

Rivalry within

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Mark Riebling

WEDGE

The secret war between the FBI and the CIA
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According to Mark Riebling, the turf wars between the CIA and the FBI during the Cold War were loaded with dramatic, dangerous consequences. Focusing on the rancorous rivalry between the two agencies, he unrelentingly imposes his thesis: institutional jealousies and conflicts created a "wedge" that profoundly weakened American national security. Counter-intelligence work, which is the main focus of *Wedge*, is reliant on speculative theories and unceasing suspicion. It is unfortunate that speculation also appears to be the mainstay of Riebling's work.

J. Edgar Hoover, FBI director for nearly half a century, is the villain of Riebling's tale. The director himself, and the culture of the institution he created, bear the bulk of his criticism and blame. Riebling has adopted the widely accepted portrait of Hoover: paranoid, obsessive, obstructionist, an empire-builder and political black-mailer who resorted to diabolical bureaucratic schemes to preserve and advance his power. Riebling seems more partial to and tolerant of the CIA, but William Donovan, Hoover's OSS rival and promoter of an early version of the CIA, was not the most self-effacing or stable of individuals either. Allen Dulles, the director of the CIA from 1953 to 1961, relished intrigue and adventurism. William Casey, the director under Ronald Reagan, revelled in clandestine operations which he knew to be illegal. The careers of such men may lack the prurient appeal of Hoover's, but they, too, have serious flaws. The post-Second World War fears of a super-spy organization with the potential of an "American Gestapo" seemed justified by the revelations of the CIA's bag of "dirty tricks", especially its actions against American citizens at home. Hoover, to be sure, disliked Donovan and his followers for self-serving reasons; but his warnings against their adventurism proved prophetic, given such ill-advised and ill-executed bungles as the Bay of Pigs and the Iran-Contra affair - events that still haunt American domestic politics.

The thesis of *Wedge* is stretched too far. It argues that the FBI's failure to share its intercepts of Soviet cable traffic prevented the CIA from learning about Kim Philby's treachery, enabling him to flee to the Soviet Union. But the endless literature on Philby clearly illustrates widespread bungling and ineptitude in various

British and American institutions. If the FBI had moved more aggressively on Whittaker Chambers and Elizabeth Bentley's accusations of Soviet subversion, Riebling believes, Senator McCarthy "would have been denied the ammunition that he used so effectively in charging that communist infiltration had been condoned, and communist agents befriended, by traitors at the highest levels of American life". But this argument lacks historical perspective. "McCarthyism" antedated and survived McCarthy. Furthermore, Hoover and the FBI were eager enough to root out "subversives", without McCarthy's lead.

Riebling also speculates without foundation that because of the lack of proper communication between the agencies, we will never know if General Walter Bedell Smith, Eisenhower's chief of staff, Director of the CIA, and Ambassador to the Soviet Union, might have been a Soviet spy. There are similarly tantalizing teases

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about Francis Gary Powers, the pilot of the U-2 spy plane forced down by the Soviet Union in 1960. Was he merely a CIA employee or was he a double agent? Was his plane sabotaged? Did he deliver the U-2 to the Soviets? Every act, every move, is heavily freighted with sinister connotations. But what all this has to do with the FBI is unclear, except that Powers eventually was exchanged for Rudolf Abel, the FBI's prize spy catch of the 1950s. Abel's initial capture, according to Riebling, was almost bungled because of inadequate liaison with the CIA. And no conspiracy theory of late twentieth-century American history dares to omit the Kennedy assassination. Riebling's tendentious contributions are that the CIA-FBI conflict possibly prevented the early detection of Lee Harvey Oswald's intentions, possible KGB involvement, and Jack Ruby's killing of Oswald.

Following another wrangle over domestic counter-intelligence activities, Hoover broke links with the CIA in early 1970. "I want direct liaison here with CIA to be terminated & any contact with CIA in the future to be by letter only." This was no momentary fit of pique, but rather a climax to decades of conflict.

Riebling steadily advances the domino theory, that the lack of formal contact inflicted one disaster after another on American national security. Perhaps his most startling observation is that because the CIA could no longer rely on FBI counter-intelligence work, the Agency had to accelerate its domestic surveillance activities in violation of its charter and existing laws. Subscribing to a commonplace notion that the CIA was a bastion of liberal intellectuals who broke the law only to save it, Riebling plays down such CIA activities as mail intercepts and infiltration

of domestic political groups that reached back several decades.

Riebling attributes Watergate to the "wedge" - never mind that the personality of Richard Nixon and the atmosphere engendered by the Vietnam war give us ample, direct explanations. The "wedge", perhaps, offers some explanation for Nixon's calling forth the Plumbers because he could not get the FBI and the CIA to deal adequately with internal security matters, but the creation of the Plumbers was only symptomatic of Nixon's wider challenge to the limits of his constitutional authority. Furthermore, burgling a psychiatrist's files had nothing to do with national security; it had, however, a great deal to do with Nixon's sense of his political security, which both agencies decided was not their concern.

Nothing is left out of Riebling's thesis - from the exposure of the capabilities of the Glomar Explorer to the mass suicide of religious cultists at Jonestown in Guyana, the failure to apprehend the rogue financier Robert Vesco, and the escape of Edward Lee Howard, a Soviet mole in the CIA. Finally, the rivalry somehow figured in the Iran-Contra débâcle, but what we know of that murky affair is that CIA Director Casey, precisely the buccaneering type so despised by Hoover and feared by early opponents of the Agency, together with Oliver North, initiated an illegal and operationally disastrous enterprise. If anything, the FBI undermined and helped reveal the nefarious affair.

Despite Riebling's gloomy view of the internecine rivalry, recent events underline the virtues of the fragmentation of power. The arrest of Aldrich Ames, a Russian spy high in CIA ranks, resulted from FBI efforts, while the Agency tried to mute the whole affair. In this case, the Agency's "culture" hampered its ability to acknowledge and counter the Russian penetration. Afterwards, that "culture" thwarted any serious attempts to punish those who had so passively responded to Ames's suspicious behaviour. The FBI's police mentality, which Riebling so often disparages, on the other hand, led to firm, decisive action.

The CIA and the FBI have much to their credit in the cause of national security; yet both are accountable for numerous, repeated violations of laws and standards of liberty. Their rivalry pales in comparison to these larger, more enduring historical considerations.