

Sins of Omission and Commission

Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA

By Tim Weiner

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By Jeffrey T. Richelson

Every author hopes for a news event that will draw attention to the subject matter of his or her book. But few actually enjoy the kind of exquisite timing that benefited Tim Weiner.

In late June, after 34 years of fending off requests, the [Central Intelligence Agency released 702 pages](#) of documents that constitute the agency's fabled "Family Jewels," in actuality, a hodge-podge of memos and reports. The "[Family Jewels](#)" were gathered in response to James Schlesinger's 1973 directive that all agency components inform him, as director of central intelligence, of any activities which might have been undertaken in violation of the agency's charter. Even though very few of the disclosures were new, release of the "Family Jewels" was major news for a full week.^[1]

The publisher of Weiner's book sought, quite naturally, to capitalize on the publicity windfall and immediately rushed *Legacy of Ashes*, which had been originally scheduled for an August release, into bookstores. This seemed to be one occasion, moreover, where timing and substance were happily joined. Weiner, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter, has spent a considerable part of his career on the intelligence beat, covering the CIA for the most prestigious newspaper in the country, *The New York Times*.

The nearly-unanimous praise that greeted *Legacy of Ashes* underscored the presumption that here was a book which would convey an extraordinary understanding of the agency. *Los Angeles Times* columnist Tim Rutten described *Legacy of Ashes* as "about as magisterial an account of 'the agency's' 60 years as anyone has yet produced," drawn "from more than 50,000 documents." In *The New York Times Book Review*, *Newsweek's* Evan Thomas, the author of a well-received volume on some of the CIA's early stalwarts, praised *Legacy of Ashes* as "engrossing" and "comprehensive." Thomas noted that it painted "what may be the most disturbing picture yet of CIA ineptitude," a claim made all the more credible since Weiner's reportedly drew from "tens of thousands of documents." Presidential historian Michael Beschloss, also writing in *The New York Times*, described the book as a "deeply researched new chronicle of the Central Intelligence Agency" which could not be simply dismissed as "an anti-CIA screed." In *The Wall Street Journal*, Edward Jay Epstein, an author of numerous books and articles on intelligence, informed his readers the "prodigiously researched" book was a "fascinating and revealing history."^[2]

There was very little critical commentary within the laudatory reviews. David Wise, the dean of journalists writing about intelligence, did observe in *The Washington Post Book Week*, “If there is a flaw in *Legacy of Ashes*, it is that Weiner’s scorn for the old boys who ran the place is so unrelenting and pervasive that it tends to detract from his overall argument. He is unwilling to concede that the agency’s leaders may have acted from patriotic motives or that the CIA ever did anything right.” Still, Wise concluded, “*Legacy of Ashes* succeeds as both journalism and history.”^[3]

The near-universal praise is perplexing, if only because Tim Weiner’s book cannot be even remotely characterized as a history of the CIA.

During its 60-year existence, the agency has been engaged in five significant types of activities: human intelligence (the proverbial spying); technical collection (and other scientific and technological activities); analysis (efforts to interpret the present and divine the future); counterintelligence (actions taken to defeat adversaries’ intelligence services); and covert action (a grab-bag of activities, all of which are intended to produce political outcomes deemed beneficial to U.S. interests). Weiner’s book gives very limited space to the first four of those activities, while devoting the lion’s share of attention to the CIA’s covert action operations. It is not surprising given that covert actions—such as the efforts to assassinate Fidel Castro—tend to be the most sensational and controversial. But the fixation is more than strange, given the subtitle to Weiner’s book, together with his assertion that *Legacy of Ashes* “describes how the most powerful country in the history of Western civilization has failed to create a first-rate spy service.”^[4]

How does one make such a sweeping conclusion without making a reasonable effort to examine the CIA’s performance in the areas of intelligence collection (human and technical) and analysis? Weiner’s calculated neglect of these activities is hardly the only problem with the book—but it is the primary one.

HUMINT

The ungainly acronym HUMINT (for human intelligence) includes everything from classic espionage operations (i.e., getting foreign nationals to turn over their nation’s secrets), to recruiting travelers to share information (particularly during the early Cold War), to the interrogation of prisoners, including (most recently) “high value” detainees held in the CIA’s “black sites.” Targets of the agency’s HUMINT operations include enemies and allies alike, from the Soviet Union and Iraq, to France and Israel.

The HUMINT dimension is not entirely absent from Weiner’s account. He dredges up well-worn anecdotes familiar to any student of intelligence history, such as the KGB’s compromise of the first CIA officer ever posted to Moscow, while presenting some novel ones. One of the book’s genuine revelations is Weiner’s disclosure of a program designated GLOBE, described as the “CIA’s first worldwide cadre of deep-cover officers . . . [who passed] as international lawyers or traveling salesman for *Fortune* 500 companies.”^[5] There is also an extensive discussion of the Aldrich Ames case (about which Weiner wrote an earlier book), which befits Ames’s devastating betrayal, easily

the worst ever suffered by the CIA. Ames not only compromised valuable intelligence operations, but was surely responsible for sending a number of agency assets in the Soviet Union to their deaths even as the Cold War was winding down. These episodes, even the thread-bare ones, are certainly a valid part of any objective history of the agency.

Weiner also describes a number of the CIA's successes against the Soviet and Soviet bloc targets. He mentions intelligence received in the 1950s from Major Pytor Popov, "the CIA's first spy of any note inside the Soviet Union," who "knew a thing or two about tanks and tactical missiles and Russian military doctrine." The CIA could, Weiner writes, "claim with conviction that Popov saved the United States half a billion dollars in military research and development."^[6] *Legacy of Ashes* also acknowledges the contribution in the early 1960s of Colonel Oleg Penkovsky, a member of the GRU (the Chief Intelligence Directorate of the Soviet General Staff), who met CIA and British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) officers on trips abroad and also "smuggled out some five thousand pages of documents, most of them providing insight into military technology and doctrine." Weiner rightly characterizes Penkovsky as the "secret hero of the Cuban missile crisis," because the manuals he provided enabled agency analysts to estimate precisely the capabilities of the Soviet missiles spotted by the CIA's U-2s.^[7]

Weiner also refers to more recent CIA assets who provided significant intelligence during the late Cold War, namely, Ryzard Kuklinski and Adolf Tolkachev. A Polish military officer, Kuklinski gave the United States "a long hard look at the Soviet military," including Soviet plans for use of tactical nuclear weapons in the event of a war in Europe. Tolkachev, who was regarded as the "CIA's greatest source in twenty years," is described as a "military scientist who had for four years delivered documents on cutting-edge Soviet weapons research."^[8]

But this is also almost everything *Legacy of Ashes* tells us about these cases, because Weiner is very parsimonious when it comes to describing successful CIA endeavors. A history of the agency, according to Weiner, need only provide the vaguest details about the intelligence these assets supplied, and even less about its value and impact. Kuklinski's information about possible Soviet intervention in Poland and internal Polish government developments goes wholly unreported—as does the salient fact that Kuklinski's intelligence served as a catalyst for U.S. warnings to Moscow against intervention. None of this once highly-sensitive information is hard to come by now. But Weiner chose not to exploit such easily available primary sources as the transcripts of Penkovsky's London debriefings, or the TOP SECRET *Military Thought* essays he turned over to Washington. Nor does Weiner even utilize well-regarded secondary sources, such as CIA officer Barry Royden's detailed account of the Tolkachev case that appeared in *Studies in Intelligence*, or well-researched books on the Penkovsky and Kuklinski cases that relied heavily on primary documents.^[9]

Weiner's parsimony, in fact, is such that a number of Soviet-era spies of import are completely missing from his account. There is no mention whatsoever of Dmitri Polyakov, Anatoli Filatov, or Aleksandr Dmitrevich Ogorodnik. Polyakov, according to

David Wise, provided information on Soviet strategic missiles, anti-tank missiles, nuclear strategy, chemical and biological warfare, and civil defense. Filatov approached the CIA in the mid-1970s while stationed in Algiers, and in the fourteen months before being transferred back to GRU headquarters provided Washington with a great variety of Soviet intelligence and military secrets. His service to the CIA continued for a year after his transfer back to Moscow, until he was detected making a dead drop. Ogorodnik became an agency asset in 1974, while serving in the Soviet embassy in Colombia. In 1975 he returned to Moscow and took a position in the foreign ministry's Global Affairs Department. The information that routinely passed through Ogorodnik's office included KGB intelligence reports and the year-end, comprehensive report from every Soviet ambassador. Such agents would seem worthy of at least some mention in any book that purports to be a thorough history and reaches sweeping judgments.[\[10\]](#)

Also, apart from the case of Colonel Chang Hsien-yi, the deputy director of Taiwan's Institute for Nuclear Energy Research – who defected in the 1980s, after twice providing critical information about Taiwan's nuclear weapons intentions to the CIA– Weiner's history essentially ignores espionage operations against non-Soviet targets, including rogue nation nuclear programs and al-Qaeda. Thus, there is no real discussion of the agency's apparent penetration of A.Q. Khan's proliferation network and how the intelligence helped force Libya to abandon its weapons of mass destruction program.[\[11\]](#)

As stunted as Weiner's history is, he does not shy away from raising all kinds of criticisms, some of which are quite curious upon close examination. In his author's note, for example, Weiner writes that all of the agency's key Soviet assets were “volunteers, not recruits.”[\[12\]](#)

This complaint seems trenchant until one recalls the Soviets were no more successful. The great majority of Americans—or at least the valuable ones we know about—who spied for Moscow were also walk-ins, a list that includes Aldrich Ames, Robert Hanssen, James Nicholson, and Edward Pitts. Both sides during the Cold War obtained far more from volunteers than from recruits. In addition to denigrating the agency unfairly, though, Weiner completely disrespects the hard work of the case officers who ran the Soviet and East European nationals who volunteered their services. Successfully recruiting an agent from a “denied area” probably paled next to the genuinely hard work of running one, as the latter ranged from the technical tradecraft involved in obtaining information from the source without detection, to the emotional and material support necessary to those who risked their lives to provide the United States with valuable intelligence. Such skills were, and are, hardly trivial, and the agency's ability to train such officers was not an insignificant accomplishment. But to ignore it is in keeping with Weiner's proclivity to cast virtually any agency success in a negative light.

Weiner also voices criticism of the quality of the agency's Soviet assets, apart from how they were gathered. The CIA “never possessed a single one who had deep insights into the workings of the Kremlin,” he writes. None of the 20 sources the CIA's Soviet Division were running in 1956 “could have any idea of what made the Kremlin tick,”

Weiner later adds, before concluding that the agency “never came close to providing a big picture of the Soviet Union.”[\[13\]](#)

Again, the critique sounds better than it turns out to be. Weiner never specifies what would constitute a “deep insight” into the workings of the Kremlin, or why he believes there was some great secret—beyond Marxist ideology, a lust for power and privilege, and the personalities of those who ran the country—that, if known, would have provided the key to unlocking the Kremlin. His complaint about the inadequacies of the CIA’s 1956 Soviet sources is supposedly justified by a recounting of their lowly positions in the Communist state: the wife of a guided missile research scientist, a low-ranking naval engineering officer, a laborer, a telephone repairman, a garage manager, a veterinarian, a high school teacher, a locksmith, a restaurant worker, and one who had no position at all.

What Weiner fails to acknowledge or appreciate is that while such individuals may not have had any special knowledge of what drove the Soviet leadership, they may still have been able to provide valuable intelligence. There is a difference between status and access. A naval engineering officer, even a low-ranking one, might well supply critical information about Soviet naval systems, just as Christopher Boyce—a \$145-a-week communications clerk—turned out to be one of the most damaging American spies ever simply because he was able to provide the KGB with a detailed manual about a top-secret U.S. signals intelligence satellite system.[\[14\]](#)

Technical Collection

As wanting as Weiner’s treatment of the agency’s HUMINT operations is, it doesn’t compare with his indefensible neglect of the CIA’s scientific and technical activities. Indeed, the agency has often been criticized for emphasizing technical collection at the expense of getting information the old-fashioned way, via human spying. Perhaps so, but the capabilities the CIA has developed over the decades are likely the envy of other intelligence services. Weiner’s treatment of this aspect leaves a gap wide enough to fly a pair of spy planes and a quintet of satellites through—with plenty of room left over.

There are thousands of pages of declassified documents on technical collection in the CIA Records Search Tool (CREST) database at the National Archives, in the National Reconnaissance Office reading room, and in the form of declassified articles in [Studies in Intelligence](#) and CIA histories. Weiner hardly makes any use of these sources.

Legacy of Ashes does recount the CIA’s interrogation experiments from the 1950s, undertaken when fears of Communist “brain-washing” of Korean War POWs were real. The saddest episode involved LSD and an Army scientist named Fred Olson, who jumped out the window of a New York hotel after a dose of the drug was covertly administered to him. Drawing from a recently declassified history, Weiner also devotes considerable attention, to the Berlin Tunnel operation which involved the tapping of Soviet communication links in East Germany. Although the Soviets knew of the project from its inception through their mole in the British SIS, George Blake, it still provided valuable

intelligence because of the Soviets' reluctance to take immediate action for fear it would compromise a highly prized source.

Wiener also devotes several pages to the U-2 program, particularly with respect to the Cuban missile crisis, but gives the program far less attention than it deserves, both as a part of the CIA's history and of the Cold War. Absent from his account is any mention of those who developed or flew the plane, almost all of the details of the missions flown and intelligence obtained, and the impact.^[15] Instead, he focuses on what he perceives as lost opportunities and at least one dramatic and allegedly negative consequence of the program.

Weiner complains that with regard to target selection for the U-2, "the Pentagon always set the requirements for reconnaissance: How many bombers did the Soviets have? How many nuclear missiles? How many tanks?" He also reports that later in life, James Reber, who headed the committee which selected targets for the U-2, observed that a Cold War, order-of-battle mentality blocked the very idea of photographing anything else, and Wiener quotes him as saying, "We didn't raise the right questions." What Reber meant, Wiener explains, is that "If the CIA had developed a bigger picture of life inside the Soviet Union, it would have learned that the Soviets were putting little money into the resources that truly made a nation strong. They were a weak enemy." Wiener concludes, "The idea that the final battles of the Cold War would be economic instead of military was beyond their imagination."^[16]

But the U-2 program was approved by President Eisenhower precisely because of a justifiable concern over the threat of a surprise attack in the missile age. There was an overwhelming need to penetrate the Soviet regime's veil of secrecy and discover if Premier Nikita Khrushchev's boasts were accurate. The planes were photographing military targets not only, or even primarily, for Pentagon war planners, but for CIA and other intelligence analysts who needed the information to assess properly Soviet, Chinese, and other nations' military capabilities. U-2 missions helped alleviate U.S. concerns of a missile or bomber gap, and kept the Cold War from turning hot, which was no minor achievement.

The treatment of James Reber's comment (assuming he was accurately quoted in context) exemplifies a problem that recurs throughout *Legacy of Ashes*. Wiener is quick to quote any former intelligence official who now has something negative to say about any of the agency's activities, but never asks whether those views are reasonable, or whether other officials have differing views in hindsight. With respect to Reber's comment, it would not be unreasonable to argue that knowledge of Soviet military capabilities was more important for the U-2 to acquire than information about why the Soviets were unlikely to manufacture the first personal computers. It should also be obvious the damage caused by nuclear warheads, delivered on American or European cities, would not be mitigated by the Soviet Union's misshapen economy, nor would its short-sighted investment policies have prevented Moscow from launching an attack.

Weiner also has some naïve and simplistic notions of his own. Writing about the Soviet shoot down of the U-2 flown by Francis Gary Powers on May 1, 1960, which ultimately led Khrushchev to pull out of the Paris summit, Weiner proclaims, “The CIA’s spy plane destroyed the idea of *détente* for almost a decade.” Weiner does not elaborate on such a significant assertion either in the text or his copious endnotes. Is he actually suggesting that if only Eisenhower and Khrushchev had had a good, heart-to-heart chat in Paris, the Soviets would not have gone on to build the Berlin Wall, install missiles in Cuba, or invade Czechoslovakia? Weiner’s assertion, at best, reveals a Pollyannaish belief that talks between adversaries are inevitably productive. At worst, it is but one example of his propensity to make extravagant judgments without hard evidence or serious thought.[\[17\]](#)

The A-12 OXCART, another major spy plane produced under the supervision of the CIA and Richard Bissell, does not make even a cameo appearance in the book. The OXCART, intended to be the U-2’s successor, could fly up to an altitude of about 100,000 feet and at a speed of greater than Mach 3. Although it had a short operational life, without it the Air Force would not have had its SR-71, which flew reconnaissance missions from 1968 to 1990 and obtained high-resolution images of targets across the world.[\[18\]](#)

An even bigger problem is the virtually complete absence of information about the three imagery satellites—CORONA, HEXAGON (KH-9), and KENNAN (KH-11)—and two signals intelligence satellites—RHYOLITE and ORION—that were developed and produced by the CIA and its contractors. CORONA satellites were in service from 1960 to 1972, HEXAGON spacecraft from 1971 to 1984, and KENNAN spacecraft (and its successors) have been in orbit from 1976 to this day. As did CORONA, HEXAGON produced images of wide swaths of Soviet and other nations’ territory with much higher resolution. KENNAN imagery was the first to be returned in real-time, so imagery interpreters at a secret site in Virginia could witness developments in the Soviet Union, China, or Southwest Asia as they were happening. Those satellites proved invaluable for providing detailed intelligence on foreign military capabilities, for supporting military operations (such as the first Persian Gulf War), and for monitoring arms control agreements.[\[19\]](#)

Much the same could be said about RHYOLITE and ORION. These satellites intercepted the telemetry of foreign missiles while they were being tested and provided information vital to any assessment of their capabilities, as well as to efforts to monitor Soviet adherence to provisions in the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) and Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START). It almost goes without saying, of course, there would never have been any agreements with Moscow in the first place if the military services had not been confident about the CIA’s ability to verify Soviet compliance. In addition, these satellites’ communications intercept capabilities expanded the U.S. ability to eavesdrop on Soviet and other nations’ communications.[\[20\]](#)

Also absent from Weiner’s account is the CIA’s role in building stations to monitor telemetry in the years before satellite interception was an option, and the agency’s founding of what eventually became the National Photographic Interpretation Center (NPIC). Both of those developments occurred during the tenure of Allen Dulles and

undermine Weiner's portrayal of Dulles as someone who was completely detached and uninterested in anything besides the agency's covert activities.^[21] Covert operations animated Dulles as nothing else could, and it is true he was initially reluctant to undertake the U-2 program. Still, he authorized the agency's first ELINT (Electronics Intelligence) program in 1954; fought off Air Force attempts to take over the U-2 once it proved successful; opposed cutbacks in the number of CORONA missions; and deflected the Defense Department's attempt to seize control over NPIC. It was during Dulles' tenure at CIA, in fact, that the groundwork was laid for the agency's extensive and invaluable technical collection operations. Had he been as indifferent as Weiner makes him out to be, it is quite likely the CIA would have been shut out of such collection efforts altogether.^[22]

Weiner also has a jaundiced view of the CIA's contribution to controlling the arms race, or at least to slowing it down. He tells the reader:

Over the course of more than thirty years, the United States had spent close to a quarter of a *trillion* dollars on spy satellites and electronic eavesdropping equipment built to monitor the Soviet military. . . . They provided the data for endless Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty negotiations with the Soviets, and it could be argued that those talks helped keep the Cold War cold. But Washington and Moscow never gave up a single weapons system that they had wanted to build. . . . And in the end the United States abrogated the very idea of arms control.^[23]

The claim that the United States has abandoned arms control altogether is a dubious one. Washington adheres to an array of arms control treaties, including some unratified ones; a recent *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* noted that "To meet its treaty obligations, the United States plans to dismantle nearly 4,500 warheads."^[24] But even if Weiner's assertion were true, would that be the fault of the intelligence-gatherers in general, and the CIA in particular? Wouldn't responsibility for such action fall on the policy-makers?

Estimates & Analysis

Analytical activities fare somewhat better than technical collection in *Legacy of Ashes*, at least in terms of space. Analytical failures as well as successes are discussed throughout the book. But overall, Weiner's treatment of this aspect suffers from the same shortcomings that afflict the rest of the book. He makes ill-supported claims, issues grandiose judgments, and gives only cursory attention to important episodes. Many accomplishments, when not ignored outright, are given an absurdly negative spin, and several failures are greatly exaggerated. There are a number of examples to choose from, but two will have to suffice.

One of the most serious shortcomings is Weiner's brief and misleading description of one of the Cold War's key analytical issues—the "missile gap" that Senators Stuart Symington (D-Missouri) and John Kennedy (D-Massachusetts) accused a complacent Eisenhower administration of letting develop in the late 1950s. Most of Weiner's account

is open to challenge. He asserts that Eisenhower longed to bury “the false claims by the CIA, Air Force, military contractors, and politicians . . . that the Soviets had a widening lead in nuclear weaponry.”^[25] Weiner’s phrasing implies that every politician and entity who ever claimed a missile gap should have known better—although as Weiner himself also acknowledges, some of those estimates were initially based on very sparse intelligence the United States possessed on Soviet missile programs. In other words, Weiner fails to make the distinction between “false claims” (of which there were several, mostly by politicians seeking a partisan advantage) and incorrect estimates, which were made in good faith, but erred because they were based upon limited information.

Weiner goes on to state that “In 1960, the agency projected a mortal threat to the United States; it told the president that the Soviets would have five hundred ICBMs ready to strike by 1961.” In fact, this projection of 500 ICBMs was not made in 1960, but 1957, when Washington’s independent knowledge of what was going inside the vast territory of the Soviet Union was severely limited. By 1960, in point of fact, the Air Force had lowered its estimate to 200 Soviet ICBMs by mid-1961, while the CIA’s estimate was down to 150.^[26]

After misrepresenting the agency’s actual 1960 estimate, Weiner goes on to complain that “Moscow did not have five hundred nuclear missiles pointed at the United States at the time. It had four.” That is the end of his account. What he does not mention, perhaps because it would be inconvenient, is that the very next National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), dated September 1961, estimated that the Soviet Union had only between 10 and 25 ICBMs, and was likely to have 75 to 125 by mid-1963. Nor does Weiner bother to inform the reader that this drastic reduction was the *direct* result of new imagery from the CIA’s CORONA reconnaissance satellites.^[27] The CIA did not propagate the missile gap; it buried it.

Weiner does no better in his account of the CIA’s performance with respect to the Soviet Union’s collapse, another fundamental issue from the agency’s first 60 years. Throughout the book, of course, there are references to how the CIA was failing to see that Washington’s main adversary was dying or crumbling.^[28] Near the end of the book, Weiner sums up the CIA’s allegedly desultory performance. He writes that the agency “pronounced the dictatorship of the Soviet Union untouched and untouchable at the hour it was starting to vanish.” The evidence he offers is that on December 1, 1988, “the CIA issued a formal report confidently stating that ‘the basic elements of Soviet defense policy and practice thus far have not been changed by Gorbachev’s reform campaign,’” although just six days later, Mikhail Gorbachev would appear before the United Nations and offer a unilateral cut of 500,000 troops in the Soviet military. Weiner also quotes a Bush administration Kremlinologist who insisted the CIA was “constantly reporting that the Soviet economy was growing.”^[29]

Weiner either did not consult, or chose not to report, any number of declassified CIA and community-wide analyses from 1985 to 1991 that painted a very different picture, and thus, put the CIA’s performance with respect to the Soviet Union’s demise in a far different light. Shortly after Mikhail Gorbachev became general secretary in 1985, the

CIA noted the difficult challenges he faced. By 1987, CIA analysts were skeptical of his chances of success. In 1989, agency analysts distinctly raised the possibility of a coup, one that would be triggered by a treaty loosening the Kremlin's control over non-Russian areas of the Soviet Union.

In November 1990, an NIE entitled "[The Deepening Crisis in the USSR: Prospects for the Next Year](#)," declared "the old Communist order is in its death throes," reflecting a judgment the CIA reached a year before any other entity in the Intelligence Community. Five months later, George Kolt, the head of the CIA's Office of Soviet Analysis, wrote a prescient paper called "[The Soviet Cauldron](#)" for the National Security Council. Kolt noted that building pressures were likely to result in a coup attempt; described who was likely to be involved and how the plotters would attempt to sell the coup; and estimated that there was a significant chance such an effort would not succeed. No policy-maker who read and took to heart Kolt's paper could have been surprised by the events that unfolded from August through December 1991. Yet there is not a word about "The Soviet Cauldron" in Weiner's history.^[30]

Given the author's predisposition to hold the agency in a bad light, Weiner's somewhat curious treatment of the CIA's performance with respect to Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)—both the stockpiles *not* known about prior to the first Gulf war, and the more recent debacle—is so cursory as to appear obligatory. Despite the detailed examination of [WMD issues](#) by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, and reporting on the likely [state of post-war Iraq](#), Weiner glides over these key topics in a mere 12 pages. There is no discussion of any specific piece of analysis other than the October 2002 NIE, "[Iraq's Continuing Programs for Weapons of Mass Destruction](#)." Nor does Weiner address the CIA's role in the analysis of Iraqi motivations for procuring aluminum tubes; allegations that Iraq attempted to procure uranium from Niger; or the charge that it was reconstituting its nuclear program. Key figures in these dramas—Joe Turner (Joe T.), CIA weapons and non-proliferation chief Alan Foley, former ambassador Joseph Wilson—are completely absent from his account.

Covert Operations

The strength, as well as the overwhelming focus of Weiner's book, is the coverage of six decades' worth of covert action, although the book's coverage is sparse after 9/11.^[31] With more attention to detail than he devotes to any other aspect of intelligence, Weiner recounts the by-now familiar litany: the disastrous attempts to insert agents behind the Iron Curtain during the earliest years of the Cold War; the CIA's successful efforts to overthrow the governments of Iran and Guatemala; covert support for Japanese politicians; the unsuccessful attempt to unseat Indonesia's President Sukarno; the Bay of Pigs disaster; and the efforts to eliminate Fidel Castro. Weiner also trods over familiar ground when he writes about covert action in Vietnam, including the overthrow and death of Ngo Dinh Diem; the attempts to prevent Salvador Allende from gaining, and then holding on to, the presidency of Chile; operations against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua; and support to the Afghan resistance, which ultimately forced the Soviets out of Afghanistan. He also discusses the CIA's success in disrupting the Abu Nidal terrorist

organization by planting false evidence that resulted in Nidal executing several of his subordinates. The end result is an account that anyone writing a history of covert operations or the agency itself would find important to consult. But even this portion of the book is not without flaws.

Perhaps the most egregious is Weiner's recycling of a very old canard he should have known was discredited.^[32] Chapter one begins with the allegation that all Harry Truman wanted, when he created the CIA in 1947, was "a global news service" that would provide him with accurate and up-to-date information. "It was not intended as a 'Cloak & Dagger outfit'!" the former president wrote to David M. Noyes in December 1963. But Truman's "vision was subverted from the start," Weiner ominously observes.^[33]

There's only one problem with this story: the meaning Weiner attaches to it cannot withstand scrutiny.

Weiner is correct in that Truman did make such a comment to Noyes, one of his closest post-presidential advisers. Noyes was the ghostwriter for a syndicated column ("Harry Truman Writes") that was published during the former president's waning years. In this instance, Noyes fashioned Truman's thoughts into a column that ran on December 22 in *The Washington Post* under the headline, "Limit CIA Role to Intelligence."^[34] The article immediately evoked concern from current and former CIA officials, including retired DCI Allen Dulles, for the simple reason that they knew the truth to be quite the opposite.

The National Security Council's top secret directive of December 14, 1947 (which Weiner elsewhere acknowledges) had tasked the nation's new intelligence agency with conducting "covert psychological operations designed to counter Soviet and Soviet-inspired activities."^[35] Under that authority the CIA began conducting covert operations in the late 1940s that soon grew to include direct financial subsidies to labor and political groups in France and Italy; organization of the Free Europe Committee and Radio Free Europe; suppression of the Huk rebellion in the Philippines; and support of insurgencies in the Soviet bloc. It was also under Truman that the CIA-operated Office of Policy Coordination was established, an organization with a sole function of covert action. For that matter, the Truman administration was the first to contemplate and to plot the overthrow of Guatemalan President Arbenz, beginning in November 1951, although it was left to the Eisenhower administration to carry it out.^[36] The CIA was not doing much in 1963, in other words, that it had not already started doing by 1953, when Truman left office.

In the spring of 1964, moreover, while passing through Kansas City, Allen Dulles made a point of meeting with the 79-year-old former president to discuss his December column. According to Dulles's four-page memo of their discussion,

I suggested [the *Post* column] seemed to me to be a misrepresentation of his position. I pointed out the number of National Security Actions . . . which he had taken which dealt with covert operations by the CIA. He

studied attentively the *Post* story and seemed quite astounded at it. In fact, he said that this was all wrong. He then said that he felt it had made a very unfortunate impression.[\[37\]](#)

Much of what is wrong with Weiner's book can be gleaned from how he handles this single anecdote. The facts don't get in the way of a winning story, indeed, the sentence that Weiner uses to open his book: "All Harry Truman wanted was a newspaper."[\[38\]](#)

Weiner also disparages CIA covert operations that succeeded in accomplishing presidentially-mandated objectives for Iran in 1953 and Afghanistan in 1988. He has every right to that view, of course, yet his logic seems cramped. Weiner will fault a covert operation on the basis of events that occur a decade or more later. With respect to Iran, he writes, "In time, the chaos that the agency had created in the streets of Tehran would return to haunt the United States." *Vis à vis* Afghanistan, Weiner faults the CIA for failing "to see that the Islamic warriors it supported would soon take aim at the United States," following their defeat of the Soviet Union.[\[39\]](#)

While it is possible to foresee negative consequences from covert operations, it is unlikely the mere prospect of such repercussions, several administrations into the future, would have deterred Dwight Eisenhower, Jimmy Carter or Ronald Reagan from ordering such actions on their watch. To argue that either the Shah's overthrow or 9/11 inevitably and inexorably followed a covert action is absurdly reductionist history, if only because it denies any agency to other actors. In the case of Afghanistan, it is more plausible and thoughtful to claim it was the Bush administration's abandonment of the country following the Soviet withdrawal that gave rise to the Taliban. And the Clinton administration, it is certain, could have done more to deal with the threat from al-Qaeda than it did. Furthermore, a pivotal development that incited Osama bin Laden—the deployment of U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait—did not occur until after Soviet forces had been driven from Afghanistan.

A Skewed *Legacy*

Those interested in the history of the CIA, particularly its covert action operations, will undoubtedly find some value in *Legacy of Ashes*. The plaudits it has received to date, however, are far out of proportion to the quality of the book and contribution it makes to an understanding of the agency's history. In particular, claims that Weiner lacks bias cannot withstand a close reading of the book. The numerous errors of omission and commission in *Legacy of Ashes* make it a profoundly tendentious and unreliable guide to the overall history of the CIA.

The kudos lavished on Weiner's book in prestigious newspapers are just as disturbing as the volume's shortcomings. The reviews in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal* were the kind one might expect from gullible writers who lack independent knowledge of the agency. While the reasons for their plaudits may be complicated, the uniform praise from reviewers who should know better leaves one with a

sinking feeling. An intelligent debate about the strengths and shortcomings of the CIA, as well as its future, requires an unbiased understanding of its performance—something missing both from *Legacy of Ashes* and its reviews.

[1] Although never released substantially, the “Family Jewels” had provided the base-line for the Church Committee’s investigation into the intelligence community in the mid-1970s, and the major revelations came out in 1976, when the final report was issued. For some perspective on the “Family Jewels” from the vantage point of two CIA directors, see “[Reflections of DCI Colby and Helms on the CIA’s ‘Time of Troubles.’](#)” *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (2007).

[2] Tim Rutten, “*Legacy of Ashes* Looks at Consequences of the U.S.’ Ineffectual Spying,” *Los Angeles Times*, 29 June 2007; Evan Thomas, “[Counter Intelligence: A Chronicle of Failure at the CIA, From the Iron Curtain to Iraq](#),” *New York Times Book Review*, 22 July 2007; Michael Beschloss, “[The CIA’s Missteps, From Past to Present](#),” *New York Times*, 12 July 2007; Edward Jay Epstein, “[Opening Up the CIA](#),” *Wall Street Journal*, 14 July 2007. Similar plaudits can be found in major foreign publications, including the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Tim Shipman, “[Invasion, What Invasion? Sorry Tale of CIA Bungles](#),” 30 July 2007), and in *The Economist* (“[On Top of Everything Else, Not Very Good at Its Job](#),” 16 August 2007).

[3] David Wise, “[Covert Action: Has the CIA Ever Been Good at Intelligence Gathering?](#)” *Washington Post Book World*, 22 July 2007.

[4] Weiner, *Ashes*, xiii.

[5] *Ibid.*, 278.

[6] *Ibid.*, 232, 566.

[7] *Ibid.*, 197, 232. Somewhat inconsistently, Weiner, after having labeled Popov the CIA’s “first spy of note,” goes on to refer to Penkovsky as “the first spy of consequence that CIA ever had.”

[8] *Ibid.*, 360, 416.

[9] Barry Royden, “[Tolkachev, a Worthy Successor to Penkovsky](#),” *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (2003); Jerrold S. Schecter & Peter S. Deriabin, *The Spy Who Saved the World: How a Soviet Colonel Changed the Course of the Cold War* (New York: Scribner’s, 1992); Benjamin Weiser, *A Secret Life: The Polish Officer, His Covert Mission, and the Price He Paid to Save His Country* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

[10] David Wise, *Nightmover: How Aldrich Ames Sold the CIA to the KGB for \$4.6 Million* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 105; John Barron, *KGB Today: The Hidden Hand* (New York: Reader’s Digest Press, 1983), 428-429; David Martin, “A CIA Spy in

the Kremlin,” *Newsweek*, 21 July 1980, 69-70; Myra A. McPherson, “The Good Neighbor Who Came in From the Cold,” *Washington Post*, 21 June 1978.

[11] Gordon Corera, *Shopping for Bombs: Nuclear Proliferation, Global Insecurity, and the Rise and Fall of the A.Q. Khan Network* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 155-156. While Weiner mentions that CIA and SIS played a part in inducing Libya to abandon its nuclear weapons program, he provides no details.

[12] Weiner, *Ashes*, xv.

[13] *Ibid.*, xv, 124, 433.

[14] Robert Lindsey, *The Falcon and the Snowman: A True Story of Friendship and Espionage* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979).

[15] For such information see, Gregory W. Pedlow & Donald E. Welzenbach, [*The CIA and the U-2 Program, 1954-1974*](#) (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, 1998), and Chris Pocock, *The U-2 Spyplane: Toward the Unknown* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer, 2000).

[16] Weiner, *Ashes*, 113-114.

[17] *Ibid.*, 160. Weiner also writes that the “The chagrin over the U-2 shoot down gave way to a murderous anger,” which he connects with Richard Bissell redoubling the CIA’s plan for “overthrowing Cuba.” He provides no source that anyone at the agency suffered from “murderous anger” or that there was any connection between the U-2 shoot down and covert activities directed against Cuba. And in point of fact, the initial decision to subvert the Castro regime was taken before the shoot down. Document 481, “A Program of Covert Action Against the Castro Regime,” 16 March 1960, in Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960: Cuba* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1991), 850.

[18] For documents on the OXCART and SR-71 see Jeffrey T. Richelson (ed.), [*The U-2, OXCART, and the SR-71: U.S. Aerial Espionage in the Cold War*](#), National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 74, 16 October 2002; and David Robarge, [*ARCHANGEL: CIA’s Supersonic A-12 Reconnaissance Aircraft*](#) (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2007).

[19] On all three imagery satellites, see Richelson, *The Wizards of Langley: Inside the CIA’s Directorate of Science and Technology* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 22ff, 129ff, 166, 201, 212; 287; on CORONA see Kevin C. Ruffner, ed., [*CORONA: America’s First Satellite Program*](#) (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1995); and Dwayne A. Day, John M. Logsdon, and Brian Latell, eds., *Eye in the Sky: The Story of the CORONA Spy Satellites* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998). The closest Weiner comes to a description of any specific satellite system occurs on page 350, when he writes of “A new generation of satellites . . . coming on line that summer.

Code-named KEYHOLE, they provided real-time television images instead of slow-to-develop photos.” The satellites were actually code-named KENNAN, not KEYHOLE (although the optical system was designated KH-11), and while they provided real-time images they were not television pictures.

[20] On RHYOLITE and ORION, see Richelson, *Wizards*, 111ff, 234-235.

[21] In his review, David Wise commented that despite Weiner’s portrayal of Dulles “as a sort of duplicitous Santa Claus, [who was] over the hill by 1961,” his personal observation and conversations with Dulles in the early 1960s revealed “not a doddering old man in carpet slippers but a shrewd professional spy.” Weiner’s determination to portray Dulles in an extremely negative light is illustrated by his portrayal of the CIA chief on page 122, where Weiner writes that:

An analyst admitted to the inner sanctum in midafternoon to advise Dulles on the crisis of the moment might find the director watching a Washington Senators baseball game on the television in his office. Lounging in a reclining chair, his feet up on an ottoman, Dulles followed the game while the hapless aide faced him from the back of the TV set. As the briefer reached his crucial points, Dulles would analyze the ball game.

Although Weiner provides no source for this anecdote about Dulles, the apparent source (which Weiner is aware of, since he cites it on page 619) was a speech by then-DCI George J. Tenet to the “Conference on the CIA’s Analysis of the Soviet Union, 1947-1991,” held in 2001. In his address, Tenet recounted the same story (also using the word “hapless” to describe the briefer) but didn’t stop where Weiner does. Weiner leaves out the rest of the story as told by Tenet: “Which is not to say that Dulles was not listening – it was just hard to tell sometimes. For example, when Khrushchev kicked out the anti-Party group in 1957, he evidently took in what everyone said, then dictated his own briefing for the president. By all accounts it was brilliant. He did not miss a single nuance.” In other words, the complete story as told by Tenet paints a very different picture of Dulles than does Weiner’s selective version. Tenet’s prepared remarks can be found [here](#).

[22] Richelson, *Wizards*, 15, 28-33. Somewhat hypocritically, Weiner criticizes Dulles for not paying attention to a 1952 memo from the deputy director of intelligence on a proposal to develop a satellite reconnaissance vehicle. At the time, however, nobody believed that such a vehicle was anything other a long-term possibility.

[23] Weiner, *Ashes*, 418.

[24] Robert S. Norris & Hans M. Kristensen, “[The U.S. Nuclear Stockpile, Today and Tomorrow](#),” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, September/October 2007, 60-63.

[25] Weiner, *Ashes*, 158.

[26] NIE 11-8-60, “Soviet Capabilities for Long-Range Attack Through Mid-1965,” 1 August 1960, 14-15; NIE 11-4-60, “Main Trends in Soviet Capabilities and Forces, 1960-1965,” 1 December 1960, 51-54.

[27] NIE 11-8/1-61, “Soviet Capabilities for Long-Range Attack,” 21 September 1961, 2, 10-11, 13.

[28] It is easy in hindsight to say that a regime was dying or crumbling. But criticism that a regime’s collapse was not foreseen well in advance ignores the reality that the world has been full of dysfunctional regimes that have managed to have long, if not healthy, lifespans—the result of an effective apparatus of repression, deluded or morally bankrupt followers, and possibly, outside assistance. Fidel Castro’s Cuba and Robert Mugabe’s Zimbabwe would be among current examples.

[29] Weiner, *Ashes*, 429.

[30] On the CIA’s track record, see Bruce D. Berkowitz and Jeffrey T. Richelson, “The CIA Vindicated: The Soviet Collapse Was Predicted,” *National Interest*, Fall 1995, 36-47, and Douglas J. MacEachin, [*CIA Assessments of the Soviet Union: The Record Versus the Charges*](#) (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1996). In addition to “[The Deepening Crisis in the USSR](#)” and “[The Soviet Cauldron](#),” other CIA and Intelligence Community papers concerning the collapse of the East European and Soviet regimes can be found in Benjamin B. Fischer, ed., [*At Cold War’s End: US Intelligence on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, 1989-1991*](#) (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1999).

[31] The sparseness of Weiner’s coverage here is at odds with his expressed concern over the effectiveness of covert action. Presumably, the time to weigh the costs versus the benefits is when the threat is palpable. There is almost nothing in *Legacy of Ashes*, however, about the CIA’s role in toppling the Taliban. Nor can a reader learn of the efforts to apprehend key al-Qaeda figures like Khalid Sheik Mohammed, or the operation of the black sites where such high-value prisoners were interrogated prior to being transferred to Guantánamo, or the use of Predator unmanned aerial vehicles equipped with Hellfire missiles to eliminate senior al-Qaeda leaders.

[32] See Hayden B. Peake, “Harry S. Truman on CIA Covert Operations,” *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 25, No. 1, (1981), and Peake, “More About Harry S. Truman on CIA Covert Operations,” *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 25, No. 2, (1981).

[33] Weiner, *Ashes*, 3.

[34] Harry S. Truman, “Limit CIA Role to Intelligence,” *Washington Post*, 22 December 1963. The actual column read, “I never had any thought that when I set up the CIA that it would be injected into peacetime cloak and dagger operations.”

[35] Weiner, *Ashes*, 26.

Washington Decoded

[36] Nick Cullather, *Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of Its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 28-31; and Document 22, "[Chronology Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency](#)," 8 October 1952, in Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954: Guatemala* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2003).

[37] Memo for Lawrence Houston from A.W. Dulles, "Visit to the Honorable Harry S. Truman," 21 April 1964, Dulles Papers, Box 127, Mudd Library, Princeton University. Truman's reaction, as noted by Dulles, suggested that he had never read the column before it was published and that it reflected Noyes's view more than the former president's. Truman's ghostwriter had no knowledge, of course, of covert actions undertaken after 1947 since they were still largely secret in 1963.

[38] Weiner, *Ashes*, 3.

[39] Weiner, *Ashes*, xv, 92.