

# **The CIA and Congress: The Untold Story**

## ***Intelligence in Recent Public Literature***

By David M. Barrett. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005. 542 pages.

***Reviewed by Britt Snider***

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Not often does a book come along that alters our understanding of history, but David M. Barrett's *The CIA and Congress: The Untold Story from Truman to Kennedy* does just that. The period covered by the book—from the creation of the CIA in 1947 until the Bay of Pigs in 1960—has heretofore been thought of as the “dark ages” of congressional oversight, when control rested with a few powerful committee chairmen, who did little monitoring of the CIA themselves, but held other committees at bay and fended off all efforts at reform. Barrett shows the relationship between the Agency and Congress, from the very start, to have been considerably more complicated.

One might have suspected as much if for no other reason than that Congress had to appropriate the money for the CIA every year. But until now, there has been little to go on. Records either had not been kept, it was thought, or they had been lost or destroyed, or they remained classified. Undaunted, however, Barrett, a political science professor at Villanova University, undertook an archival search that lasted 10 years, unearthing in the process a wealth of material from places where others had failed to look—among them, the personal papers of the legislators involved and the work diaries of the CIA's legislative counsel during most

of the period, the inestimable Walter L. Pforzheimer. While Barrett concedes he was unable to fill in *all* the blanks—the expected obstacles remain to a considerable degree—he nonetheless is able to paint a far richer picture of this early period than we had before.

Intriguing tidbits are scattered throughout. For instance, Barrett reports that the CIA's first appropriation for FY 1948 (originally requested for the Central Intelligence Group) was \$40 million. The next year, it was \$50 million. By 1953, it had grown tenfold to \$587 million, although it dropped somewhat thereafter. Beyond such facts and figures, however, almost every chapter reveals something that we did not quite appreciate before:

- Not only did the FBI object to the creation of the CIA, military intelligence worked behind the scenes to keep the legislation from being enacted, backing off only when reassured by legislators that the military would retain its own intelligence capabilities.
- The CIA's immediate concern in seeking the special authorities ultimately provided in the CIA Act of 1949 was not to facilitate its espionage operations but rather to support its covert action operations.
- The oversight committees in Congress supported an exponential growth of the Agency between 1949 and 1953 and were fully aware of the disproportionate share (almost two-thirds) of Agency resources and personnel going to covert action—referred to then as “Cold War activities”—rather than to such intelligence functions as espionage and analysis.
- Even with the burgeoning resources going to covert action, in 1951 a congressman from Wisconsin, who was not a member of the oversight subcommittees, managed to get a public amendment attached to the foreign aid bill authorizing \$100 million to assist underground liberation movements in communist countries. This drew criticism not only from the Soviet Union, but also from the United Nations, forcing members of Congress to defend their actions. Barrett's research shows that DCI Allen Dulles told the congressman that the CIA did not need the money and suggested that the State Department could use \$4.3 million to improve the quality of its refugee centers overseas. It was the first time, but not the last, that Congress would publicly appropriate funds for a covert action, and the result, from the congressional standpoint, was far from propitious.
- Barrett found no records that showed the CIA briefed Congress in advance of a specific covert action operation until the Bay of Pigs, but he speculates that when the Agency's involvement in a particular country became a matter of public speculation—as it did in 1954, with the overthrow of the government in Guatemala—the leaders of the subcommittees would have been told.

- Almost from the CIA's creation, the DCI and other senior officials were called on the carpet by oversight and non-oversight committees alike to respond to perceived failures of the Agency to predict events around the world—for example, the Soviet atomic test in 1949, the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, and the launch of Sputnik in 1957. In some cases, the CIA was able to mollify its critics; on other occasions, according to Barrett, it was not.
- Indeed, the DCI and other senior CIA officials appeared far more often before congressional committees, even non-oversight committees, than was previously understood. In 1958, for example, DCI Dulles appeared a surprising 27 times before 16 different committees. Over time, interaction at a more mundane level also increased—members of Congress who traveled to countries of interest were debriefed, for example, and the Agency participated in responding to constituents' complaints (usually in the cases of disgruntled former CIA employees).

Still, as Barrett's account documents, a great deal of what passed for oversight during this period was informal and less than rigorous. Despite its significance, the first mention of the U-2 program to a member of Congress came one afternoon in December 1955, after the program had been going on for a year, when DCI Dulles stopped by the townhouse of Senator Leverett Saltonstall, the ranking member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, for cocktails. Dulles followed up a few weeks later with personal briefings of the leaders of the CIA subcommittees, but he left it to them to inform other members as they saw fit. When the U-2 program finally became public knowledge after Francis Gary Powers was shot down over the Soviet Union in May 1960, Dulles was mortified to learn that Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn was not among those who had been informed of the program. And, even when Congress *was* told about Agency activities, there were limits, at times, on *what* they were told. In his testimony before several congressional committees about the U-2 shutdown, for example, Dulles never revealed that President Eisenhower had personally approved the overflights of the Soviet Union. To have done so would have deepened the president's already significant foreign policy problems.

*The CIA and Congress* also sheds considerably more light on the interplay within Congress itself, especially within the Senate, over the adequacy of the oversight arrangements that had been adopted in 1947—that is, leaving monitoring of the CIA to specially designated subcommittees of the Armed Services Committee and Appropriations Committee in each house. While Senator Mike Mansfield's interest in replacing these arrangements with a

joint committee—similar to the Joint Atomic Energy Committee—is well known, only by reading Barrett’s book does one realize how often Mansfield’s proposal was raised during those years (by Mansfield and others) in response to perceived failures by the Agency. (With some irony, Barrett notes that the joint committee idea was put forth yet again in 2004, by the 9/11 Commission, as a way to improve the quality of intelligence oversight.)

Through Barrett’s account, we come to appreciate how often during this period the threat of increased oversight by the Congress prompted the executive branch to institute its own oversight of the CIA in an effort to preempt congressional action. In 1956, for example, when Mansfield’s resolution to create a joint committee on intelligence was voted out of the Senate Rules Committee on a 7-2 vote, President Eisenhower created his own oversight mechanism in the White House, the President’s Board of Consultants on Foreign Intelligence Activities—the forerunner of today’s President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB)—in an effort to head off action by the full Senate on Mansfield’s resolution. A year earlier, according to Barrett, Eisenhower had agreed to oversight of the CIA’s activities by two independent commissions—the Hoover and Clark commissions—largely to keep Senator Joseph McCarthy’s Permanent Investigations Subcommittee out of the Agency’s backyard. One can only wonder, if congressional oversight was so toothless during this period, why the Eisenhower administration took such pains to avoid it.

Toothless or not, the relationship that Barrett details was livelier, both on a personal level and on an institutional level, than what had previously been thought. Congress was more assertive in making demands upon the Agency, and the Agency, more assiduous and forthcoming in response. Some pieces of the puzzle, however, are still missing. Barrett’s search turned up nothing, for example, on the interplay that must have taken place at the time of the Agency’s operation in 1953 to restore the Shah of Iran to his throne. Nor does his account mention congressional awareness of, or involvement in, the CORONA project—the first reconnaissance satellite program, begun in 1956. Perhaps, if the CIA releases its records from this period in the future, some of these gaps can be filled in.

Nevertheless, thanks to Professor Barrett’s prodigious effort, what has been considered the “dark ages” of congressional oversight now seems much more real— and, indeed, much closer to the present day—than we had imagined. Congress still carries out its oversight of the Intelligence Community largely in a reactive mode. While today’s oversight committees

are far more aware of what the CIA is doing than their predecessors were, Congress continues to find it hard to mount in-depth, systemic studies of intelligence activities aimed at identifying shortcomings and finding solutions.

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