

Intelligence in Public Media

The Spy Masters: How the CIA Directors Shape History and the Future

Chris Whipple (Scribner, 2020), 377, illustrations, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Thomas Coffey

The Spy Masters makes for good copy but poor history, even an informal one. A look at the CIA record through the lens of its directors, the book is a string of war stories that are snappy and interesting, yet grow tiresome by the end. Picture some shoot-the-breeze session that has gone on for too long, lost its point, and does not know how to end.

Chris Whipple takes the same approach to *The Spy Masters* as he did three years ago in a book about White House chiefs of staff.^a It is documentarian in form and a distillation of conventional wisdom on its topic. The chapters that cover George H. W. Bush, Stansfield Turner, James Woolsey, and John Deutch are nicely done, with the reader learning a lot in a short span. The photograph of Bush waiting on a train station platform in Philadelphia is priceless, showing an unguarded side to the usually formal and in-control former CIA director and president. It's moments like this that give *The Spy Masters* promise, especially when Whipple tells us in the introduction that he hopes to answer the following questions: "Who succeeds and fails as CIA Director?" "What is the proper relationship between a director and a president?" "What is the CIA mission?" "Is the world's most powerful agency a force for good in the world?"

Alas, Whipple fails to deliver on his promise, rarely asking the directors for their views on such important questions. Instead the book mirrors one big storytelling session on major CIA historical events, which is better recounted by lower level officers. In this respect, *The Spy Masters* is a missed opportunity to gain valuable insights, perspectives, and lessons learned from officers at the highest level. And so the usual tropes surface: Counterintelligence Chief James Angleton as a mole-hunting obsessive; (201) President Reagan as "someone who liked to watch TV more than actually read the PDB"; (292) President George W. Bush needing a "pretext to invade Iraq that [Director George] Tenet provided"; and how the WMD intelligence "books were

cooked." (204) In a CSPAN program about the book, Whipple rehashes the line about Bush White House officials unable to believe "a bunch of guys with beards in caves in Afghanistan would blow up the World Trade Center." Tired hyperbole like these only underscores how little new there is to say in *The Spy Masters*.

Accordingly, Whipple could have used some fact-checking of his own statements and of those former intelligence officers he interviewed. The CIA did not back the 1973 coup in Chile and so "did not have its fingerprints all over it." (45) Soviet defector Yuri Nosenko was not put in solitary confinement "at Angleton's insistence." Soviet Bloc Division had Nosenko put in detention; it was handling his case at the time. (31) Iran-Contra was not a "failed covert action program" but an illegal undertaking by NSC officials and some rogue CIA officers. (13) Spy Aldrich Ames was not arrested on his way to meet "an FBI agent posing as a Soviet handler." (163) He was going to the office to meet with his boss about a trip they were going to take. That was the ruse. The dispute between DNI Dennis Blair and CIA Director Leon Panetta was not over whether the DNI could name chiefs of station, but whether the DNI could designate other intelligence organizations in place of CIA as key to bilateral relationships and so name the chief liaison officer. (242–43) Even Whipple's little touches are suspect, as when he describes former Director John McCone after hearing of JFK's assassination, "grabbing his hat and racing to meet Bobby Kennedy." (45) There is no photograph of McCone having ever worn a hat.

The shoot-the-breeze aspect of *The Spy Masters* descends into the sophomoric. "The analysts will do whatever you want them to do," said a former intelligence officer. "If you tell them to walk off a cliff, they'll walk off a cliff. The ops guys will only do what you ask them to do if they believe you love them—if you believe that they are as great as they think they are." (14–15) A fun and exaggerated quote, but is it illuminating? Then

a. Chris Whipple, *The Gatekeepers: How the White House Chiefs of Staff Define Every Presidency* (Crown Publishing, 2017).

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there's the flippancy that Director William Casey never really died in 1987, with the former National Security Advisor and Deputy CIA Director Frank Carlucci wondering as the pallbearers walked by with the closed coffin, "how do we know he's in there." (134) Hard to make out how this furthers a historical account of CIA.

At least those remarks are silly, and meant to be unserious, even if they add little to the record. *The Spy Masters* includes downright nasty quotes, some unattributed. "As a former Ambassador put it, '[Director Mike] Pompeo is like a heat-seeking missile for [President Donald] Trump's ass.'" (284) Current Director Gina Haspel is compared to a prison camp commandant by a former senior CIA officer. "She'd get everything done and say, 'I was following orders. The President gave me an order.'" (319) How could one even substantiate such defamation? But the kicker belongs to a former DNI speculating on why Republican lawmakers did not go along with President Barack Obama's suggested policies to counter Russian election interference in 2016. "I think it was because he's black. No one overtly said that. But I think there was a lot of resentment among Republicans about that." (282) Whipple exercises poor judgment in whether to let a quote stand or to question its credibility. Or simply to use common sense in deciding whether someone is just saying something for effect.

These remarks come near the end of *The Spy Masters* and are of a kind with his coverage of the CIA's relationship with President Trump. The focus on the president seems disproportionate: Trump looms over the

introduction and is at the center of the last chapter and the epilogue. A rough look at the index suggests Trump receives nearly as much attention as Directors Helms and Tenet, even though Trump served about half the time of their tenures, was not interviewed for the book, nor has written any memoir on his White House years. And, of course, Trump was never a CIA director. Since the epilogue does not attempt to answer the big questions Whipple posed earlier, the Trump focus in the last part of the book perhaps reveals the point of *The Spy Masters*.

If so, it's a surprisingly ahistorical look. Take the daily presidential briefing: Questions over the content of the *President's Daily Brief*, who attends the briefing, leaks, receiving bad news, and the need to develop a personal relationship between the director and president have been issues of concern throughout administrations. The inside-the-briefing stories, many by unnamed intelligence sources and the hand-wringing about them show a lack of awareness on the part of *The Spy Masters*. It is these types of leaks in the book that historically contribute to testy briefing exchanges, for they undermine trust and damage many a relationship between director and president.

In the acknowledgments section, the author suggests only one former CIA officer read the entire draft. Still, the question becomes how many former directors, attributed former CIA officers, and the slew of unattributed ones had a sense of what *The Spy Masters* was about and where it was headed as opposed to Whipple's originally stated intentions in the introduction.



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