

Intelligence in Public Media

Undaunted: My Fight Against America's Enemies at Home and Abroad

John O. Brennan (Celadon Books, 2020) 446 pages, illustrations

Reviewed by Thomas G. Coffey

Only three pages into the preface and it's clear that John Brennan is annoyed. Quoting from a letter to CIA Director Gina Haspel, he writes, "It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the Agency's refusal to grant my [official records] request reflects the current administration's desire to punish and retaliate against me for speaking out as a private citizen—an abuse of power designed to chill the exercise of my first amendment rights."⁽³⁾ Of course, Brennan is not exactly your average private citizen, having once served as CIA director (DCIA) and now as a regular pundit on cable news. The withholding of his records may indeed be the reason *Undaunted* does not provide the level of detail found in memoirs by other former directors. Stylistically, Brennan's narrative lacks the intrigue and excitement we would expect to see from the head of the CIA. *Undaunted* is a book that does not do justice to a momentous life.

And what a life Brennan has lived, starting from his blue-collar upbringing in northern New Jersey to eventually serving as President Clinton's briefer, DCI George Tenet's chief of staff, the senior intelligence liaison in Saudi Arabia, director of the Terrorist Threat Integration Center (TTIC) and its successor the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), President Obama's chief White House assistant for homeland security and counterterrorism, and DCIA. Rich material for a life story and yet *Undaunted* lacks the rich storytelling and eye for detail of Robert Gates's classic *From the Shadows*^a or the well-paced and interesting, if less vivid, recollections of Michael Morell in *The Great War of Our Time*.^b Even when it comes to coverage of their mutual antagonist, President Trump, Brennan's book is no match for the wry humor and lucid prose on display in John Bolton's *The Room Where It Happened*.^c In the acknowledgements section, Brennan graciously thanks by name the many intelligence officers and policy officials who affected his

career. Their voices, however, are largely missing from the narrative.

The chapters on the takedown of Bin Ladin, hardly a surprise with its can't miss material, and the rendition, detention, and interrogation (RDI) uproar with Congress, give *Undaunted* some spark. Apparently, the Pakistanis had scrambled fighter jets at the end of the assault on the compound. (245) After pouring cold water on a raid in an earlier National Security Council meeting, Vice President Biden later told Obama that he should approve the operation. (240) All the camera lenses in the Situation Room were covered during the meetings on this subject so there would be "no inadvertent hemorrhaging" of the discussions via secure video. (231) On RDI, then DCIA Panetta granted the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) direct access to any related operational files, including background investigation reports and polygraph results of CIA officers involved in the program, which Brennan describes as "an unprecedented intrusion by Congress into the private lives of American citizens working at the CIA." (305) Of course, just who was intruding on who is a matter of debate, given the controversy surrounding CIA officers accessing SSCI's RDI database to discover how the Panetta review, compiled to flag issues and actions that could get raised, found its way into SSCI's possession. (315) Biden mediated a sit-down between Brennan and SSCI Chair Dianne Feinstein that helped ease tensions. (321)

Brennan is a pioneer in the successful US counterterrorism effort undertaken in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. So it's a letdown to have him coast through arguably his grandest achievement in laying a firm foundation for integrated counterterrorism intelligence work through the creation of TTIC and NCTC. Former officers this author has interviewed swear that, if not for Brennan's tenacity and commitment against stiff opposition, these centers would

a. Robert Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (Simon and Schuster, 1996).

b. Michael Morell (with Bill Harlow), *The Great War of Our Time: The CIA's Fight Against Terrorism—From al Qaeda to ISIS* (Hachette Book Group, 2015).

c. John Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir* (Simon and Schuster, 2020)

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have failed. Indeed, Brennan claims the FBI and CIA directors only agreed to cooperate on information sharing after Brennan threatened to go to President Bush. (147) And, that's about it for the legendary dustups between Brennan and his Intelligence Community counterparts. The chapter's routine treatment sells short all Brennan's hard work.

Much of the passion in *Undaunted* is reserved for Trump, which gives the narrative an element of being preordained. Many episodes of his career are summed up with an unfavorable comparison to the former president's handling of the issue, from the guidelines for taking direct action against terrorists, to managing presidential transitions or pandemics, to separating politics from national security work. (220, 192, 196, 274) And so it's no surprise the final chapter that shares the memoir's title is devoted to his rows as a former DCIA with the then-president. The section is a rundown of earlier Brennan criticism of

Trump's behavior toward President Vladimir Putin, his treatment of Obama administration officials, along with his unusual approach to the office. (401, 400, 402)

Being undaunted, Brennan raises few second thoughts about entering into the public fray. His one stab at reflection notes "my caustic criticism of Trump would trigger a sharp backlash from Trump supporters as well as from individuals who believe a former CIA director should not engage in public denunciation of a sitting president." (401) But he follows this stocktaking with a reference to being denied service on corporate advisory groups and remunerative speaking engagements. Nothing about whether Brennan considered the impact such outspokenness might have on the CIA or the Intelligence Community, for better or worse. What is clear is that Brennan is at peace with his decision and is set on his course. "It's a path I have freely and willingly chosen." (410)



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