

REVIEWS

Hugh Wilford, *The CIA: An Imperial History*
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INSTRUMENTS OF EMPIRE

In the historiographical field of intelligence studies, ideological blinkers abound. The standard account in the American case is that the democratic mandate which brought the Central Intelligence Agency into being through the 1947 National Security Act was roundly abused by successive US presidents, who commanded the Agency's operatives to overthrow foreign governments, assassinate political enemies and extract information through torture, despoiling the foundational tasks of intelligence collection and analysis. This is the story retold in the much-reprinted *The CIA and American Democracy* (1989) and other works by the University of Edinburgh's Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones. The same basic move is reiterated by notionally more critical historians, such as Richard Immerman in *The Hidden Hand* (2014), or in punchier prose by the *New York Times's* Tim Weiner in *Legacy of Ashes* (2007).

Hugh Wilford's starting point in *The CIA: An Imperial History* marks a welcome departure from all this. He argues that, while much has been written on the history of the Agency, and still more on that of the American empire, there has been little attempt to read them in relation to each other. His aim is to bring the two fields together to advance understanding of both. This is Wilford's fifth study of the Cold War CIA and his broadest to date. Like every historian of the American intelligence service, he has been obliged to circumnavigate the fact that the richest source, the CIA's official archives, remain largely under lock and key. The method that Wilford has

developed to compensate for that has entailed intensive reading of memoirs, private papers and documents from the Pentagon and MI5 to produce granular accounts focused on individual figures at the interface of clandestine political power and cultural practice. British-born, he completed a PhD at Exeter on the milieu of the *Partisan Review* as it pivoted in the postwar period towards anti-communism and engagement with the Congress for Cultural Freedom. The resulting monograph appeared in 1995 under the title *The New York Intellectuals: From Vanguard to Institution*; soon after, Wilford relocated to California State University, Long Beach, where he still teaches. His second book, *The CIA, the British Left and the Cold War* (2003), examined the Atlanticism of leading figures of the Labour right such as Gaitskell and Crosland. *The Mighty Wurlitzer* (2008), Wilford's best-known book, reconstructed the cultural front organizations through which the CIA, as one of its top officials boasted, could play any tune. It was followed by *America's Great Game* (2013), examining the brief heyday of the CIA Arabists in the 1950s before US Middle East policy cleaved to Zionism.

The CIA: An Imperial History dispenses with the myth that the US national-security state was merely a defensive reaction to Pearl Harbor or Soviet expansion. Despite the country's long history of 'empire denial', Wilford writes, the origins of American imperial expansion date back to the settler colonialism of the first European immigrants. A homegrown military-intelligence tradition began with the reports of scouts and spies in 'Indian country', consolidated by the Army topographers, reconnaissance forces and hired local agents who made possible the huge landgrab of the 1846 Mexican War. Centralized analysis of information extracted during the interrogation of captured Confederate soldiers and escaped slaves was crucial for the Union victories at Gettysburg and Appomattox. But for Wilford, the crystallization of a modern US intelligence bureaucracy begins with the New Imperialism of the 1890s, coinciding with heightened labour militancy at home. His book opens with a panorama of European colonial-intelligence practice of the period, from British India and the Transvaal to French Indochina, Madagascar and the Rif. When America entered the stage with its 1898 annexation of the Philippines, it was in some respects replicating its conquest of Indian territory, Wilford argues: forcible relocation, interrogation under torture, indiscriminate slaughter of unarmed populations; but the US also took over the existing Spanish-colonial institutions, police and prison networks. Leading the intelligence effort was a Harvard-educated army officer, Ralph van Deman, politicized in the early 1890s as a violent opponent of the US miners' strike. In Manila, van Deman took over the records of the colonial police to create a vast card-index of the Filipino resistance, constituting America's first overseas field intelligence unit while laying the basis for what Wilford calls a colonial surveillance state.

Back home in the 1900s, van Deman lobbied his army superiors to set up a centralized intelligence system, such as Britain was establishing with its Secret Service Bureau. In 1917, as the Wilson Administration geared up for war in Europe, Deman was appointed head of the newly formed US Military Intelligence Service, setting in place a series of divisions—intelligence gathering, translation and cryptography, direction of military attachés at US embassies, security screening for German, Irish and African-American subversives among military and government personnel—borrowed from French and British models. The imperial experience of this earlier generation of overseas intelligence operatives was crucial for their successors in the 1940s, Wilford argues. First the wartime Office of Strategic Services and then, from 1947, the Central Intelligence Agency, as nerve-centre for American power projection, were staffed by elite Anglophile cohorts, typically educated at Groton and Harvard. Warmly anti-colonial, in the American fashion, and still more fiercely anti-communist, these early CIA men, reared on Kipling's *Kim* and Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, were perfectly at home in the colonnaded villas and ritzy watering holes—Beirut's Hotel St George, Cairo's Gezira Sporting Club, Saigon's Hôtel Continentale—barely vacated by the French and British.

At the same time, Wilford argues that there were structural reasons why the CIA played a spearhead role in what he calls America's 'covert empire'. His central thesis is that, setting out to manage the new states emerging from European colonial rule, Washington was constrained both by fear of provoking a nuclear war with Moscow and by popular American anti-colonialism; the turn to covert action—using the CIA to help prop up pro-US regimes and crush left-sovereignist forces—was part of the solution. *An Imperial History* makes the case for this through an episodic-cum-institutional analysis of the Agency's many functions, starting with its supply of global intelligence to the US government. Even as the CIA's covert-action division ballooned under Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy, expanding from seven bases in 1949 to 47 in 1962—with thousands of staff and contractors—the apex unit for intelligence analysis, known as the Office of National Estimates (ONE), remained tight-knit: two dozen or so staff members, many recruited from Yale, where ONE's long-serving director Sherman Kent had taught French history before being signed up to the wartime OSS. Their task was to assemble and analyse the regional information produced by field officers, crafting regular briefings for the White House.

The field officers themselves, generally operating under cover of some diplomatic position at the US Embassy, were trained to recruit networks of local agents to supply this material, targeting natives with access to valuable information—a junior government minister or army officer—for assessment by CIA HQ. The challenge was to identify the potential agent's

vulnerability, then work out how to exploit it, while remaining alert to the possibility that the recruit might be an enemy plant; money, blackmail, ideological conviction or psychological entanglement were the main tactics listed in the CIA training manual. Recruitment was ‘the most sensitive step’. Once targets had agreed to supply information in exchange for money or other inducement, they would be tested, then trained in spy craft and ‘handled’, ideally over many years, until the time came for termination. Emotional involvement with agents was an occupational hazard for field officers; according to Wilford, some likened the relationship to sexual conquest; others, to a marriage.

The political role of the CIA station chief was more directly imperial—or perhaps, in Nkrumah’s term, ‘neocolonial’; that of an informal pro-consul. Congo station chief Larry Devlin breakfasted daily with Mobutu, the venal dictator, while using the country as a staging post for covert operations in Angola, South Africa and elsewhere; the CIA supplied the tip-off that sent Mandela to prison for 27 years. Jordan station chief Jack O’Connell became a close confidant of the young King Hussein. In Mexico City, the CIA’s Winston Scott lubricated the special relationship with the PRI with ‘cash and camaraderie’, buying new cars for ministers’ girlfriends. In the Philippines, operative Edward Lansdale channelled CIA dollars into a presidential run for the anti-communist defence chief Ramon Magsaysay, writing his speeches and procuring a catchy radio jingle, ‘Mambo Magsaysay’. The result was a landslide, hailed by a CIA-orchestrated campaign in the US media. (‘It was a privilege’, Lansdale told CIA HQ, ‘to give the lie to the current adage that the white man is through in Asia. Hellsfire, we’re just starting!’) Ten years later, Lansdale was propping up the Ngo Nhu Diem regime in South Vietnam. Wilford provides a memorable picture of the CIA man vacationing at a beach resort near Saigon with his Filipina mistress, the President, Diem’s brother Nhu and the notorious Madame Nhu: ‘the women splashed about in the waves while the American played Scrabble with Nhu and Diem dozed.’ In Cairo, Kermit ‘Kim’ Roosevelt, grandson of Teddy, drafted an early memo for Nasser and the Free Officers, whom he’d helped to bring to power, titled ‘Notes on How to Be the Prime Minister of Egypt’. Lansdale did the same for Diem in Saigon.

Sustaining these pro-US regimes in power required building up their security forces. The CIA helped with funds and training, drawing on the expertise of the Police Administration Department at Michigan State University to turn local guard units into professional death squads capable of terrorizing rural communities and recruiting their own networks of informers. Across Latin America, the Middle East, Central Africa and Southeast Asia, the CIA supplied intelligence on ‘communist suspects’ to local dictatorships, assisting them with wire-tapping and surveillance technology. Though Wilford

does not explore the links, he notes that Mossad served as a 'regional surrogate' for the Agency's counter-insurgency work, helping to train political police for Haile Selassie and SAVAK torturers for the Shah. The corollary of propping up pro-American regimes was the CIA-orchestrated coup to overthrow governments—Mosaddeq in Iran, Arbenz in Guatemala—that put national-popular projects like oil nationalization or land reform ahead of US interests. *The CIA: An Imperial History* gives a full-dress account of Kim Roosevelt's machinations in Iran in the summer of 1953: paying one mob to play the part of communist rioters so as to mobilize another as an Islamist counter-demonstration, while a loyal American press portrayed the country as 'dangerously unstable'. A similar playbook was deployed in Guatemala.

The debacle of the Agency-backed Bay of Pigs assault on Castro's government caused the first domestic crack in the covert-imperial carapace. The CIA was now openly named and blamed in books like C. Wright Mills's *Listen, Yankee* (1960). The cloak of clandestinity was whipped away as pro-Cuba demonstrators (W. E. B. Du Bois, Maya Angelou) staged vigils outside its new headquarters in Langley, VA. In Vietnam, the CIA's Phoenix Program was 'a bloodbath of torture and assassination'; its counter-insurgency needed ever greater military back-up, morphing into a full-blown war. In 1967, *Ramparts* magazine published a series of CIA exposés. In the early 1970s, 'anti-imperialism entered the mainstream', as Wilford puts it: the *Washington Post* published the Pentagon Papers; the *New York Times* ran Seymour Hersh's report on Agency penetration of the campus anti-war movement—aspects of the 'imperial-boomerang effect' discerned by Hannah Arendt and Aimé Césaire. Establishment criticism peaked with the Senate's Church Committee which imposed a series of checks on the Agency, including a (short-lived) ban on assassinations. 'We do not need a regiment of cloak-and-dagger men', thundered Senator Church, 'earning their promotions by planning new exploits throughout the world.'

These proscriptions would not stop Operation Condor, the clandestine CIA-backed network responsible for the torture and 'disappearance' of Latin American leftists which saw student leaders and trade unionists thrown from military helicopters over the Southern Cone. Nor would they deter Carter and Brzezinski from dispatching CIA trainers, funds and weaponry to the Hindu Kush. Rather, increased media and congressional oversight of the Agency led to an outsourcing of 'covert-imperial' operations, as with the Reagan Administration's re-routed funding for anti-communist Contra militias to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, overseen by the shady figure of Col. Oliver North, a member of the National Security Council. Reagan appointed a hardline Director of Central Intelligence, Bill Casey, who revamped the CIA's discredited front operations, creating new organs such as the National Endowment for Democracy and the Asia Foundation.

Via the Vatican, funds were channelled to trade-union leader Lech Walesa and Church-backed Solidarność groups in Poland; not, of course, to trade unionist Lula da Silva and liberation-theology networks in Brazil.

America's Cold War victory led to a recalibration of support for such CIA favourites as Mobutu and Suharto; once pillars of the Free World, now decried as hoary dictators unwilling to move with the times. Plagued by budget cuts and a high turnover of directors—five in seven years—Langley began a cautious and partial declassification of its files, allowing for a preliminary evaluation. On one estimate, that of Lindsey O'Rourke's *Covert Regime Change* (2018), only 39 per cent of covert operations had successful outcomes. The intelligence record was spotty: the CIA had failed to predict the Soviet bomb, the Chinese Revolution, the Korean War, the Cuban missile crisis, the Iranian Revolution or the disintegration of the USSR; it would miss 9/11, the Arab Spring and October 7. Against the charge-sheet, the spymasters could point to their roles in the successful postwar stabilization of Italy and Japan, under the CIA-funded Christian Democrats and LDP; in the faltering of radical Arab nationalism and strengthening of police regimes that made the Middle East safe for Israel; in the elimination of the Indonesian Communist Party and strengthening of conservative rule in Thailand and the Philippines, weighed against the admitted defeats in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos; if Cuba was 'lost', Latin America had been 'saved', its dictatorships carefully dismantled; and the Soviet Bloc had fallen to the free market.

The CIA: An Imperial History has less to say about the remaking of US intelligence after 9/11, though an epilogue considers the CIA's changing fortunes during the 'global war on terror'. Analysts were pulled off the Asia and Russia desks and reassigned to the Agency's hitherto downgraded counterterrorism centre; a CIA officer there recalled working 'in a barely bounded rage', consumed by 'a burning need for retribution, rooted in a sense of shameful violation'. That no doubt helped the Agency's reorientation towards rendition and torture operations under Bush, and its expansion into assassination by drone warfare under Obama. The Agency's counter-terrorism chief reportedly assured the former that the terrorists would before long have 'flies walking across their eyeballs'. In formal bureaucratic terms the Agency was demoted by the 9/11 Commission recommendations; its chief no longer the overall Director of Central Intelligence but merely head of the CIA, under a new Director of National Intelligence (DNI) charged with overseeing a clutch of other clandestine bodies. Yet its funding soared to some \$500 billion under Bush and an estimated \$640 billion under Obama, while with the vast expansion of digital surveillance and satellite data, TECHINT established a clear predominance over HUMINT. An intelligence agency focused on real threats would be concentrating instead on issues like global inequality,

climate change, population movements and pandemics, Wilford writes; but 'as long as America continues to behave like an empire while denying it is one, it will carry on reaching for covert action as an instrument of its foreign relations', with the same baleful domestic and overseas consequences.

An eminently readable synoptic study, *The CIA: An Imperial History* might be taken as the culmination of Wilford's project, which has always aimed to refract political and intelligence-service history through portraits of individual characters and the reconstruction of their cultural worlds. While the macro-structure of his latest book is chronological and thematic, in narrative terms it is also micro-biographical, its cast of CIA men not only embodying an aspect of the Agency's work—Sherman Kent, intelligence analysis; Roosevelt, the military coup; Edward Lansdale, counter-insurgency; James Jesus Angleton, counter-intelligence; Cord Meyer, propaganda—but bringing a specific sensibility to the task. The opening chapter on European precedents sets the scene in similar fashion: Kipling evokes imperial paranoia; T. E. Lawrence, divided loyalties; Lyautey, aspirations to developmental pacification combined with 'brisk' military repression; van Deman, the domestication of imperial methods. In adopting this approach, Wilford aligns himself with the 'emotional turn' in the historiography of US foreign relations, on display in Frank Costigliola's recent biography of Kennan.

In Wilford's telling, the CIA's moving spirits rarely wanted to repeat the imperial past. Lansdale, one of the principal architects of US counter-insurgency in Southeast Asia, declared: 'I was first of all an anti-colonial.' Roosevelt, nemesis of sovereign democracy in Iran, counterposed—in his *Arabs, Oil and History* (1947)—the European powers' 'imperial relationship' to the Middle East to one he believed America alone could develop, 'based on common interests, to be advanced without unfair advantage to either side'. Yet 'for historical reasons, somewhat beyond their control', Wilford argues, repeating the past was 'what they all ended up doing'. *An Imperial History* makes a compelling case for some continuities between European colonialism and American practices: the pro-consular CIA station chiefs, the British models for National Estimate reports, the homosocial bonding with client rulers, the romance of exotic adventures far away from the tedium of domesticity.

Nevertheless, Wilford sometimes vests too much significance in the European past as structuring context for a burgeoning American present. This is due in part to a narratological choice to identify the process by which the 'imperial impulse' came to predominate within early CIA practice as one of colonial rehearsal: 'Agency officers constantly found themselves, regardless of their personal beliefs, using colonial-era scripts to perform the intelligence-gathering and covert-action missions with which they were charged.' But though the CIA men sometimes donned European

clothes—and, as his vivid political-intellectual portraits make clear, often took positive glee in acting out Kipling-esque fantasies—it was not a case of them merely stepping into Anglo-French shoes. They inhabited a distinctly American imperial subjectivity that melded old and new. It was no paradox that the American ‘imperial impulse’ strengthened as decolonization advanced; that was surely the point.

As far as it went, the anti-colonialism of Wilford’s CIA cast was in the end self-consciously imperial, with the negation of European empires understood as a boon for American power. Such was the case for Kim Roosevelt’s Arabism, even at its sympathetic height. Before 1955, Nasser was his ‘necessary leader’, a potential aide to American interests as understood in Washington, and duly lauded in *Time* magazine as a ‘dedicated soldier, with the build of a big, handsome, All-American fullback’. Wilford tends to use ‘imperial’ and ‘colonial’ interchangeably, and given that he is often writing about European colonial influences on American imperial actors, this terminological slippage may result in conceptual confusion. The Agency, founded as the US rose to global dominance, was imperial precisely because it was American, not due to the corruption of its officers by a European colonial inheritance, however potent this may have been for the early Cold War generation. Putting too much explanatory weight on such cultural continuities risks, *inter alia*, eliding the CIA’s early efforts to entrench American power within Europe itself, memorably documented in Wilford’s study of Gaitskill and Crosland.

The notion of American imperialism as a ‘covert empire’, transposed from Priya Satia’s study of early twentieth-century British intelligence operations in the Middle East, may be part of the problem here. There was, needless to say, little that was covert about the Pax Americana writ large. This was ‘a global hegemonic system of geopolitics and economic dominance’ in the words of Anders Stephanson. In the superintendence of this system, the men in the shadows played a notable role, but they counted as one coercive arm of the new American imperium rather than defining its essence. When Wilford writes that the CIA became ‘the cutting edge of US power in the postcolonial world’, he doesn’t weigh its impact against that of the broader forces of American hegemony—military, economic and ideological. The US, after all, announced its arrival on the world-historical stage with the detonation of two atomic bombs. It built its empire on the basis of military conquest and occupation in Japan and Germany, the industrialized wingtips of the Eurasian continent, and famously ringed the planet with military bases, linked by satellite orbits, while its aircraft carriers ploughed the seas. America’s postwar strength came, secondly, from rebuilding capitalist economies and installing parliamentary systems—doctored, of course, by the CIA—in former fascist states. By way of modernization theory,

capitalist development was also an important part of American policy for the Third World, financed by borrowing recycled petro-dollars; when that ended in the catastrophe of the 1980s debt crisis, economies were restructured not by the CIA but by the IMF and World Bank. Ideologically, the US undeniably provided a model of affluence and modernity, of cars and Coca-Cola, as well as racial segregation and red-baiting. Wilford's 'covert empire' is not contextualized against this backdrop of overt American power projection.

Failure to pin down the Agency as a *sui generis* product of America's emergent global empire leads to a degree of indulgence towards the more apologetic accounts that are Wilford's ostensible targets. Histories like those of Immerman and Jeffreys-Jones, both popular and scholarly, reprise what might be termed the originalist conceit: as defined by the noble intention of its architects, the original purpose of the CIA was to practise the innocent craft of intelligence gathering and analysis, but this honourable mission was derailed by excess and overreach—or, in Immerman's terms, 'sacrificed to a misguided emphasis on covert and paramilitary projects that its designers did not intend for it to undertake'. As in so many supposed reckonings with the Agency's indefensible practices, the redeemable essence is here an article of faith. More recent periodizations, including those of such supposed deep-state opponents as Tucker Carlson and Elbridge Colby, date the CIA's 'corruption' to 9/11. Before Ground Zero, in Carlson's view, CIA operatives were 'just doing Cold War stuff, nothing particularly evil'. It all went off the rails with the global war on terror.

Such accounts often build upon a notion of the national-security state as springing from the untainted soul of the nation in response to Japan's Pearl Harbor attack. The maximalist version of this was laid out by Douglas Stuart, former NATO Fellow and scholar of international policy at Dickinson College, in *Creating the National Security State* (2012). Examining the debates behind the 1947 National Security Act, Stuart argued that Pearl Harbor swept away older conceptions of the national interest to establish the concept of 'national security' as the 'unchallengeable standard against which all future foreign-policy decisions were to be made'. Vesting responsibility for the coordination of intelligence within a single central agency was supposed to be a defensive move, to foreclose the possibility of further shocks from without.

Although *An Imperial History* does not linger on the ins and outs of the 1947 legislation, the backstory it tells makes for an effective refutation: from continental conquest to annexation of the Philippines, US national intelligence was expansionary from the start. Nor was there any clean distinction between analysis and covert action. In the field of founding visions, much weighed in favour of the covert-actionists, not least the template of the war-time OSS and its vaunted adventurism. The very haziness of the 1947 National

Security Act about the boundaries of the CIA's responsibilities—enabling it to 'perform such other functions and duties related to intelligence affecting the national security as the President . . . may direct'—wrote such an expansive view into the Agency's founding charter. This was passed into law in the same season that the Truman Doctrine demanded the projection of US Cold War efforts to Greece and Turkey. In May 1948, as Wilford detailed in *The Mighty Wurlitzer*, George Kennan was one of the chief backers of the covert-ops division, OPC, opening a Policy Planning Staff memo with the declaration that political warfare was 'the logical application of Clausewitz's doctrine in the time of peace'. (Characteristically, he would later rue this as 'probably the worst mistake I ever made in government'.) Weeks later there flowed National Security Council Directive 10/2, giving sweeping authorization for the CIA to undertake activities

conducted or sponsored by this Government against hostile foreign states or groups, or in support of friendly foreign states or groups, but which are so planned and executed that any US Government responsibility for them is not evident to unauthorized persons and that if uncovered the US Government can plausibly disclaim any responsibility for them.

In this light, the originalist conceit would appear to be just that.

One deficiency of *An Imperial History* as a guide to grasping the actually existing practice of American covert power is its relative neglect of 'military-intelligence convergence'—the process by which parts of the US military have become more like the CIA, while the CIA has become more like the US military. The legal scholar Robert Chesney has suggested that this nexus began to emerge in the Middle East, in the context of the Iranian Revolution, when US Special Operations Forces complained that no existing organization was capable of providing the 'tactical intelligence and covert logistical support' they needed during the bungled Tehran hostage crisis. In consequence, the US Army Chief of Staff authorized the creation of an Army Intelligence Support Activity unit to institutionalize such capacities within the special forces, thus bringing into the Pentagon functions that had largely been exclusive to the CIA. At the same time, the expansion of counterterrorism operations in response to the 1983 Beirut bombings of US forces saw the Agency furnished with lethal paramilitary options typically reserved for special forces.

Convergence, now more specifically between the Joint Special Operations Command and the Agency, was supercharged by 9/11. Scholars of the national-security state distinguish between rivalrous and cooperative dimensions of the convergence process, but the latter seem to have predominated—notwithstanding politically determined contingencies, such as Rumsfeld's reported contempt for the Agency's competencies leading to an

expansion of the Pentagon's intelligence network. Extra-judicial killings—of Bin Laden in Pakistan, but also of Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen—have frequently been instances of 'cooperative' convergence, even if Hollywood has enlisted such heroic deeds to legitimate the CIA's use of torture, as in Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty*. Such developments cast a cold light on Wilford's concluding hopes for a less lethal intelligence agency concentrating on problems like climate change and inequality. Given the univocally imperial history of the CIA, lucidly recounted in his book, there should be little ground for such confusion. The national-security state and the Agency at its apex incarnate imperial imperatives which derive from a bipartisan commitment to American global primacy. There can be no disentangling the two. And while the CIA functions to entrench such imperatives, and insulate them from the possibility of democratic challenge, it remains their outlet and instrument rather than their source.