The CIA Gets an F

Legacy of Ashes:
The History of the CIA

by Tim Weiner

Anchor Books, 2007,
812 pages.

Reviewed by Shmuel Rosner

Former president Richard Nixon was probably overstating the case when he said, “The CIA isn’t worth a damn.” Perhaps he was simply venting his frustrations, but if one accepts the basic thesis proffered by author Tim Weiner in his celebrated book *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA*, he was not altogether far from the truth.

Weiner, a *New York Times* reporter who has spent years covering the CIA, read 50,000 pages of documents—including the declassified oral and internal histories of the CIA—before writing his history of the agency or, to be more accurate, his history of the CIA’s failures. From a political perspective, his point of view is somewhat surprising. Weiner appears to be a man of the center-left, and he is very critical of the George W. Bush administration, which he blames for running a “faith-based” foreign policy. And yet, his book could easily qualify as an essentially right-wing indictment of the intelligence community.

The political left has always tended to complain about the CIA's secrecy and its abuses of power—its ostensibly immoral involvement in orchestrating political coups in Latin America, its relationships with thugs and despots, and its lack of respect for democratic institutions. The American right, by contrast, has tended to question the CIA's capabilities and grumble about its incompetence. Weiner, for the most part, gives more ammunition to the second of the two camps. Indeed, many Bush aides—including some long-departed neo-conservatives—will find their misgivings echoed in Weiner's book. The same criticisms they could not voice in public without being accused of politicizing intelligence are readily found in this lengthy and detailed tome.

Donald Gregg, a former CIA station chief in South Korea and later national security adviser to vice president George H.W. Bush, once said that the CIA has "a great reputation and a terrible record." This quote immediately springs to mind as one sifts through the few successes that Weiner chronicles—if one can call them "successes," since these achievements were hardly worth the price or the consequences. The Iranian coup of 1952, for instance, which brought the anti-communist shah to power, "was regarded as CIA's greatest single triumph," according to Andrew Kilgore, a State Department officer in Iran from 1972 to 1979. "It was trumpeted as a great American national victory. We had changed the whole course of the country here," quotes Weiner. But a generation of Iranians grew up knowing that the CIA had installed the shah and helped keep him in power. Over time, the agency's "triumph" in Tehran would return to haunt the United States.

And this, according to Weiner, was not the only unintended and damaging consequence of the coup. "The illusion that the CIA could overthrow a nation by sleight of hand," he writes, "was alluring." As a result, the CIA, incapable of doing what it was supposed to do—namely, providing American leaders with reliable information so they could make informed decisions—began to focus on more glamorous tasks. This "led the agency into a battle in Central America that went on for the next forty years." The disastrous invasion of the Bay of Pigs in 1961, says Weiner, was a direct result.

If its successes are few—and disputable—the failures of the CIA are legion. Going through the list of mistaken analyses, trends overlooked, signs ignored, and operations mishandled can make one cringe. For example, the CIA failed to predict that the

Soviet Union would detonate an atomic bomb in 1949 and that North Korea would invade the South in 1950. It was consistently wrong in its information and analysis both before and during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, and it failed to predict the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War in 1973. It was taken by surprise by the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian revolution of the same year. More relevant today, it also conspicuously failed twice in Iraq: It did not predict Saddam Hussein's 1991 invasion of Kuwait, and it presented flawed intelligence on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction program in 2003. And the list does not end there.

It is no wonder, then, that when Robert Gates, now secretary of defense, took control of the clandestine service of the CIA in 1982, he stated that "the CIA is slowly turning into the Department of Agriculture." He complained that the agency had "an advanced case of bureaucratic arteriosclerosis." Its halls were filled with plodding mediocrities counting the days until retirement, whom Gates viewed as the principal cause of "the decline in the quality of our intelligence collection and analysis over the last fifteen years." Gates told the CIA's analysts that they were "close-minded, smug, arrogant;" that their work was "irrelevant, uninteresting, too late to be of value, too narrow, too unimaginative, and too often just flat-out wrong;" and that their ranks were filled with amateurs "pretending to be experts." It was time to shape up or ship out.

Seven years later, shape up or no shape up, Gates admitted that the CIA "had no idea in January 1989 that a tidal wave of history was about to break upon us." The Soviet Union was on the verge of collapse, and America's spy agency was as blind as a submarine without a periscope. In December of 1988, it had issued a report "confidently stating" that "the basic elements of Soviet defense policy and practice thus far have not been changed by [Mikhail] Gorbachev's reform campaign." Less than a week had passed before the Soviet leader publicly offered to unilaterally cut half a million troops from the military.

Because Weiner, generally speaking, treats the cooperative Gates with kid gloves, it is left to Mark Palmer, a former Kremlinologist in the first Bush administration, to remind readers of a basic fact about the current secretary of defense: Gates had "never actually been to the Soviet Union! He'd never once been there, and he was the top so-called expert in the CIA!"

In all fairness to Gates, being called an expert for very little reason was hardly unique or exceptional in the

CIA. And Gates was far from the most blatant example of this puzzling state of affairs. "I knew little about Iran," recalls William Daugherty, a thirty-two-year-old veteran of the Marine Corps, who was sent to the Islamic republic in the summer of 1979, only nine months into his service as a CIA officer. "My entire exposure to Iran, beyond the evening television news and a three-week area-studies course at the State Department, consisted of what I had picked up during five weeks on the desk reading operational files."

It wasn't long before Daugherty was captured by the Iranians. He later reported,

> [My interrogators] said they knew that I was the head of the CIA's entire Middle East spy network, that I had been planning Khomeini's assassination, and that I had been stirring up the Kurds to revolt against the Tehran government.... Those Iranians found it inconceivable that the CIA would ever send to such a critical place as Iran someone who was so ignorant of the local culture and language. It was so inconceivable to them that weeks later, when they at last came to realize the truth, they were personally offended. It had been difficult enough for them to accept that the CIA would post an inexperienced officer in their country. But it was beyond insult for that officer not to speak the language or know the customs, culture, and history of their country.

Amazingly enough, sending inexperienced and insufficiently trained agents into enemy territory has been a CIA tradition since its inception. Weiner's retelling of the CIA's early years contains a veritable laundry list of human tragedies caused by the agency's insistence on sending raw recruits to certain death in Eastern Europe, Korea, and China. No one appears to have hesitated or asked questions about this policy, and no damning reports followed.

In 1952, for instance, the CIA was looking to bolster anti-communist forces in Manchuria. According to a CIA official study, "the CIA took steps to exploit the potential for a Chinese 'Third Force' by trying to link Chinese agents, trained by CIA, with alleged dissident generals on the mainland." "Beijing later broadcast a scorecard for Manchuria," writes Weiner. "The CIA had dropped 212 foreign agents in; 101 were killed and 111 captured." One suspects that Weiner believes the Chinese numbers to be fairly accurate, and he has good reason.

The agency was not only wasting its manpower. It was also giving away billions of dollars to shady middlemen, con artists posing as counterintelligence agents, and petty thieves. According to Weiner, it was trying to compensate for its lack of competence by relying on others to garner

intelligence in exchange for money. In the best cases, the CIA was paying a lot for very little, usually information that was overpriced and largely irrelevant. In the other cases, it was simply paying for nothing, or worse: false and misleading intelligence, for which it paid an even higher price in the future.

Responsibility for these failures does not fall solely on the CIA and its operatives. The American body politic shares part of the blame. A long line of presidents and their advisers, along with Congress and its numerous committees, have consistently botched any chance of changing the CIA for the better. They neglected the agency, played political games with it, replaced one miserable chief after another, and never invested the serious effort necessary to implement reforms. Then, when the bill inevitably came due, they blamed the agency.

True, every president since Eisenhower has harbored at least some ambition to crack, once and for all, the tough nut that is the CIA, and every single one of them has failed. The pattern appeared early on, with Eisenhower's CIA chief, Allan Dulles, for whom Weiner reserves some of his most severe criticisms. Dulles's sole talent appeared to be for public relations and governmental infighting. He "polished the public image of the CIA" and "fended off all efforts to change [it]." Eisenhower ended his term without ever reforming the intelligence services, and complained bitterly that he had "suffered an eight- year defeat on this."

This was hardly the last time an American president felt, and rightly so, that he wasn't getting what he needed from the CIA. "In his wrath after the Bay of Pigs," Weiner writes, "John Kennedy first wanted to destroy the CIA." He didn't. When Lyndon Johnson discovered that a CIA report claiming that Cuba was behind a coup in the Dominican Republic was baseless, he "took no further counsel from his new director of Central Intelligence." "It was no secret that I was dissatisfied with the CIA," Richard Nixon replied when he was asked if the agency helped bring down his presidency. For his part, Jimmy Carter "pronounced himself puzzled at the fact that the CIA's daily brief recapitulated what he read in the newspapers."

According to Weiner, various officials have attempted to deal with the CIA's shortcomings, but these efforts were made with no clear goal in mind and no strategy for success, and they were thus doomed to failure. From the Church Committee of the 1970s, "remembered today chiefly for its chairman's statement that the

agency had been 'a rogue elephant'—a pronouncement that badly missed the point by absolving the presidents who had driven the elephant," to the 9/11 Commission, which succeeded only in adding more layers of bureaucracy to America's already byzantine conglomerate of intelligence services, all attempts at reforming the CIA have fallen well short of the goal.

A new president will be taking office in January of 2009, and the indications are that even though the issue has not been central to the presidential campaign—it is too complicated and risky for such high-stakes politicking—both candidates understand that reforming the intelligence community is a challenge that must be faced by any new and ambitious administration. Weiner, hoping his book will serve as a warning, advises future presidents to "give immediate and sustained attention to the heart and soul of the CIA." It is not clear, however, that "sustained attention" will be enough. Judging by this book and the many others dealing with the American intelligence community which have emerged in the wake of 9/11, it seems clear that more profound changes may be necessary.

Can the CIA be saved? In the final analysis, this may not be the most important question. The question Americans should be asking themselves is: How can we get better intelligence? For U.S. presidents, the question is even more pressing, and if the CIA cannot be relied upon, they will turn to other sources to get their answers. One option is military intelligence. Not long ago, an article appeared in *Mother Jones* in which a civilian intelligence officer criticized John McCain and his aides for relying on military intelligence information rather than the CIA. "They think the CIA is a hotbed of liberals," he said. "Right-wing, nutty paranoia stuff. They all love the military and hate the CIA. Because the CIA tells them stuff they don't want to hear."

Indeed, as Weiner recounts in his book, there was an ongoing "battle for control of American intelligence" between civilian and military agencies "that went on for three generations." He concludes that, in the end, "the Pentagon… crushed the CIA, just as it vowed to do sixty years before." Weiner appears to find this more troubling than comforting, and many Americans share his sentiments. Such critics blame the military for being complacent in the months leading up to the Iraq war, and for outdoing the CIA in its efforts to provide a pretext for the Bush administration's war of choice.

In truth, however, there is a convincing case to be made for relying on the Pentagon over the CIA. For

many years now, intelligence officers working at the Pentagon have proved more reliable than the CIA, delivering correct assessments of almost every major crisis. Examples are plentiful: When the CIA said that the Soviets were not going to position missiles in Cuba, the Pentagon made the opposite case. When the CIA said that the arms race would not bankrupt the Soviet Union, the Pentagon begged to differ. The CIA doubted that Sunni and Shi'ite terrorists could collaborate, but the Pentagon took the more alarmist view and got it right. In fact, the Pentagon has gotten it right most of the time precisely *because* it has tended to take the more alarmist view.

To the foreign observer, it sometimes seems as if American culture itself is the primary cause of the miserable state of its intelligence agencies. Clearly, changing a country's basic culture is not a viable method of reforming its clandestine apparatus—and probably not an advisable one. And indeed, there is something morally commendable in the fact that a country like the United States has difficulties sustaining its clandestine operations. America's problems with intelligence seem to derive from certain fundamental values—resistance to institutionalized secrecy, fear of government lawlessness, and distaste for political deceit—which have always been part of the American consensus.

Unfortunately, such objectionable practices as secrecy and deceit are often the stock and trade of good intelligence work. As a result, Americans' relationship with their own intelligence services is often deeply ambivalent. Indeed, on the first page of *Legacy of Ashes*, Weiner quotes Eisenhower's statement that having a spy agency is a "distasteful but vital necessity." There is reason to suspect that America still treats the necessity of spying with the kind of distaste that makes it difficult for an intelligence agency to thrive. Aware of the necessity but unwilling to lower the bar of moral expectations—the recent controversy over the Bush administration's eavesdropping programs are a good example—American society continues to place many obstacles in the way of its intelligence agencies, so as to ensure that they do not interfere with the American way of life.

Of course, there are many good reasons for limiting the authority of clandestine government actions. The power given to the CIA has been abused many times at the hands of over-eager operatives, and no less by lawful politicians such as Johnson, Nixon, and, some would certainly

say, Bush as well. These abuses have contributed mightily to the problems of the CIA: They have eroded public support for the agency and all the benefits one gets from such support, and they have given the CIA an excuse for its own incompetence.

In *Against All Enemies*, his account of the war on terror, former White House counterterrorism official Richard Clarke writes that former secretary of state Madeleine Albright once told him "it was easy to understand why [the CIA] was risk-averse: It acts in a passive-aggressive way, she said, as if 'it has battered-child syndrome.'"

Legacy of Ashes more than confirms this description. In fact, it shows in great detail how the agency tends to swing between extremes of behavior: It is either too cautious or too reckless; too reluctant to take risks and put real spies on the ground, or too quick to send cash and ammunition to dubious allies, hoping for quick fixes in the form of coups and rebellions; it either drags its feet when the president asks for help, or acts rashly without properly warning the commander-in-chief of possible, even probable consequences.

Worse still, the agency can always hide behind the thick walls of its own bureaucracy, claiming to be doing a purely "professional" job, even as it tries to set the national agenda and dictate what it considers a desirable outcome. Indeed, if there is any flaw in this excellent volume, it is that Weiner pays an undue amount of attention to the ways the CIA has been used by various presidents in order to achieve their predetermined goals. Not enough attention is paid, however, to the intelligence community's manipulation of the president, often by giving him only a fraction of the information he needs and thus limiting his options.

If there is to be a sequel to *Legacy of Ashes*, Weiner would be well advised to address this aspect of the CIA's problematic legacy. The National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran that was ceremoniously submitted last year—announcing to an astonished world that Iran's military nuclear program was halted four years ago—is a good place to start.

The NIE report—issued out of the CIA's eagerness to eliminate the possibility of violent action by the Bush administration and to calm the debate over Tehran's intentions—blatantly employed intelligence means in order to achieve political ends. Whether Iran had actually halted its nuclear program was beside the point, because the country's long-term plan of achieving nuclear capabilities remained unchanged.

Seven years after 9/11, the CIA was correcting one mistake—its overselling of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction program—by making another: underselling Iran's weapons of mass destruction program. In doing so, it was laying the groundwork for its next predictable failure. The legacy of ashes continues, and there is no end in sight.

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