

The Life and Times of the 'Agency'

by Chalmers Johnson via reed - ICH *Wednesday, Jul 25 2007, 6:43pm*

international / imperialism / other press

A review of *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* by Tim Weiner

The American people may not know it but they have some severe problems with one of their official governmental entities, the Central Intelligence Agency. Because of the almost total secrecy surrounding its activities and the lack of cost accounting on how it spends the money covertly appropriated for it within the defense budget, it is impossible for citizens to know what the CIA's approximately 17,000 employees do with, or for, their share of the yearly \$44 billion-\$48 billion or more spent on "intelligence." This inability to account for anything at the CIA is, however, only one problem with the Agency and hardly the most serious one either.

There are currently at least two criminal trials underway in Italy and Germany against several dozen CIA officials for felonies committed in those countries, including kidnapping people with a legal right to be in Germany and Italy, illegally transporting them to countries such as Egypt and Jordan for torture, and causing them to "disappear" into secret foreign or CIA-run prisons outside the U.S. without any form of due process of law.

The possibility that CIA funds are simply being ripped off by insiders is also acute. The CIA's former number three official, its executive director and chief procurement officer, Kyle "Dusty" Foggo, is now under federal indictment in San Diego for corruptly funneling contracts for water, air services, and armored vehicles to a lifelong friend and defense contractor, Brent Wilkes, who was unqualified to perform the services being sought. In return, Wilkes treated Foggo to thousands of dollars' worth of vacation trips and dinners, and promised him a top job at his company when he retired from the CIA.

Thirty years ago, in a futile attempt to provide some check on endemic misbehavior by the CIA, the administration of Gerald Ford created the President's Intelligence Oversight Board. It was to be a civilian watchdog over the Agency. A 1981 executive order by President Ronald Reagan made the board permanent and gave it the mission of identifying CIA violations of the law (while keeping them secret in order not to endanger national security). Through five previous administrations, members of the board -- all civilians not employed by the government -- actively reported on and investigated some of the CIA's most secret operations that seemed to breach legal limits.

However, on July 15, 2007, John Solomon of the Washington Post reported that, for the first five-and-a-half years of the Bush administration, the Intelligence Oversight Board did nothing -- no investigations, no reports, no questioning of CIA officials. It evidently found no reason to inquire into the interrogation methods Agency operatives employed at secret prisons or the transfer of captives to countries that use torture, or domestic wiretapping not warranted by a federal court.

Who were the members of this non-oversight board of see-no-evil, hear-no-evil, speak-no-evil monkeys? The board now in place is led by former Bush economic adviser Stephen Friedman. It includes Don Evans, a former commerce secretary and friend of the President, former Admiral David Jeremiah, and lawyer Arthur B. Culvahouse. The only thing they accomplished was to express their contempt for a legal order by a president of the United States.

Corrupt and undemocratic practices by the CIA have prevailed since it was created in 1947. However, as citizens we have now, for the first time, been given a striking range of critical information necessary to understand how this situation came about and why it has been so impossible to remedy. We have a long, richly documented history of the CIA from its post-World War II origins to its failure to supply even the most elementary information about Iraq before the 2003 invasion of that country.

Declassified CIA Records

Tim Weiner's book, *Legacy of Ashes*, is important for many reasons, but certainly one is that it brings back from the dead the possibility that journalism can actually help citizens perform elementary oversight on our government. Until Weiner's magnificent effort, I would have agreed with Seymour Hersh that, in the current crisis of American governance and foreign policy, the failure of the press has been almost complete. Our journalists have generally not even tried to penetrate the layers of secrecy that the executive branch throws up to ward off scrutiny of its often illegal and incompetent activities. This is the first book I've read in a long time that documents its very important assertions in a way that goes well beyond asking readers merely to trust the reporter.

Weiner, a New York Times correspondent, has been working on *Legacy of Ashes* for 20 years. He has read over 50,000 government documents, mostly from the CIA, the White House, and the State Department. He was instrumental in causing the CIA Records Search Technology (CREST) program of the National Archives to declassify many of them, particularly in 2005 and 2006. He has read more than 2,000 oral histories of American intelligence officers, soldiers, and diplomats and has himself conducted more than 300 on-the-record interviews with current and past CIA officers, including ten former directors of central intelligence. Truly exceptional among authors of books on the CIA, he makes the following claim: "This book is on the record -- no anonymous sources, no blind quotations, no hearsay."

Weiner's history contains 154 pages of end-notes keyed to comments in the text. (Numbered notes and standard scholarly citations would have been preferable, as well as an annotated bibliography providing information on where documents could be found; but what he has done is still light-years ahead of competing works.) These notes contain extensive verbatim quotations from documents, interviews, and oral histories. Weiner also observes: "The CIA has reneged on pledges made by three consecutive directors of central intelligence -- [Robert] Gates, [James] Woolsey, and [John] Deutch -- to declassify records on nine major covert actions: France and Italy in the 1940s and 1950s; North Korea in the 1950s; Iran in 1953; Indonesia in 1958; Tibet in the 1950s and 1960s; and the Congo, the Dominican Republic, and Laos in the 1960s." He is nonetheless able to supply key details on each of these operations from unofficial, but fully identified, sources.

In May 2003, after a lengthy delay, the government finally released the documents on President Dwight D. Eisenhower's engineered regime change in Guatemala in 1954; most of the records from the 1961 Bay of Pigs fiasco in which a CIA-created exile army of Cubans went to their deaths or to prison in a hapless invasion of that island have been released; and the reports on the CIA's 1953 overthrow of Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mossadeq were leaked. Weiner's efforts and his resulting book are monuments to serious historical research in our allegedly "open society." Still, he warns,

"While I was gathering and obtaining declassification authorization for some of the CIA records used in this book at the National Archives, the agency [the CIA] was engaged in a secret effort to reclassify many of those same records, dating back to the 1940s,

flouting the law and breaking its word. Nevertheless, the work of historians, archivists, and journalists has created a foundation of documents on which a book can be built."

Surprise Attacks

As an idea, if not an actual entity, the Central Intelligence Agency came into being as a result of December 7, 1941, when the Japanese attacked the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor. It functionally came to an end, as Weiner makes clear, on September 11, 2001, when operatives of al-Qaeda flew hijacked airliners into the World Trade towers in Manhattan and the Pentagon in Washington, DC. Both assaults were successful surprise attacks.

The Central Intelligence Agency itself was created during the Truman administration in order to prevent future surprise attacks like Pearl Harbor by uncovering planning for them and so forewarning against them. On September 11th, 2001, the CIA was revealed to be a failure precisely because it had been unable to discover the al-Qaeda plot and sound the alarm against a surprise attack that would prove almost as devastating as Pearl Harbor. After 9/11, the Agency, having largely discredited itself, went into a steep decline and finished the job. Weiner concludes: "Under [CIA Director George Tenet's] leadership, the agency produced the worst body of work in its long history: a special national intelligence estimate titled 'Iraq's Continuing Programs for Weapons of Mass Destruction.'" It is axiomatic that, as political leaders lose faith in an intelligence agency and quit listening to it, its functional life is over, even if the people working there continue to report to their offices.

In December 1941, there was sufficient intelligence on Japanese activities for the U.S. to have been much better prepared for a surprise attack. Naval Intelligence had cracked Japanese diplomatic and military codes; radar stations and patrol flights had been authorized (but not fully deployed); and strategic knowledge of Japanese past behaviors and capabilities (if not of intentions) was adequate. The FBI had even observed the Japanese consul-general in Honolulu burning records in his backyard but reported this information only to Director J. Edgar Hoover, who did not pass it on.

Lacking was a central office to collate, analyze, and put in suitable form for presentation to the president all U.S. government information on an important issue. In 1941, there were plenty of signals about what was coming, but the U.S. government lacked the organization and expertise to distinguish true signals from the background "noise" of day-to-day communications. In the 1950s, Roberta Wohlstetter, a strategist for the Air Force's think tank, the RAND Corporation, wrote a secret study that documented the coordination and communications failings leading up to Pearl Harbor. (Entitled Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision, it was declassified and published by Stanford University Press in 1962.)

The Legacy of the OSS

The National Security Act of 1947 created the CIA with emphasis on the word "central" in its title. The Agency was supposed to become the unifying organization that would distill and write up all available intelligence, and offer it to political leaders in a manageable form. The Act gave the CIA five functions, four of them dealing with the collection, coordination, and dissemination of intelligence from open sources as well as espionage. It was the fifth function -- lodged in a vaguely worded passage that allowed the CIA to "perform such other functions and duties related to intelligence affecting the national security as the National Security Council may from time to time direct" -- that turned the CIA into the personal, secret, unaccountable army of the president.

From the very beginning, the Agency failed to do what President Truman expected of it, turning at

once to "cloak-and-dagger" projects that were clearly beyond its mandate and only imperfectly integrated into any grand strategy of the U.S. government. Weiner stresses that the true author of the CIA's clandestine functions was George Kennan, the senior State Department authority on the Soviet Union and creator of the idea of "containing" the spread of communism rather than going to war with ("rolling back") the USSR.

Kennan had been alarmed by the ease with which the Soviets were setting up satellites in Eastern Europe and he wanted to "fight fire with fire." Others joined with him to promote this agenda, above all the veterans of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), a unit that, under General William J. "Wild Bill" Donovan during World War II, had sent saboteurs behind enemy lines, disseminated disinformation and propaganda to mislead Axis forces, and tried to recruit resistance fighters in occupied countries.

On September 20, 1945, Truman had abolished the OSS -- a bureaucratic victory for the Pentagon, the State Department, and the FBI, all of which considered the OSS an upstart organization that impinged on their respective jurisdictions. Many of the early leaders of the CIA were OSS veterans and devoted themselves to consolidating and entrenching their new vehicle for influence in Washington. They also passionately believed that they were people with a self-appointed mission of world-shaking importance and that, as a result, they were beyond the normal legal restraints placed on government officials.

From its inception the CIA has labored under two contradictory conceptions of what it was supposed to be doing, and no president ever succeeded in correcting or resolving this situation. Espionage and intelligence analysis seek to know the world as it is; covert action seeks to change the world, whether it understands it or not. The best CIA exemplar of the intelligence-collecting function was Richard Helms, director of central intelligence (DCI) from 1966 to 1973 (who died in 2002). The great protagonist of cloak-and-dagger work was Frank Wisner, the CIA's director of operations from 1948 until the late 1950s when he went insane and, in 1965, committed suicide. Wisner never had any patience for espionage.

Weiner quotes William Colby, a future DCI (1973-1976), on this subject. The separation of the scholars of the research and analysis division from the spies of the clandestine service created two cultures within the intelligence profession, he said, "separate, unequal, and contemptuous of each other." That critique remained true throughout the CIA's first 60 years.

By 1964, the CIA's clandestine service was consuming close to two-thirds of its budget and 90% of the director's time. The Agency gathered under one roof Wall Street brokers, Ivy League professors, soldiers of fortune, ad men, newsmen, stunt men, second-story men, and con men. They never learned to work together -- the ultimate result being a series of failures in both intelligence and covert operations. In January 1961, on leaving office after two terms, President Eisenhower had already grasped the situation fully. "Nothing has changed since Pearl Harbor," he told his director of central intelligence, Allen Dulles. "I leave a legacy of ashes to my successor." Weiner, of course, draws his title from Eisenhower's metaphor. It would only get worse in the years to come.

The historical record is unequivocal. The United States is ham-handed and brutal in conceiving and executing clandestine operations, and it is simply no good at espionage; its operatives never have enough linguistic and cultural knowledge of target countries to recruit spies effectively. The CIA also appears to be one of the most easily penetrated espionage organizations on the planet. From the beginning, it repeatedly lost its assets to double agents.

Typically, in the early 1950s, the Agency dropped millions of dollars worth of gold bars, arms, two-

way radios, and agents into Poland to support what its top officials believed was a powerful Polish underground movement against the Soviets. In fact, Soviet agents had wiped out the movement years before, turned key people in it into double agents, and played the CIA for suckers. As Weiner comments, not only had five years of planning, various agents, and millions of dollars "gone down the drain," but the "unkindest cut might have been [the Agency's] discovery that the Poles had sent a chunk of the CIA's money to the Communist Party of Italy." [pp. 67-68]

The story would prove unending. On February 21, 1994, the Agency finally discovered and arrested Aldrich Ames, the CIA's chief of counterintelligence for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, who had been spying for the USSR for seven years and had sent innumerable U.S. agents before KGB firing squads. Weiner comments, "The Ames case revealed an institutional carelessness that bordered on criminal negligence." [p. 451]

The Search for Technological Means

Over the years, in order to compensate for these serious inadequacies, the CIA turned increasingly to signals intelligence and other technological means of spying like U-2 reconnaissance aircraft and satellites. In 1952, the top leaders of the CIA created the National Security Agency -- an eavesdropping and cryptological unit -- to overcome the Agency's abject failure to place any spies in North Korea during the Korean War. The Agency debacle at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba led a frustrated Pentagon to create its own Defense Intelligence Agency as a check on the military amateurism of the CIA's clandestine service officers.

Still, technological means, whether satellite spying or electronic eavesdropping, will seldom reveal intentions -- and that is the *raison d'être* of intelligence estimates. As Haviland Smith, who ran operations against the USSR in the 1960s and 1970s, lamented, "The only thing missing is -- we don't have anything on Soviet intentions. And I don't know how you get that. And that's the charter of the clandestine service [emphasis in original, pp. 360-61])."

The actual intelligence collected was just as problematic. On the most important annual intelligence estimate throughout the Cold War -- that of the Soviet order of battle -- the CIA invariably overstated its size and menace. Then, to add insult to injury, under George H. W. Bush's tenure as DCI (1976-77), the agency tore itself apart over ill-informed right-wing claims that it was actually underestimating Soviet military forces. The result was the appointment of "Team B" during the Ford presidency, led by Polish exiles and neoconservative fanatics. It was tasked to "correct" the work of the Office of National Estimates.

"After the Cold War was over," writes Weiner, "the agency put Team B's findings to the test. Every one of them was wrong." [p. 352] But the problem was not simply one of the CIA succumbing to political pressure. It was also structural: "[F]or thirteen years, from Nixon's era to the dying days of the Cold War, every estimate of Soviet strategic nuclear forces overstated [emphasis in original] the rate at which Moscow was modernizing its weaponry." [p. 297]

From 1967 to 1973, I served as an outside consultant to the Office of National Estimates, one of about a dozen specialists brought in to try to overcome the myopia and bureaucratism involved in the writing of these national intelligence estimates. I recall agonized debates over how the mechanical highlighting of worst-case analyses of Soviet weapons was helping to promote the arms race. Some senior intelligence analysts tried to resist the pressures of the Air Force and the military-industrial complex. Nonetheless, the late John Huizenga, an erudite intelligence analyst who headed the Office of National Estimates from 1971 until the wholesale purge of the Agency by DCI James Schlesinger in 1973, bluntly said to the CIA's historians:

"In retrospect.... I really do not believe that an intelligence organization in this government is able to deliver an honest analytical product without facing the risk of political contention. . . . I think that intelligence has had relatively little impact on the policies that we've made over the years. Relatively none. . . . Ideally, what had been supposed was that . . . serious intelligence analysis could.... assist the policy side to reexamine premises, render policymaking more sophisticated, closer to the reality of the world. Those were the large ambitions which I think were never realized." [p. 353]

On the clandestine side, the human costs were much higher. The CIA's incessant, almost always misguided, attempts to determine how other people should govern themselves; its secret support for fascists (e.g., Greece under George Papadopoulos), militarists (e.g., Chile under Gen. Augusto Pinochet), and murderers (e.g., the Congo under Joseph Mobutu); its uncritical support of death squads (El Salvador) and religious fanatics (Muslim fundamentalists in Afghanistan) -- all these and more activities combined to pepper the world with blowback movements against the United States.

Nothing has done more to undercut the reputation of the United States than the CIA's "clandestine" (only in terms of the American people) murders of the presidents of South Vietnam and the Congo, its ravishing of the governments of Iran, Indonesia (three times), South Korea (twice), all of the Indochinese states, virtually every government in Latin America, and Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The deaths from these armed assaults run into the millions. After 9/11, President Bush asked "Why do they hate us?" From Iran (1953) to Iraq (2003), the better question would be, "Who does not?"

The Cash Nexus

There is a major exception to this portrait of long-term Agency incompetence. "One weapon the CIA used with surpassing skill," Weiner writes, "was cold cash. The agency excelled at buying the services of foreign politicians." [p. 116] It started with the Italian elections of April 1948. The CIA did not yet have a secure source of clandestine money and had to raise it secretly from Wall Street operators, rich Italian-Americans, and others.

"The millions were delivered to Italian politicians and the priests of Catholic Action, a political arm of the Vatican. Suitcases filled with cash changed hands in the four-star Hassler Hotel. . . . Italy's Christian Democrats won by a comfortable margin and formed a government that excluded communists. A long romance between the [Christian Democratic] party and the agency began. The CIA's practice of purchasing elections and politicians with bags of cash was repeated in Italy -- and in many other countries -- for the next twenty-five years." [p. 27]

The CIA ultimately spent at least \$65 million on Italy's politicians -- including "every Christian Democrat who ever won a national election in Italy." [p. 298] As the Marshall Plan to reconstruct Europe got up to speed in the late 1940s, the CIA secretly skimmed the money it needed from Marshall Plan accounts. After the Plan ended, secret funds buried in the annual Defense appropriation bill continued to finance the CIA's operations.

After Italy, the CIA moved on to Japan, paying to bring Nobusuke Kishi to power as Japan's prime minister (in office 1957-1960), the country's World War II minister of munitions. It ultimately used its financial muscle to entrench the (conservative) Liberal Democratic Party in power and to turn Japan into a single-party state, which it remains to this day. The cynicism with which the CIA continued to subsidize "democratic" elections in Western Europe, Latin America, and East Asia, starting in the late 1950s, led to disillusionment with the United States and a distinct blunting of the

idealism with which it had waged the early Cold War.

Another major use for its money was a campaign to bankroll alternatives in Western Europe to Soviet-influenced newspapers and books. Attempting to influence the attitudes of students and intellectuals, the CIA sponsored literary magazines in Germany (Der Monat) and Britain (Encounter), promoted abstract expressionism in art as a radical alternative to the Soviet Union's socialist realism, and secretly funded the publication and distribution of over two and a half million books and periodicals. Weiner treats these activities rather cursorily. He should have consulted Frances Stonor Saunders' indispensable *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*.

Hiding Incompetence

Despite all this, the CIA was protected from criticism by its impenetrable secrecy and by the tireless propaganda efforts of such leaders as Allen W. Dulles, director of the Agency under President Eisenhower, and Richard Bissell, chief of the clandestine service after Wisner. Even when the CIA seemed to fail at everything it undertook, writes Weiner, "The ability to represent failure as success was becoming a CIA tradition." [p. 58]

After the Chinese intervention in the Korean War, the CIA dropped 212 foreign agents into Manchuria. Within a matter of days, 101 had been killed and the other 111 captured -- but this information was effectively suppressed. The CIA's station chief in Seoul, Albert R. Haney, an incompetent army colonel and intelligence fabricator, never suspected that the hundreds of agents he claimed to have working for him all reported to North Korean control officers.

Haney survived his incredible performance in the Korean War because, at the end of his tour in November 1952, he helped to arrange for the transportation of a grievously wounded Marine lieutenant back to the United States. That Marine turned out to be the son of Allen Dulles, who repaid his debt of gratitude by putting Haney in charge of the covert operation that -- despite a largely bungled, badly directed secret campaign -- did succeed in overthrowing the Guatemalan government of President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954. The CIA's handiwork in Guatemala ultimately led to the deaths of 200,000 civilians during the 40 years of bloodshed and civil war that followed the sabotage of an elected government for the sake of the United Fruit Company.

Weiner has made innumerable contributions to many hidden issues of postwar foreign policy, some of them still on-going. For example, during the debate over America's invasion of Iraq after 2003, one of the constant laments was that the CIA did not have access to a single agent inside Saddam Hussein's inner circle. That was not true. Ironically, the intelligence service of France -- a country U.S. politicians publicly lambasted for its failure to support us -- had cultivated Naji Sabri, Iraq's foreign minister. Sabri told the French agency, and through it the American government, that Saddam Hussein did not have an active nuclear or biological weapons program, but the CIA ignored him. Weiner comments ruefully, "The CIA had almost no ability to analyze accurately what little intelligence it had." [pp. 666-67, n. 487]

Perhaps the most comical of all CIA clandestine activities -- unfortunately all too typical of its covert operations over the last 60 years -- was the spying it did in 1994 on the newly appointed American ambassador to Guatemala, Marilyn McAfee, who sought to promote policies of human rights and justice in that country. Loyal to the murderous Guatemalan intelligence service, the CIA had bugged her bedroom and picked up sounds that led their agents to conclude that the ambassador was having a lesbian love affair with her secretary, Carol Murphy. The CIA station chief "recorded her cooing endearments to Murphy." The agency spread the word in Washington that the liberal ambassador was a lesbian without realizing that "Murphy" was also the name of her two-year-old black standard

poodle. The bug in her bedroom had recorded her petting her dog. She was actually a married woman from a conservative family. [p. 459]

Back in August 1945, General William Donovan, the head of the OSS, said to President Truman, "Prior to the present war, the United States had no foreign intelligence service. It never has had and does not now have a coordinated intelligence system." Weiner adds, "Tragically, it still does not have one." I agree with Weiner's assessment, but based on his truly exemplary analysis of the Central Intelligence Agency in *Legacy of Ashes*, I do not think that this is a tragedy. Given his evidence, it is hard to believe that the United States would not have been better off if it had left intelligence collection and analysis to the State Department and had assigned infrequent covert actions to the Pentagon.

I believe that this is where we stand today: The CIA has failed badly, and it would be an important step toward a restoration of the checks and balances within our political system simply to abolish it. Some observers argue that this would be an inadequate remedy because what the government now ostentatiously calls the "intelligence community" -- complete with its own website -- is composed of 16 discrete and competitive intelligence organizations ready to step into the CIA's shoes. This, however, is a misunderstanding. Most of the members of the so-called intelligence community are bureaucratic appendages of well-established departments or belong to extremely technical units whose functions have nothing at all to do with either espionage or cloak-and-dagger adventures.

The sixteen entities include the intelligence organizations of each military service -- the Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, Navy, and the Defense Intelligence Agency -- and reflect inter-service rivalries more than national needs or interests; the departments of Energy, Homeland Security, State, Treasury, and Drug Enforcement Administration, as well as the FBI and the National Security Agency; and the units devoted to satellites and reconnaissance (National Geospatial Intelligence Agency, National Reconnaissance Office). The only one of these units that could conceivably compete with the CIA is the one that I recommend to replace it -- namely, the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR). Interestingly enough, it had by far the best record of any U.S. intelligence entity in analyzing Iraq under Saddam Hussein and estimating what was likely to happen if we pursued the Bush administration's misconceived scheme of invading his country. Its work was, of course, largely ignored by the Bush-Cheney White House.

Weiner does not cover every single aspect of the record of the CIA, but his book is one of the best possible places for a serious citizen to begin to understand the depths to which our government has sunk. It also brings home the lesson that an incompetent or unscrupulous intelligence agency can be as great a threat to national security as not having one at all.

Chalmers Johnson's latest book is Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic (Metropolitan Books, 2007). It is the third volume of his Blowback Trilogy, which also includes Blowback and The Sorrows of Empire. A retired professor of international relations from the University of California (Berkeley and San Diego campuses) and the author of some seventeen books primarily on the politics and economics of East Asia, Johnson is president of the Japan Policy Research Institute.

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