

Frantz Fanon and the CIA Man

THOMAS MEANEY

THE IMAGE IS NOT lacking in irony: Frantz Fanon, the intellectual father of Third World revolution, lying in a Maryland hospital bed, watched over by a blue-blooded agent of the CIA. It was out of desperation and his lack of success with Soviet doctors, Fanon's biographer David Macey reports, that Fanon had agreed to American offers to fly him to the United States—"that country of lynchers," as he called it—for leukemia treatment.¹ The benefit of aiding the figure who wrote of "a murderous and decisive confrontation" between the colonial and the colonized world was not lost on the CIA.² The gesture could have been intended to shore up the United States' anticolonial credentials in the Cold War, and/or to signal the feebleness of radical national liberation movements whose leaders were compromised by relations with U.S. intelligence. Eight years after Fanon's death in 1961, Joe Alsop made the latter argument when he leaked the story of the circumstances of Fanon's last hours in his column in the *Washington Post*. Writing at a low point in America's war in Vietnam, Alsop, a leading rhapsodist of pro-war opinion, wanted to score a point at the Third World's expense. "The chief black hero of the New Left," he gloated, had died "almost literally in the arms of the CIA." Alsop savored the CIA case officer's "downright brotherly visits" to Fanon's bedside. "Altogether," he wrote, "it is like saying that Che Guevara died, not because of, but despite the best efforts of the Central Intelligence Agency."³ Alsop sent his column to Hannah Arendt, a severe critic of Fanon's thought and style of expression, whose essay

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¹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York, 2004), vii.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

³ Joseph Alsop, "Passing of New Left's Hero an Odd Facet of U.S. History," *Washington Post*, February 21, 1969, A21. The information had probably been supplied to Alsop by the CIA officer Frederick W. Flott, who was on a roving mission in Geneva, where his cover was serving as a political officer at the Consulate General. Flott had attended Fanon's funeral in Tunisia with Iselin, and his later interview with the LBJ Library confirms that he was often in touch with Alsop. See Ted Gittinger, Interview with Frederick W. Flott, July 22, 1984, The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, National Archives and Records Service, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas.

“On Violence” Alsop claimed had “inspired” him.⁴ “It almost could move one to tender feelings toward the CIA,” Arendt responded. “Seriously, it shows a certain humanity that is consoling.”⁵

In the following years, Alsop became fascinated by the CIA agent’s relationship with Fanon, to the point that he co-authored a screenplay about it with Fanon’s first biographer, the Dutch writer Peter Geismar. The film was intended to be a tale of moral folly: the story of a promising colonial subject who enlists as a teenager in the Free French Army to help liberate Europe, but who succumbs to the delusion that Alsop, in a letter to studio executives, described as “the basic futility of the effort that he really cared the most about, which was the drive for African unity.”⁶ Universal Pictures took on the project, though the executives demanded more character and color. “Did [Fanon] enjoy dancing, either as a participant or a spectator?” a Universal executive asked Alsop in a letter. “Did he display any tendencies toward physical belligerence before or after his involvement in the anti-colonial movements?” The studio also wanted “as much information as possible on [Fanon’s] personal relationship with the CIA man.”⁷ *Frantz Fanon* the motion picture was eventually dropped, and it does not seem that Alsop ever made an attempt to meet the CIA agent.

The “CIA man” in question, Oliver Iselin, did not think there was anything left to say when I first contacted him in the spring of 2016. At the time, I was winding up the research for a study about the changing views of American elites and officials toward Third World nationalism. When a colleague mentioned to me that Fanon’s CIA case officer was still alive, I thought I might learn something from the sort of mid-level figure I had up to that point neglected—neither a top policymaker nor a passing bystander, but rather a rare kind of American participant observer of decolonization. I had only the name from Macey’s biography to go on: Oliver Iselin. I tried calling the handful of Oliver Iselins in existence, until one of them, a youngish-sounding man in New York City, suggested that I must be searching for a relative he hazily remembered, who lived somewhere in the South. When I found an online reference to a Virginian veteran of the “foreign service” named C. Oliver Iselin III in the *Chronicle of the Horse*, a weekly equestrian magazine, I sent a letter to his address inquiring about Fanon. Several weeks later came this reply:

I don’t do telephones and I don’t know how much more there is to share with you. Fanon was very ill when he arrived in the US and he only came here out of desperation. His prior medical treatment in Moscow was a failure and our advances in treatment for his disease were the last hope he had for remission. Even so he remained distrustful of our motives for bringing him here and consequently my relationship with him reflected this attitude. In sum, we had a good relationship. I think he appreciated my efforts in taking care of him and his family while here.⁸

Later that summer, I contacted Iselin again to see if he would be willing to speak more about Fanon. He asked to meet at his farm outside Middleburg, Virginia. The town is

⁴ Joseph Alsop to Hannah Arendt, March 4, 1969, Hannah Arendt Papers, box 8, folder 2, MSS11056, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵ Hannah Arendt to Joseph Alsop, March 12, 1969, *ibid.*

⁶ Joseph Alsop to Ed Muhl, June 26, 1969, Joseph Alsop and Stuart Alsop Papers, box 165, folder 7, MSS10561, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷ Ed Muhl to Joseph Alsop, April 30, 1969, *ibid.*

⁸ Personal correspondence with Oliver Iselin, April 16, 2016.

only an hour's drive beyond the glass-and-steel office buildings of the Dulles Corridor, but considering the history the landscape shares with American intelligence, it belongs to a different stratum of empire. After the CIA was formally founded in 1947, its directors wanted the agency's operatives to live in towns with pastoral backdrops, such as McLean, Virginia. The idea, the historian Andrew Friedman writes, was that "[t]he seemingly natural privacy afforded by the suburbs lent itself to the secrecy beneficial to both the U.S. government and suburban life," and the pristine residential life around them "became the symbol of a precarious good life that needed defending."⁹

Iselin joined the CIA while still an undergraduate, but the informal manner of his recruitment was more in keeping with the ad hoc arrangements of the CIA's wartime precursor, the Office of Strategic Services. He was a residual type of figure from the period when U.S. intelligence drew recruits from wealthy families and a small set of institutions and networks, before it was fully professionalized, staffed by middle-class men fashioned by a mature bureaucracy with a developed sense of *habitus* and purpose. Iselin's house, a quietly imposing stone edifice with crimson shutters and cream-white columns nestled within a 500-acre horse and hound farm, testified to that difference.

I was led into the house by a discreet housekeeper, who directed me to a small office on the first floor. After Iselin entered, she brought us iced tea, and we started speaking about his life and career. He was born in the house in 1927, and he expected to die in it, he said.¹⁰ Behind his office chair stood meticulously ordered file cabinets related to his time in Africa, and to his own family history. Iselin is the descendant of a family of Swiss American bankers and merchants. His great-grandfather's firm, A. Iselin & Co., which specialized in mining and railroads, helped finance the U.S. government during the Civil War. His paternal grandfather, Charles, was a banker and yachtsman who won the America's Cup six times, while his father, Charles Jr., transformed himself into a convincing member of the Virginia gentry, raising Holstein cattle and running a dairy operation on the family's farm, Wolver Hill, and serving as the longtime president of the National Beagle Club. (Some members of the family were committed internationalists: in the interwar years, Iselin's older brother-in-law, Charles L. Marburg, led five American delegations to the International Federation of League of Nations Societies, and he was a founder of the World Federation of United Nations Associations in 1946.)

In the late 1940s, Iselin attended Harvard, where he captained the crew team, worked on the *Harvard Lampoon*, and studied "colonial history." While still an undergraduate, he underwent two years of paramilitary training with the CIA that was officially declared U.S. Army service. Upon graduation, he was assigned to the desk in Tangiers, then part of the Near East Division. Iselin stressed to me that his anti-imperialist sentiments were complementary, even constitutive, of his intelligence work:

As a desk officer I was 100 percent with the nationalists. My branch chief was very much nationalist-oriented and obviously indoctrinated me. The point was to try to show the Moroccans that although we were part of NATO, our views were different from France as far as colonial policy went, and that we really—after all, Roosevelt, during the war, when he went to the Casablanca summit, actually spoke in favor of eventual Moroccan indepen-

⁹ Andrew Friedman, *Covert Capital: Landscapes of Denial and the Making of U.S. Empire in the Suburbs of Northern Virginia* (Berkeley, Calif., 2013), 3, 38.

¹⁰ Iselin did die at home, of congestive heart failure, on October 10, 2017. <https://www.vabred.org/long-time-virginia-breeder-and-vta-member-c-oliver-iselin-iii-passes-away/>.

dence . . . We had a wonderful name for the French. We called them the LAs. We'd never refer to the French—always the LAs this, the LAs that: “Leaping Amphibians.”

Iselin was head of the North Africa desk by the time the French, in league with the pasha of Marrakech, Thami El Glaoui, sent Mohammed V into exile in Madagascar. While periodically checking the underside of his car for explosives placed by the anti-French terror group the Black Hand (not to be confused with the French state-sponsored terror organization the Red Hand next door in Algeria), which drew recruits from among local workers and artisans, Iselin championed the cause of more moderate Moroccan nationalists. He welcomed the return of Mohammed V in 1955.

We were able to gather information about the Istiqlal Party of Morocco. We were able to get agents of influence, so to speak, who gave us information and whatnot, and we also gave them support. Because of NATO and everything, this all had to be very *sub rosa*. We were limited very much in what we could do, but the result of all this was that our contacts, when Morocco did become independent, allowed us to liaise with Moroccan intelligence services, a liaison which still exists today.

Iselin described his six years in Tangiers as among the happiest in his life. “The big decision every day was whether you wanted to have a picnic lunch on the Mediterranean or the Atlantic.” The officers lived in the medina of Tangiers, in the American Legation—the oldest U.S. government property outside the United States, given to the Monroe administration by Sultan Slimane of Morocco in 1821. At the suggestion of the U.S. consul, Julius Holmes, Iselin bought a fleet of ponies in Spain and assembled a polo team made up of himself, the brother of the wife of a CIA officer, a U.S. Marine gunnery sergeant, and an American businessman. They played a few times a week against the French, Spanish, and Garde royale teams. When they won the championship one year, the trophy was awarded by the American Woolworth heiress Barbara Hutton, who lived in a palace in the medina. “Tangiers was very cosmopolitan, small cosmopolitan. Everybody knew everybody else, more or less. The English and French and Spanish and Americans, like Paul Bowles. I was asked to do a lot of things for Paul—visas and stuff like that.”

After Morocco became nominally independent, Iselin's focus shifted to Algeria. The desk in Algiers was run out of the European Division, but Iselin spent a great deal of time cultivating Algerian—and after 1954, Algerian FLN—contacts. “The Algerians were a very tough nut to crack. Especially with Algeria being French completely, it was very difficult to—you had to be very careful.” By 1957, when John F. Kennedy was making his controversial “Algeria speech” in the U.S. Senate—in which he argued that excessive U.S. support for French colonialism would only further weaken France, transform moderate Algerian nationalists into communist rebels, and unhelpfully conflate decolonization with the Cold War—Iselin was developing his first recruits. “I guess I'm the only American official that's ever been given a tour—not a full dress parade, but a tour of an Algerian Liberation Army [ALN] camp in Morocco.” He made regular visits to ALN and FLN training sites. “We gave hospital supplies, though mainly cigarettes, which I got from Port Lyautey and used to bring back in the back of my car. Also, we had lighters made up with an Algerian flag and ‘FREE ALGERIA’ on them.” Iselin's feelings toward French colonialism were not untypical of the hard-nosed Kennedy-style

realism common among the American CIA officers he worked with.¹¹ JFK was more ruthless than his predecessors toward the leaders of anticolonial states in his own hemisphere (Castro and Cheddi Jagan, for example), but he also took greater care to discriminate more finely between different anticolonial leaders' agendas. This was partly because he met frequently with African leaders and devoted more time to the continent than his predecessors.¹² Iselin's anticolonial animus grew over the course of the 1960s. He described the onset of decolonization as a conveyor-belt-like process of new nations rolling into view, though he was still able to summon outrage at some of Charles de Gaulle's maneuvers:

It was a very interesting experience to see how those French colonies in Africa came on. A lot of them had nothing going for them, really. Ivory Coast did, obviously. Guinea had it. When de Gaulle offered independence to all those countries, he said, "You can have independence in 1960." They all agreed except one. Sékou Touré said, "No, I want it now." Do you know when the French left Conakry, they took out even the toilets? Unbelievable. They took out everything. They said, "Okay, psycho. You can have your—," but they didn't leave diddly-squat. Anyway, a tremendous amount of French had stayed in the Ivory Coast, and they prospered under Houphouët Boigny, really prospered.

During the height of the war between the FLN and France, Iselin continued to develop contacts within the FLN. By 1960, he had two reliable informants. "One turned out to be, when Algeria became independent, very high-level. The second one I recruited was medium-level, and after a while, when he went back, he decided to pursue a business career, which lost his access. While he was an agent being paid and everything, he provided us with an unbelievable amount of material from the FLN, really. All the files of the whole Tangiers setup." Iselin also made regular trips across the border into Algeria to get information from the ALN. "Obviously I hoped the French didn't know about [it]. I felt very strongly, being American, what we went through here in this country, I was entirely for independence as the rightful thing to do. I was morally into this completely."

French authorities in Algeria were aware of the CIA's interest in national liberation movements across North Africa, where the agency worked through the American Federation of Labor to infiltrate trade unions in Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria, building on its earlier support for anti-communist trade unions on the French mainland.¹³ The CIA first became interested in Fanon sometime in the late 1950s.

We tried to keep control of, keep up to date on, what was happening in the GPRA [Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic] and whatnot, so we knew about Fanon. I can't remember exactly when, but we knew he'd been an ambassador and whatnot. We knew he

¹¹ In Anders Stephanson's exposition of Kennedy's novel foreign policy orientation, the Algerian resistance was viewed as one piece in a wider historical movement, in which "anticolonial liberation was the wave, not only of the future but of the present, which would have happened with or without communism, and the United States should not subordinate its support for that wave to its coldwar concerns by supporting, in effect, the colonial powers of Western Europe just because they also happened to be allies in NATO." Stephanson, "Senator John F. Kennedy: Anti-Imperialism and Utopian Deficit," *Journal of American Studies* 48, no. 1 (2014): 1–24, here 2.

¹² Philip E. Muehlenbeck, *Betting on the Africans: John F. Kennedy's Courting of African Nationalist Leaders* (New York, 2012), xiii.

¹³ Matthew Connolly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford, 2002), 58–59.

had been a medical assistant in Blida with the French army. As he said, why cure these people when you're just gonna—anyway, so that's why he defected. I even read some of his literature and books.

The CIA case file on Fanon remains classified, though it was not the only intelligence agency that was interested in him. The first unclassified, but heavily redacted, FBI file dates from 1961, in which the FBI-CIA liaison Samuel J. Papich noted that Fanon was “the Algerian representative in Ghana,” and that he was currently in Tunisia preparing to travel to the U.S. for “extensive medical treatment.” In the following decade, the Bureau tried to account for Fanon’s influence on black radicals at home and abroad. An in-house FBI book review of David Caute’s 1970 biography of Fanon claimed that *The Wretched of the Earth* “is often quoted and misquoted by Stokely Carmichael and other black power advocates, both foreign and domestic,” and that “Fanon’s importance has been inflated into exaggerated dimensions by the need of black revolutionaries for philosophical justification and leadership.”¹⁴

Iselin came back from Morocco on home leave at the end of 1960, when M’hamed Yazid, an FLN representative in New York, contacted him about Fanon.

Yazid arranged to get Fanon over here. We offered Fanon to come in the summer. He didn’t do that, didn’t come until September. He delayed his departure because he thought he was getting better. He’d gone to Russia, and he’d had a bad experience there. They didn’t do anything for him. They let his wife sleep in the room, which is the only good thing about it, he told me. They fed him potatoes and stuff like that. He accepted to come to the States, obviously with a lot of qualms because of his views and whatnot. I went to New York and met him on the plane, got him down to Washington and then put him in a hotel. He was a sick man. Oh, he was hurting. He was tired. When I told him we had to go—we were landing in Virginia and had to go into the District of Columbia—he thought it was another border: “Oh my god, another border.”

As Fanon well knew, this was not just any border. He believed that American power represented the interest of capital more purely than its European counterparts. “The Americans take their role as the barons of international capitalism very seriously,” he wrote in *The Wretched of the Earth*, where he went on to sketch out a five-stage process of postwar U.S. policy toward the colonial world. “At first, [the Americans] advise the European countries to decolonize on gentleman’s terms” because they do not want to be involved in propping up colonies that have already formed privileged, protected economic spheres. Second, the Americans declare “their respect then their support for the principle: *Africa for the Africans*.”¹⁵ Third, the Americans observe the violence erupting in certain colonies—the Mau Mau actions in Kenya, for instance—and determine that such conflagrations are not worth engaging in one way or the other; they do not threaten much beyond the economy of the colony itself. Fourth, the Americans realize that in the

¹⁴ Three FBI files on Fanon were released thanks to the work of Simone Browne. The quotes from the files here are from Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, N.C., 2015), 2.

¹⁵ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 38. Fanon was referring to a speech by Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs G. Mennen Williams from 1961, in which Williams was widely reported to have called for “Africa for the Africans.” In fact, Williams said, “What we want for the Africans is what the Africans want for themselves.” The misreported speech was celebrated in the U.S. press, with Kennedy publicly backing it (“I don’t know who else Africa should be for”) despite being privately alarmed by it. Mennen was advised against using similar language in the future. Robert B. Rakove, *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Non-Aligned World* (Cambridge, 2013), 48–49.

context of “peaceful coexistence” of the Cold War, “every colony is destined to disappear and, taking it to the extreme, neutrality will command capitalism’s respect.” Fifth, and finally, the Americans, impatient that neutral nations are playing both sides of the Cold War, presume that there must be “outside” forces working on them that will require inoculation before they contract some form of socialism.¹⁶ In an article in the Algerian nationalist newspaper *El Moudjahid*, written two years before *Wretched* appeared, Fanon offered Americans some wry advice. While he acknowledged that U.S. liberals were more dialectically nimble than French colonials, he broadly believed that French, American, and European positions were converging on the understanding that colonialism ran “counter to history”—that much of Africa, once “France’s restricted hunting ground,” was in the process of becoming a “restricted hunting ground” for European capital.¹⁷ “Americans should be told,” Fanon wrote, “that if they want to fight communism they must, in certain sectors, adopt Communist attitudes.”¹⁸ In other words, unless Washington was willing to link national liberation, however vaguely, with “authentic justice” and social equality, local populations were liable to be attracted to Soviet rhetoric that made the connection explicit.

It seems reasonable to suppose that Fanon may have viewed Iselin as an emissary of ostensible goodwill, expressing a relatively inchoate stage in the unfolding official American attitude toward the Third World, one still holding itself to be sympathetic. Iselin was in some measure aware of Fanon’s suspicions, but when I met him, he was determined to revise the established view on Fanon’s time in the U.S., which still relies on Claude Lanzmann and Simone de Beauvoir’s secondhand accounts of Fanon being “left to rot in his hotel for ten days, alone and without medical attention.”¹⁹ Iselin told me that he first arranged for Fanon and his family to stay at the Dupont Circle Hotel in Washington, D.C.

After Fanon’s arrival in Washington, he remained in his hotel for a week before being admitted to NIH [the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland]. He was very disappointed at the delay, as was I, but it took that long to clear all the bureaucratic hurdles for admission. Some critics have suggested this delay was contrived so that Fanon could be “debriefed.” This was not so. Knowing Fanon’s political views and aware of his distrust of our motives, I avoided political discussion with him and concentrated on establishing rapport and making his stay at the hotel as comfortable as possible.

¹⁶ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 39.

¹⁷ Frantz Fanon, “A Continued Crisis,” in Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York, 1964), 106–109, here 108; originally published in *El Moudjahid*, May 5, 1958.

¹⁸ Frantz Fanon, “Maghreb Blood Shall Not Flow in Vain,” *ibid.*, 91–95, here 94; originally published in *El Moudjahid*, February 15, 1958.

¹⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, trans. Richard Howard, vol. 2: *Hard Times* (London, 1992), 621. A mythology has collected around Fanon’s trip to the U.S. for treatment. On one end of the spectrum, accounts such as Elaine Mokhtefi’s claim that Fanon was incapable of being “duped” by the CIA and would never have traveled with a CIA officer, while others, such as Hussein Abdulahi Bulhan’s, continue to suggest, with no direct evidence, that the CIA deliberately hastened Fanon’s death. Mokhtefi, *Algiers, Third World Capital: Freedom Fighters, Revolutionaries, Black Panthers* (New York, 2018), 43–44; Bulhan, *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression* (London, 1985), 5. The full set of motivations that drove Fanon to seek treatment in the U.S. may never be known, but it seems reasonable to consider the possibility that, while he viewed America negatively and with suspicion, he was a sick man trying to get the best medical care he could. See, for instance, Christian Filostrat’s 1978 interview with Fanon’s widow, Josie Fanon, on the occasion of her second visit to the U.S., in Filostrat, *Negritude Agonistes, Assimilation against Nationalism in the French-Speaking Caribbean and Guyane* (Cherry Hill, N.J., 2008), 155–161, here 156.

Iselin had Fanon listed as a patient under his previously used pseudonym, “Ibrahim Fanon,” while—to ease their passage as black people in the U.S. capital—he developed a cover story for the family.

I tried to be a good Samaritan and take care of him and gain his confidence. I think I succeeded in the end, getting his little boy Olivier into school. Olivier was dark, and so I finally got him in a private school as the son of an Arab diplomat. I got Josie an apartment and whatnot. If Frantz was to the left, she was further to the left.

Domestic U.S. racism, in Iselin’s eyes, was less than convenient when it came to fighting the Cold War in Africa. It made forging ties with the leaders of national liberation in Africa more subject to the charge of hypocrisy. That a cover story was necessary for him to help enroll Fanon’s son in Howard University’s kindergarten suggests that he thought it was imperative for even potentially sympathetic hosts to be fed smooth categories (“Arab diplomat”) rather than jagged realities.

Iselin claims to have developed a rapport with Fanon, but it is unclear what and how much they discussed. Iselin did, however, monitor the visitors who came to Fanon’s bedside. These included Holden Roberto, the founder of the National Liberation Front of Angola, whom Iselin said he met for the first time in Fanon’s hospital room, and who would later become a prized contact when Iselin oversaw part of the CIA’s African activities that included Angola.

When Fanon died in December 1961, his body was transported by the U.S. Air Force to Tunis, where the FLN had requested it be delivered. Iselin, who had been sent back to the North Africa desk at the time, had arrived the day before to take over temporarily for the Tunis station chief, who was on leave.

I just happened to get there the day before. In fact, the pictures of me at the funeral, I’ve still got my traveling clothes on because they lost my bag. When I got there, the Algerians knew who I was, and they said, “We want you to come to the funeral.” Then I can’t remember what happened, except I know that the next day, one day or two days later, they were going to have the funeral in Ghardimaou. They asked me to go. I did. I cleared it with Walmsley [Walter N. Walmsley, the U.S. ambassador in Tunis], who said, “Fine.”

Iselin still had a file of photos of himself and Frederick Flott at the funeral ceremony in Tunisia. Iselin is very tall and was easily recognizable in the photos, which included other snapshots in which he is not present, including blurred shots of FLN members carrying Fanon’s coffin. (When I asked if I could photograph the photos in his office, Iselin gently but firmly declined, and carefully placed them back in his files.) After the funeral in Ghardimaou—where in-country FLN leaders paid their last respects—the core group crossed the border into Algeria to perform the burial.

Attending the burial in Algeria was obviously an unexpected and unusual experience for me. I do not know how far into Algeria the burial site was located, but I remember it being a considerable hike from where we left the vehicles and proceeded on foot. We were escorted by a company of Algerian Liberation Army troops, who carried the casket to the burial site. After the funeral, we returned to Ghardimaou for a dinner hosted by the Algerian army leadership.

News of Iselin’s attendance was reported in the local press. *Le Petit Matin*, a Tunis newspaper, published an account of Fanon’s funeral in its edition of December 14,

1961. (Iselin spryly retrieved the original clipping for me from his Fanon file.) “The publication of my presence created quite a diplomatic stir, and I left Tunis immediately for Morocco.”

The following year, in 1962, Iselin and his family moved to Algiers, the capital of the newly independent state of Algeria. “I arrived when the French were still packing up—the streets were covered with straw because they were using that to pack their furniture.” Those were years that also figure as happy ones in his memory. With the first U.S. ambassador to Algeria, William Porter, Iselin took trips each year deep into the Sahara, in the far south of the country:

It was amazing because the French Foreign Legion was in control of the Sahara completely. They stopped us. We had walkie-talkies between two Dodge Power Wagons, and we were “Wineglass Four” and “Wineglass Five.” We were detained by the French Foreign Legion, at one of their posts way down in the Sahara. They had the audacity to ask us where the other three vehicles were.

Iselin had little trouble adjusting to Algiers:

My wife and I, we really had a lot of Algerian friends. I’m a hunter, and I used to—my pals in the government and whatnot—we’d go hunting on weekends. I used to go out before breakfast just around Algiers, and come back with four or five partridges. Anyway, I did a lot of that. People came to me because wild boar were rooting up all their gardens. They were frantic, so they’d say, “Come out and kill all the wild boar, and we’ll give you whatever you ask.” The point I’m trying to make is that these guys—Algerians—were really good guys, and they weren’t recruitable. I knew what they did and whatnot in the intelligence service and whatnot, and especially in the code work and all that stuff. They weren’t recruitable, but we were good—we were honestly good friends. They knew, I think, what I did. We never spoke about this. I knew what they did. This is what really saved me in the end. Because at the end, I made a recruitment that went sour on me, and they could have wrapped me up even with a passport. They could have made it awful. Things were tense in 1965. They let me get out without a scratch.

Iselin’s voice relaxed into a softer timber when he recalled Algeria as an unrestricted hunting ground. Enacting the process Fanon outlined in *Wretched*, Iselin made clear that he was more at ease with members of the emerging nationalist bourgeoisie than he was with French officials or the *piets-noirs*.

Iselin met several members of the early core leadership in the FLN, and maintained relationships with several. But after he moved on to other desks in Africa, he looked with less and less favor at the outcomes of independence around him on the continent, in particular in Algeria, whose liberation movement he had, in his own small way, participated in.

I felt disappointed when [Ahmed Ben] Bella—after independence, the way they went, they drifted to the left. Instead of taking a more realistic line, they fell for all the stuff about all the support the Soviet bloc was gonna give them and all that crap. I was very disappointed by that. Disappointed. Disappointed. They made it very difficult for us, for the West. They really got more and more difficult to deal with during this period. They could have had everything. Wonderful beaches, wonderful tourist country, unbelievable, but they really messed it up by going with collective farms, all this crap, and trying to build a steel industry. They had the oil. Still do. Yeah, they messed it up. I was hoping things would eventu-

ally change. I had a relationship with [Houari] Boumédiène, who led the coup. He knew what I'd done and etcetera, and so we had a good relationship. He never told me, but I knew—I was informed that the coup was gonna take place. I'd hoped that that was going to be a change for the better. It was, in many respects. The military is still in control of Algeria.

Iselin interpreted Algeria's pursuit of industrialization as an anachronistic blunder—a slap in the face of a future that could have transformed the land into promising tourist territory on the expanding American periphery, where decolonization was supposed to remake colonized populations into able restaurateurs and concierges, catering to, and benefiting from, visitors from the capitalist core.²⁰

In 1973, Iselin was scheduled to return to North Africa, where the number of agents had grown considerably from the handful who were there when he first worked out of Tangiers. But that year he was diagnosed with advanced lymphoma. Two years later, he left the CIA on a medical disability retirement. He retired to his Virginia farm, where, to his own astonishment, he continued to live for decades. Iselin got married again, to a woman who enjoyed hunting as much as he did; they raised racehorses and hounds, and he succeeded his father as chair of the Middleburg bank. In the newspapers, he read of the ascent of former contacts in the FLN, including his old acquaintance Abdelaziz Bouteflika—“He was an idealist, and he had a lot to learn”—who is credited as one of the scribes who took down Fanon's dictation of *The Wretched of the Earth*, and who earlier this year resigned in the face of mass protests, after having ruled Algeria for twenty years.²¹

Iselin's “disappointment” with national liberation movements is a common refrain among American liberals—academics, diplomats, businesspeople, union leaders, intelligence operatives, aid workers—who felt they had dedicated their lives to the decolonizing world of the 1950s and 1960s.²² Their books and memoirs often contain dreams of

²⁰ For a striking study of the American postwar vision of how decolonization was coupled with the American pursuit of leisure, and how tourism was believed to portend a U.S.-sponsored, consumer-centered, cosmopolitan, multiracial utopia, see Sarah Miller-Davenport, *Gateway State: Hawai'i and the Cultural Transformation of American Empire* (Princeton, N.J., 2019). The Vichy regime in France during the war years drafted the substantial plans for the heavy industrialization of Algeria. In the 1950s, these plans were supplanted by the Constantine Plan, which outlined how the French state would induce the participation of the Algerian urban classes in the market with a wide variety of incentives, some specifically tailored to their Muslim identity. Despite concentrating more on housing projects and modernizing agriculture, by the time Iselin was in Algiers and admiring its beaches, the Algerian Ministry of Public Works was determined to continue with large-scale industrial projects. Soviet advisors recommended pressing on with the French initiatives. Senior Algerian officials passed the details of their meeting with Soviet planners to the U.S. State Department, presumably to encourage rival aid. For a new interpretation of the Constantine Plan, on which I draw here, see Muriam Haleh Davis, “Markets and Muslims: Planning for ‘Homo Economics’ during Algerian Decolonization,” paper presented at the International History Workshop, Center for International History, Columbia University, November 14, 2018. For Soviet aid, see Jeffrey James Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order* (Oxford, 2016), 163, 322. For an overview of the political economy of the Algerian war and its economic and political effects on metropolitan France, see the in many ways unsurpassed World-Systems account of Hartmut Elsenhans, *Frankreichs Algerienkrieg 1954 bis 1962: Entkolonisierungsversuch einer kapitalistischen Metropole zum Zusammenbruch der Kolonialreiche* (Munich, 1974).

²¹ Alice Cherki, *Frantz Fanon: A Portrait*, trans. Nadia Benabid (Ithaca, N.Y., 2006), 151.

²² Among liberal academics, see, for instance, the retrospective reflections of two of the most prolific American writers about decolonization: Clifford Geertz, “The Judging of Nations: Some Comments on the Assessment of Regimes in the New States,” *European Journal of Sociology* 18, no. 2 (1977): 245–261; and Rupert Emerson, “The Fate of Human Rights in the Third World,” *World Politics* 27, no. 2 (1975): 201–226. Other entries in the tragic register include Robert A. Packenham, *Liberal America and the Third World: Political Development Ideas in Foreign Aid and Social Science* (Princeton, N.J., 1973); and Michael Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation: Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions* (New Haven, Conn., 2015). For diplomats, see, for instance, William Attwood, *The Reds and the Blacks: A Per-*

what could have been, and sometimes florid alternative futures. But the dominant feature is a will to correct: the Algerian revolutionaries may have believed that they were players in an epic drama, but they were mistaken about the genre. Wistfulness aside, the emplotment of decolonization by sympathetic U.S. observers was consistently tragic. Iselin's story contains many standard features of the mode: the tight weave of anticolonialism and anti-communism found among U.S. officials in the Kennedy years; the conviction that other peoples, too, deserve their revolutions; the sense of having "good friends" in the regions where he worked; the deep connection to foreign landscapes and fauna; and, finally, the sense that they—the decolonized—"messed it up." To a degree that is hard to gauge, some of Iselin's reliance on the declensionist trope may have been absorbed from or reinforced by the wider American culture of the 1970s and 1980s.²³ In films and novels and popular books of that period, the Third World is understood or remembered as an area of darkness that squandered its future, while American cities themselves often feature as Third World conurbations in the making.²⁴ Nevertheless, Iselin's dialogue captures perhaps the most salient element of the American interest in decolonization: that it was a grand recruitment gone sour, in which the specter of economic sovereignty was pursued, or rhetorically championed, by nationalist parties, a few of which could, for a time, afford their stubbornness thanks to natural resources. For some of Iselin's former colleagues, Algeria would recover some of its formerly promising status only when the "war on terror" made it an attractive, if challenging, ally.²⁵

sonal Adventure (New York, 1967), which was promptly banned in independent Kenya. For union/intelligence figures, see in particular Ted Morgan, *A Covert Life: Jay Lovestone, Communist, Anti-Communist, and Spymaster* (New York, 1999); and John C. Stonor, "Anti-Communism, Anti-Colonialism, and African Labor: The AFL-CIO in Africa, 1950–1975" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2001).

²³ Iselin's commentary may also owe something to the earlier type of American narrative that Christina Klein has tracked in more popular responses to the outside world. In James Michener's early work, for instance, Klein identifies an avoidance of common tropes of imperial narratives—grand vistas, picturesque sites, and the like—in favor of scenes that stress the personal exchange between social equals. The implicit narrative function, Klein suggests, is to foreground "the sentimental ideal of forging personal bonds" and "the principle of reciprocity" and to remove "any possibility of economic exploitation." The difference with Iselin is that his personal bonds with Moroccans and Algerians were most often of an elite-to-fellow-emerging-elite nature. Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Berkeley, Calif., 2003), 131, 130. For a rich methodological reflection on "the imperial as a way of seeing," which helped focus the concerns of this essay, see Paul A. Kramer, "Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World," *American Historical Review* 116, no. 5 (December 2011): 1348–1391, here 1350.

²⁴ The way the "Third World" and its successors have been depicted in American literature over time would seem to be a subject worthy of systematic study, from Paul Bowles's lament for the passing of traditional Moroccan society between the crosshairs of leftist revolution and colonial reaction in *The Spider's House* (1955); to Allen Drury's *A Shade of Difference* (1962), in which the United States nearly becomes mired in a civil war after a young African leader in a fictional "Gorotoland" manipulates the United Nations in a bid for independence and nefariously tries to accelerate U.S. school integration, while his comrade in Panama tries to nationalize the canal, Nasser-style (the NAACP is recast as DEFY); to John Updike's *The Coup* (1978), in which an African dictator goes to war against American aid; to George Packer's *The Half Man* (1991), in which the anti-American anti-hero launches a guerrilla war against his native island's landowning class after spiraling into a breakdown after someone accuses him of not having read Adorno in a graduate school seminar; to Norman Rush's *Mortals* (2003), in which the protagonist, a Milton-adoring CIA agent under cover as an English teacher in Botswana, can no longer justify his existence in the post-Cold War dispensation and surrenders to introspection and political revision. Each of these novels captures a distinctive American way of approaching (traditionalist-nostalgic, reactionary-comic, liberal-satirical, humanitarian-sincere, leftist-ironic) the subject of anticolonial revolution/Third World/Global South.

²⁵ See Bruce Riedel, "Algeria a Complex Ally in War against Al-Qaeda," *Al-Monitor*, February 3, 2013, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/02/algeria-a-complex-ally-in-war-against-al-qaeda.html>.

Fanon, too, would have been more than critical of the ultimate outcome of the Algerian Revolution. Not necessarily in its earlier years, when Boumédiène led the charge in promoting the New International Economic Order—one of the last significant coordinated attempts by a collective of nations to revise the rules of global redistribution—but certainly the Algeria of the past three decades. In *Wretched*, Fanon wrote of “the race for jobs and handouts that is symptomatic of the aftermath of independence.” His concern was that the same nationalist bourgeois elite that Iselin wanted to rule and prosper would not be effectively combated. This class was not a mirror of the European version but, significantly for Fanon, a caricature. “Mediocre in its winnings, in its achievements and its thinking, this bourgeoisie attempts to mask its mediocrity by ostentatious projects for individual prestige, chromium-plated American cars, vacations on the French Riviera and weekends in neon-lit nightclubs.”²⁶ The FLN gerontocracy in Algeria today has belatedly traveled the trajectory that Fanon believed had to be avoided at all costs, one in which “[t]he party machine tends to resist any innovation. The revolutionary minority finds itself isolated, confronted by a leadership, frightened and anguished at the idea it could be swept away in a whirlwind whose nature, strength and direction are beyond its imagining.”²⁷

The year after I met Iselin, I traveled across Algeria for an unrelated project. Fanon’s old journalistic home *El Moudjahid* is now the desiccated organ of the Algerian state, where the obituary columns for the revolutionary dead have pride of place. Alongside it, however, some of the best and least inhibited newspapers in North Africa—*El Watan* and *Le Quotidien d’Oran*—continue to thrive. The white arcades of Algiers’s coastline, where the Iselins would have seen jewelry and French pastries in the windows, are now Internet rooms and impromptu shops where men spread out their electronic wares on the concrete floor. Young middle-class *algérois* hang out at the new malls in the city and gaze at their phones like everybody else. It is not difficult to tease out their impatience with the regime that affords them few chances of a promising future outside of leaving the country. At the city center, some of Fanon’s books are for sale, but more as tourist souvenirs, near the postcard racks. History books and imagery from the years of revolution are in no short supply, but there is a notable silence about the October 1988 protests against the regime, which forced the military government to make democratic reforms, however cosmetic, and revealed a rift in society that dramatically deepened in the ensuing civil war of the 1990s.²⁸ No Algerian history department has yet overseen a thesis devoted to the period of post-independence.²⁹ The sense of rupture of 1988, which was only faintly revisited during the Arab Spring, appears to have reopened with this year’s massive demonstrations that forced the ruling clique of generals to restrain themselves from rolling out an already incapacitated President Bouteflika for a fifth term.

On the outskirts of Algiers, it is hard to imagine going hunting amid the temporary camps erected for the Chinese workers whom the government has hired to construct

²⁶ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 121, 120.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁸ Hugh Roberts, “Moral Economy or Moral Polity? The Political Anthropology of Algerian Riots,” Crisis States Programme Development Research Centre Working Paper No. 17, October 2002, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/28292/1/WP17HRoberts.pdf>.

²⁹ Malika Rahal, “Le temps arrêté: Un pays sans histoire. Algérie 1962–2013,” *Écrire l’histoire*, no. 12 (Autumn 2013): 7–36, here 27–28.

both necessities, such as roads, and the president's vanity projects, such as the tallest minaret in the world. Walking through Algerian towns and cities, I rarely sidestepped Iselin's epistemologically crippling conviction that I was witnessing nothing more than the aftereffects of a misguided course of political development, or that I met with nothing but confirmations and caricatures of a revolution—Fanon's revolution—betrayed. But it may be that the more Fanonist a visitor's vision becomes, the more clearly appear the new forms of unfreedom that threaten the future, rather than the squandering of some pristine original freedom that only needed to be preserved.

In contemporary Western commentary about Algeria, Iselin's call for tourist development is a common refrain. "Tourism might help Algeria open up," advised *The Economist* in 2017. "Its 1,600km of coastline and deserted beaches could attract far more holidaymakers than they do."³⁰ "Blessed with abundant natural resources, stunningly beautiful landscapes and with the makings of a dynamic and youthful workforce, the country ought to be thriving," noted the *Financial Times* last year. "Tourism could help diversify the economy away from reliance on petrodollars, providing at least some of the jobs that young people yearn for."³¹ The message appears to be getting through to the ministries. In the cavernous Houari Boumediène Airport, I saw enormous posters featuring digitally generated plans for coastal villas and luxury condos. The more privileged children of the revolution are offered these images of more segregated, comfortable lives, while the rest of the population tries to learn how to achieve the appropriate objects of desire.

³⁰ "Reviving the Land of the Living Dead," *The Economist*, July 1, 2017, 4.

³¹ "Algeria Can Ill-Afford More Stagnation and Drift," *Financial Times*, November 26, 2018, 8.

Thomas Meaney is a Journalist in Residence at the Max Planck Society in Göttingen, Germany. His work has recently appeared in *Social Research*.