

Weber, Ralph E., ed., *Spymasters: Ten CIA Officers in their Own Words*. Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1999.

This compilation of interviews with intelligence officials, assembled with introductions a few years ago by history professor Ralph Weber at Marquette University, finds a useful place in the literature on intelligence and in the classroom as a supplementary reader for courses on intelligence, national security, and foreign policy.

The interviewees will be well-known to students of intelligence. Not all of them are “spymasters,” as the title claims (a term best left to directors of Central Intelligence – DCIs – or at least case officers running agents in the field), but they are an all-star line-up of intelligence (make that Central Intelligence Agency) notables. They include, in order of their appearance in the anthology: Sidney W. Souers, the first director of the Central Intelligence Group (precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency); Allen Dulles, the most legendary of the DCIs; Richard M. Bissell, architect of the U-2 and the Bay of Pigs invasion; Samuel Halpern, one of the most talented of the CIA’s operatives; Lyman B. Kirkpatrick, Jr., Executive-Comptroller of the CIA from 1961-65; Robert Amory, Jr., one of the CIA’s brightest analysts in the 1950s and early 1960s; Ray S. Cline, who headed the CIA’s Intelligence Directorate during the 1960s and the State Department’s Intelligence and Research division in the early 1970s; John McCone, DCI at the time of the Cuban missile crisis; Richard M. Helms, DCI from 1965-73; and William E. Colby, DCI from 1973-76.

That group sums up to five DCIs (Dulles, McCone, Helms, Colby, and stretching the term a bit, Souers – a most remarkable man who also served Truman as the first White House executive secretary for national security, the precursor to the role of national security adviser, an office established by President Dwight D. Eisenhower); two operatives (Halperin and Bissell, the latter also something of a scientific whiz as displayed in his leadership for the U-2 development); two analysts (Amory and Cline); and an administrative overseer (Kirkpatrick). Missing from the list of specialities is someone prominent in the counterintelligence side of the CIA.

All the interviews but one (Weber’s with Halperin) had been either published or recorded as oral histories prior to their appearance in this volume; but most would be difficult for the average reader to find – such as the archives at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library in Austin, Texas, in the case of the longest interview (with Helms). So Weber provides a valuable service to intelligence scholars by digging up these “lost” documents and presenting them in this volume. He also provides a lengthy introduction of his own about the origins of the CIA, as well as brief profiles on each of the book’s personalities (placed before each interview).

Several of the interviews are fascinating. Among them are Weber's own session with Halperin, a smart man who is inclined to tell it like it is. In response to Weber's question about which DCI has been most popular, Halperin responds in this manner (which, according to my own interviews at the CIA, seems to be something of a consensus among Agency people). "Allen Dulles was probably the most popular among the troops, junior, middle, and senior," Halperin said. "The most effective Director was [General Walter Bedell] Smith first, McCone second, then probably Helms and Dulles." Halperin ends his remarks with perhaps the most important point in the entire volume: "... unless the DCI is able to walk in to see the President at will, privately, except maybe for the secretary, just these persons – unless that's possible, you don't have a DCI."

Some of the interviews are more candid than others, and Dulles and Helms in particular are inclined to take us for a waltz now and then. Dulles mentioned nothing in his 1964 interview about CIA assassination plots against the Cuban leader Fidel Castro and is generally coy about what he told President John F. Kennedy regarding Agency operations in Cuba; and Helms insults every reader's intelligence by his claim that "the CIA never has assassinated anyone." While technically true, the CIA tried very hard to kill a number of foreign leaders (such as Castro and Patrice Lumumba of Congo), but either failed (Castro) or were beat to the punch by other assassins (in the case of Lumumba, intelligence agents from Belgium, whose government also sought regime change in Africa's "heart of darkness"). Such comments serve to reduce Helms's credibility on the printed page, as it did his testimony before Congress, where he had a reputation for slipperiness.

This is a treasure trove of information about the views of leading intelligence officials from an earlier era – not always to be taken at face value, to be sure, but largely straight-shooting and with many insights and vivid recollections. Journals would do well to publish more interviews of this kind; they read with the interest of plays and, in the hands of a skillful interviewer, can be far more revealing than government documents or memoirs.

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