A Question of Standing: The History of the CIA

Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones (Oxford University Press, 2022), 300 pages, endnotes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Brent Geary

Scottish historian Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones has, over a long career, written a series of books about CIA and US intelligence. His first, *CIA and American Democracy* (1989), accomplished much as a scholarly, well-researched look into the history of the agency through the late 1980s. In the words of reviewer Robert Sinclair, writing for this journal, it was "a worthy book, a serious book, an earnest book."[a] It was also, according to Sinclair, "a flawed book that leaves the reader frustrated and unsatisfied." Jeffreys-Jones's most recent offering, *A Question of Standing: The History of the CIA*, appears formed by a similar mold. It is at times insightful, critical but largely fair, and well-sourced. However, the author's frequent digressions, sensational flourishes, limited scope, and often unsupported conclusions make this an uneven and mostly disappointing book.

First, it is important to stress that Jeffreys-Jones remains a serious student of US intelligence who recognizes its importance and tries to give praise where he thinks it due. Unlike some writers about CIA—journalist Tim Weiner and his *Legacy of Ashes* (2007) comes to mind—Jeffreys-Jones appears not to have set out to condemn CIA but to offer an honest appraisal of its strengths, faults, and place in the world. While critical of their failures, for example, he generally credits CIA analysts with serving honorably and well. He lauds the way CIA has adapted to congressional oversight, calling it "a model for other nations," and argues that "With regard to China and Russia … not many citizens of democratic nations would wish the CIA not to exist." (220) He also displays a keen eye for the unique challenges of conducting intelligence operations in an open, democratic society, stressing several times that it is often policymakers, rather than intelligence practitioners, who deserve the lion's share of the blame for some of the more noteworthy "intelligence failures" in recent history.

Since the publication of *CIA and American Democracy*, Jeffreys-Jones has stressed the importance of the agency's "standing"—its reputation and influence—with US presidents, Congress, and the American people, a theme supposedly so central to his latest book that he incorporated it into its title. While certainly a point worth making and studying at length, and despite the author calling it his central thesis, his treatment of the topic is sporadic at best. For every good reference to how a president or the public viewed the agency at a given time—and there are several—there are long stretches in this book where the importance of standing falls by the wayside. In addition, Jeffreys-Jones never provides a standard by which to measure CIA's standing and sometimes struggles to prove his arguments.

The book's title is misleading for another reason. By the author's own admission, it is not really a comprehensive history of CIA but a chronological series of essays on key events. (x) Many of his essays are solid examinations that deserve praise. In general, when writing about the first three decades or so of CIA history, Jeffreys-Jones is on firmer ground, mining declassified documents and secondary sources such as memoirs of former CIA leaders and officers. For example, he provides evidence that although the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) was a key inspiration for CIA, its influence has been exaggerated at the expense of other early intelligence offices, like the FBI, Secret Service, and State Department's World War I intelligence shop U-1.

In early chapters Jeffreys-Jones discounts former President Truman's claim after the Bay of Pigs failure in 1961 that he had never intended to have CIA conduct covert actions. "That bit of sheer mendacity," Jeffreys-Jones writes, "conformed to standard presidential protocols of denial. The truth is that, while in a very small number of cases the CIA may have acted without the say-so of the chief executive, Truman and later incumbents of the White House routinely authorized dirty tricks." (34) This is another praiseworthy aspect of the book that is featured throughout: Jeffreys-Jones does not subscribe to the notion that CIA has ever really acted as a

a. *Studies in Intelligence* 33, no. 3 (1989).

"rogue elephant" but has instead served at the pleasure of presidents who oftentimes misused the CIA.[a]

In describing Truman's decision to disband the OSS at the end of World War II, Jeffreys-Jones argues that Truman had a strong personal dislike for OSS Director William Donovan, which dated to their interaction in World War I, when artilleryman Truman may have directed errant cannon fire on some of Donovan's men. This is a story that is not often told; in addition to adding texture to the story of the demise of the OSS, it reflects well on the author's research. However, it is here that Jeffreys-Jones first exhibits an unfortunate tendency to choose sensational, unsupported assertions that distract the reader and call into question his analytic rigor. In this case, he claims that after World War I, Truman—who struggled mightily in his early business ventures—"could only watch with a feeling of worthless envy Donovan's heroic status and rocketing career." (23) This is pure, unsubstantiated supposition.

Other examples of the author's use of similar embellishments include a passage about National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, whom he claimed, during the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, "may have been over-acquiescent in warmongering because she was in perpetual awe of her own achievement." (158) This needless and unsupported digression was particularly unfortunate because it came in the midst of an otherwise cogent argument that the George W. Bush administration sought to shift the blame to CIA and then-Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) George Tenet for the Iraq WMD failure. Likewise, future DCI and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, according to Jeffreys-Jones, "remained at heart a Boy Scout glued to the flag," who "clicked his heels in agreement whenever the White House upped the ante" in the Cold War during the Reagan administration. (109) Here again, the author succumbed to pseudo-psychology and generalization, tainting an otherwise well-supported argument that Gates had sometimes allowed his biases about the Soviet Union to cloud his analytic judgment.

In still another example, in his effort to illustrate ways in which the George W. Bush administration politicized intelligence, Jeffreys-Jones again gets carried away. "Tremendous pressure was brought to bear on the CIA's WMD unit," he wrote, "whose members knew full well that Hussein did not possess the alleged weaponry." (155) Jeffreys-Jones is wrong, however, about the last half of that sentence. Tenet and many other former CIA leaders have publicly acknowledged that the agency simply failed in its analysis on Iraq WMD. No one at CIA lied in their Iraq analysis, but Jeffreys-Jones ever-so-subtly implies here that they did. This episode neatly encapsulates the haphazard nature of *A Question of Standing*. Just a few pages after implying that CIA officers had knowingly falsified their analysis, he seemingly backtracks by including a reference to a speech Tenet gave in 2004 in which he publicly admitted that CIA "had been wrong in believing that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction." (157) It is hard to know what, exactly, Jeffreys-Jones's conclusion is in this instance.

Although the author generally applauds the efforts of CIA analysts, he essentially ignores one analytic success and badly misinterprets another from the agency's recent past. In discussing CIA's failures in assessing Iraq's WMD programs, he doesn't discuss a parallel Bush administration narrative falsely purporting the existence of a working relationship between al-Qa'ida and Saddam's regime. Tenet, former counterterrorism analyst Nada Bakos, and others have written that CIA argued strongly that bin Ladin's organization had no ties to the Iraqi government, despite the repeated public assertions of Vice President Richard Cheney and Secretary of State Colin Powell's address to the United Nations in the run-up to the invasion. In the face of relentless public posturing by war advocates, CIA got it right on Iraq and al-Qa'ida, a story Jeffreys-Jones omits entirely.

In another vignette, the author argues that following the advent of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) in 2005, the new organization "forced the CIA to yield the analytical high ground" to the DNI-controlled National Intelligence Council (NIC). (163) To prove his point, he discusses at length the promotion of a non-CIA analyst—State Department intelligence officer Thomas Fingar—as the DNI's deputy director for analysis and NIC chairman and argues that it was Fingar's NIC that deserves credit for the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran's nuclear weapons program. For those who may not remember, the Iran NIE concluded that Tehran had shuttered its nuclear weapons program in 2003, a controversial assessment that drew

a. For a discussion of the CIA's acquisition of covert action authorities see Dr. Bianca Adair "The Quiet Warrior: Rear Admiral Sidney Souers and the Emergence of CIA's Covert Action Authority" in *Studies in Intelligence* 65, no. 2 (June 2021).

furious denunciations from conservatives who claimed that the paper's authors intended to undermine the Bush White House, details which the author includes. Fifteen years later, Iran still has no known nuclear weapons, and Jeffreys-Jones credits the NIE with having eased tensions and hawkish calls for attacks on Iran. In his quest to show that Fingar's rise somehow took place at CIA's expense, however, the author missed something important. The two lead authors of the 2007 NIE were, in fact, CIA analysts, whose meticulous work convinced skeptics across the IC to make a bold and seemingly accurate call. Perhaps not surprisingly, Jeffreys-Jones concludes that chapter by stressing that "care should be given not to exaggerate the marginalization of the CIA," and quotes former NIC Chairman Gregory Treverton as saying "we still looked to the CIA as our primary source of analysis." (171) In a pattern that is all-too-frequent in *A Question of Standing*, the author spends pages making an argument about the relative standing of the CIA at a certain time, only to undermine his point shortly thereafter.

To be fair, Jeffreys-Jones—like all intelligence historians—has a great disadvantage when writing about the recent past because they are forced to rely so heavily on journalistic accounts and interviews with former intelligence professionals, often leading them to draw conclusions based on incomplete information. Some errors in *A Question of Standing*, however, are hard to excuse. For example, the author confuses the 1976 Entebbe raid by Israeli commandos with the events surrounding the hijacking of TWA 847 in 1985 and implies—mistakenly—that forces from the US Joint Special Operations Command participated, a blunder so eminently discoverable that it leads this reviewer to judge that the book's editors and fact-checkers were also falling down on the job. (170)

Jeffreys-Jones spends the large majority of his time on three issues: intelligence analysis, CIA leadership and its working relations with policymakers, and covert action. He dabbles lightly in the CIA's development of overhead collection platforms such as the U-2—and acknowledges that they were wildly successful endeavors that helped US presidents make decisions based on solid evidence. (61) He also hits other highpoints such as the hunt for Usama bin Ladin and the 2011 operation that led to his death but breaks no new ground in these areas. His observations about CIA analysis and the ties between CIA leaders and the White House are likewise orthodox, adhering closely to conventional wisdom in most respects.

However, Jeffreys-Jones largely ignores the topic of human intelligence and the CIA's successes over the years in recruiting and handling valuable agents abroad. For example, Oleg Penkovsky—the joint British-US mole inside Soviet military intelligence whom one writer dubbed "the spy who saved the world" because of his role in the Cuban Missile Crisis—receives mention in exactly one sentence. (70) Likewise the Soviet aeronautics engineer Adolf Tolkachev—whom biographer David Hoffman called "the billion dollar spy" because of the value of his information to the US defense industry (and taxpayers)—gets only one brief mention by Jeffreys-Jones among a list of agents whom CIA turncoat Aldrich Ames betrayed to the USSR. (132) Polish agent Ryszard Kuklinski—who provided CIA with valuable intelligence about Warsaw Pact countries during the later years of the Cold War—is also barely mentioned.

Jeffreys-Jones argues throughout the book that covert action has been, in many ways, the greatest detriment to the agency's standing both at home and, especially, abroad. Again, this is not a controversial statement but neither is it particularly insightful. Another point the author stresses at various points is that no CIA director has ever resigned in protest of US policy. In fact, it is somewhat odd the degree to which Jeffreys-Jones pulls at this string. Even as he acknowledges, DCI John McCone resigned in 1965 because he had lost access to President Johnson over disagreements about the situation in Vietnam, he claims that this was not really "in protest" of policy but because McCone had lost personal standing with LBJ. (222)

It is telling, in a strange way, that Jeffreys-Jones spends nearly a third of his concluding chapter on this point because it highlights how, in spite of his vast knowledge of US intelligence history, he still misunderstands certain nuances of American government. First, it is not really a feature of US politics for senior officials to resign in protest to the degree that it is in other countries such as the author's own United Kingdom. To paraphrase Colin Powell, rightly or wrongly most officials here reason that they can do more good inside the tent than outside of it. Second, Jeffreys-Jones claims that by not resigning when faced with policies with which analysts disagree, CIA directors have allowed the agency to become "politicized"

by default. He does not contemplate that if agency leaders made a habit of such resignations, it could open CIA to the exact same charge of politicization and undermine its "standing" with future presidents likely to see it as just another self-centered bureaucracy rather than—on its best days—an objective provider of hard truths.

In sum, this book is disappointing mostly because it comes close to being much more. It is filled with details about a variety of important episodes in CIA history, and Jeffreys-Jones is clearly seeking to treat the agency fairly, from his perspective. For experts of US intelligence history and most intelligence professionals, *A Question of Standing* is probably not worth their time. For those who will read only one book about the 75-year history of CIA, however, it is probably the most complete and balanced volume currently available and could serve as a good starting point for further inquiry.

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