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Cloak and Dollar: A History of American Secret Intelligence

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

By Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002. 357 pages.

Reviewed by David S. Robarge

Cloak and Dollar is a provoking, sometimes insightful, but ultimately overblown and unsatisfying book. Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, a professor at the University of Edinburgh, has written several useful works on intelligence and national security—notably *The CIA and American Democracy* (1989)—but he does not reach that mark here.

The author's critical, often arch, perspective resembles that of another British intelligence revisionist, Phillip Knightley, in *The Second Oldest Profession* (1986). Published in the United States with the subtitle *Spies and Spying in the Twentieth Century*, Knightley's snide tone is caught far better in the English edition's subtitle: *The Spy as Bureaucrat, Patriot, Fantasist, and Whore*. To that litany, Jeffreys-Jones now adds "confidence man"—a practitioner of "smooth talk, hyperbole, [and] deception" who exploits public fears and private greed by peddling his indispensability from a "great rhetorical carpetbag" of salesman's tricks, and uses grifter ploys to transform failure into rewards. The confidence man, the author argues, "has had an impact in an area desperately in need of honest analysis yet

endemically prone to conspiracy and dissimulation—namely, secret intelligence."[1]

That clever-sounding idea probably could support a magazine piece or journal article, but it is too weak to carry an entire book—or, more accurately, a collection of essays stitched into one. None but the most deluded or obsequious partisans of intelligence would deny that hucksterism has contributed to secret agencies' longevity. But only through a selective reconstruction of history can Jeffreys-Jones make a case that "hyperbole"—the word must appear on almost every page at least once—has been the driving force behind American intelligence since the Revolution. A more supportable premise would be bureaucratic preservation—the spy not as con man, but as organizational gamesman. But who needs another book to prove that institutions and the people who run them have survival instincts?

Moreover, like the confidence man he deplores, Jeffreys-Jones promises more than he delivers. He regularly suggests that he will set the record straight, but then— especially in the early chapters—he recycles old stories and relies on the usual hoary sources. Only later in the book does he draw much on new material, often journalism or his students' papers. Meanwhile, he dispatches already dispatched legends—e.g., there was no "message to Garcia" during the Spanish-American War—and lapses into literary anachronism, like references to "spin control" in the 1800s. He uses annoying prose techniques, such as attaching graduation class designators to early 20th-century patricians' names—"Edward M. House (Princeton '79)"—so that the text reads like an alumni newsletter. Reflecting the sociological preoccupations of academe, he overstates the relevance of ethnicity, race, class, and gender, sometimes to a pop-culturish extreme: generals are "testosterone-filled" and John Kennedy resembles King Arthur wielding his "phallic" sword Excalibur. In his effort to meld all civilian and military secret activities into a "tradition," Jeffreys-Jones often conflates intelligence, law enforcement, and special operations, thus ignoring whether they concentrated on espionage, crime, subversion, counterintelligence, propaganda, or counterinsurgency, and overlooking institutional cultures and interdepartmental rivalries. After concluding that most covert actions (or at least the ones he knows about) have failed, he does not then ask the bigger question: whether the policies the operations were intended to implement were themselves misguided.

The book has other flaws of omission and commission. The chapter on the American Revolution ignores successful espionage and counterintelligence

operations in New York; the one on OSS says nothing about its achievements in analysis and technology or its European espionage operations. The Kennedy Administration's MONGOOSE program was a broad-based political action effort, not a plot to kill Castro, as Jeffreys-Jones would have it. The CIA's Directorate of Science and Technology was created in 1963, not 1954. The Katzenbach Report of 1967, issued after the radical magazine *Ramparts* divulged the Agency's covert action (CA) funding mechanisms, had nothing to do with putting limits on other forms of CA. Contrary to the book's assertion, the Phoenix program accomplished its purpose of eviscerating the communist infrastructure in South Vietnam, and South Vietnamese forces, not CIA officers, were responsible for its excesses. DCI William Casey died of brain, not prostate, cancer. Lastly, it is perverse for Jeffreys-Jones to contend that the Contra program had nothing to do with the Sandanistas' fall from power in Nicaragua in 1990.

Despite all these faults, *Cloak and Dollar* has some strong points. The chapters on the late 19th and early 20th centuries offer a good case study of Americans' ambivalence toward spying. They recognized the need for it, particularly once the United States became a global power, but they did not like it. At the same time, they were, and still are, fascinated by the exploits of secret agents and counterspies. The discussion of the Department of State's centralized intelligence element between the world wars—U-1—is enlightening. U-1's story epitomizes the US government's pre-CIA pattern of taking on great international responsibilities after wars without retaining or building the intelligence capability needed to fulfill them. The chapter on Herbert Yardley—author of a 1931 exposé of US cryptology, *The American Black Chamber*—puts to rest that cryptanalyst's self-portrayal as a misunderstood victim of official naïveté, driven to questionable conduct by government vindictiveness and embarrassment. Yardley sold cryptologic secrets to foreign powers for money and to salve his wounded pride, and Americans died needlessly as a result. The book's description of how politics distorted historical analyses of Pearl Harbor is well done, and its treatment of the CIA's "time of troubles" in the 1970s is even-handed, showing how Agency champions have overstated the effectiveness and durability of the "reforms" initiated then.

In its last chapter on the 1990s, however, *Cloak and Dollar* deteriorates into clipping-file history. The section on drug trafficking as a *cause du jour* is an awkward, cut-and-paste job that highlights the book's scramble to keep current. Thanks to digital publishing technology, Jeffreys-Jones was even able to tack on some closing (but unenlightening) paragraphs about the World Trade Center attacks.

His conclusion that the Intelligence Community needs reform is unarguable, as is his contention that American leaders have not and cannot, or will not, implement any meaningful changes. If *Cloak and Dollar* makes one large point, it is not that intellocrats are con men, but that nonreform of American intelligence has a long history that undoubtedly will repeat itself—post-September 11th congressional investigations and blue-ribbon commissions notwithstanding. But we do not need a 300-plus-page book to tell us that.

Footnote:

1. Jeffreys-Jones, pp, vii, 3, 254.

David S. Robarge serves on the CIA History Staff. This review is unclassified in its entirety.

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