“SPY PILOT” SETS THE RECORD STRAIGHT
By STEVEN TRAVERS

Keith Dunnavant is a writer who likes to set the record straight and might even be called a curmudgeon of sorts. In his biography of legendary Alabama football coach Paul “Bear” Bryant, and in subsequent commentary about the effect of the 1970 USC-Alabama football game’s effect on desegregation of Southern collegiate football, Keith tended to go against the grain, which was usually based on the notion that a happy group of white and black Trojan warriors traveled to Birmingham, set the Crimson Tide straight, and caused them to do the right thing.

This is far too simplistic and basically not true. Keith was entirely correct in his assessment, “It’s more complicated than that.”

So it makes sense that Keith has teamed with Francis Gary Powers Jr. to investigate the story of Francis’s father, the spy pilot shot down by the Soviet Union in 1960, exacerbating Cold War tensions beyond the nuclear and space build-ups of the era.

The average American probably knows who Powers was, but for reasons that make little sense, Powers was attacked by his own government essentially for not committing the mortal sin of suicide. The CIA director at the time was John McCone, a San Francisco Republican appointed by John Kennedy apparently to mollify the right demanding toughness against Communism.

McCone was as charged up against the Communists as anybody, straight out of the Joe McCarthy-Richard Nixon wing of the John Birch Society. He had replaced the old icons who allowed the Bay of Pigs to fail, and was contemptuous of Powers for not taking a poison pin he had been provided. The book details that the U-2 pilots were not “ordered” to kill themselves; the poison pin was there if needed but it was left up to the discretion of the pilots.

It was problematic for Powers to even take the poison considering he was first trying to save his plane from crashing, then had to escape in a harrowing exit from the cockpit that threatened to tear his body in two, then was surrounded first by farmers and then by Soviet authorities.

The book traverses a recurring theme: alcoholism. Powers’s first wife was a terrible dunk, the experience of a husband in captivity only making it worse. She was a “loose cannon” that worried the military and CIA who Powers worked for. His second wife also was an alcoholic, especially after Powers died too soon in a helicopter accident in L.A. in 1977. Finally the son battled alcohol growing up without a dad, but eventually he found purpose in getting to the bottom of his dad’s story, having museums and think tanks accurately assess the truth of the U-2 incident, and finally getting the Pentagon to award his dad with medals of valor denied him during his life.

The book is unusual in that the first half is written apparently by Dunnavant in
biographical form, but when the son is born the book then becomes a first-person autobiography.

A major question addressed is how much Powers told the Soviets while in captivity. He was treated well and not tortured, but different rumors floated about what he was saying and even where his loyalty lay. What seems to emerge is that the Soviets knew most of what Powers knew already. They were aware of the flights but did not register public complaint because it made Nikita Khrushchev look impotent. He was an important piece of propaganda so having Powers tell people he was treated well made them look humane. Powers was useful to them in that he was used to make a trade for a Soviet spy jailed in the U.S.

Powers was a hero and his son heroic in pursuing the truth. The Cold War was as JFK said a “twilight struggle” that did not produce men like George Patton winning glorious battles, but rather was a long struggle of attrition slowly but surely making whatever “victories” the Communists may have achieved ultimately Pyrrhic, in that the cost was greater than the victory itself.