

Secret government

David Talbot's 'The Devil's Chessboard' outlines mid-20th-century rise of CIA's clandestine power

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In 1947, President Harry Truman signed the National Security Act, creating the National Security Council and the CIA. Thus, Truman laid the groundwork for the

"deep state," a shadowland of secret machinations and deadly intrigue. It comprises a parallel government unaccountable to the American people and elected officials. Years later, Truman would question the surreptitious forces he had unleashed.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower's dour secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, and his wily brother, Allen Dulles, epitomized Cold War ideology of this clandestine power. In 1953, Allen Dulles became the director of

central intelligence. He occupied that position for eight years.

In his magnificent narrative, "The Devil's Chessboard," David Talbot writes: "During the Eisenhower administration, the Dulles brothers would finally be given full license to exercise their power in the global arena. In the name of defending the free world from Communist tyranny, they would impose an American reign on the world enforced by nuclear terror and cloak-and-dagger brutality. Elevated to the pinnacle of Washington power, they continued to forcefully represent the interests of their corporate caste, conflating them with the national interest."

As World War II ended, skullduggery was afoot. In the Office of Strategic Services, the CIA's forerunner, Allen Dulles was engaged in deals with Nazis who should have been tried at Nuremberg. Ignoring President Franklin D. Roosevelt's demand for unconditional surrender, Allen Dulles was instrumental in formulating "ratlines" of escape for Nazis he would employ in the confrontation between Soviet communism and the capitalist West.

Adolf Hitler's expert on the Soviet Union, Gen. Reinhard Gehlen, convinced his U.S. military captors of his indispensable importance. Gehlen got a ticket out of a destroyed Germany. He and his top staff wound up at Fort Hunt in Virginia.

"Here Gehlen was introduced to his American intelligence counterparts, including Allen Dulles, who, after listening to the German spymaster's pitch, decided that the U.S. government should bring the former Nazi intelligence operation under its supervision," Talbot wrote.

In 1956, Gehlen became the first chief of West Germany's foreign intelligence service.

Born into privilege, the Dulles brothers became players in the powerful Wall Street law firm Sullivan & Cromwell. This prodigious organization represented an impressive list of clients such as Rockefeller oil interests and United Fruit Co. Later stepping into potent positions during the



The lobby of the CIA Headquarters Building in Langley, VA.

REUTERS/LARRY DOWNING

Eisenhower administration, the brothers were already well versed in sophisticated political maneuvering and spycraft. Allen wielded considerable power as CIA chief. Smooth and convivial with the appearance of a pipe-smoking professor, the shrewd director of central intelligence weighed another's worth by how useful that individual could be to his designs. Little regret was ever in evidence for those who vanished on risky assignments.

Allen's ascendancy brought furtive characters, such as gun-toting William Harvey and cadaverous James Jesus Angelton, into a powerful global apparatus. Cold War ideology brooked no nationalist aspirations in any country wishing to control domestic politics and natural resources. A post-colonial era was emerging. But democratically elected nationalist leaders such as Mohammad Mossadegh in Iran and Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala were conveniently portrayed as communists. In both countries, the CIA orchestrated coups ensuring protection for profitable corporate oil interests and the United Fruit Co. The agency contributed to the killing of Patrice Lumumba, the charismatic Congolese leader who only wanted self-government for his beleaguered people.

The rise of Marxist Fidel Castro in Cuba was witnessed by Dulles and company with undisguised disdain. On April 17, 1961, a brigade of anti-Castro Cubans given training and materiel by the CIA embarked on an invasion of the island. John F. Kennedy had been president for only a few months when the action took place. He had been assured the Cuban people would greet the invaders enthusiastically and would join in overthrowing Castro.

Initiated during Eisenhower's administration, JFK allowed the invasion to proceed but emphasized that under no



NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

President Harry S. Truman signs the National Security Act Amendments of 1949 at his desk in the Oval Office.

circumstances would the U.S. intervene. Disaster struck immediately at the Bay of Pigs. Kennedy kept to his resolve. He infuriated CIA officials who had cooked up the reckless scheme, knowing beforehand that without involvement of U.S. military forces, the campaign was folly. An angry Kennedy knew he had been set up and said he would like to "splinter the CIA into a thousand pieces and scatter it to the winds." He never did, but he fired Allen Dulles and two top associates. However, Dulles continued to operate as though he were still director of central intelligence. Says Talbot: "The battle to take charge of the CIA would become the most fateful drama of the Kennedy presidency."

Hawkish pressure began mounting to intensify the U.S. military presence in Vietnam. Kennedy had visited Vietnam in the 1950s as the French were being vanquished by Vietnamese forces. Forever after he would be skeptical of U.S. military

involvement in that part of the world. He had the support of Douglas McArthur who asserted: "Anyone wanting to commit American ground forces to the mainland of Asia should have his head examined."

In October 1963, JFK signed National Security Action Memorandum 263 when there were 16,500 U.S. advisers in South Vietnam. The memorandum outlined a withdrawal plan that would evacuate all U.S. personnel by the end of 1965. This did not sit well with many hardened militarists and especially the CIA. In the eyes of implacable Cold Warriors, the president was an outright heretic. Talbot lays out a strong circumstantial argument for the CIA's involvement in the assassination of John F. Kennedy on Nov. 22, 1963. NSAM 263 would be discarded. The hideous bloody quagmire of the Vietnam War would soon unfold.

Exactly one month after JFK's assassination, Truman wrote in The Washington Post: "For some time I have been disturbed by the way CIA has been diverted from its original assignment. It has become an operational and, at times, a policy-making arm of the Government. This has led to trouble and may have compounded our difficulties in several explosive areas."

Talbot's book is a riveting portrayal of often unacknowledged history. In an interview in 2015, Talbot said: "Do we want to live in this endless cycle of violence or not? And I think (the American people) have to begin by understanding our history because those who would control the future would control the past." Talbot's worthy effort has shined light on dastardly aspects of the not-so-distant past. Yet the deep state is still in business.

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