Cloak-and-Dagger Days

WILD BILL AND INTREPID
Donovan, Stephenson
And the Origin of the CIA
By Thomas F. Troy
Yale University Press. 272 pp. $30

REFLECTIONS OF A COLD WARRIOR
From Yalta to the Bay of Pigs
By Richard M. Bissell Jr.
With Jonathan E. Lewis and Frances T. Pudlo
Yale University Press. 268 pp. $30

FROM THE SHADOWS
The Ultimate Insider's Story
Of Five Presidents
And How They Won the Cold War
By Robert Gates
Simon & Schuster. 604 pp. $30

By Jefferson Morley

NOT TOO MANY months ago, it seemed the CIA might be a casualty of the Cold War. If the collapse of the Soviet Union was a vindication of democratic principles, those very principles called into question the legitimacy of a multibillion-dollar intelligence sector whose activities are concealed from the people and all but a handful of their elected representatives. There was a feeling in official Washington circles that, without an ideologically hostile, nuclear-armed foe, the United States could reorganize—and reduce the sway of—the secret wing of the government. The CIA's Directorate of Operations, in the aftermath of the Aldrich Ames treachery and revelations about misdeeds in Guatemala, seemed an especially prime candidate for reform.

It's probably not going to happen. A variety of high-level commissions has been examining the U.S. intelligence network, but all seem to be backing away from recommending much beyond tinkering. For the Clinton administration, the only concession to the desire for more democratic accountability is to make public the annual budget of all the intelligence agencies: $28 billion.

The Agency's institutional ability to protect its budget and prerogatives is rooted in its past. CIA legend, as recounted by the late William Casey and others, holds that the agency was the creation of Col. "Wild Bill" Donovan. A hero of World War I, Donovan supposedly saw a world convulsed in 1940-41 and single-handedly persuaded President Franklin Roosevelt to create a job called the Coordinator of Information. From that position Donovan founded the Office of Strategic Services and laid the organizational foundation for the creation of the CIA in 1947.

In his useful study, *Wild Bill and Intrepid*, CIA historian Thomas F. Troy revises this founding myth of the agency. He demonstrates in scholastic detail that Donovan was actually working in 1940-41 with senior eminences in the British Secret Intelligence Services, including Sir William Stephenson. Stephenson is mostly known to history as the spy, code-named Intrepid, who cleverly deceived the Nazis into spiking their own guns aimed at the British. Intrepid, Troy demonstrates, also helped Donovan mobilize the U.S. intelligence effort in the early 1940s. The CIA, in other words, was not the brainchild of a lone bureaucratic gunslinger but the offspring of an Anglo-American liaison.

How the CIA proceeded to install itself at the heart of the American government in the 1950s is exemplified in the career of the late Richard M. Bissell Jr. The scion of a well-established family, he was groomed for leadership at Groton and Yale. He went to Washington in 1941 to help administer the wartime economy. After the war, he moved on to Europe, where he played a key role in implementing the Marshall Plan before taking a post near the top of the CIA.

Reflections of a Cold Warrior, drafted by Bissell before his death in 1994 and completed by two assistants, provides a glimpse of the idealism and *—Continued on page 8*

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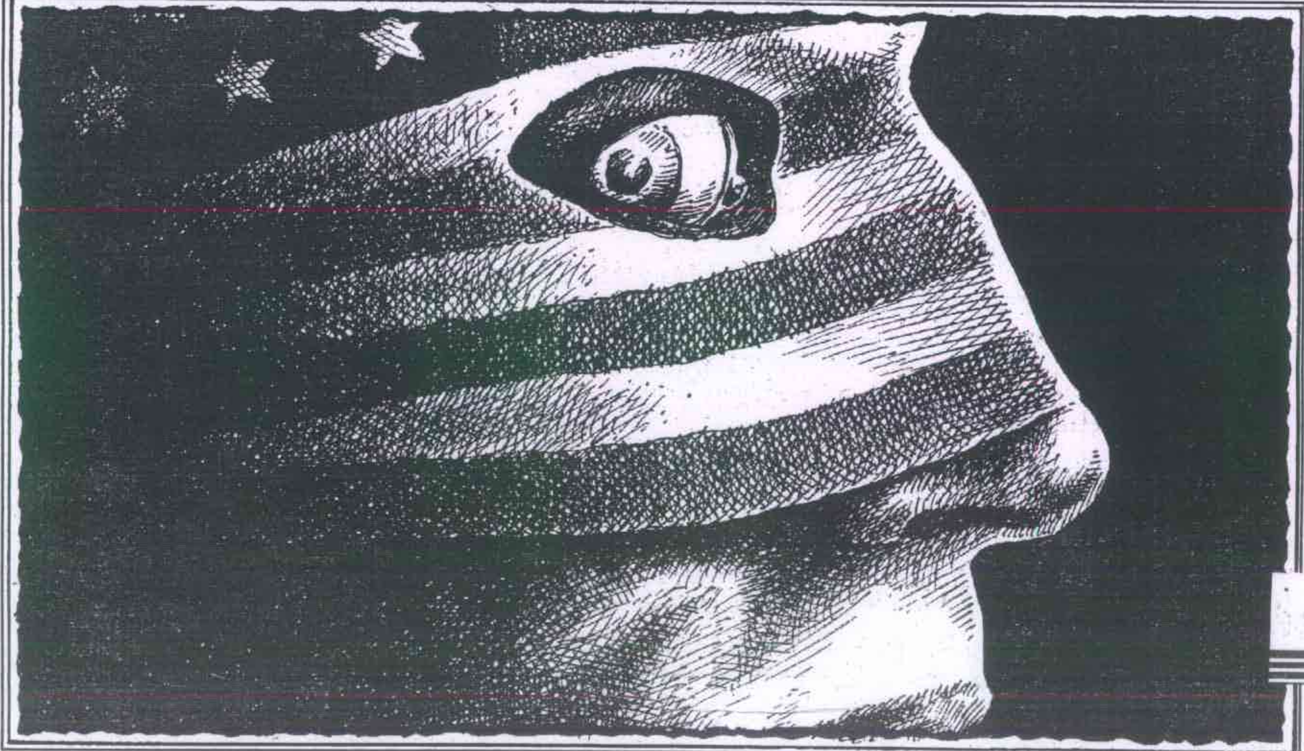

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the limitations of a senior CIA official at the peak of the agency's powers. Above all, his memoir captures the enormous power of American officials at the time and the way they preferred to wield it. "European political leaders were invited to private dinners and clubs to discuss what goals would be acceptable to the United States," Bissell wrote of his work on the Marshall Plan. "These meetings were always very discreet so that the leaders were able to accept the strong measures recommended."

The epitome of a liberal technocrat, Bissell was a natural for the CIA. In early 1954, Bissell began working at the agency as an assistant to director Allen Dulles. Within a year, he played a key role in one of the agency's unquestioned triumphs—the U2 spy plane—and a significant role in one of its most enduring failures—the overthrow of a democratically elected government in Guatemala.

Assigned to develop a high-altitude reconnaissance vehicle in December 1954, Bissell and associates had a plane flying over the Soviet Union in July 1956. "Twenty months from approval to operation was a remarkable feat," Bissell wrote with justifiable pride. The photographic take from such flights would be invaluable to U.S. policy-makers for decades to come (despite the notorious U2 incident in 1960, when pilot Gary Powers was downed over the USSR while on a recon mission).

Bissell is circumspect (deabout Guatemala. He describes himself as a "trouble-shooter" for the agency officials who succeeded in deposing President Jacobo Arbenz in June 1954. He notes what recent scholarship confirms—that the Arbenz government was dominated by communists—and stoutly says that, with hindsight, he would pursue the same policy. But he allows that "it is perfectly arguable that U.S. interests over the years might have been better served if Arbenz remained in power."

Bissell's second thoughts will not comfort a generation of dead Guatemalans. Since 1954, a succession of Guatemalan military strongmen—supported by annual stipends and constant CIA advice—pioneered the use of death squads (1966), annihilated 440 Indian villages in a counterinsurgency campaign (1982) and liquidated an estimated 100,000 civilian opponents. Today's scandal involving the agency in Guatemala is but the latest small excretion of the intelligence relationship that Bissell helped inaugurate.

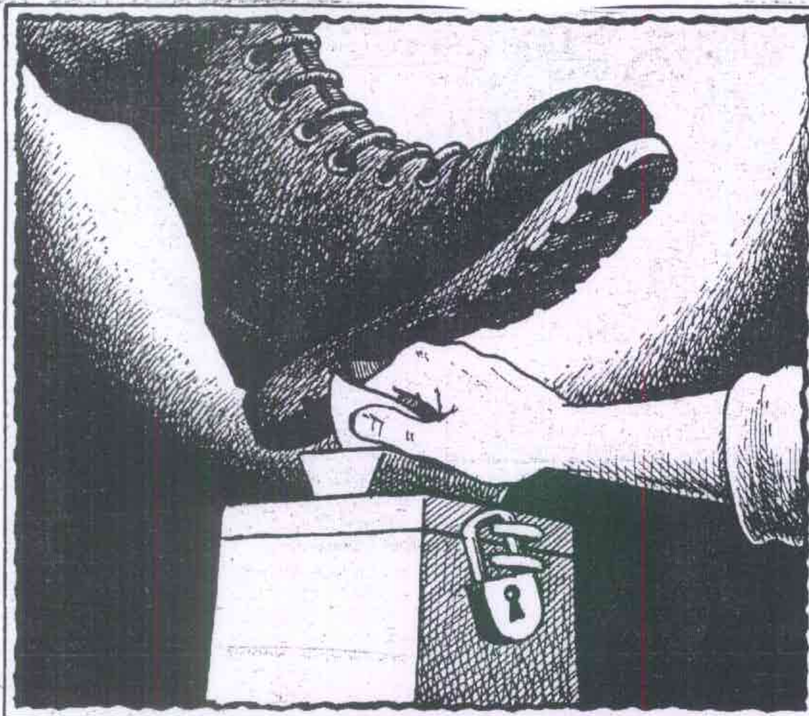
Bissell is somewhat more reflective in his assessment of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. By 1961 he was the deputy director of plans (i.e., covert operations). The ultimate blame for failure, he says, belonged to President Kennedy for canceling proposed air strikes in support of the invaders. But his account of this debacle does not spare himself. "So emotionally involved was I that I may have let my desire to proceed override my good judgment on several matters," he says. When Castro defeated the exile army, Bissell knew his dream of becoming CIA director was finished. Less than a year later, he left the agency.

Looking back over his career, Bissell concluded that "there are those who may find fault with some of the agency's programs in its golden age," the '50s, "but there is no doubt that during this period it was a place where innovation flourished. . . . Any serious reform of the CIA must seek to recapture that spirit, if not necessarily the policies, that animated the agency in those early years."

Robert Gates, an Indiana University graduate and Air Force officer who joined the CIA as a young analyst just a few years after Bissell's departure, had a first-hand view of Ronald Reagan and William Casey's effort to recapture the glory of those "golden years." In *From the Shadows*, Gates recounts how he rose up through the ranks of agency analysts in the 1970s when revelations about illegal surveillance programs and assassination conspiracies delivered the agency's reputation a blow from which it has never fully recovered.

Gates's perspective is that of the detached insider. He is both fond of and bemused by the men he served. Of Carter National Security Council adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski he observes dryly, "I don't believe I ever heard him tell a joke at his own expense." He is world-weary about the hazards of interagency policy-making, as only someone truly skilled in that vicious art can be. By Ronald Reagan's second term, Gates was the deputy director of the agency.

An analyst by trade, Gates attempts to answer the question, What policies won the Cold War? He attaches only secondary importance to espionage operations in the last half of the Cold War. He credits the CIA's operatives with obtaining important Soviet military secrets and forcing the Soviets to overextend themselves in the Third World. In his account, the hero of America's victory in the Cold War is Ronald Reagan, whose strategic toughness masked a tactical flexibility that ensured that the fall of communism would be peaceful. Gates argues, with equal plausibility, that Jimmy Carter's much-maligned human rights diplomacy



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played a key role in undermining the legitimacy of Soviet rule at home and in Eastern Europe.

Gates is at pains to refute the charge that his own hard-line views on the Soviet Union blinded him to changes taking place in the Gorbachev years. He makes a plausible, though perhaps selective case that the agency did a fairly good job of providing senior officials with an accurate interpretation of what was going on between 1985 and 1991.

Also relevant to today's debate about the CIA is his portrait of William Casey. While Gates's account of his adventures with Casey is personally affectionate, it is substantively devastating. The aging spymaster was, according to Gates, a creative and stubborn prevaricator who operated on the windy side of the law and was consistently outmaneuvered by Secretary of State George Shultz. Casey's favorite underlings in Latin America were, in Gates's view, "zealots" who deceived their chain of command and whose whole division was in need of "radical surgery." This surgery is now being postponed.

Gates's purpose, it seems, is less to vindicate the CIA than to rehabilitate the bipartisan tradition of American foreign policy. That a CIA director appointed by a Republican president gives Jimmy Carter much more credit than William Casey in America's Cold War victory is not only a measure of how dangerous and dysfunctional the operations division had become by the 1980s. It is also shows how some CIA institutional memories perpetuate its unseemly side.

William Casey, after all, self-consciously cast himself as a latter-day Wild Bill Donovan, a lone American hero impatient with a passive public and blundering bureaucrats. He acted, as Richard Bissell recommended, to revive the spirit of boldness and innovation in the agency's operations division. And he delegated power to zealots, as Robert Gates acknowledges, with the full approval of the president, the agency's ultimate defense against the argument that it is not democratically accountable. Gates, ever the bureaucrat, concludes that "the overhead costs [of Casey's tenure] became very high."

A price that Washington is evidently still willing to pay. ■