

David M. Barrett. *The CIA and Congress: The Untold Story from Truman to Kennedy.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006. 544 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1400-4.



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No Free Ride: Congressional “Oversight” of the CIA, 1947-1961

In September 1975, after learning that the White House planned on withholding records from his committee’s investigation of the intelligence community, Rep. Otis Pike (D-New York) took aim at assistant attorney general Rex Lee. Pike forcefully rejected Lee’s claim of executive privilege and provided him with a history lesson: “For decades, other committees of Congress have not done their job, and you have loved it in the executive branch ... the executive branch comes up and whispers in one friendly Congressman’s ear or another friendly Congressman’s ear, and that is exactly what you want to continue, and that is exactly what I think has led us into the mess we are in.”^[1] In the aftermath of the investigations that unfolded in 1975 and 1976, the Senate and House of Representatives established separate intelligence committees, which have remained in place for over three decades. But to what extent was Pike correct in asserting that Congress had neglected to properly monitor the intelligence establishment in the past? In other words, did Congress provide effective oversight of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) prior to the mid-

1970s? This is the primary question that David M. Barrett attempts to answer in *The CIA and Congress: The Untold Story from Truman to Kennedy*.

Barrett’s study is both fascinating and provocative, and it is unquestionably one of the most important books ever published on the early history of the CIA. It nicely expands on the narrative that David Rudgers outlined in *Creating the Secret State* (2000). Focusing on the CIA’s interactions with Congress from 1947 through the fallout from the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961, Barrett convincingly argues “that Congress was more assertive in relation to the CIA than has been understood” (p. 461). In addition to the four committees responsible for monitoring the agency—House Appropriations, Senate Appropriations, House Armed Services, and Senate Armed Services—the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy (JCAE), the Foreign Affairs Committee, and the Government Operations Committee also entered the fray on occasion. Barrett acknowledges that there were obvious limitations to this arcane system, and he estimates that only “10 to 12 of the 531 members of Congress were in the business of

approving the increasingly extensive covert action programs, though some knew far more than others about themâ (p. 100). In fact, CIA officials preferred to restrict information even within the oversight subcommittees, devoting most of their time to an elite group of powerful members. As a consequence, Barrett shows that the effectiveness of oversight depended more on personality than politics. Rep. John Taber (R-New York) closely watched the CIA's escalating budget (p. 150), while Senator Carl Hayden (D-Arizona) gave less attention to CIA oversight than any other subcommittee chair of the 1950sâ (p. 204). In the final analysis, Barrett concludes, the House carried out more effective oversight of the CIA than the Senate did in the early Cold War eraâ (p. 459).

As the book progresses, Barrett carefully illustrates how Congress became increasingly attentive to the CIA with the passage of time. The first director of central intelligence (DCI), who headed the agency, had just ten documented visits to Capitol Hill a year (p. 92), but by 1959, top CIA officials were involved in an annual total of at least thirty or thirty-one ... appearances before formal legislative bodies (plus two informal groups sessions), apparently the highest number in the CIA's thirteen yearsâ (p. 331). Even though Congress held more hearings in the late 1950s, they were unwilling to modernize the oversight system. Senator Mike Mansfield (D-Montana) had warned in 1954 that the status quo was unacceptable: until we create some sort of watchdog committeeâ ... we will have nothing but continued anxiety about the Central Intelligence Agency and its widespread activities,â he declared (p. 174). Mansfield believed that Congress needed to establish a joint oversight committee. His resolution received the most support in 1956, but due in part to the shrewd maneuvering of DCI Allen Dulles, Congress voted down the proposal by a margin of 59 to 27.

The book is arranged in three chronological sections, which are each divided into what might be called quasi-chapters. Part 1 examines Congress and the CIA during the Truman administration. For scholars familiar with the origins of the CIA, Barrett tells a familiar story: President Truman's decision to disband the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the short-lived Central Intelligence Group (CIG), the creation of the CIA in the National Security Act of 1947, the approval of NSC 10/2 in 1948, and the CIA Act of 1949. The trajectory of Barrett's narrative is mostly predictable, but the details he includes are often fresh and exciting. For instance, he frequently takes the reader inside complicated congressional debates. In the hands of a

less talented author, this would have been an incredibly tedious book. Barrett, however, has a good eye for revealing quotations and fun anecdotes. The description of the fist-fight between Taber and Rep. Clarence Cannon (D-Missouri) is great entertainment (pp. 116-117).

Yet despite the internal feuds on some of the subcommittees, Barrett points out that a consensus emerged in Congress on the relationship between secrecy and democracy. While committee leaders envisioned having a few legislators monitor the CIA on behalf of Congress,â he observes, they agreed with [Allen] Dulles and administration leaders that secrecy took priority over opennessâ (p. 22). The congressional commitment to secrecy was clearly revealed in Section 10 of the CIA Act of 1949. When debating the legislation, few members of Congress expressed concern about granting the agency top-secret funds that could be hidden within the Pentagon's budget. Interestingly, several did complain about a provision in the bill that would allow the CIA to bring one hundred foreign assets into the country every year, circumventing normal immigration rules and regulations. Rep. Emanuel Celler (D-New York) worried about the arrival of communists, Hitler sadists, morons, moral perverts, syphilitics, or lepersâ (p. 45). The CIA Act passed the Senate unanimously, while only one vote was cast against it in the House (p. 48). Although it is doubtful that any lepers entered the United States as a result of the CIA Act, the law placed a shroud of secrecy over the agency's overall budget that has been lifted only three times in six decades.

Another argument that Barrett develops in the opening section is that Congress frequently took notice of intelligence failures. When rioting disrupted a conference in Bogota in April 1948, the CIA was unfairly blamed for not anticipating the crisis. Roscoe Hillenkoetter, the CIA director from 1947 to 1950, later revealed to a congressional subcommittee that warnings had been sent to the State Department the previous month (p. 36). Despite the accuracy of the Bogota reporting, however, CIA analysts faltered badly the following year when they estimated that the Soviet Union would probably not develop an atomic bomb until the middle of 1953. The problem, of course, was that the Soviets had already detonated a bomb in August. For obvious reasons, Barrett calls this perhaps the most embarrassingly ill-timed and mistaken estimate of the CIA's early yearsâ (p. 55). Hillenkoetter did not perform much better on June 23, 1950 when he appeared at a secret session of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. Specifically asked about the situation in South Korea, he seemed confident that the agency's

intelligence on the region was solid and gave no indication of an impending crisis (p. 82). Less than forty-eight hours later, North Korea attacked South Korea. The CIA survived the embarrassment, but Hillenkoetter did not. General Walter "Beetle" Smith soon replaced "Hilly."

Part 2 covers the Dwight Eisenhower years, a period that is commonly known as "the golden age" of covert operations at the CIA. Barrett works diligently to piece together what Congress knew about covert operations and when they knew it. The immense difficulty of this endeavor becomes apparent once Barrett reveals "no" full transcript of a CIA subcommittee hearing devoted to covert action has ever been declassified, forcing historians to rely on other documentation plus the memories of those who attended (p. 100). Presumably because of the paucity of documents, Barrett says nothing about Operation TPAJAX in Iran. He does, however, include a section on PBSUCCESS in Guatemala during 1954, contending that "while direct evidence of what congressional leaders knew of the operation before, during, and immediately after its occurrence is fragmentary, a suggestion that they did not know something of what was happening is thoroughly implausible" (p. 162). In fact, in all his years of research, Barrett says that he "very rarely encountered a legislator privately telling a DCI or president that the agency should avoid covert action" (p. 460). An anecdote involving Senator Harry Byrd (D-Virginia) makes congressional enthusiasm for covert tactics abundantly clear. When Dulles denied that the agency behaved in a "free-wheeling" manner, Byrd was astonished: "If you're not a free-wheeling outfit, why aren't you?" (p. 174).

During the 1950s, as the agency embarked on a long list of covert operations, its analytical capability did not improve. (This was probably connected to the fact that the CIA spent less than 25 percent of its annual budget on analysis.) In 1955, a CIA estimate on Hungary envisioned almost no potential for a major uprising there: "active and organized resistance is virtually impossible, because of elaborate and effective police controls" (p. 254). The CIA performed somewhat better in reports on the Middle East in 1956, but Barrett shows that Dulles intentionally misled Congress to cover up deficiencies in the agency's analysis. Based on his reading of the evidence, "the substantial declassified records of the Suez crisis do not especially vindicate the CIA head" (p. 255).

The section on the Iraq coup of 1958 is arguably the strongest of part 2. CIA officials are apparently still embarrassed by their inability to foresee this event, since

they refuse to declassify how Dulles responded to a question on "whether CIA had notice of the coup in Iraq" (p. 292). Although Dulles provided an answer fifty years ago, what he said remains classified. He probably was just acknowledging the obvious: the CIA had been caught off guard once again.

Researchers who study the CIA are fully aware of the long-standing "culture of secrecy" at Langley, and they can certainly empathize with the difficulties that Barrett confronted in his extensive research. From this perspective, the book is a 463-page example of everything wrong with current declassification policies. The reader is frequently told that documents have been lost, destroyed, heavily redacted, or withheld, allegedly for reasons of national security. In one of the book's most important contributions, Barrett painstakingly reconstructs the CIA's budget in the mid-1950s (pp. 102, 120-121, 154-155, 221). Since the relevant CIA documents were classified, Barrett was forced to sift through the personal papers of congressmen and senators. The information on the agency's budget is an impressive demonstration of Barrett's research skills, but it also reveals the absurdity of government secrecy. After all, what damage could be done to national security if the American public learned that the CIA had a budget of about five hundred million dollars in fiscal year 1953? The reader is also left to wonder the motivations for withholding the internal CIA history of congressional relations, the work schedules of General Smith, and the key sections of a memo that describes one of Dulles's meetings on Capitol Hill after rioters threatened Richard Nixon during his visit to South America. (There are several other instances of irrational redactions and unnecessary classification of records over fifty years old.)

In fairness, however, there is a glimmer of hope for researchers in Barrett's study. He was able to track down helpful information using the CIA Records Search Tool (CREST) at the National Archives II in College Park, Maryland. Barrett, for instance, took full advantage of the work diary of Walter Pforzheimer, the CIA's liaison to Congress from 1947 to 1956. Based on the information that the CIA has released, it is easy to understand why the agency hates to declassify records for historians. Pforzheimer, while still working for the CIG, ran a domestic operation in order to acquire a transcript that was locked inside a congressman's safe (p. 17). A decade later the CIA's top lawyer privately admitted that the agency was involved in activities "that are certainly technically improper. It doesn't bother me too much" (p. 260).

The documents that Barrett unearthed on Dulles are equally disturbing, shattering the mystique that Dulles cultivated in the 1950s. During a conversation in 1956, Dulles lamented that the Soviets had not killed thousands of Czech protestors three years earlier (p. 251). Such a massacre would have made for terrific American propaganda. Even in situations where Congress was upset with the CIA, Dulles had a striking ability to turn the tables on his inquisitors. He brought concerned leaders to the Highlands (his estate in Washington, DC), poured them a stiff drink, and reminisced about the glory days of the OSS in World War II while smoking his trademark pipe. It was masterful public relations. In 1960, after the U-2 incident, Congress was furious. Yet by the time Dulles finished his testimony, he received a standing ovation (p. 391). Dulles did not expect this response, and he almost caught fire after dropping his pipe. But even Dulles could not repair the damage that was done the following year after the Bay of Pigs, an event that Barrett explores in part 3.

It is hard to say anything critical about *The CIA and Congress*. The depth of Barrett's research makes the book essential reading for scholars of the intelligence community, and it will also appeal to both diplomatic and political historians. Having said this, however, I must end with three points of criticism—two minor and one major. First, the section on McCarthyism in part 2 needed to be placed in a broader context. Barrett reveals that at least one high-ranking CIA official considered infiltrating Senator Joseph McCarthy's staff, but it remains unclear whether this actually happened. Barrett discusses how McCarthy targeted CIA employees Carmel Offie and William Bundy. Yet he neglects to mention Cord Meyer who, like Offie and Bundy, fell under suspicion. After finishing his career in the Directorate of Operations, Meyer wrote a memoir and became a prominent conservative columnist.[2]

My second complaint pertains to a statement that Barrett makes in the afterword. "Possibly, someday, researchers will find documentation suggesting that members of Congress did know of [domestic] activities," he says (p. 458). This is quite puzzling, because on p. 259,

Barrett demonstrates that Senator Mansfield discovered a shadowy group operating inside the United States known as the American Friends of the Middle East that received CIA funding. One can only speculate what this organization was doing in the 1950s to influence the American public.

Finally, when Barrett evaluates whether congressional oversight was irresponsible between 1947 and 1961, he is profoundly unconvincing. "A simple answer is not obvious," he concludes (p. 461). Barrett proves beyond a reasonable doubt that Congress was sometimes displeased with the CIA; there were even times when legislators sought to cut the agency's funding. But while Congress did not grant the CIA a blank check during the early years of the Cold War, it provided the agency with a massive annual budget and demanded very little accountability in return. Based on the evidence that Barrett presents, Congress was extremely irresponsible, time and again allowing secrecy to undermine American democracy. It is indeed a tragedy that Senator Mansfield's colleagues did not listen to him in the mid-1950s. Barrett has every right to be skeptical of what a joint oversight committee could have accomplished. If nothing else, though, it would have made agency leaders think twice before engaging in domestic espionage during the Vietnam War or destabilizing Chile in the early 1970s.

Ultimately, of course, readers should decide for themselves whether they agree with Barrett's interpretation, and I sincerely hope that this book finds an audience outside of academic circles. Members of the intelligence committees in the House and Senate would benefit from reading this cautionary tale of what can go wrong when leaders fail to ask tough questions and demand openness.

Notes

[1]. Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Challenging the Secret Government: The Post-Watergate Investigations of the CIA and FBI* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 123.

[2]. Cord Meyer, *Facing Reality: From World Federalism to the CIA* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980).

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