, were taking huge risks, testing their character while keeping cool in dangerous circumstances. They regularly faced the possibility of discovery by others, along with consequent exposure, discrediting and worse. They personified Goffman’s view of the precarious interaction order of modern Western societies: people are ever on the verge of being exposed.

It is little wonder then why, as mentioned earlier, Goffman in his dissertation described social interaction as “an arrangement for pursuing a cold war” (Goffman 1953:40). The strategic interaction of nations and their agents during World War II, and in the Cold War that followed it and within which Goffman was writing, were a difference in degree not in kind from everyday interaction. Thus, Goffman insisted that “we all must face moments of this kind, albeit much less extreme in every regard, and it is the sharing of this core contingency [of the risk of disclosure and discrediting] that makes the stories of agents relevant” (Goffman 1969:80). Again, “we are like them [intelligence agents] in significant ways, so they are like us” (Goffman 1969:81).
After World War II, one would not have had difficulty encountering former members of military or government service, including intelligence services, at the University of Chicago, or indeed on the campuses of nearly any major university in the United States. They were abundant. As Abbott and Sparrow (2007:287–8) have shown for the discipline of sociology alone, of the roughly 1300 PhD sociologists in their data set from the 1940s, “9 percent saw government service at some point in their careers … another 5 percent saw government and military service, and 22 percent saw military service alone.” Although we do not have comparable figures for disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, geography, economics, history, international relations, political science, communications, mathematics, philosophy, or, indeed, any of the natural sciences, such figures would only serve to bolster the already well-known close collaboration between academia and government and the military in the post-World War II years (e.g., Diamond 1992). As studies like that of Abbott and Sparrow are published for other disciplines, academics will come to understand, like the protagonists of Ondaatje’s (2018) *Warlight*, that many of those closest to them in their community were secretly a part of the war effort.

By circumstance and choice, Goffman came to be associated with academics and others who were affiliated with the U.S. military, government and postwar think tanks, conferences, and foundations, including those that were advancing and supporting U.S. interests in Cold War America. This is not to say that something nefarious was going on, but Goffman was closer to the corridors of influence in these years than perhaps is normally represented. Most widely known among these contacts was Edward A. Shils, who served in the OSS’s Research and Analysis Branch in the London Office. Shils went to work in the OSS soon after it was created in June 1942, referred perhaps by Talcott Parsons. In late 1943, Shils was assigned to the Psychological Warfare Division, which was tasked with assessing the motivation to fight of captured *Wehrmacht* soldiers. Interrogators of the captured prisoners employed a special questionnaire devised by Shils and colleague Henry Dicks, along with Morris Janowitz, who was recruited to be a research analyst. As Pooley writes, “Shils and Dicks (with the close collaboration of Janowitz) were focused, especially, on the question of tenacity: Why did German soldiers maintain the fight, and with such disciplined resolution” (Pooley 2006:122). After the war, Shils returned to Chicago, with Janowitz, whom he had convinced to take up graduate study in sociology. Back at home, the two analyzed the questionnaire data and presented their results in a landmark postwar study, “Cohesion and Disintegration in the *Wehrmacht* in World War II” (Shils and Janowitz 1948). There they argued that the motivation to fight was not ideology or hyperpatriotism or “manliness” but the soldiers’ loyalty to each other, their sense of camaraderie, and indeed their desire for esteem in their fellows’ eyes. Here was the genesis of Shils’s emphasis on the importance of primary group ties.
Shils was an eminent, if somewhat divisive, professor at the University of Chicago and Goffman served as his research assistant there for 1 year (1952–53), working on a project on social stratification funded with $30,000 of Ford Foundation money (Bessner 2018:184). Available archival records do not provide a clear indication of whether Shils and Goffman spent any time together on this project and, if so, what was discussed. In his writings, however, Goffman does refer to Shils as an important reference point in those years. In his dissertation (Goffman 1953:128) and again in the important early paper, “The Nature of Deference and Demeanor” (Goffman 1967), Goffman notes that Shils’s course lectures on “primary groups,” and views on deference (e.g., Goldhamer and Shils 1939), respectively, were relevant to his own developing ideas. Further, Goffman recognizes the Ford Foundation grant and “Professor Shils” in the “Acknowledgements” to both the 1956 version of Presentation (Goffman 1956) and the 1959 American edition (Goffman 1959). Such open acknowledgements, though, were not the only way Goffman communicated his alliances; he reveals them in footnotes. For example, in the 1959 American edition of Presentation (Goffman 1959:146), in a discussion of informers and spies, there appears a footnote to a single page in Hans Speier’s (1952) Social Order and the Risks of War. Speier was a German émigré who became one of the leading American “defense intellectuals” of the postwar era, and eventually headed up the “Social Sciences Division” of RAND, the postwar think tank aligned with the U.S. Airforce. Bessner’s (2018:146–7) important biography of Speier shows that he and Shils had developed a close friendship since the 1930s. That friendship was strengthened by mutual offers of patronage. Speier was offered a deanship in the University of Chicago’s Social Science Division, a position which he politely turned down to remain at RAND. For his part, Speier had invited Shils to serve as consultant at RAND and had helped Shils secure the $30,000 Ford Foundation grant on which Goffman served as research assistant (Bessner 2018:184), and which certainly provided Goffman with the time and resources to research his first book and other early publications. Goffman’s footnote to Speier’s book, then, was reference to a relationship of considerable importance to his early career.

Shils was not the only faculty member at the University of Chicago with ties to the U.S. intelligence community and who was noteworthy in Goffman’s intellectual milieu. Goffman was also sitting in on seminars and classes in areas of interest to him, including with Douglas Waples. This is a name that is not widely known among contemporary sociologists, though Waples is acknowledged as a central figure in the history of the field of mass communication (Pooley 2006; Pooley and Katz 2008; Wahl-Jorgenson 2004, 2013). In fact, Waples had been at the University of Chicago since 1925, where he taught courses in education and assisted in the creation and development of Chicago’s Graduate Library School (Richardson and John 1980; Richardson Jr. 1982). He published in the American Journal of Sociology and the American Sociological Review and authored or coauthored a series of studies, such as What People Want to Read About (Waples and Tyler 1931), People and Print (Waples 1938), and What Reading Does to
People (Waples, Berelson, and Bradshaw 1940), that helped create the field of reading studies.

Waples becomes relevant to our story thanks to the vision of University President (and later Chancellor) Robert Maynard Hutchins. He expanded the University of Chicago from an institution of departments to a center of experiments in interdisciplinary collaboration. Chicago faculty members proposed new interdisciplinary committees to support their academic and wartime interests (for a comparison to Harvard University, see Isaac 2012:158–90). The Committee on Social Thought, founded in 1941 by John U. Nef, is perhaps the most renowned of these new committees. There were many others as well, including the short-lived “Committee on Communication and Public Opinion” (1942–1945) and the “Committee on Communication” (1947–1960) that followed it. The faculty of the Committee on Communication included a wide range of junior and senior scholars, including Bernard Berelson, David Riesman, Herbert Goldhamer, Sebastian de Grazia, and Kenneth P. Adler. Waples was a founder and leader of both these committees and the ideas that circulated there were ones to which thoughtful students had to contend.

Waples was no simple armchair enthusiast for reading; he clearly wanted to make an impact on the world. In early August of 1941, only months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and the subsequent U.S. declaration of war, Waples led a conference focused on the “administration of mass communications in the public interest” during the Sixth Annual Institute of the Graduate Library School, University of Chicago. The conference brought together experts in communication, such as Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Harold D. Lasswell, Bernard Berleson, and Ernst Kris, and members of the sociology department who served as session chairs, including Herbert Blumer, Lloyd Warner, and Louis Wirth. The papers were published as Print, Radio, and Film in a Democracy (Waples 1942a) and the book was edited and introduced by Waples. For all the talk in this book, and especially in Waples’s introduction (written after war was declared), about the “public good” and the “good of the people,” there is little actual discussion of the public. The main actors in these pages are social scientists, who are portrayed as equipped to provide needed communication research, and the government, which is portrayed as intelligently using that research “in the interest of national defense and the all-out prosecution of the war” (Waples 1942a:vi–vii). Thus, already at the start of the war, Waples was campaigning for a collaboration between social science and the U.S. government and military. The public would enter the analysis only to the extent that people were portrayed as “deeply perplexed” (Waples 1942a:vi). In contrast, the communications experts were, to employ the words of historian Joy Rohde (2013), “armed with expertise” — added weapons in the battle for democracy.

While Waples wrote publicly about the public good and preserving the values of democracy, he privately expressed a willingness to employ very non-democratic means to preserve those values, including spying on American citizens. Here is a specific instance of a larger pattern of mythmaking and illusion that Oakes (1994) discovered in civil defense discourse during the Cold War. Only a few months after the
conference discussed above, Waples expressed his concern in internal memos about the infiltration of America by “malcontents” who could influence public opinion. In an unpublished document titled, “Suggested Agenda for University Observation Posts” (Waples 1941a), he called for “local collaborators” who would form “observation posts” to scan local areas around the country and identify supposed subversives. Observation posts were developed in England in the First World War and continued there, and in the United States, during World War II. The purpose of these posts was to scan the skies for enemy aircraft, a part of the countries’ civil defense effort. Waples’s plan was clearly an innovation: he was looking not for enemy planes but for subversive individuals. In a related unpublished memorandum from the same time, “A Statement Concerning the Proposed Chicago Communications Station” (Waples 1941b), he discussed a proposed post, here called a communications station, “under the auspices of the University of Chicago,” which would expose “how particular communications are affecting public opinion on particular issues.” In this way, he proposed to “spot subversive propaganda.” While there may have been informal groups engaged in this effort around the country, Waples’ larger plan was abandoned when war was declared.

By August of 1942, Waples war service had begun. He departed Chicago first for Phoenix and then Washington, DC, where he was assigned to the U.S. Office of War Information (OWI), in the Bureau of Public Inquiry, a domestic propaganda arm of the U.S. government (Howe 1942).

Waples’s precise wartime activities during the years 1942–1948 are only partially known. His own autobiography (Waples and Waples 1967), written for family and friends, is more of a sketch than a full story, the result of an intelligence officer’s trained incapacity for candor. Even the most thorough review of Waples’ life and work by Kamberelis and Albert (2007) draws from this same thin soup. Waples admits to being involved in military and intelligence assignments in war information, antisubversion, and “black propaganda” (Kamberelis and Albert 2007:273), but details are limited. The lack of clarity is also a result of the protracted length of Waples’s war service (6 years) and his involvement in various capacities with a number of agencies: the OWI, OSS, and U. S. Army. Some things are known, however. After receiving a Major’s commission in the U.S. Army in December, 1942, Waples was assigned stateside to various training duties where he lectured, tested, and reviewed, among others, foreign language training in the United States. By his own admission, these efforts were “not highly successful” (Waples and Waples 1967:6), and one can imagine Waples itching for a role with greater impact. This came in August of 1944 when Waples was transferred to the Morale Operations Division of the OSS, where he was in charge of collecting information useful for subversive work. But before he left for the European Theater later that year, Waples went on a 12-day U.S. recruiting trip for the OSS — with visits to academic colleagues in Chicago, Minneapolis, Ann Arbor, Bloomington, Columbus, and Pittsburgh — to secure the assistance of persons with foreign language facility for work in the European Theater and the Far East. When the Allied countries entered Germany
and administered the defeated nation, Waples was given a special assignment for which he is best known. In Germany, the U.S. Army established the Office of Military Government (OMGUS), whose aim was not just to administer the defeated country but to fundamentally transform it from a hostile nation to a prodemocratic state. At this time, the recently promoted Lieutenant Colonel Waples served as “Director of Information Control” in the Information Control Division (ICD) of OMGUS. He spent 4 years in Germany (1945–1948), one of the longest tenures in the ICD (Warkentin 2016:32). In this capacity, he was in charge of shaping German reeducation (“denazification”) in the American zone of control in postwar Western Germany by shaping what they read.

To do so, Waples had to identify and give refuge to German publishers whom the U.S. government could trust. The city of Leipzig was the center of publishing before the Nazi era and after the war still contained the country’s most prominent publishers. The U.S. military forces held that city since April 17, 1945, but it was scheduled to be transferred to the Soviets on July 2. Thus, Waples and his fellow officers had two and a half months to do their job (Warkentin 2016:145). In his autobiography, Waples claims that he and his team did it in one week! He took special pleasure in reporting on this effort, when he writes in his autobiography that he and several other officers

… went down publishers’ row in that city and picked some ten publishers whom we considered the best compromise between the most important pre-war German publishers and those most likely to be cleared by our own Intelligence Branch, which had a veto on all of our recommendations to license. Those we picked were moved out of Leipzig on the eve of the Russian occupation and across Germany by military convoy to Wiesbaden on the Rhine where they have prospered ever since. (Waples and Waples 1967:7)

This was just the beginning of a thorough restructuring of the book and magazine publication industry in postwar Germany (Warkentin 2016:114–55).

After Waples returned to Chicago in 1948, he returned to the Graduate Library School as Professor of Communication and, upon the departure of Bernard Berelson, led the Committee on Communication from 1951–1958. The curriculum of the Committee reveals a solid grounding in the latest knowledge in communication, with a heavy focus also on “applied” subjects. As future author of a dissertation on “Communication Conduct in an Island Community” (Goffman 1953), Goffman would have been keenly aware of these courses, including Waples’s own seminar Sociology 494: Psychological Warfare and Strategic Intelligence (offered from 1949 forward). This course represents a continuation of warfare by academic means.

A key text used in the seminar was Yale historian and CIA Cold Warrior Sherman Kent’s (1949) Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy. The modern CIA considers Kent as the “father of intelligence” and has named the Sherman Kent School for Intelligence Analysis in his honor. In the postwar years, Waples’ seminars on psychological warfare and strategic intelligence were already applying lessons learned to the Soviet Union, the next target of the United States (Waples 1949–1953). Indeed, Waples transformed the Committee into a proving
ground for former military personnel and other individuals whose careers would include serving in the U.S. government’s Cold War propaganda organizations, especially the United States Information Agency (USIA). Just two examples may suffice. One of the young instructors of the Committee on Communication was Kenneth P. Adler. Born and raised in Germany, he had escaped Nazi persecution because his parents had sent him to an English boarding school at age 13. After the war, Adler enjoyed a 25-year career with the USIA, including in Germany, where he conducted research on Western European public opinion about the United States, as well as research into the effectiveness of the Voice of America and other American propaganda sources in Eastern Europe (Schrankl 2013:400–2). Another was James Nelson Tull, who earned an MA from the Committee and whose early promise Waples saw clearly. Tull became a career U.S. foreign service officer who spent time in Saigon and Laos during the mid-50s to early 60s, and later was Head of the USIA’s Work Group in Washington, DC, where he was part of the approval process of internal communications during the Vietnam War. These are just two of the people Waples (1953) wrote about so proudly when he revealed in 1953: “Our Chicago group includes some 40 individuals (faculty and students) who have had several years’ experience with aspects of Mil. Govt.” “Mil Govt” was shorthand for the postwar military government in the countries that the U.S. administered after the war. According to historian Hajo Holborn, in the immediate postwar years, some 150 million people around the world were administered by the American military government, a population which was then larger than that of the United States (Holborn 1947:xi).

CONCLUSION

This paper points to the value of situating Goffman’s writings within the cultural and intellectual space of the post-World War II era and the Cold War that followed it. As Travers (1999:170) noted, Goffman came “to sociological consciousness at the height of the Cold War.” If we grant this view as credible, then it might also be affirmed that this context helped give rise to the problems, both social and intellectual, on which Goffman worked and the vocabularies with which he examined them. From this perspective, it is no coincidence that Goffman chose to analyze the interactional features of everyday “information control” while Waples was telling tales of his experiences in postwar Germany as Director of Information Control. For the U.S. military government after the war, and for Waples as one of its official representatives, “information control” was something that governments did to vanquished enemies, or to subdue potentially dangerous populations. The media that people read, saw, and listened to were strictly controlled. For Goffman, however, seen through the prism of the “interaction order,” information control was the daily activity of everyone. It was a game of deception and counter-deception and players were ever on the verge of being discredited.
Goffman pulled his conceptual creations from many sources, and there are multiple examples of his use of wartime and Cold War terminology in his writings. For example, in his dissertation, he characterized social interaction as a game of “concealment and search” (Goffman 1953:84), a phrase that echoed the “search problem” of the war years: namely, how to find and destroy German submarines (Leonard 2010:271). He also first characterized the interdependence of players in a game of strategic interaction as one of “massive interdependence” (Archibald 1966:200). This phrase echoed the Eisenhower era’s nuclear policy of “massive retaliation” (Jaworski 2019:393n5). Additionally, as noted at the beginning of this paper, he called interaction an “arrangement for pursuing a cold war.” Other examples could be cited. It would be characteristic of Goffman to give a full twist to the ideas or phrases he liked. Winkin (1999) this propensity to give a “twist” to ideas was characteristic of Goffman’s “habitus” and indeed represents an epistemological stance shared by Goffman’s generation of graduate students at the University of Chicago. In this respect, it is rather Goffmanian to give a democratic spin to the phrase “information control”: to take it out of the hands of the military and make it an everyday practice of the people. In addition, during the postwar years, so much activity had the word “strategy” or “strategic” connected to it: Strategic Air Command, Strategic Bombing Survey, and the book The Strategy of Conflict. Waples and his Committee on Communication were part of the larger context within which Goffman wrote about secrets and spies. The seminar on “strategic intelligence” certainly provides added context to Goffman’s own coinage of the term “strategic interaction.”

The foregoing also suggests that Edward Shils must be written into the story of Goffman’s intellectual development. Shils is usually considered en passant, mentioned in passing while reviewing Goffman’s biographical journey (e.g., Jacobsen and Kristiansen 2015; Manning 1992). But, as was discussed above, Goffman’s view of secrets as “destructive information” in Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (Goffman 1959) is consistent with Shils’s (1956) own examination of secrets in The Torment of Secrecy, a book that was published in the same year as Goffman’s first book. The current evidence shows that Goffman would go beyond him in viewing secrets in a broader and more benign way (Jaworski 2020). As more evidence becomes available from archives, the relation between Goffman and Shils is likely to become more than a footnote.

All considered, though, one does not have to look very far for the background of Goffman’s interest in espionage and spies — it was formed in the very classrooms of the University of Chicago.

These analyses have value beyond the specific question of Goffman’s interest in spies and espionage explored here. They provide a path for the history of sociology in examining the trajectories of ideas and careers within the Cold War era. This path forward eschews the use of grand formulas of the Cold War as a monolithic determinant and offers in its place, as Isaac (2007:728) has suggested, “middle-range contextualizations” that analyze institutional and intellectual developments during
the Cold War in specific historical detail. Although Goffman was unique for viewing spies and espionage as analogues to American postwar lives, his career may be very ordinary in the way that it connects to Cold War intellectual problematics and the institutions and networks of individuals that developed them. Sociology has yet to fully examine its Cold War legacy at this middle-range level of analysis. Because his postwar intellectual networks were so wide, and his writings so deeply resonant with Cold War themes and vocabularies, Goffman's career may be a great place to start.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank Andrew Abbott, Philip Manning, Larry Nichols, Dmitri Shalin, and Yves Winkin for their encouragement and counsel during the early stages of the larger project on Goffman and secrets. For critical readings and helpful advice, the author thanks Gary T. Marx, Guy Oakes, Jefferson Pooley, and Greg Smith. The author kindly thanks Professor Robert Jervis for sharing his remembrances of Goffman (and Schelling) during his years at University of California–Berkeley and Harvard University, and Yves Winkin for many years of collegial sharing and conversation on matters Goffmanian. Finally, the author acknowledges the editor of this journal and two anonymous reviewers, who gave specific counsel that has considerably improved the paper. Any remaining errors of evidence or interpretation are the author’s sole responsibility.

Material from the Ernest Watson Burgess Papers and the Office of the Vice-President, Records, 1937–1946 is quoted with permission of the Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library. Material from the Carnegie-Myrdal Study of the Negro in America is quoted with permission of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. For research assistance, the author gratefully thanks the following: Elayne Stecher and Christine Colburn of the Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library; Lauren Stark at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library; Monica Blank of the Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY; and Candice Blazejak at the United States National Archives at College Park, MD.

ENDNOTES

2. Goffman’s true heir on these matters is former student Gary T. Marx, who has written extensively on surveillance and information control. See, for example, his recent book Windows into the Soul, where he writes: “This inquiry seeks to advance understanding of the social and ethical aspects of personal information control and discovery as a naturally bounded, analytically coherent field, in the tradition of Erving Goffman” (Marx 2016:x).
3. A related argument based on different grounds was made by University of Chicago political scientist Morton Grodzins when he wrote in reference to postwar “other directed” personality
types, that “[h]is sensitivity to group opinion makes him less likely to be the bold traitor but more likely to be the easy collaborator” (Grodzins 1956:16).


5. For a contemporary version of these ideas, see Gary T. Marx (2016:Ch. 6), “A Tack in the Shoe and Taking the Shoe Off: Resistance and Counters to Resistance.”

6. In the movie version of the story, the spy is a social climber, the accomplice is a countess who has title but no wealth, and the money paid for the purloined documents turns out to be counterfeit. James Mason’s (playing Cicero) protracted sardonic laughter at the film’s conclusion disdainfully mocks the whole spy game, and by extension the game of postwar social mobility, as a fraud.


8. Of course, Goffman explored the themes of fatefulness, character, and “cool” under pressure in his lengthy essay “Where the Action Is” (Goffman 1967:149–270). It is evident that Goffman’s thinking about spies was part of his general thinking about fatefulness, moral character, and the situational potential for discrediting (see Shalin 2016). The conceptual framework of game theory allowed Goffman to theorize interactions that manifested “mutual fatefulness” (Goffman 1969:137; see also Goffman 1961:35) and to move beyond the “men of action” framework.

9. In _Presentation_, Goffman makes a similar argument, but he is writing about “imposters” and “liars.” Goffman (1959:66) writes, “Because of these shared dramatic contingencies [of the possibility of audiences discrediting performances], we can profitably study performances that are quite false in order to learn about ones that are quite honest.”

10. This paragraph is based on Jefferson Pooley’s (2006) unpublished doctoral dissertation and on the work of MacLoed (2017). Both authors were granted access to Shils’s private papers, which are normally closed to researchers, although Pooley’s access came only after he finished his dissertation (email to the author from Jefferson Pooley, February 27, 2020).


12. Efforts to locate the Ford Foundation grant application, assuming there was one, and Final Report, at both the University of Chicago and in the records of the Ford Foundation, have turned up nothing. Much will become clearer if these documents are found. Until then, researchers do have access to the Shils-authored study, “The Bases of Social Stratification in Negro Society” (Shils 1940), which was a part of the Carnegie-Myrdal Study of the Negro in America. There, following his article with Herbert Goldhamer (Goldhamer and Shils 1939), Shils defines “social stratification” as “the distribution of deference.” And he employs in that report the same scientific language that Goffman uses in his references to the Ford Foundation grant, namely, that the study offers a “propositional inventory of social stratification.” In fact, there is no inventory of propositions, as that term is normally used, in the Carnegie-Myrdal study. It is, however, an insightful review and analysis of not only the scholarly literature but also the author’s own experience, the experiences of others, and the insights found in “a number of fictional and autobiographical works written by Negroes” (Shils 1940: “Foreword”). If one were looking for a predecessor to Goffman’s use of biography, literature, and keen personal observation, Shils’s report would be a good place to start.

13. Personal correspondence with Yves Winkin (on August 9, 2018), who wrote to me in an email, “I remember Bob Habenstein telling me that Goffman attended seminars run by members of the Committee on Communication (Waples and others).” Winkin was reporting on conversations he had had with Robert W. Habenstein, a World War II Army veteran, friend of Goffman’s and
fellow student at the University of Chicago. Goffman (1981:62) himself affirms that he learned from Committee chairman Bernard Berelson’s course on content analysis; and war veteran and fellow graduate student Fred Davis in an unpublished interview with Winkin (on May 28, 1987), stated that Goffman sat in on a course on communication taught by charter member of the Committee Herbert Goldhamer and was “rather admiring” of it. The atmosphere of the University of Chicago in these postwar years was very liberal regarding attending classes; students were free to audit the classes that interested them and not attend the ones in which they were registered. This explains why none of these courses are listed on Goffman’s University of Chicago official course transcript: he sat in on classes and borrowed fellow students’ course notes rather freely.

14. For biographical sources on Waples, I have relied on the above-cited Pooley and MacLoed studies charting Waples’s role as a founder of the field of communication, and also these sources: Berelson (1979), Kamberelis and Albert (2007), and Waples’s OSS Personnel File in the National Archives of the United States (Waples 1942–c. 1962).

15. Contemporary evidence that “strategic interaction” was coined by Goffman comes from Kathleen Ann Archibald (1966), who stated in her “Introduction” to the proceedings of the 1964 UC Berkeley conference on Strategic Interaction and Conflict, “In using Erving Goffman’s term ‘strategic interaction’ as a label for the conference, we hoped to designate a particular network of concepts of interest to several disciplines.” For further discussion, see Jaworski (2019).

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR(S)

Gary D. Jaworski, PhD, is retired Professor of Sociology at Fairleigh Dickinson University, Madison, New Jersey. He is the author of Georg Simmel and the American Prospect (1997) and numerous articles and book chapters in the history of sociology. Jaworski’s current project is “Erving Goffman and the Cold War,” a study of Goffman’s life and work within the context of America’s emerging post-World War II national security state. His MA and PhD are from the New School for Social Research in New York City.