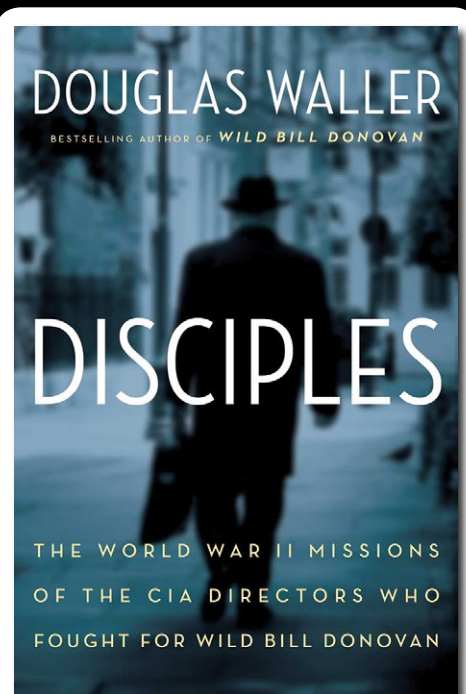


REVIEW ESSAY



Disciples The World War II Missions of the CIA Directors Who Fought for Wild Bill Donovan

Douglas Waller, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2015,
592 pages

John G. Breen, PhD

The CIA is said to have three primary missions: the clandestine recruitment and handling of human assets, the analysis and production of finished intelligence, and the conduct of presidentially directed covert action. The last mission set appears to be the most problematic; it has resulted in embarrassing disclosures and ever-increasing congressional oversight. Reportedly, presidents used to be able to wield the authority to order covert action by simply picking up a phone and calling the CIA director; today it takes a signed presidential finding with congressional notification.

While truly successful covert action will perhaps never be acknowledged or revealed, the litany of failed or ethically questionable covert actions is well known: the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961, the effort to influence the Chilean presidential elections in 1970, the CIA involvement in the Vietnam-era Phoenix Program, the clandestine and illegal sale of arms to fund Nicaraguan fighters in the Iran-Contra affair, and most recently, the use of

“enhanced interrogation techniques” such as waterboarding against prisoners in CIA custody. Though morally dubious as they may sometimes be, presidents rely on covert action. It is an important tool to support identifiable foreign policy objectives vital to national security, certainly, when overt action tied to the United States would run the risk of conflagration.

In *Disciples*, author Douglas Waller provides a detailed accounting of the early careers of CIA luminaries Allen Dulles, Richard Helms, William Colby, and William Casey. Each began his career immersed in World War II espionage, and each ended his career after covert action programs following the war went wrong, with details spilling into the press or into congressional hearings. These four began their service under “Wild Bill” Donovan, the legendary director of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), in a largely paramilitary covert-action-based “good fight” against the Nazis. Each eventually rose within the ranks of the newly created CIA, successor to the OSS after the war, to become director of central

intelligence (DCI). Each pursued far-ranging covert action and clandestine human intelligence operations throughout the Cold War.

What lessons can today's CIA leadership learn from their examples? What lessons did the author draw from their World War II OSS careers to help explain their challenging director tenures—Dulles and the Bay of Pigs, Helms convicted of lying to the Congress, Casey and Iran-Contra? While Waller leaves many of these questions for readers to figure out on their own, in a separate article based on the book, he suggests an answer of sorts, highlighting how the OSS's failings "permeated the new agency," and attributing those failings to "the delusions that covert operations, like magic bullets, could produce spectacular results" and the feeling that "legal or ethical corners could be cut for a higher cause."¹

Disciples is at its best when the author takes some time to consider these ethical and moral ambiguities. Why, for example, diverging so sharply from the views of his contemporaries, did Colby choose to release to Congress the "Family Jewels," an internal report on questionable CIA covert action? In 1975, following media reports of domestic intelligence collection and foreign assassination plots, the Senate established a Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, better known as the Church Committee. DCI Colby made the arguably bold and precedent-setting decision to cooperate with this congressional oversight. But, while Colby soberly called the final report of the committee "a comprehensive and serious review of the history and present status of American intelligence," Helms felt betrayed and had a "special loathing" for Colby; Casey "watched in horror" and, responding to a friend who suggested Colby was forced to answer congressional questions, replied that "[h]e didn't have to understand the question."²

Waller offers several theories for Colby's decision to cooperate with Congress. He notes, for example, that some OSS veterans believed Colby's service as a commando might have made him less attuned to keeping secrets, than, say, Helms, and more "oriented to noisy action." However, this suggestion seems simplistic. Colby was involved in significant covert action and managed large espionage programs

throughout the Cold War, and his ability to keep a secret was never in doubt.

Closer to the mark perhaps, Waller offers that the "real reason" for Colby's openness was his legal reasoning that being less than forthcoming would result in Congress seizing the information anyway, without the ability for Colby to provide "proper context." Given the hostility at the time of a Congress reeling from the presidential malfeasance wrought by Nixon, this explanation resonates.

Colby's actions as DCI may have been tied more explicitly to his background and activities in war. Unlike Dulles, Helms, and Casey, Colby began his career as a true street operator. The others spent their OSS careers running the operations of others and planning larger scale espionage campaigns. Vital work of course, but one's perspective from the perch of management is different from one's perspective at the pointy tip of the spear. Dulles, for example, displayed perhaps a less than well-honed knack for espionage early in his own diplomatic career when he declined a request to meet with Lenin in 1918; how this meeting might have changed history is unknowable.

As Waller relates in some of the more entertaining segments of his book, Colby was a member of the original "Jedburgh" OSS paramilitary officer cadre. He parachuted into France after the D-Day invasion, and later in the war he lost a toe and part of a finger to frostbite while conducting direct action behind enemy lines in Norway. Unlike the others, Colby came face-to-face, in perhaps a more personal way, with the sometimes-ugly realities of covert action, first in Norway dealing with the investigation of the possible assassination of German prisoners of war under his control, and later in Vietnam, when he was involved with the controversial Phoenix Program. Perhaps it was more his close contact with these activities that later affected his decision to "open the books" to Congress.

In the end, Dulles, Helms, Colby, and Casey felt a call to duty they answered with devotion, though perhaps at times misplaced. They were complex individuals and certainly not infallible. As the U.S. military and the CIA engage in overt and covert action in hot spots around the world today (some newly lit, others smoldering, while others have notably rekindled), Waller's *Disciples* offers the reader a thoroughly

researched and highly detailed history of these influential spies who ignited the covert action industry of the late twentieth century, led as they were by the

progenitor spy—Wild Bill Donovan. Perhaps future directors can draw some lessons from the examples of these early pioneers. ■

Biography

John G. Breen, PhD, is the Commandant's Distinguished Chair for National Intelligence Studies at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Notes

1. Douglas Waller, "How the OSS Shaped the CIA and American Special Ops," War on the Rocks website, 30 September 2015, accessed 8 March 2016, <http://warontherocks.com/2015/09/how-the-oss-shaped-the-cia-and-american-special-ops>.
2. Central Intelligence Agency, "The CIA and Congress: Creation of the SSCI," CIA website, 30 April 2013, accessed

8 March 2016, <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/2011-featured-story-archive/the-cia-and-congress-creation-of-the-ssci.html>; Douglas Waller, *Disciples: The World War II Missions of the CIA Directors Who Fought for Wild Bill Donovan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 442-43.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Correction to essay

My essay "Remembering Vietnam" (*Military Review*, September–October 2013) incorrectly indicated that Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster's book *Dereliction of Duty* criticized the members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1964–65 for not resigning or protesting against policy decisions made by the Johnson administration as it approached intervening in the Vietnam War. That criticism was made by many commentators who cited McMaster's research, but his book did not express that view, and I was wrong to write that it did. I regret the error and apologize to Lt. Gen. McMaster and *MR's* readers for the misstatement.

Arnold R. Isaacs

