

The Devil's Chessboard: Allen Dulles, the CIA, and the Rise of America's Secret Government

By David Talbot

Harpers. 686 pp. \$29.99

Who Needs Soviet Propaganda?

By David M. Barrett

A key indicator of where David Talbot is going in his portrait of CIA Director [Allen W. Dulles](#) comes from his treatment of C. Wright Mills and Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Mills was a Columbia University sociologist whose 1956 book, [The Power Elite](#), caused a minor sensation in the seemingly placid '50s. Liberal and conservative scholars alike depicted the American political process as a balancing act among competing interests, which included big business, organized labor, farmers, and professional groups. But Mills, as Talbot notes approvingly, did not believe such a perspective was "adequate even as an approximate model of how the American system of power works." Instead, Mills posited a Marxist-lite critique that presented governance in the United States as an elaborate conspiracy theory of unaccountable elites. He argued that corporate, military, and governmental leaders worked hand-in-glove solely to enrich and empower themselves and the institutions they headed, and cast doubt on the belief that the United States was some version of a democracy.

How did presidents—America's nominal leaders—fit into this system of elite control? According to the Millisian analysis, Eisenhower's prime directive was to preserve an elite that benefited from a "permanent war economy." That would seem to be at odds with Ike's famous parting shot, in which he warned Americans that "we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist . . . Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together." Perhaps that portion of Eisenhower's nationally-televised farewell address from January 1961 was a gaffe, which Michael Kinsley famously defined as a politician accidentally telling the truth.

Much more often, according to Talbot, President Eisenhower acted the role of an amiable dunce who followed the *diktats* of the power elite. Ike had been “a peace-loving warrior” during the great global conflict of the previous decade, but by the time he sought the presidency in 1952 he was an “aging general,” well-meaning perhaps but subject to manipulation and oftentimes just plain clueless. He obligingly took orders from the “Dulles-Dewey group” (a combination brain trust and bank consisting of future CIA Director Allen, his brother and future Secretary of State John Foster, and former GOP presidential nominee Thomas Dewey). These were the men, for example, who “tapped [Richard] Nixon for vice president.”^[1]

Unfortunately, as in so many episodes related in the book, the true story is at odds with Talbot’s invented version. After the GOP convention nominated Eisenhower, Herbert Brownell, Ike’s campaign manager (who would become attorney general), told Eisenhower the time had come to select a running mate. After ruminating for awhile, the nominee handed his short list to Brownell, who then consulted leading Republican pols, including Dewey, but *not* the Dulleses. How Nixon got picked is recounted in an exhaustively researched new book about Eisenhower and Nixon, [*The President and His Apprentice*](#), by Irwin F. Gellman.^[2]

Talbot goes on to assert that during the eight-year Eisenhower presidency, no one in the administration—not even Ike himself—matched the Dulles brothers in power. In particular, the president is depicted as knowing shockingly little about what Allen Dulles and the CIA were up to, while lacking the intelligence and energy to insist on knowing. These portraits of Ike and the Dulleses are a graphic novel (comic book) rendering of the national and international politics of the 1950s, and not in a good way. The charge that Eisenhower was an amiable dunce is an old and political one, dating back to the time he was still in office. Eisenhower was so popular and scandal-free that Democrats had little choice but to claim he was more interested in playing golf than running the country. While researching *The CIA and Congress*, the majority of which dealt with the Eisenhower era, I saw some episodes of an out-of-touch Ike, especially during the last few years of his White House tenure, which were illness-plagued. But there was more frequent evidence of a shrewd political figure. It may be going a tad too far to claim that Eisenhower’s was a “hidden-hand” presidency, a revisionist argument political scientist Fred Greenstein first put forward in 1982. But the five-star general surely was not a cipher.^[3]

Talbot’s book, of course, really purports to be an expose about Allen Dulles’s directorship of the Central Intelligence Agency. Here there are serious problems, rooted in a number of bad choices by the author. Among them:

- *Reliance on too few or too questionable sources*

In the period when Dulles was the deputy director of Central Intelligence, serving under DCI Walter “Beetle” Smith (who was Ike’s chief of staff during World War II), Talbot has the latter man breaking the law in an effort to help assure the election of his former boss (Eisenhower) to the presidency. The story is that Nicolae Malaxa, an

unsavory Romanian exile living in the United States, wished to stay on as a permanent resident. He bribed then-Senator Richard Nixon with a check for \$100,000 to make that happen. When a photocopy of the check came into Dulles's possession, he allegedly directed that it be passed to Smith, *knowing* (according to *The Devil's Chessboard*) that this was "as good as destroying the evidence." Smith supposedly demanded that every bit of evidence be brought to his office, whereupon the DCI "flushed it all down the toilet."[\[4\]](#)

Given that DCIs were expected to stay out of electoral politics, this story about Dulles, but more so, Smith, is striking. As with so many other lurid stories in the book, a historically literate person will wonder about the truth of it. What is the evidence for this destruction-of-evidence story? There is but one source: Anthony Summers's [*Arrogance of Power: The Secret World of Richard Nixon*](#), a book replete with badly-sourced stories. It boggles the mind that Beetle Smith, a career military man before becoming a diplomat and then DCI, engaged in such criminal behavior, and the burden of proof is heavy. Neither D. K. R. Crosswell's [*Beetle: The Life of General Walter Bedell Smith*](#) or Ludwell Montague's [*General Walter Bedell Smith as Director of Central Intelligence*](#), has such a story.[\[5\]](#)

Regarding the perennial question from the Ike-Dulles era of whether Eisenhower authorized a plan to kill Castro, it would have been preferable for Talbot to admit frankly that the evidence is limited and imperfect rather than to refer unambiguously to "the Agency's ongoing plot with the Mafia to assassinate Castro, which had been authorized by Eisenhower." While evidence of the existence of such Agency plotting is overwhelming (and Dulles's knowledge of it is substantial), the matter of presidential involvement is open to question. Some scholars believe Ike did authorize it, and others do not, for the simple reason that we do not have voluminous, much less unimpeachable evidence. The doctrine of "plausible deniability" was supposed allow the US government—including the president—to deny involvement in covert operations. Because so much business between presidents and DCIs during the early Cold War was done by word of mouth, defenders of Eisenhower and Kennedy can plausibly deny that those presidents authorized such attempts. Better for Talbot to report that reality than to mislead readers, many of whom will have no idea about the paucity of evidence.[\[6\]](#)

Talbot, in any event, cannot have it both ways. If he is going to assert on scant evidence that Eisenhower (the disengaged dunce) authorized assassination plots, then on that same basis he must acknowledge the plots conducted during the Kennedy administration also received direct authorization. The circumstantial evidence for the latter is, if anything, much greater.

- *A proneness to believe in and print exaggerations*

Florida industrialist William Pawley had significant contacts with Dulles and the Agency; in 1960, for example, Eisenhower told Dulles to pay attention to what Pawley was saying and trying to do about Castro. Talbot writes that Pawley boasted about being "in daily touch with Allen Dulles" during this period. Although Talbot cites no source for

this quote, it seems likely he used Anthony Carrozza's excellent 2012 [biography](#) of Pawley. Carrozza cited a Pawley letter to Richard Nixon, in which the industrialist actually wrote, "I'm in touch with Allen Dulles's *people* [emphasis added] almost daily." Talbot, moreover, fails to note an important qualifier: that Eisenhower (the supposedly detached commander-in-chief) actually wanted Pawley removed from any role in the covert operation to depose Castro. The CIA was intent on supporting anti-Batista revolutionaries who felt Castro had "betrayed" the revolution, while Pawley was in bed with right-wing Cubans, including former Batista police. Eisenhower agreed with Secretary of State Christian A. Herter (who had succeeded John Foster Dulles in 1959) that US backing of right-wingers would surely doom any chance of overthrowing Castro.[\[7\]](#)

Even more suspect is Talbot's acceptance of author Joseph Trento's rendering of how James Angleton became head of counterintelligence. According to Trento, Angleton claimed it was because "I agreed not to polygraph or required detailed background checks on Allen Dulles and 60 of his closest friends." Perhaps Angleton told Trento this story, but is the claim credible? Or is this an alcohol-fueled late-in-life story from a controversial man regarded by many as an alcoholic?[\[8\]](#)

- *A willingness to speculate wildly without credible evidence*

Talbot has some moving discussions of Dulles's family in parts of the book. But in writing about his daughter Toddie, who suffered from manic depression, Talbot insinuates CIA doctors were involved in Toddie's electroshock therapy. Since there is no evidence, why does Talbot engage in lurid speculation? Since every serious scholar of CIA history acknowledges that doctors acting on behalf of the Agency did some shocking and immoral experiments on human subjects, it can be tempting to tie them to this Dulles daughter. But since there is ample evidence of Dulles not having been a good father or husband, why not stick to stories that have basis in fact?

Not much need be said about Talbot's account of Dulles's involvement in the assassination of President Kennedy, both before and after the fact. Pinning responsibility on Dulles appears to be the true purpose of the book. Among the many provable falsehoods: Talbot writes that Dulles pressed Lyndon Johnson to place him on the Warren Commission. The truth is the [suggestion was made by Robert F. Kennedy](#); moreover, during a [tape-recorded conversation](#) on 29 November 1963, the day the Warren Commission was organized, Dulles warned LBJ the appointment might not be a good idea because his participation would surely be exploited by Soviet propaganda. Dulles was right, though he did not foresee the day when a major US trade publisher would publish such buncombe.

- *A lack of familiarity with the literature on the CIA, the presidency, and Congress in the Truman-to-Kennedy era of US history, or an unwillingness to draw on it*

There are many sources out there that seem unknown to Talbot, or if known, went unused And when Talbot does draw upon recent literature about the CIA, he does so in

an credulous, uncritical way. According to Talbot, Eisenhower had a dim view of the Agency at the end of his presidency. “In a scolding tone, the president told Dulles that the CIA was badly organized and badly run—and as a commander-in-chief, he had been utterly powerless to do anything about it, despite one blue-ribbon presidential task force after the next. He would leave the next president a ‘legacy of ashes,’ Eisenhower bitterly remarked.”[\[9\]](#)

This never happened. How did it end up in Talbot’s book? He borrows from Tim Weiner’s history of the CIA, *Legacy of Ashes*, wherein Ike is similarly quoted. But as more than one reviewer of Weiner’s book has shown, Eisenhower was not talking about the CIA; he was addressing another subject altogether—the fact that each branch of the US military had its own intelligence agency, and the failure during his administration to centralize that ongoing, wasteful, inefficient military intelligence setup. (John F. Kennedy and Robert McNamara would have a solution, of sorts, in creating the Defense Intelligence Agency in 1961).[\[10\]](#)

- *A skewed understanding (and portrayal) of the political environment of the early-to-middle Cold War era of national politics*

About the 1950s, Talbot writes, “Together, the Dulles circle and Richard Nixon would bring about a sharp, rightward shift in the nation’s politics, driving out the surviving elements of the New Deal regime in Washington and establishing a new ruling order that was much more in tune with the Dulles circle’s financial interests.” In the margin of that page, I wrote “o.b.!” (standing for “Oh, brother!”, something noted fairly often in the margins of my review copy. At other places, I wrote “b.s.,” which does not stand for the words one might expect; it stands for “badly sourced”).

Where to begin with that Dulles-Nixon statement? Of course, US politics shifted rightward in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Did “the Dulles circle and Richard Nixon” bring it about? Nixon certainly exemplified and benefited from the shift, but claiming that the “Dulles circle” (itself, a questionable concept) caused the conservative shift is an unusual, even bizarre claim. In any case, even while allowing for the importance of the Dulleses—many political actors (mostly long-forgotten) in government, politics, the news media, and even church circles worked to bring about the shift. And the idea that “surviving elements of the New Deal regime in Washington” were driven out is laughable. While Republicans briefly gained control of the Congress in the 1946 and 1952 elections, the Democrats regained control two years later. Was the somewhat more conservative government of the 1950s friendlier to big corporate interests? Probably so, but I don’t see that as proving Talbot’s claim.[\[11\]](#)

- *There is a breathless quality to the writing, which tends to distort reality*

Nuance is in rare supply. The book describes (accurately) how Senator Joseph McCarthy made the CIA’s William Bundy (younger brother of McGeorge, who would later serve as JFK’s national security adviser) one of his targets and tried to subpoena him for testimony. Bundy had a connection to Alger Hiss, thus making him highly suspect in

McCarthy's eyes. Dulles refused to bow to McCarthy's demand to put Bundy under oath, and Talbot rightly says this set up a clash of titans. But instead of writing that Dulles simply told Bundy to leave town ("Be out of touch," were Dulles's parting words to his young subordinate), Talbot claims "The Agency had Bundy spirited away to an undisclosed location . . ." A reader could be forgiven for imagining Bundy in some remote locale, owned and operated by the CIA. In fact, Bundy went home to Massachusetts and played golf with his father for a few days.[\[12\]](#)

There are some strengths to David Talbot's treatment of Dulles in *The Devil's Chessboard*. He has drawn from some new and important sources (such as the unpublished as well as published journals of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.) that have become available only recently. Occasionally the book provides fascinating insights into Dulles as a husband and a father, drawing from the diary of Dulles's wife, Clover, and interviews with his daughter, Joan. Parts of his chapter, "Brain Warfare," have a poignant quality. Talbot clearly knows how to tell a good story.

Indeed, it may be that Talbot's talent as a writer has led to this terribly skewed portrait of Dulles. As every historian and/or biographer knows, there are always innumerable stories out there that relate to one's subject, some of which can make for titillating reading. But there is another compelling constraint—or ought to be—namely, that the author exercise diligence in deciding what is credible and what is not.

For those seeking a highly readable and credible portrait of Allen Dulles, Peter Grose's [Gentleman Spy](#) is a terrific read, partly because of Grose's discernment. There one finds more of the actual Allen Dulles: intelligent, capable, sociable, passionate, and (sometimes) cold-blooded. He was also a director of Central Intelligence who passed along many an intelligence estimate that repeatedly stressed there was no evidence Soviet leaders were planning a surprise attack on the United States in the foreseeable future. A balanced and credible biography would credit Dulles with tamping down some of the more dangerous Cold War fears that existed in the late 1950s.

Because of Talbot's talent as a writer, the thought crossed my mind that *The Devil's Chessboard* might be a candidate for treatment by Hollywood. Perhaps director Oliver Stone (whose film, *JFK*, gave us an implied portrait of "the Dulles circle") would take on the project. Despite the book's formal designation as "nonfiction" though, it belongs on the shelves where novels are lined up.

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Washington Decoded

[1] Talbot, *Devil's Chessboard*, 185, 204.

[2] Irwin F. Gellman, [*The President and His Apprentice: Eisenhower and Nixon, 1952-1961*](#) (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 17.

[3] Talbot, *Devil's Chessboard*, 204; Fred I. Greenstein, [*The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader*](#) (New York: Basic Books, 1982).

[4] Talbot, *Devil's Chessboard*, 191.

[5] *Ibid.*, 633.

[6] *Ibid.*, 399.

[7] *Ibid.* 340; Anthony R. Carrozza, [*William D. Pawley: The Extraordinary Life of the Adventurer, Entrepreneur, and Diplomat Who Cofounded the Flying Tigers*](#) (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2012), 238.

[8] Talbot, *Devil's Chessboard*, 333-334.

[9] *Ibid.*, 367.

[10] Tim Weiner, [*Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA*](#) (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 167: see, for example, Nicholas Dujmovic, "[Review of 'Legacy of Ashes: The History of CIA,'](#)" *Studies in Intelligence*, Volume 51, Number 3.

[11] Talbot, *Devil's Chessboard*, 162.

[12] *Ibid.*, 221; David M. Barrett, [*The CIA and Congress: The Untold Story from Truman to Kennedy*](#) (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas), 183.