

John McCone As Director of Central Intelligence 1961–1965

David Robarge (Central Intelligence Agency, 2015), 482 pp., footnotes, bibliography, photos, index; available at <http://www.foia.cia.gov/collection/john-mccone-director-central-intelligence-1961-1965>

Reviewed by Hayden Peake

The Bay of Pigs calamity led directly to the retirement of Allen Dulles, the fifth and best known director of central intelligence (DCI). His successor, John McCone, was a conservative Republican industrialist who had served in the Pentagon and been chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission during the Eisenhower administration. His selection by President Kennedy “came as a complete surprise to me” recalled McCone, (28) but some Kennedy loyalists were appalled and privately expressed opposition. The 59-year-old McCone didn’t fit the youthful image of the new administration: he opposed arms control, and he was, after all, a Republican. “Liberal and left-wing circles” also voiced “loud objections” (31) but Kennedy ignored them. Intelligence Community leaders and CIA careerists were similarly unsettled by the selection of someone with no experience in the business and they wondered: who is this man, why was he chosen, and what are his marching orders? Only partial answers to these questions emerged during McCone’s tenure.

Few would discover his “overalls to riches” story that included graduating with honors from U. C. Berkeley with a degree in mechanical engineering, working as a riveter for 40 cents an hour, and his steady rise to the top of Consolidated Steel Corporation during the depression. These details and ‘the rest of his story’ are skillfully told by CIA historian, David Robarge, in *John McCone As Director of Central Intelligence 1961–1965*.

The broad reasons for President Kennedy’s choice quickly became apparent. McCone’s appointment was announced on 27 September 1961 and he signed on as a consultant on 13 October to familiarize himself with the Intelligence Community of which he would become the titular leader when he was sworn-in on 29 November 1961.^a After meeting with the various heads of Community elements and visiting CIA stations overseas where he met with allied intelligence service leaders, “it was clear

a. It was a recess appointment and he wouldn’t be confirmed by the Senate until 21 January 1962.

to any observer,” writes Robarge, “that boardroom efficiency had replaced [the] faculty club collegiality” of the Dulles years. (32) This was particularly so at the CIA.

Unlike Dulles, whose style of leadership Robarge characterizes as *intelligence operator*, McCone is viewed as a *manager-reformer outsider* and that is just how he approached the curious paradox he found at the CIA. The administration had lost “faith in intelligence generally” after the Bay of Pigs, the successful Penkovsky case notwithstanding, while at the same time retaining its “enchantment with covert action and counterinsurgency.” (33) Complicating matters, McCone found the agency “in a state of shock” (34) resulting from, inter alia, the furor caused by an inspector general’s report that many insiders felt unjustly criticized for the agency’s performance during of the Bay of Pigs. Surprisingly, Robarge notes, McCone agreed that the president’s withdrawal of air power “was the fatal error that caused the failure.” Nevertheless, McCone concluded that the CIA had to assume most of the “responsibility for the operation’s failure.” (40)

Despite a demanding and sometimes abrupt style—McCone didn’t tolerate war stories at meetings—Robarge shows how a forceful and decisive McCone gradually turned things around by choosing good lieutenants, delegating authority, and working as hard as they did. By the end of his first year, he had made substantive changes in the organization, given day-to-day administration of the CIA to others, and initiated steps to improve the agency’s scientific and technical programs. Perhaps most important, he had begun to restore White House confidence in CIA’s fundamental missions of analysis and clandestine operations. At the same time, he established contacts with policymakers and Congress while giving “the work of the Intelligence Community” priority attention. He regarded the latter mission as “more important than overseeing CIA’s activities.” (59) Perhaps the most remarkable achievement of his first year was the relationship that

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evolved with the president. Robarge describes how McCone gained his trust—McCone would speak truth to power—and how Kennedy often sought his views on policy. Despite the unwritten rule that DCIs should leave that task to the decisionmakers, Robarge shows that it became a routine part of McCone’s role throughout his tenure.

It was also during his first year that McCone encountered the events that would command his attention in the years that followed. Robarge examines the major topics—Cuban operations, counterinsurgency in South East Asia, science and technology, counterintelligence, and the post Kennedy years—in separate chapters. As he does so, the reader should keep in mind that many of the events discussed overlapped or occurred simultaneously, all in less than four years.

The covert action operations against Castro were aggressively promoted by the Kennedy brothers. And though they were interrupted by the Cuban Missile Crisis (Robarge gives a detailed account of McCone’s role in that operation), these operations were aimed at removing Castro from power, one way or another. The main effort—an interdepartmental program, Operation MONGOOSE—was run by BG Edward Lansdale out of the White House. It involved “sabotage, propaganda, and espionage.” (84) Since McCone “agreed with administration strategy but not with its tactics,” he concentrated on not involving the CIA in another “questionable covert enterprise.” (83) Thus, while the agency supported Lansdale administratively, its anti-Cuban espionage and sabotage operations were run separately by William Harvey, head of Task Force W. Harvey would later become more well known for his involvement in the eight attempts to assassinate Castro under a program codenamed ZRRIFLE. None of these operations went smoothly or accomplished any of the foreign policy objectives the Kennedys set out. They all involved serious personality and bureaucratic conflicts at high levels and Robarge gives them an objective account. He also notes that some lingering controversies—as, for example, how much McCone knew about the assassination plots—remain in dispute absent hard evidence and McCone’s inconsistent recollections. Surprisingly, while these events were underway, as revealed by a previously classified paragraph, “McCone participated in . . . discussions about the administration’s diplomatic feelers to the Cuban leader in October and November 1963,” which were intended to “explore ‘various possibilities of establishing channels of communication to

Castro.” Some unofficial contacts were in fact made, but McCone viewed them as “a cynical exercise to buy time” for Cuban subversive activities. (150) The gesture was moot when the president was assassinated.

While McCone was dealing with the Cuban issues, he was also a member of the *Special Group Counterinsurgency* (SGC). This high level committee was created by the White House to deal with what Robarge terms “Camelot’s counterinsurgencies” (153) in the third world and initially focused on Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand. McCone had no experience in this area, though he did have an “overall skepticism” about covert action and the attorney general’s imprecise conception of counterinsurgency as “social reform under pressure.” Thus, he sought to limit CIA’s participation to tasks historically associated with an intelligence service. “His dilemma was figuring out how to be responsive, protective, and not obstructionist, all at the same time.” (157)

Robarge discusses how, despite some policy disagreements with the White House and the State Department, McCone struggled to manage CIA’s role in Laos after the 1962 Geneva agreement that attempted to create a neutral Laos. The CIA “assumed full responsibility for training and supporting the 17,000 Hmong fighters,” a number later expanded to 23,000. (165-66) Although there were some initial successes at stemming North Vietnam’s Laotian incursion, what was meant to be a limited covert action gradually became an “adjunct to the intensifying conventional war in Vietnam.” (166) The result was an expansion of CIA’s role in Southeast Asia, accompanied by what McCone saw as unjustified optimism, especially in Vietnam.

From the outset, McCone “had doubts about the efficacy of covert action against the Vietnamese communists . . . and he was skeptical about the quality of intelligence being sent to Washington, particularly from the military.” He also “disagreed with many of the diplomatic and military tactics the administration was using, in Vietnam,” even questioning whether the objectives could be met. (171ff) And then, in what appeared to be a gesture to help the administration and despite the CIA’s own pessimistic assessments about the war in 1963, McCone suddenly insisted “that the Community produce and optimistic estimate on Vietnam’s future.” (175) That act subjected him to charges of demanding intelligence to please. Robarge sorts all this out amidst describing McCone’s opposition

to the overthrow of Diem, his battles with Ambassador Lodge's authority over the CIA station in Saigon—which he lost—and the assumption of the responsibility for the pacification program by the military. McCone returned from a trip to Vietnam in on 21 November 1963, “more discouraged... than ever.” (192) As Robarge astutely observes in retrospect, how can success be achieved when an ally “seemed unable or unwilling to bear its share of the burden”? (397)

While Cuba and Vietnam consumed much of McCone's attention, it was the creation of the Science and Technology Directorate and the preservation of CIA's satellite mission where, in Robarge's judgment, his leadership was most significant. And it was leadership that was important here; he didn't make the changes by decree. Both projects had been proposed before he became director and he managed the required changes in personnel while balancing bureaucratic and operational equities. Opposition was intense and persistent; the changes took years to implement. The formation of the S & T directorate was largely an internal matter and was finally overcome when Albert 'Bud' Wheelon became its director. The battle to retain the agency's role in the space program was equally problematic: the CIA had been responsible for the U-2 and the CORONA satellite platforms and McCone wanted responsibility for designing follow-on systems. He also sought and achieved a high level position in the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) that managed these programs. All this required overcoming challenges posed by the Air Force and its “almost unbelievable phobia over its position” in the space program. (203) Robarge tracks the sometimes tortuous bureaucratic exchanges among the key players in the Department of Defense, the CIA, and the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board.

The paramount purpose of the satellite systems and other technical capabilities was, of course, to monitor and assess the strategic threat from the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC) with emphasis on the former. Robarge looks at how McCone, as chairman of the United States Intelligence Board (USIB), managed the Intelligence Community's analytical efforts that produced its premier product: the annual Soviet estimate and its supporting documents. Throughout his tenure, he battled conflicting estimates of Soviet military strength produced by the Air Force and “never succeeded in gaining Air Force concurrence with a Soviet strategic forces esti-

mate.” (236) By the mid-1960s, however, there was consensus that the Soviet strategic capabilities were growing at a robust rate.” (237)

At the same time, McCone was involved in the administration's efforts to achieve a nuclear test ban treaty. This placed him, Robarge observes, “at the intersection of intelligence and policy.” (238) In those early days of the Cold War, the critical problems of monitoring the Soviet order of battle—how many and what type of weapons—and verification that the treaty obligations are met, were of central importance. In Robarge's words: “distrust and verify.” (246)

McCone's immersion in strategic policy continued when national estimates concerning the PRC were formulated. Robarge notes that Kennedy regarded China “as a greater threat to global peace than the Soviet Union,” though not all policymakers shared that view. McCone, again ignoring the precedent that a DCI didn't comment on policy, sided with Kennedy and commented on a State Department policy paper that “it seems a little bland.” (261) Of particular concern regarding PRC was its plan to detonate an atom bomb. Satellite photography kept President Kennedy and later President Johnson up to date on their plans and progress. In order to avoid any charge of surprise as happened with the first Soviet test, McCone and other officials recommended that Johnson issue a public warning that the test was near, and he did so.

Not all questions raised by policymakers about the Soviet Union and the PRC could be answered or even addressed by satellite coverage or other technical means. And while McCone clearly “valued technical collection over traditional espionage,” he also recognized that “‘spies in the sky’ had significant limitations and must be used in conjunction with . . . reliable human sources.” (277-8) Nevertheless, his strong support for HUMINT-related activities was confined to the policy level, leaving implementation to his deputies. This would later lead to difficulties during the Church Committee investigations of the CIA when one of his executive assistants denied McCone had been informed about two controversial internally generated projects, MKULTRA (testing LSD and other mind-altering drugs on humans) and HTLINGUAL, the Soviet mail opening program. McCone's deputy, Richard Helms, contradicted this view when he “said that HTLINGUAL was well known to John McCone.” The official record indicates, Robarge writes in a previously

classified paragraph, that McCone did indeed know about both of them since he “ordered their suspension.” (281) McCone was no longer DCI by this time and there the matter rested.

Some of the more time consuming clandestine operations in which McCone played a role involved KGB defectors to the CIA and, in one rather unusual instance, a suspected defector to the KGB. The latter case concerned U-2 pilot Gary Powers about whom, Robarge suggests, McCone held “persistent suspicions” never totally resolved in his mind and wondering at one point whether Powers had defected, even after officially cleared. (322-3)

Turning to the KGB defectors, Anatoli Golitsyn and Yuri Nosenko get the most attention because of the vigorous internal conflicts their cases created and the public notoriety they eventually generated. Golitsyn came first (1961) and demanded star treatment. Considered at first a very valuable agent, he met with McCone eleven times, “in several cases alone.” McCone also arranged for one of Golitsyn’s visits to Robert Kennedy. It was Golitsyn who insisted that the Sino-Soviet split was a deception operation and he convinced many of his supporters that Nosenko was a dispatched KGB officer sent to discredit all the valuable information Golitsyn was providing. Robarge reveals, for the first time officially, how McCone and the CIA dealt with Golitsyn’s “arrogance and irascibility” and why he approved Angleton’s unprecedented request to make Golitsyn an adviser to his CI Staff. (312) It was Golitsyn’s work on the staff that led to the molehunt at CIA that began a few months before McCone left office.

The Nosenko defection in 1964 received high level attention because he claimed to have read the KGB file on Lee Harvey Oswald and could therefore affirm that the KGB played no role in the president’s assassination. Years of hostile interrogation—“12 of his 16 months occurred during McCone’s tenure”—(345) failed to change his story. The FBI believed Nosenko and this led to strained relations between the two agencies. But doubt remained in the CI Staff and McCone was persuaded that Nosenko should not give testimony to the Warren Commission. McCone did testify, but as Robarge notes, “his answer was neither frank nor accurate” and he explains why. (342)

The relationship McCone developed with President Johnson was not as close as it had been with Kennedy. Johnson didn’t want one-on-one daily briefings and this

led to the creation of the President’s Daily Brief (PDB) on 1 December 1964, that Johnson liked. (354) The president also wanted to get McCone “out of the cloak and dagger business” (383) in the public’s mind at least, since it contributed to the administration’s ‘dirty trick’ image in the press. Robarge explains how, as McCone worked to burnish the agency image, his efforts were complicated by exposé books. The dogged and intense press coverage and the leaks that followed caused extraordinary public turmoil. The book that caused the greatest uproar was *The Invisible Government*,^a that, to McCone’s dismay, claimed to disclose CIA’s basic secrets. CIA analysis revealed “120 significant security disclosures” along with “200 significant inaccuracies.” (386) Robarge’s account of McCone’s unsuccessful attempts to suppress publication—he dealt with the publishers and met with the authors—will have an ironic overtone familiar to readers today. But to McCone at the time, it was a “frightening and sickening” episode that left him disheartened. (413)

As the fury over *Invisible Government* diminished, a second book started another controversy. *The Bay of Pigs: The Leader’s Story of Brigade 2506*^b asserted that a CIA field officer had been directed to “disobey administration orders to suspend the landing at the Bay of Pigs.” Of serious internal concern, the officer denied the claim and fortunately the book didn’t create much of a fuss.

While the books controversy was going on, “McCone’s forthright criticisms of US policy in Southeast Asia” further estranged him from the president. (371) Robarge reveals that McCone didn’t think Johnson knew how to fight a war and told him so. (409) When his recommendations concerning covert actions and insurgency programs the world over were ignored by the administration, he knew it was time to leave. Asked who should succeed him, McCone recommended Richard Helms or Ray Cline, both experienced intelligence officers, only to be stunned when Johnson picked the inexperienced admiral, William Raborn. After the president received his first briefing from Raborn, he bluntly told him, “I’m sick and tired of John McCone’s tugging at my shirt tails. If I want to see you, Raborn, I’ll call you.” (416)

a. David Wise and Thomas B. Ross, *The Invisible Government* (Random House, 1964).

b. Haynes Johnson with Manuel Artime et. al., *The Bay of Pigs: The Leader’s Story of Brigade 2506* (W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1964).

John McCone As Director of Central Intelligence 1961–1965 concludes by noting “McCone was the right DCI for the times—the manager and leader CIA desperately needed” and he showed that neither a career intelligence officer nor a Washington insider was essential to running the Community effectively. Robarge also makes clear that the DCI’s dual-hatted responsibilities without the corresponding authority meant that McCone never achieved the level of Community control that he sought.

Official histories by in-house historians risk accusations of writing-to-please or favorably shaping the institutional image. CIA historian, David Robarge, avoids this dilemma in his study of John McCone. It is a fine book, superbly documented, with many new insights. For those wondering how the CIA rebounded from the Bay of Pigs and attained new respect in the Intelligence Community, it is essential reading.



