

## Intelligence in Public Media

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### ***The Devil's Chessboard: Allen Dulles, The CIA and The Rise of America's Secret Government***

David Talbot (HarperCollins, 2015), 686 pp., photographs, notes, index.

**Reviewed by J. R. Seeger**

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*The Devil's Chessboard* is really two very different books in one. The first half of the book is a detailed description of the early leadership of the CIA with very specific attention (as stated in the title) to Allen Dulles and the way he ran the CIA in the 1950s and first years of 1960s. Along with the detailed background on Dulles—including tracking his work against Nazi Germany and the early days of the Cold War—we are given profiles of Richard Helms, William Colby, and James J. Angleton, as well as a number of CIA foot soldiers whose work in the Cold War is used to set the stage for the second half of the book.

Talbot, a journalist and founding editor of *Salon.com*, documents strategic decisions that CIA leadership made during the early days of the Cold War, emphasizing alleged associations between CIA operations and former Nazis, hardline anti-communists, mercenaries, coup plotters, and members of organized crime—often to the exclusion of any other discussion. While it may be uncomfortable for members of the Intelligence Community to read some of these chapters, Talbot has done detailed research in his effort to stitch together a story. It may appear to most readers as prosecutorial or adversarial in tone, but this perspective needs to be read and understood, even if it is only part of the story of the CIA in the 1950s.

The second half of the book takes the reader past the details of the early Cold War into a world made up entirely of Talbot's opinions and cherry-picked quotations from government and media documents. The world he believes in is encapsulated in the following paragraph:

*Unmanaged by the White House and unsupervised by Congress, Dulles's CIA grew to become the most potent agency of the Eisenhower era. Dulles was a master at seeding Washington bureaucracies with agency men, placing his loyalists in top positions in the Pentagon, State Department, and even the White House. The CIA became increasingly intertwined*

*with the armed services, as military officers were assigned to agency missions, and then sent back to their military posts as "ardent disciples of Allen Dulles," in the words of Air Force Col. L. Fletcher Prouty, who served as a liaison officer between the Pentagon and the CIA between 1955 and 1963. (251)*

Like any good prosecutor, Talbot selects witnesses whose viewpoints support his argument. It may be easy enough to imagine that CIA officers in the field at the time felt they were part of "the most potent agency in the Eisenhower era," but it hardly seems likely that officers at Headquarters would have argued they were more potent than the Pentagon; however, since few Central Intelligence Agency officers from the time are listed as references, it is hard for the reader to know for sure. Those familiar with early CIA history will be dismayed to see the discredited former agency officer James Stockwell offered as the primary—sometimes the only—witness for the prosecution.

Beginning with the chapter entitled "The Dulles Imperium" slightly halfway through the book, the focus turns to a more speculative side of Talbot's argument. Talbot posits that, due to complex political intrigues centered in the CIA and specifically around Allen Dulles, the Kennedy administration's foreign policy was regularly undermined. As is most often the case with this well known (though not well accepted) conspiracy theory, the discussion begins with detailed reporting on the tensions between President Kennedy and the senior leadership at the Pentagon and with Allen Dulles in the early months of the administration and, most especially, during, and after the Bay of Pigs failure. It is at this point in the book that Talbot begins to describe the tensions between the president and the CIA in a manner that becomes harder and harder to accept based on the available data in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, Talbot frames the final plans for the invasion—limited by the president's interest in a truly deniable covert action—as follows:

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*Years after the Bag of Pigs, historians—including the CIA's own Jack Pfeiffer—painted a portrait of Dulles as a spymaster in decline . . . But, as usual, there was a method to Dulles's seeming carelessness. It is now clear that the CIA's Bay of Pigs expedition was not simply doomed to fail, it was meant to fail. (400)*

It is not clear from the research presented how Talbot decided that Dulles meant for CIA operations and operators to fail and for the Cuban surrogates to be killed on the beach, but it is only the beginning of a long series of speculative comments and accusations that fill the last third of the book. Talbot expands upon theories he began to develop during the research phase of his previous book, *Brothers: The Hidden History of the Kennedy Years* (Free Press, 2007), which addressed the conflict between both President Kennedy and Attorney General Robert Kenne-

dy and the CIA. He ends *The Devil's Chessboard* with a direct accusation of CIA complicity both in the murder of the president and in covert action after the fact to insure the Warren Commission did not present what he sees as the only logical conclusion the commission should have presented. In the author's view, there is a direct CIA link to Lee Harvey Oswald, who he suggests was set up years in advance as an agency fall guy for some longstanding CIA intelligence operation that Talbot cannot further explain.

Unfortunately, *The Devil's Chessboard* will serve as a textbook for many conspiracy theory devotees and others who are convinced "a secret government" runs the United States from the shadows. It is equally unfortunate that a book whose important research provides an auspicious beginning ends with speculation and conjecture.

