



Safe For Democracy: The Secret Wars Of The CIA

John Prados

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Safe for Democracy for the first time places the story of the CIA's covert operations squarely in the context of America's global quest for democratic values and institutions. National security historian John Prados offers a comprehensive history of the CIA's secret wars that is as close to a definitive account as is possible today.

Safe For Democracy: The Secret Wars Of The CIA Details

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From Reader Review Safe For Democracy: The Secret Wars Of The CIA for online ebook

Jerome says

We are not always the good guy.

Sally says

library has... maybe I can learn about why my grandpa came home from vietnam in 63, and what he was doing in southeast asia during ww2...

N. Jr. says

This was a difficult book for me to rate, and even more difficult to review. It is also rather remarkable that bad reviews of this book can come from both sides of the fence, those who defend the CIA, and those who loathe it, and perhaps this is an indication that the author had been undecided on the stance he should take. Probably *'none'* would have been his best option.

American readers who are hardcore flag-wavers swelling with national pride resented his occasional (and in my view, mild) disparaging tone critical of the Agency's covert operations. On my part, I got the impression that the author tended to sentimentalize their destructive adventurism, and only found fault with those cases that failed. To me he was more of an apologist than a critic. I found his term referring to case officers as "secret warriors" an annoying example of this.

Another illustration of this is his detailed bio of key individuals, often including quirks and habits of the top CIA officers. Who the funk cares whether so and so was a good golf player, or that he was known by some cutesy nickname given to him by so and so. This ruins the flow of the book, forcing me to slog my way through pages of personal trivia after the author had already introduced the historical background of an operation pages back, compelling me to skip forward until I could finally pick up the thread again further on.

2 stars for effort; I'm sure there are better books. Otherwise, for a *'just the facts ma'am'* approach, there's always Wikipedia and other online sources.

Kamil Salamah says

A very detailed history of an intelligence agency whose reputation has been blown out of proportion.

Having started from the ashes of the OSS(a body full of disastrous follies), its creators knew that the USA was an amateur in this field.

The CIA committed more failures than is publicly projected.

Jerome says

A broad, interesting and informative review of CIA covert action.

The CIA has been a symbol for the mysterious and given almost omnipotent power in the imaginations of those predisposed to paranoia. This very good book should set a number of these notions to rest. John Prados gives us a very detailed of the CIA from its founding out of the WWII OSS.

He shows us its role in engaging in alternative warfare and in undermining regimes that were hostile to America, its allies, and their mutual interests. Prados is not pro-CIA. Nor is he nakedly anti-CIA. It is pretty good reporting. I can't imagine how much digging he had to do to provide the information that is here. I enjoyed one footnote that after he got some information from some declassified files in a Presidential library that planes and agents were sent to collect those documents and others after he published his findings.

Prados points up the embarrassing failures that have become public knowledge. And when there are successes, he points up the transitory nature of such clandestine efforts. He is plainly unconvinced that the long term problems created by those efforts are worth the various kinds of costs incurred in pulling them off. In his concluding chapter he points out that the CIA and intelligence gathering should not be viewed only by the ends they claim to support, but evaluated as to whether their means are compatible with our Democracy and its professed ideals. I will leave this for each reader to judge.

I will say that Prados does not go out of his way, this is already a long book, to set the chessboard up and discuss what the Soviets were doing. In doing so, he makes the United States to out to be the aggressor, instigator, and fumbler of so many global events. In my view, this is a distortion. It isn't that Prados is wrong (he may well be, but I am not competent to say so), it is that he is only showing us one part of the stage. The actors that he show us look quite silly at times, however, if we saw what they were reacting to, with, or against on the unlit art of the stage, our perception of the story might well be different.

Still, this is a very valuable and comprehensive telling of this history and until we get something even more complete or authoritative or more information is declassified, this is a must have text for those interested in the history of the CIA.

The part on Bush-era, "war on terror" operations in Afghanistan and Iraq is lacking, however.

He also describes in detail the relations between the CIA's paramilitary arm and the military special operations forces.

This book does not suggest that the CIA is a rogue arm of the government; the problem is that a covert capability proves too tempting to presidents seeking quick fixes to otherwise intractable problems.

Colin says

On the one hand, this is a highly detailed account of a ~60 year history of CIA covert actions spanning everything from political manipulations in Italy to the Bay of Pigs to Black Hawk Down-era Somalia. On the

other hand, it is a hell of a slog to get through. This is not a CIA history writ large, as the analysis and espionage sides of the organization are discussed only tangentially, but the observational lens is set squarely on the CIA and its relationship with the rest of U.S. government, much more than the impact of its activities and the actions of its partners and opponents.

The author's central message comes through fairly clearly (and repetitively) through each case: covert action almost never accomplishes any of the purposes it's touted to achieve, often reinforces or creates local actors who take advantage of U.S. largess to pursue their own aims, and is almost invariably carried out with little to no close scrutiny from the presidents who commission the action or from Congress, upon whom the final chapter hangs its oversight hopes.

This is a narrative heavily driven by - and driven at - the individual personalities that populated the CIA covert action program, and often feels like a 650 page Washington reader for anyone looking for ammunition on how one particular CIA official or the other screwed things up on their watch (as many, many of them did).

The post 9/11 era is not really discussed, although in some respects the concerns raised in the book over the para-militarization of the CIA are quite prescient; but for my reading, this was overwhelmed by a prosecutorial focus on which officials lied about what and who should have known better.

If you ever need a companion reference for a history of the Bay of Pigs or U.S. intervention in Guatemala, or any of several other Cold War episodes, this is worth consulting; but as a whole it felt both too dense and too quickly sketched out to fit the whole 60 year history in.

Ted says

This is a broad and lengthy review of CIA covert operations from the earliest days to the impacts of the 2004 Intelligence Reform Act; essentially an update of a similar book Prados wrote in the mid-'80s.

The book is fatally flawed by the author's clear determination to put all forms of covert ops in a negative perspective, and the narrative reflects his strong bias as he relates different operations throughout the decades. Not that all he relates was in reality sunshine and butterflies, but even considering harsh realities there are key parts missing in many stories, and others are consciously worded in the most negative manner possible.

A narrative already weakened by bias is further undercut by the author's ignorance of military SOF, which is evident in the several areas where he discusses military SOF support to Agency operations. The book is also weakly sourced, with the notes section poorly structured and only partially covering the discussion in each chapter.

However, I don't know of any other book as comprehensive in its attempted scope that deals with this subject matter. But, due the issues I've mentioned with this book, I'd recommend reading a number of other books focused on specific operations rather than this fatally flawed broad overview.

Marius Croeser says

Don't leave home without it..

Socraticgadfly says

Very good overview of the CIA's history since its official creation, focusing more on its various major operations before that of its various leaders, etc.

By the end of the first couple of chapters of this book, I realized that Ike's railings against the "military-industrial complex" had little to do with morality and not much to do with fears of the country's political future. Rather, he had become enamored of CIA covert operations as being cheap.

And, there were plenty of them!

Iran. Guatemala. A first foray in Iraq. Mainland China (outside of Tibet). Thoughts about Lebanon. Syria. Indonesia. The Philippines. Vietnam. Laos. Making Japan's Liberal Democrats a 40-year powerhouse. Tibet.

And the Bay of Pigs. Yes, the failure was partially Kennedy's, but more Ike's.

Iran and Guatemala were the only real successes in terms of meeting goals. Tibet was the only one that was arguably moral. Add in that we get a few details here of Ike letting down the Hungarians plus his various reasons for blocking Suez, and he definitely falls a few presidential ratings notches.

Anyway, the rest of the book is much the same.

New idiocies in expanding in Laos and Vietnam. Other unwarranted meddling in Guyana, this all in Kennedy-Johnson years.

Then we have Nixon giving us Chile. Ford, taken up by Reagan, giving us Angola. Ronnie also having Nicaragua, and by extension, Iran-Contra.

Prados shows us that

1. Most of these "actions" fell well short of goals;
2. There was a lot of CYA after most of them;
3. Most of them were built on oversold myths of "communist domino theory." In reality, Ho was as much a nationalist as communist; we pushed Fidel to becoming more communist; Allende and the Guatemalans never were communist in the first place. Etc.

This book could be much longer, but for its still large one-volume size, it's very good.

And yet, today, with another retired general running the CIA, who knows what covert action lurks?
