Contents

List of Acronyms, vii

Acknowledgments, ix

Introduction: First Hidden, Then Lost, 1

PART 1. THE TRUMAN ERA, 1947–1952, 7
No “American Gestapo,” But “No More Pearl Harbors,” 9
Initial Oversight: Budgets and Covert Action, 25
“A South American Pearl Harbor,” 33
“This Is an Espionage Bill,” 40
The Soviet A-Bomb: “We Apparently Don’t Have the Remotest Idea,” 51
Communists and “Perverts” in the CIA, 64
Korea: “No Better Today Than on December 7, 1941,” 82
A New DCI, 90
The “Dirty Business,” 95
Portraits, 113
CIA Subcommittees, Intelligence Roles, and Budgets, 118
“We Don’t Let Just Anybody Look at Our Files,” 125
“There Will Be No Changes,” 135

PART 2. THE EISENHOWER ERA, 1953–1960, 139
Meddling? 141
Getting “Taberized,” 149
Guatemala: Sterilizing a “Red Infection,” 161
Mr. Mansfield Goes to the Senate, 171
Joseph McCarthy: The CIA’s Other Would-Be Overseer, 177
“You, Who Championed Our Cause,” 197
Contents

Barons Restored, 203
“Dodging Dead Cats,” 209
“They Have to Have a Building,” 215
The New Mansfield Resolution: Two Surprises, 223
“We Have a History of Underestimation,” 234
Hungary and the Suez: “We Had a Very Good Idea, Senator,” 251
Sputnik, 262
An Early “Year of Intelligence”? 274
“I Cannot Always Predict When There Is Going to Be a Riot,” 281
Iraq: “Our Intelligence Was Just Plain Lousy,” 290
Return to Missile Gap, 301
From the Pforzheimer Era to the Warner Era, 314
Subordinating Intelligence? 323
In and Out of Hearing Rooms, 331
“Who Are Our Liquidators?” 347
“I’d Like to Tell Him to His Face What I Think about Him,” 356
U-2: “We Have Felt These Operations Were Appropriate,” 375
Pouring Oil on Fire, 383
“ Their Answer to That Demand”: Congressional Paternity? 394
“My Opinion of the CIA Went Skyrocketing,” 404

Castro: “This Fellow Is Bad and Ought to Go,” 425
“What Is the Rationale behind That?” 438
“I Agree That You Had to Replace Dulles,” 450

Afterword: Alarms, 458
Notes, 465
Selected Bibliography, 511
Index, 521
Acronyms

ADD/A  Assistant Deputy Director for Administration
A-DD/A  Assistant to the Deputy Director for Administration
AEC  Atomic Energy Commission
BOB  Bureau of the Budget
CAT  Civil Air Transport
CG  Comptroller General
CIA/DRM  CIA Declassified Reference Materials
CIG  Central Intelligence Group
COMINT  U.S. communications intelligence
CREST  CIA Records Search Tool
DD/A  Deputy Director for Administration
DD/I  Deputy Director for Intelligence
DD/S  Deputy Director for Support
ECA  Economic Cooperation Administration
FOC  first operational capability
FRUS  Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States
GAO  General Accounting Office
GMIC  Guided Missile Intelligence Committee
HUAC  House Committee on Un-American Activities
ICBM  intercontinental ballistic missile
JCAE  Joint Committee on Atomic Energy
NA  National Archives
NIA  National Intelligence Authority
NRA  National Recovery Administration
NSC  National Security Council
OAS  Organization of American States
OCB  Operations Coordinating Board
ONE  Office of National Estimates
ONI  Office of Naval Intelligence
OPC  Office of Policy Coordination
ORR  Office of Research and Reports
OSO  Office of Special Operations
OSS  Office of Staff Secretary
OSS  Office of Strategic Services
Acronyms

PBCFIA  President’s Board of Consultants on Foreign Intelligence Activities
PSB    Psychological Strategy Board
RFE    Radio Free Europe
SANSA  Special Assistant for National Security Affairs
SAS    Senate Armed Services Committee
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Introduction
First Hidden, Then Lost

“I just get no comfort out of anything that the Admiral has said to us!” The stocky, grim-faced speaker was one of the U.S. senators and representatives making up a joint committee of the U.S. Congress. In October 1949, this committee had summoned the director of central intelligence (a former rear admiral in the navy) to a secret hearing in the Capitol building. Twice-a-year recipients of estimates that the DCI and associates had produced since the Central Intelligence Agency was created two years earlier, the committee members had been stunned by the Soviet Union’s first test explosion of an atomic bomb. So were others, including President Harry Truman, since the CIA had not predicted the event. Its director took a pummeling at the hearing from the angry senator and others for not having “the remotest idea” of what the Soviet Union was up to. The chairman excused the DCI after ninety minutes with a warning not to let Soviet progress on a much more powerful hydrogen bomb go similarly undetected: “It might well mean the difference between our existence as a nation and not existing.”

The following year, a Democratic leader of the House of Representatives went to CIA heads and then to the president, insisting that the agency rid itself of a flamboyant homosexual who managed covert action projects. Republicans were determined to attack Truman and his agency over this, he said, putting “friends” of the CIA in an impossible situation. By week’s end, the man was gone.

In 1951, Congress, which rarely had hinted at American covert operations around the world, debated an amendment that would authorize the president to spend up to $100 million on such interventions against the USSR and its Eastern European satellites. “Aiding the underground organizations that may now exist,” using “refugees from behind the Iron Curtain,” and “going on the offensive” were the intended results, said the amendment’s sponsor. The ultimate goal of the amendment, which passed the House and Senate overwhelmingly, was “liberation” of those living under communism. Two years later, the House Appropriations Committee’s new Republican chairman hired additional staff to investigate executive branch agencies that had proliferated during twenty years of Democratic rule. After the staff examined
the CIA’s performance, he imposed a personnel ceiling on the agency, provoking the complaining words “arbitrary and capricious” heard at the CIA.

Late in 1958, the Central Intelligence Agency’s legislative counsel began counting how often his superiors appeared on Capitol Hill annually. There had been thirty informal sessions, mostly with individual legislators, so far that year, and two dozen hearings held by fifteen committees or subcommittees. Five concerned the CIA’s failure to anticipate the overthrow of Iraq’s pro-U.S. government, thereby heightening instability in Lebanon and provoking an American military intervention there. “Our intelligence was just plain lousy” about Iraq, said one of the scores of legislators who complained publicly about the CIA’s performance. By year’s end, the chairmen of the House Appropriations and Armed Services Committees had appointed trusted younger colleagues as chairs to energize their CIA subcommittees’ performance.

Early in 1960, following over a year of off-and-on private and sometimes angry interactions with intelligence leaders, a senator charged publicly that intelligence estimates had been “juggled so that the budget books may be balanced.” An economy-minded President Dwight Eisenhower had (the senator said) intentionally downplayed grave intelligence estimates about growing Soviet nuclear war fighting capabilities.

Through the rest of the year and into early 1961’s new presidency and Congress, some legislators agitated for the overthrow of Cuba’s Fidel Castro. The United States “would be committing suicide in allowing any unfriendly regime in Cuba,” which would establish “military bases of the Soviet universal empire 90 miles away from our shoreline,” said a powerful House member. Privately, a senator stressed to the DCI that there should not “be any appeasement shown to Castro, no softness of any kind.” The DCI and four assistants soon went before eight members of a House subcommittee and their staff assistant. After the director’s usual warning—“this is very classified”—he described plans for what would later be known as Bay of Pigs. No representative advised against secretly invading Cuba, but some questioned whether “a force of 1,000, however well-trained, would be able to hold … a sizeable enough piece of Cuban real estate.”

No history of the Central Intelligence Agency’s early Cold War relations with the branch of government substantially responsible for its creation— the U.S. Congress— has ever been published. (In-house CIA historians produced such a volume, but the U.S. government has yet to declassify it, implausibly
claiming that it might harm the nation’s security. The government still keeps
tens of thousands of pages of CIA documents from the 1940s and 1950s
secret.) Since the Constitution specifies that Congress must appropriate every
dollar that executive branch agencies may spend, the nation’s legislature has
always asserted the right to monitor those bureaucracies’ performance. The
first such instance was a House committee’s 1792 investigation of the U.S.
Army, following a calamitous battle with a Native American nation.

Nonetheless, congressional oversight of agencies has been a “variable
phenomenon,” as one pair of scholars politely worded it, across American
history. Whether legislators monitored the CIA during the Truman and
Eisenhower presidencies has been particularly doubted by knowledgeable
persons. Some have suggested to me that a history of congressional over-
sight of the CIA during those years would surely be a thin volume. Their
skepticism is perfectly understandable. Stories that circulate about that era’s
treatment of the CIA by Congress tell only of deference:

- An agency administrator recalled the “story” of securing money in a mid-
1950s hearing for a new CIA headquarters. A House committee chairman
told DCI Allen Dulles, “You probably are going to ask us for about $25
million.” The director responded, “Mr. Chairman, we’re going to ask you
for $50 million.” With a deep southern drawl, the chairman replied, “My,
my, that is going to be a nice building.”

- In 1956, when the Senate debated a resolution that would create a joint
House-Senate intelligence committee, a CIA subcommittee’s ranking
Republican faced questions about the efficacy of his oversight. He spoke
words that have endured in many a history book: “The difficulty in
connection with asking questions and obtaining information is that we
might obtain information which I personally would rather not have,
unless it was essential for me as a Member of Congress to have it.”

- In the mid-1970s, a much-publicized Senate committee investigated
alleged abuse of powers by the CIA. Convinced that Congress needed to
monitor the agency aggressively, it found that in prior decades oversight
had been “more perfunctory than rigorous.”

Such accounts, though, convey only part of the reality of the struggles of
the CIA and Congress with each other and against a widely perceived and
feared Soviet threat.
Some authors have described Congress and the CIA in the years since the mid-1970s, when the House and Senate created and sustained large intelligence committees with extensive staffs. But the story of Capitol Hill and the agency during the early Cold War years is a history that was initially hidden and later lost. From the start, heads of congressional subcommittees on the CIA insisted even more strongly than agency leaders that their hearings be shrouded in secrecy. They succeeded. Later, the records that members of Congress created concerning the CIA—limited as they were—became dispersed around the country and effectively lost. Situated in typically large collections, they became proverbial needles in haystacks.

Many records of congressional interactions with the agency were destroyed. The papers of the late Georgia Democrat Carl Vinson, who headed the House Armed Services Committee and was one of the CIA’s important early overseers, do not exist. He apparently had them burned. Similarly, at the National Archives, there is nothing approaching a decent accumulation of his committee’s papers from those years. And that era’s papers of the House Appropriations Committee? Nonexistent.

A related problem is the understandably widespread tendency of legislators and CIA officers in those days not to document critical business. Having spent innumerable days exploring the papers of dead members of Congress and the considerable (if censored) declassified CIA papers, I have found violations of this tradition—a representative’s handwritten notes of Dulles’s briefings, another’s notes about one year’s CIA budget (still classified as “Top Secret” a half-century later), a subcommittee’s transcript of a discussion of covert action, etc. On such occasions, I have sent heartfelt thanks to those late officials.

The secret and usually informal interactions of the CIA and legislators from 1947 to 1961’s Bay of Pigs crisis were the darkest years of intelligence oversight’s dark ages. Still, those mostly unchronicled encounters illustrated two dilemmas that confront any democratic nation in a dangerous world: First, if the government is not open about its functioning, citizens cannot know if agencies are performing with competence, incompetence, or even mendacity. Many a member of Congress shared the worry of a colleague who warned in the late 1940s about “the establishment of a Gestapo in the United States by which people may be hounded and harassed.” Yet, in a menacing world, even a democratic government must shield information about its military and intelligence capabilities, as well as its knowledge of other countries’ secrets.
Second, as George Washington suggested in his Farewell Address, a “novel” U.S. foreign policy guided by “exalted justice” could inspire other nations and someday transform the world. A century and a half later, though, the superpower United States was increasingly vulnerable to annihilation. A commission secretly advised President Eisenhower, “If the United States is to survive, long-standing American concepts of ‘fair play’ must be reconsidered. We must develop effective espionage and counterespionage services and must learn to subvert, sabotage and destroy our enemies by more clever, more sophisticated, and more effective methods than those used against us.”

Unless the world evolves into a collection of peaceable democracies, or at least an arena free of aggression, the two dilemmas will not disappear for the United States. An imperfect solution exists, though: direction and oversight of powerful, secretive bureaucracies by elected officials. The Constitution gives the president such “executive power.” Citizens may hope that the president knows the CIA’s most important secrets and that only with his approval does it operate in foreign nations. Since Congress passes the laws that create, direct, and fund such organizations, it has a constitutional right and obligation to monitor them, as well.