

Intelligence in Public Media

Surprise, Kill, Vanish. The Secret History of CIA Paramilitary Armies, Operators and Assassins

Annie Jacobsen (Little, Brown and Company, 2019), 545 pps, 16 pages of photographs.

Reviewed by J. R. Seeger

As the US military and Intelligence Communities enter the 19th year of armed conflict in the 21st century, dozens of books have been published addressing everything from the geostrategic aspects of the post 9/11 world to tactical descriptions of specific conflict zones and sometimes specific battles in those zones. These books include memoirs and well researched official and unofficial histories of the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other “small wars” raging across the entire globe. While it is no longer considered an acceptable descriptor for the US missions since 9/11 to talk about a “global war on terror,” for the men and women in uniform and for members of the IC that these 19 years have been a “global war.” If not entirely focused on terrorist organizations, the conflicts across the globe certainly focused primarily on non-state actors and often their state sponsors hostile to the US and to our NATO allies.

At the beginning of her book, *Surprise, Kill, Vanish*, Ms. Jacobsen offers a clear description of the options the president of the United States has in these complex times. He can use diplomacy as a first option to influence world actors. If that fails, he can use the US military to force enemies and malign actors to comply. Somewhere between the public sphere of diplomacy and the equally public but far more destructive sphere of military operations, the president also has a third option. He can use covert (meaning deniable) means to influence adversaries. Often that third option is designed to prevent war and provide the United States with some breathing space so that the diplomacy can work. Sometimes, the third, covert option is used in advance of military activity to prepare the battlefield for US forces. The third option is almost always associated with violence.

In the first pages, Jacobsen asks, “I wondered if dispatching paramilitary operators around the world to conduct lethal covert-action operations was all too often a recipe for disaster or, instead, mostly a weaponized strength.” And adds, “Is killing a person decreed by the president to be a threat to the U.S. national security right or wrong? Moral or immoral? Honorable or dishonor-

able? I found answers in writing this book. I hope readers find theirs.” (6–7)

These questions posed along with the subtitle of the book would argue that the author intended the book to be didactic: to teach readers through discussion of the strategic aspects of presidential authorities with regard to covert action or, instead, to teach readers about the sophisticated covert capability available to every president since the end of World War II. Another alternative would have been to provide a modern explanation for the famous line from John LeCarre’s novel *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, “We do disagreeable things so that ordinary people here and elsewhere can sleep safely in their beds at night.”

While both topics are discussed in the book, they are discussed only by means of vignettes without any help in identifying teaching points. Further, neither of the topics are discussed in anything resembling the detail required to understand the nuance of covert action or the “third option.” Instead, the book bounces among at least four different topics. First, the book provides vignettes of special operations from World War II to the present. Some of these operations are linked by the concept of unconventional warfare. UW is often described simply as working “by, with, and through” indigenous forces to accomplish a military mission.

Some of the operations are linked to the concept of clandestine special operations conducted by the OSS, US Army Special Forces, and other US Special Operations Forces. These clandestine operations are not in any way designed to be “deniable” and are therefore not considered “covert” operations. Instead, they are secret operations conducted by small teams of highly trained operators who have a specific mission which is described in the title of the book: to surprise, kill, and vanish. Some of the operations she describes were true covert operations in which the approving authority is always the president of the United States and the US government must not be as responsible.

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Woven into the fabric of the book are biographies of two men famous in their respective communities: Billy Waugh and Lewis Merletti. Both started their federal careers in the military. Jacobsen makes it very clear that the origins of their successes in two very different careers were in Vietnam, when they were members of the US Special Forces conducting direct action and strategic reconnaissance missions against the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army. Billy Waugh began his career as a paratrooper in the Korean War and ended his military career as a highly decorated noncommissioned officer. Merletti served with distinction in Vietnam as a non-commissioned officer and at the end of his tour of duty returned to the United States and separated from service. In the late 1970s, Waugh became a CIA contractor working for Special Activities Division. After college, Merletti joined the US Secret Service. He served on the Presidential Protective Detail and eventually served as the Special Agent in charge of the detail under President George H.W. Bush. He was director of the Secret Service under President Clinton.

Jacobsen has a well-deserved reputation as a good writer and an excellent researcher. The bibliography and notes at the end of the book reinforce her credentials as a journalist who wants to be sure that she has more than one source to corroborate a story. Unfortunately, the book has two problems that make it hard to recommend. First, Jacobsen tries to capture too many topics between the covers. The paired biographies of Waugh and Merletti alone would have easily filled a book and their heroic actions in war and peace would have guaranteed an avid readership. The same could be said if the book had focused on the interplay between White House policymakers and the “foot soldiers” responsible for delivering the required operational successes. Another focus might have been detailing why some covert operations succeeded and why others failed. Instead, readers are left with bits and pieces of each of these topics. Though well researched, the material doesn’t seem to hang together for the entirety of the book.

The second problem is probably of less interest to the general public than to members of either the special operations or IC, and these are a number of small errors that should have been corrected by an editor familiar with

the topic. For example, in the first chapter, Jacobsen puts the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) inside the British Secret Intelligence Service (aka MI6). In fact, SOE and MI6 operations were entirely separate during WW II and often were openly hostile to one another. In the same chapter, Jacobsen identifies William Casey as the chief of OSS Special Operations in Europe. He was the head of OSS Secret Intelligence operations running spy networks in occupied Europe and in mid-late 1944 focused on OSS operations inside Nazi Germany. Jacobsen conflates OSS/Special Operations UW missions working with resistance forces in occupied Europe with OSS/SO Operational Groups which were US-only direct action and strategic reconnaissance teams.

Later in the book, Jacobsen compresses the story of the CIA-Special Forces partnership in Vietnam with the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG) in a way that readers might assume the partnership began with Operation SWITCHBACK and was almost certain to be a failure. A more detailed reading of CIA and Special Forces histories the partnership would indicate that CIDG operations were showing some success until policymakers in Washington, including the director central intelligence, transferred command and control of the CIDG program to the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). During what is probably the most dramatic vignette involving Billy Waugh’s multiple Vietnam tours, the text confuses an RPG (rocket propelled grenade) with a Soviet bloc machinegun (either an RPD or RPK). Finally, in the post 9/11 part of the book, Jacobsen glosses over the death of Mike Spann, the first CIA SAD officer to die in Afghanistan. There she reiterates a completely inaccurate account of the events, which implies that Mike Spann’s death was linked to CIA errors in headquarters and in the field. In reality, he was killed in a larger Al Qa’ida and Taliban ambush designed in one stroke to kill the regional Afghan leaders and US Special Forces and CIA officers.

In sum, *Surprise, Kill, Vanish* is a disappointment mostly because it tries to cover too many topics. Jacobsen conducted research to write multiple books on multiple topics, but compressing them into one book results in a work that sometimes enlightens, sometimes entertains, but often misses the mark.



The reviewer: J. R. Seeger is a retired CIA paramilitary officer and frequent reviewer of books in the field.