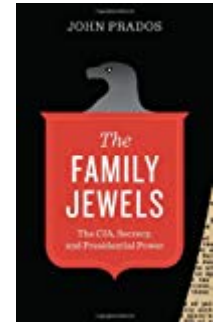


John Prados. *The Family Jewels: The CIA, Secrecy, and Presidential Power.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013. 400 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-292-73762-4.



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John Prados ends his latest book on the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) with a call to action. In *The Family Jewels: The CIA, Secrecy, and Presidential Power*, Prados argues that the intelligence system in the United States is broken. Setting out a case for intelligence reform, this prominent commentator on the secret world declares that “There is much work to be done by presidents, legislators, officials and citizens. The time to start is now” (p. 333). From its inception in the late 1940s, Prados suggests, the CIA’s interrelationship with its executive patron in the White House has served the American people poorly. In short, the CIA is presented as a dysfunctional intelligence organization, tainted by habitual abuses of power, recurrent illegality, and an inveterate obsession with concealing, when not willfully misrepresenting, the less savory aspects of its institutional history. The extent to which intelligence agencies can, and should, be held publicly accountable for their actions within the framework of a democratic society forms the leitmotif of this account of the

CIA and its “Family Jewels,” or most controversial intelligence operations.

Prados’s particular reading of the CIA and its operational history is unsurprising given his background as a leading advocate of government transparency and position as a senior fellow of the Washington DC-based National Security Archive, which for decades has been at the forefront of efforts to liberalize the disclosure of classified state records. Few scholars of intelligence, or indeed wider American foreign policy, will find much in the way of new evidence in this book. To a large extent Prados offers up a comprehensive and expertly crafted, if by now familiar synthesis, of the most controversial covert operations mounted by the CIA during the second half of the twentieth century and, more recently, in the context of an ongoing global war on terror. Prados provides detailed and engaging accounts of the original Family Jewels revelations, which were first aired in the *New York Times* in late 1974; the subsequent Year of Intelligence in 1975; the CIA’s involvement in political surveillance on American

soil; and agency complicity in eavesdropping, extrajudicial detention, and assassination plots; all cover well worn historical ground.[1] Likewise, Prados's examinations of the efforts undertaken by Langley to control the CIA's public image and manipulate official and unofficial documentary representations of agency history have recently attracted scholarly attention.[2]

The value of this latest in a long and seemingly endless line of polemics focused on the CIA, resides in the questions that it poses to contemporary American policymakers and their broader political constituencies. Prados meticulously catalogues and forensically interrogates evidence that suggests the CIA has long played fast and loose with its own charter and the U.S. Constitution in support of White House policy. Moreover, the U.S. intelligence communities "tendency to replicate" legally and ethically questionable activities in pursuit of executive directives has, in Prados's eyes, proved singularly counterproductive and is indicative of the "disturbing" possibility "that abuse fulfills some functional purpose" (p. 322).

Supporters of the Agency will undoubtedly take exception to the stridency with which Prados condemns the CIA's institutional culture and operational performance. To be sure, mundane yet successful intelligence operations, for obvious reasons, tend to remain hidden from public view and, in any case, generate fewer media headlines and much less controversy than more spectacular "failures." Indeed, a central plank of Prados's thesis is that manifestations of "abuse" within the intelligence environment "fester" in the dark shadows of excessive and unwarranted secrecy (p. 323). Equally, rightly or wrongly, the agency has invariably been forced to assume the role of public fall guy whenever a capricious president encounters political difficulties as a consequence of intelligence "blowback." In fact, to his credit, Prados is careful to emphasize the long-standing and pivotal role played by senior government officials outside the agency, including Henry Kissinger,

Dick Cheney, and Donald Rumsfeld, in exerting pressure on the CIA to launch controversial and action-orientated operations. Most notably, Dick Cheney is castigated as "the leading ringmaster" behind a litany of intelligence impropriety stretching back over thirty years, originating in efforts to hamstring the Rockefeller Commission on intelligence in the mid-1970s, and continuing through post-9/11 furors involving extraordinary rendition, enhanced interrogation, and NSA eavesdropping (p. 323). Democrat politicians come in for similar censure. In electing not to pursue Bush administration officials and CIA officers for acts of allegedly illegality, yet prosecuting CIA whistleblowers, such as John Kiriakou, and expanding the use of drone strikes across Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, Barak Obama has perpetuated "actions [that] have damaged America's real interests" (p. 326).

The book makes its biggest impact by deftly weaving a litany of historic intelligence abuses into the narrative of contemporary debates surrounding tensions between the preservation of national security on the one hand, and the maintenance on civil liberties and individual freedoms on the other. Prados constructs a strong case for interpreting Family Jewel abuses not as unfortunate historical glitches, but instead as components in an endemic pattern of executive misconduct, the roots of which stretch back to the formation of the postwar national security state. In this sense, perhaps a common thread can be discerned, as Prados claims, between the imprisonment and maltreatment of Yuri Nosenko, a KGB defector to United States in the 1960s, and the secret prisons, extraordinary renditions, enhanced interrogation practices employed by the CIA after 2001. The National Security Agency (NSA) communication interception programs recently revealed by Edward Snowden could be seen to have antecedents in CIA and NSA surveillance operations mounted inside the United States during the 1950s and 1960s, such as CHAOS, SHAMROCK and MINARET. The current deployment of drones armed with Hell-

fire missiles in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen to target foreign nationals deemed threats to the United States, contain faint echoes of earlier assassination plots hatched against Fidel Castro, Patrice Lumumba, and Rafael Trujillo. For sure, as Prados is at pains to point out, “the issue of abuse in intelligence activities” has hardly receded since the 1970s (p. 3). In fact, it has mushroomed in the aftermath of 9/11.

Prados argues that this abuse thrives amid secrecy and, in turn, corrodes public trust and confidence in the important work performed by intelligence agencies. Prados’s antidote to the malaise afflicting America’s intelligence community is a large dose of transparency. Noting that “over the years Langley has worked very hard to cloak its daggers” (p. 190), Prados reopens the long-standing debate about how open and accountable intelligence agencies can be in a liberal democracy while, at the same time, safeguarding the anonymity of sources and methods and preserving operational effectiveness. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Prados’s answer is, quite a lot more open than at present. Indeed, Prados insists that disclosure of questionable intelligence practices is not the problem. Investigate journalists from Seymour Hersh, the reporter responsible for uncovering the original Family Jewels, to Dana Priest, the *Washington Post* staffer who broke the post-9/11 “Top Secret America” story, are lauded for performing a valuable public service. However, continued vigilance on the part of the Fourth Estate, Prados concludes, can only be of limited utility in holding governments and intelligence services to account. Press exposes and the disclosures of whistle-blowers from Philip Agee to Edward Snowden, have, after all, failed to stem a recurring pattern of intelligence scandals. The voting public and political classes have notably short memories. In Prados’s estimation, the historical pattern of questionable practices and the efforts to evade accountability exhibited by America’s

spymasters are suggestive of an urgent need to reform the current system of intelligence oversight.

Lambasting existing regulatory mechanisms as not fit for the purpose, Prados bemoans that congressional committees tasked with scrutinizing the CIA’s work rely heavily on agency disclosure, are understaffed, and are subject to powerful political and legal pressures. In their place, Prados proposes an oversight system centered upon regular public reviews of intelligence agencies. Such a radical prescription for reform raises a number of questions. Is a public role in intelligence oversight practical? How would the security implications inherent in such a system be overcome? Would public intelligence hearings turn into media circuses reminiscent of the Church and Pike Committee enquiries of the mid-1970s, or the Iran-Contra inquests a decade later? Would, in short, such a system of oversight generate more heat than light?

John Prados has produced an expertly crafted and thought-provoking account of the faultiness between the United States’s intelligence community and its clients in the White House. He makes a strong case for intelligence reform. Prados’s prescriptions for change, however, are less persuasive. Ultimately, it is by challenging the American public to engage more meaningfully with complex and contentious debates within the intelligence sphere that encompass issues of ethics, civil liberties, and national security, that Prados’ book promises to make its greatest mark.

Notes

[1]. Some of the best accounts that address CIA covert action include Roy Godson, *Dirty Tricks or Trump Cards: US Covert Action and Counterintelligence* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s, 1996); Gregory Treverton, *Covert Action: The Limits of Intervention in the Postwar World* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); and John Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006).

[2]. See, Paul McGarr and Matthew Jones, “‘Real Substance, Not Just Symbolism’? The CIA and the Representation of Covert Operations in the Foreign Relations of the United States Series,” in *Intelligence Studies in Britain and the US: Historiography since 1945*, ed. Christopher R. Moran and Christopher J. Murphy (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 65-89; and Christopher R. Moran, “The Last Assignment: David Atlee Phillips and the Birth of CIA Public Relations,” *International History Review* 35, no. 2 (2013): 337-355.

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