The Ghosts of Langley: Into the CIA's Heart of Darkness

John Prados (The New Press, 2017), 446 pp., endnotes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Hayden Peake

John Prados is a senior fellow at the National Security Archive in Washington, DC. His more than 20 books include an impressive study of WWII intelligence in the Pacific, *Combined Fleet Decoded*, and several others that are harsh critiques of what he calls the CIA's "secret wars" and domestic abuses. *The Ghosts of Langley* is his latest contribution on the latter topics.

The book's dust jacket contains high praise from a number of journalists and academies. For example, Tim Weiner, author of his own book on the CIA, *Legacy of Ashes*, writes that "Prados proves again that he is among America's greatest chroniclers of secret intelligence." History professor H. W. Brands at the University of Texas (Austin) goes even further, noting that Prados "knows more than anyone else about the CIA." And Prados, untainted by modesty, echoed these assessments in a presentation at the International Spy Museum on 9 November 2017, when he characterized himself as "widely knowledgeable of every aspect of the agency."

While serving and veteran CIA officers might find these testimonials somewhat exaggerated, these assertions may well entice readers interested in CIA and the idea that it is inhabited by ghosts—or as Prados puts it, "There are ghosts stalking the halls at Langley." (xvi)

What exactly are the "ghosts" of Langley? What is the CIA's "heart of darkness"? Prados never addresses these questions directly, though he does say the ghost metaphor is deliberate. As to the CIA's "heart of darkness" (the British edition chose a different subtitle: *Into The Heart of the CIA*) readers are left to infer that the author has penetrated the dark forces protected by secrecy that, while essential to CIA operations, are also used to avoid criticism and accountability.

To support of this view, he describes precedents or ghosts "of past spooks [that] are always there to encourage—and to warn—the current generation of CIA officers. For this reason, *Ghosts of Langley* follows the exploits (or misadventures) of the great, the good, and the misguided." (preface) Further clarification follows in the semantically awkward comment, "The ghosts that inhabit Langley headquarters may not be corporeal, but these individuals and others like them are exemplars. The legends of the forebears furnish illustrations for today—and tomorrow. They are both good, like Jennifer Matthews and Eloise Page, and bad, say Dewey Clarridge or Jim Mitchell. Some—like Robert Ames, perhaps—are sad. Langley has seen them all. Its halls echo with the footsteps of past spymasters and their henchmen and henchwomen . . . the Agency, over seven decades, has resisted—and finally decoupled itself from—government accountability." This knowledgeable expert then adds, "Those who advocated a peacetime intelligence agency for America would themselves be haunted—by what their offspring has become." (xvi–xviii)

With his position clarified, Prados abandons the traditional chronological approach to events and proceeds to group "the spies by their character types and presents their stories as lenses showing the larger picture of the Agency's evolution." (xvii) Thus the book begins after some rather critical comments on President Trump, with a discussion of the enhanced interrogation program—Prados calls it torture—adding that he will "not hide horror behind euphemism. There will be no effort here to play the CIA's word game. If that is not acceptable you can put this book down right now." (xxi) Whatever your choice, be advised that the interrogation program and the CIA ghosts are the main themes of the book.

The first chapter, "The House That Allen Built," reviews Dulles's CIA career, concluding that his ghost "seemed to teach 'lessons'—most important for the CIA's future, that the mission was the thing, that anything else, including outside efforts at regulation, posed obstacles to be bypassed." (75) The author provides no evidence to support this contention.

Events and personalities are the topic of chapters with such titles as "Zealots and Schemers," "Stars and Meteors," "Crises," "The Consiglieri," "The Sheriffs," "The Headless Horseman," "A Failed Exorcist," "Jacob Marely's Ghosts," and "The Flying Dutchman."

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In general, these labels apply to agency officers and events—not in any particular order—that illustrate the perpetuation of the ghosts or precedents that Prados sees as having negatively affected the agency's performance. The result is a choppy narrative—and one not without errors—complete with frequent flashbacks, biographical sketches, and a great deal of organizational and bureaucratic detail.

For example, "The Consiglieri" chapter is about CIA's Office of General Counsel (OGC)—whose attorneys he gratuitously labels gunslingers (while agency officers are referred to as spooks)—and begins with a discussion of Stanley Sporkin, who served DCI William Casey. Prados comments on how Sporkin and Casey worked together to get things done, despite congressional opposition. The chapter ends with an account of Larry Houston, the agency's first and longest serving general counsel. In an aside, Prados tells how Houston was recruited by "a tall" General Donovan (but it was Houston who was tall; Donovan was 5'9"). In between, Prados discusses how the agency treated whistleblower Victor Marchetti over his book *The CIA and The Cult of Intelligence*. The case, writes Prados, "illustrates the work of OGC gunslingers in public." (209) Then, after placing Philip Agee in the whistleblower category without alluding to his KGB service, he relates the difficulties Agee encountered with his tell-all book, *Inside The Company: CIA Diary*, published in Britain to avoid agency review. Other examples follow, including that of Frank Snepp, a former CIA analyst who declined to submit his book, *Decent Interval*, for prepublication review to the then-recently formed Publication Review Board and lost his case in court.

The chapter entitled "The Sheriffs" is curious, since the title does not seem to reflect either of the two topics the chapter addresses: women at the CIA, and the inspectors general (IG). The chapter reviews the role of women from the Dulles days until the present; in it, Prados presents an accurate summary of the genuine difficulties women encountered in the early days, the gradually changing attitudes, and finally progress achieved—he summarizes several cases to illustrate the uphill battle.

The contributions of the IGs are also reviewed, from the days of Lyman Kirkpatrick (the first IG) to John Helgerson (who served as inspector general from 2002 until 2009). Prados discusses Kirkpatrick's controversial Bay of Pigs investigation and report, the reasons the IG position now requires Senate confirmation, and why, as he see it, "Langley's director came to dread the touch of the inspector general." (247) Along the way, he digresses with a short essay on director John Deutch's "bad boy" prohibition that limited agency contact to those potential agents who did not have "human right transgressions." Prados challenges those who opposed the directive, claiming that "of the top spies in CIA history, Popov, Penkovsky, Tolkachev, Gordievsky, Kuklinski—none were bad boys." (243) (It is worth noting the Gordievsky was never a CIA agent—the British get the credit, as Ben MacIntyre's upcoming biography of Gordievsky will document.[a]) This chapter then establishes precedents—or ghosts—for the IG's role in events discussed later in the book.

"The Headless Horseman" chapter reprises the Richard Helms era at CIA. It discusses, among other things, his problems with Congress—a ghostly precedent?—but offers nothing new and leaves the reader wondering, again, as to the significance of the title.

"A Failed Exorcist" is mainly concerned with the George Tenet era, before and after 9/11. Prados goes over familiar ground here too, especially the "slam dunk" comment, although he doesn't include Tenet's own explanation of its use. But the main focus is on the Iraq War and the enhanced interrogation program. Among the ghosts that haunted Tenet's tenure, writes Prados, was Bill Colby's Phoenix Program—"a torture and murder operation." (312) That more accurate depictions of Phoenix are available is not mentioned. In the end, Prados concludes inexplicably that George Tenet ". . . somewhere morphed from spy hero to a ghost of Langley." (312)

The final chapters—"Jacob Marley's Ghosts" and "The Flying Dutchman"—attempt to show how the ghosts of prior mistakes and failed operations persist, their lessons unlearned or ignored. Both are devoted to aspects of the CIA's role in the events preceding and following 9/11. The emphasis is on rendition, enhanced interrogation, and the drone program that presumably restricted "the real business of spying." (387) Prados comments on the contributions of key players, such as Jose Rodriguez (and his decision to destroy the interrogation tapes) and the serving directors. He is particularly hard on director Michael Hayden, dismissing out of hand the views expressed in his memoir, *Playing To The Edge* (Penguin, 2016).

a. See Ben MacIntyre, *The Spy and The Traitor: The Greatest Espionage Story of the Cold War* (Crown, forthcoming—September 2018).

"The Flying Dutchman" (the identity of the Dutchman is not made clear) concerns the battle over the Senate investigation into the enhanced interrogation program. Without qualification, *The Ghosts of Langley* subscribes to the opinions expressed by the Senate "torture" report and is dismissive of contrary views. Prados does mention the corrective actions instituted by director John Brennan, adding the bewildering qualification that, "The coming failure most likely will flow from the success of John Brennan's initiatives." (384)

Overall, the only thing new in the book is the metaphor of ghosts, threaded through Prados's stories of the unsuccessful operations crafted by Allen Dulles and, to varying degrees, by all of the directors and principal subordinates who succeeded him. But no straight-line cause and effect is ever established: whether you accept or reject Prados's arguments depends upon whom you choose to believe. There is no smoking gun evidence that proves the "ghost" hypothesis or Prados's interpretation of its role in current Agency endeavors.

In the preface to *The Ghosts of Langley*, Prados states, "This book could not have been written by an insider," (xx) implying that only authors who are not handicapped by their own experience as professional intelligence officers are qualified to undertake the task; however, a not unreasonable consideration is that insiders would have written a less polemical and more balanced assessment. Admittedly, the public history of any intelligence agency is something of an operational iceberg. And while *The Ghosts of Langley* is in some respects an original, challenging account, it is merely a surface view that reflects the author's previous works on the CIA. As such, the book is a partisan apparition that has earned its place in the intelligence literature of discontent.

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