

Legacy of Ashes- The History of the CIA
Tim Weiner

Espionage and democracy are incompatible

Tim Weiner gives a sweeping account of the full six decade history of the CIA. As his title "Legacy of Ashes" implies, it is a chronicle of blunders and incompetence occasionally interspersed with success.

A constant theme throughout the book is the clashes of strong egos, of individual ambition taking precedence over national interest. This is a problem throughout the bureaucracy. The natural brakes on bureaucracy are the Congressional checkbook, oversight and rivalries from above and elsewhere in the bureaucracy, and public opinion informed by a diligent press. Bureaucrats everywhere try to hide their failings. When the mission itself is clandestine, they can be unusually successful in doing so.

The CIA is split into a Directorate of Operations and a Directorate of Intelligence, responsible for covert actions and espionage respectively. The DO received most of the funding through the early history of the CIA, and because of its activist charter got the agency into its gravest difficulties. Under its first long-term director, Allen Dulles, it developed a passion for regime change. Installing the Shah in Iran was the most sparkling success. Along with regime change, it was fascinated with political assassination.

Presidents were fascinated by the opportunities which a clandestine service presented for carrying out activities outside the law, or at least at its limits. They often directed the CIA to do things that its management would rather not have done, and they often asked for intelligence that was impossible to acquire given the CIA's resources. The tension resulted in a lot of lies being told. Presidents and Congress were told what they wanted to hear rather than the truth. Agency directors, especially those from the outside, seldom got the whole truth from their underlings. Even station chiefs often ran their own operations without informing their superiors. And, the superiors often did not want to know the details; they did not want to have to lie out right when called before their higher ups.

Castro was an especially attractive target for assassination. Weiner chronicles several schemes to wipe him out. He does not say that Kennedy's assassination was directly due to Castro, but he does say that the CIA withheld a great deal of information from the Warren Commission investigating the assassination, and suggests that they would have come to different conclusions had they had all the facts.

Other bungled covert operations included the Bay of Pigs, our operations against Sukarno in Indonesia, Iran Contra, the many failures to eliminate bin Laden between the time of the embassy bombings in Africa and 9/11. We embarrassed ourselves by association with skulduggery in Chile, the Diem assassination in Vietnam, and murderous regimes throughout Africa and Latin America.

The failures on the intelligence gathering side were equally great. The fundamental problem that has dogged the agency since its inception is that they have never had agents who speak foreign languages

and are willing to live under cover in foreign countries to collect human intelligence. Weiner claims that we were almost uniformly unsuccessful in placing agents in the USSR, China, Vietnam, Cuba and Islamic nations. The intelligence we were able to gather came from foreign intelligence agencies, communications intercepts and other electronic sources.

The fact that we did not know what was going on led to many failures. We did not understand the USSR and its intentions, so we vastly overrated the threat. We constantly overrated the danger of merely neutral countries going over to the communists, leading us to support regime changes that installed right wing thugs. In my travels through South America I am amused at the patronizing, sometimes contemptuous familiarity with which almost everybody speaks of the CIA. La see-ah. When those regimes fall, as in Nicaragua, Honduras, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic, we reap a harvest of resentment.

Weiner does not delve deeply into the motives of moles and traitors, but he does offer ample evidence that our counterintelligence has been consistently weak. The Soviets penetrated the CIA with some regularity, and our agents were neutralized. As a consequence, spying for America has been extremely dangerous for Soviet citizens and Muslims.

The focus of the book is primarily on the US. Weiner does not go into the extent of the real threat posed by, for instance, left-wing guerrillas in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Brazil during the 1970s. The regimes we supported were repressive, and our CIA perhaps out of control, but there was a real enemy, a fact which Weiner tends to understate.

No personality comes out of the book untarnished, but Weiner clearly views some of his subjects as more intelligent and having more integrity than others. Presidents Eisenhower, Carter, Ford and George H. W. Bush come out looking pretty good. John and Bobby Kennedy relentlessly pushed the CIA to unconscionable acts. Nixon, George W, and Lyndon Johnson did likewise. Among the CIA directors, Richard Helms and George Tenet come out looking fairly good; William Casey, Allen Dulles, and Porter Goss come out looking bad. Weiner has a long list of sources, and one suspects that good sources got favorable treatment.

The major conclusion of the book are that running an espionage service is inconsistent with the freedoms inherent in a democracy. Weiner says in his conclusion that an occasional terrorist attack is probably the price we must pay for maintaining our individual liberties. A conclusion I draw is that there are no altruists in government. People seek power for its own sake and sometimes their own enrichment. The unaccountable power that came with service in the CIA was attractive to a number of unprincipled characters from its very first days, with the veterans of the OSS. Will