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ARTICLE



# Forbidden history: CIA censorship, *The Invisible Government*, and the origins of the “deep state” conspiracy theory

Simon Willmetts 

## ABSTRACT

This article explores the context, legacy and influence of David Wise and Thomas Ross’ influential history of the CIA, *The Invisible Government*. It highlights how the book broke the silence in the American media on CIA covert operations. It documents the CIA’s attempts to censor the book upon its publication. It will also show how the book was reinterpreted by conspiracy theorists, Soviet propagandists, and leading figures within the decolonization movement. Finally, it argues that the book’s ultimate legacy, although a misreading of their original argument, can be found in the ‘deep state’ narrative so prevalent among conspiracy theorists today.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

‘There are two governments in the United States today. One is visible. The other is invisible’. With this stark declaration, journalists David Wise and Thomas Ross opened their bestselling history of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), titled pointedly: *The Invisible Government*.<sup>1</sup> It was a landmark book. Published in 1964, it was the first *bestselling* history of CIA, and one of the first detailed accounts of US covert operations abroad. It was also remarkably influential, inspiring a generation of journalists and activists who would soon come of age amidst the turmoil of US intervention in Vietnam, and the disenchantment with US foreign policy back home that this would inspire. Published in 1964, it marked something of a turning point in the public discussion of both the CIA specifically, and US foreign policy more generally. It was also a foundational text in the evolution of a narrative about US government secrecy that would eventually metastasize into the ‘deep state’ narrative of unaccountable federal bureaucracies run amok. In recent times this narrative has become a key rhetorical instrument utilized by, among others, President Donald Trump to galvanize his base. Indeed, this idea of a ‘deep state’, or an *Invisible Government* to use Wise and Ross’ term, has become one of the central pillars in the chaotic narrative universe of the QAnon movement that inspired the attempted insurrection at the United States Capitol on the 6 January 2021. Perhaps more than any other story about the United States intelligence community, it has also significantly tarnished the reputation of the CIA and other US intelligence services. When, for example, CIA reporting became uncomfortable for Trump (CIA whistleblowers on Hunter Biden in Ukraine, or reports about Russian influence in the 2016 election), Trump repeatedly used the term ‘deep state’, and the narrative it invokes, to dismiss his own intelligence community.<sup>2</sup>

It would be unfair, however, to condemn *The Invisible Government* as a paranoid conspiracy theory. Whilst Wise and Ross certainly did argue that the CIA had at times exceeded their authority, and even acted without Presidential approval, their argument was more nuanced than the coarse polemics of many contemporary purveyors of ‘deep state’ paranoia. Moreover, its immediate impact

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was far more widespread, influencing an array of activists, politicians, writers, and a broad section of the public. Part of the reason its impact was so significant was that it provided a narrative framework for understanding activities that were hitherto largely undiscussed, namely, CIA covert action. Up until the CIA's very public failure at the Bay of Pigs in 1961, CIA covert operations were almost entirely absent from the American media. *The Invisible Government* was part of a wave of journalism that sought to come to terms with the meaning of CIA covert operations for our understanding of US foreign policy. As the first bestselling history of the CIA which focused upon covert action, it was perhaps the most significant work to emerge from this effort, helping to shape the interpretation of CIA covert operations for decades to come.

Utilizing archival research this article examines the history of *The Invisible Government*. First it contextualizes its impact by exploring what came before it: the absence of widespread public discussion of CIA covert operations followed by a growing interest in the topic in the wake of the Bay of Pigs. It then documents the book's production history, in particular the attempts by the CIA to prevent its publication. This was a major precursor for the later efforts by the CIA to censor critical histories of its own organization, for example its later lawsuits against CIA insiders Victor Marchetti, Philip Agee and Frank Snepp. In this much earlier example, we find evidence of the CIA attempting to go beyond the maintenance of official secrecy for the preservation of national security, veering instead into a conscious effort to censor a book that by the CIA's own admission, included no content that would constitute a security breach. The strongest argument that they could find against the book's publication was that its critical narrative would provide ample propaganda opportunities for the Soviet Union. They were right. The USSR did utilize *The Invisible Government* in its anti-CIA propaganda. But if providing the enemy with a critical narrative were reason enough to block a book's publication, then almost any critique of the CIA, or U.S. foreign policy, might qualify it for censorship. The final section of this article explores the influence of *The Invisible Government*. It was not only conspiracy theorists and Soviet propagandists who read the book. Leading activists, student protestors, policymakers, revolutionary leaders, prime ministers, and leading advocates of decolonization, were also inspired by Wise and Ross's framing of US covert operations. By examining the history of *The Invisible Government*, from pre-publication through to its lasting influence, this article argues that, for better or worse, it is one of the most significant books that has ever been published about the CIA.

### **A conspiracy of silence?: The absence of covert action in the American media before the Bay of Pigs**

One of the remarkable features of the early Cold War obsession with espionage in the United States was that spies were invariably portrayed as foreign agents. The notion that the United States conducted espionage and covert operations abroad was almost entirely absent from American popular culture in this period. 'For fifteen years or more', wrote the former spy turned novelist John Le Carré, both the West and the Soviet Union 'believed that in the public mind only Counter-Intelligence was respectable. Each side spoke with horror of the treachery of the other, each spoke proudly of its own vigilance in frustrating the efforts of hostile spies and saboteurs, but maintained the fiction that it abstained from aggressive espionage'.<sup>3</sup> Although David Hadley has convincingly documented a 'rising clamour' of press criticism of the CIA from the 1950s onwards, almost none of that criticism concerned CIA covert operations until the disastrous attempt to invade Cuba at the Bay of Pigs made the topic almost unavoidable.<sup>4</sup> Journalists were critical of perceived CIA intelligence failures, such as their apparent failure to predict the outbreak of war in Korea, and the riots that broke out in Bogota in 1948 during Secretary of State George Marshall's visit to the Pan-American Conference.<sup>5</sup> They also covered Senator Joseph McCarthy's attacks against the CIA for apparently harboring communist spies.<sup>6</sup> From time to time they also questioned whether a more robust system of accountability was necessary to oversee the fledgling intelligence service.<sup>7</sup> What they didn't cover was the CIA's involvement in coups in Iran, Guatemala and Indonesia, or the myriad other CIA covert

operations of this period that is sometimes referred to as the 'golden age' of covert action. Indeed, it is not a coincidence that one of the CIA's most active periods of engaging in covert action was simultaneously an era in which the American press routinely avoided covering those operations. In later decades, with the presence of a more recalcitrant press that were perfectly prepared to report on covert CIA operations, it became far more difficult for the Agency to engage in such risky operations.

Many journalists were not ignorant of CIA covert action. Kennett Love, a *New York Times* foreign correspondent and one of only two American journalists in Tehran during the 1953 coup, was introduced to the leader of the coup, General Fazlollah Zahedi, through his CIA contacts. He even helped distribute propaganda leaflets that were printed by the CIA and was well aware, even involved with, CIA operatives on the ground during the coup.<sup>8</sup> Yet, not a single article that he published during those tumultuous days mentioned the CIA's involvement. James Reston, the *Times'* Washington bureau chief, acknowledged that 'we left out a great deal of what we knew about U.S. intervention in Guatemala and in a variety of other cases' because 'we are clearly in a form of warfare with the Communist world' and therefore 'it has not been difficult to ignore information which, if published, would have been valuable to the enemy'.<sup>9</sup>

Journalists were not the only representatives of the American media to ignore US covert operations abroad. Hollywood also deliberately avoided the subject. Joseph Mankiewicz's 1958 big screen adaptation of Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American* completely inverted the original story from a cautionary tale about the dire consequences of US covert intervention in Vietnam into a film starring an American war hero successfully foiling a communist plot. Indeed, Greene's novel was one of the few popular texts of this era to condemn CIA covert action: Alden Pyle, the eponymous Quiet American, is a young and idealistic CIA officer who supplies plastic explosives to Cao daist rebels who then detonate them in a crowded central Saigon square, killing many innocents. When the novel was published in the United States Greene was attacked for being 'anti-American', and accused of depicting Americans as mass murderers.<sup>10</sup> The notion that the United States covertly funded violent insurgencies abroad was still a taboo subject, inspiring consternation among a significant section of Greene's American readership. Helped and encouraged by real CIA officer Edward Lansdale, often assumed to be Greene's inspiration for Alden Pyle, Mankiewicz bowdlerized Greene's plot.<sup>11</sup> Pyle, in the movie, was played by American war hero Audie Murphy, and is a much more sympathetic character. Crucially, Mankiewicz pins the blame for the Saigon Square bombings firmly on the communists. Once again, a story of American covert intervention abroad is ignored, replaced instead with a story of communist subversion.

Popular spy radio and television shows of this era further reinforced this idea that Americans did not involve themselves in aggressive covert operations abroad. In the popular radio and later television series *The Man Called X*, central protagonist Agent X does indeed fly to exoticized foreign locales. But the show's writers were careful to make sure that Agent X is always invited as a guest to the country. As the show's producer, Maurice Unger, instructed one of the show's Directors, Eddie Davis, 'Officially our government has no foreign espionage system in peacetime ... therefore, it is important in our stories that when X goes to a foreign country, it must not be for the purpose of official or unofficial espionage'.<sup>12</sup> Another television show of the era, *Diplomatic Courier*, likewise featured an American government official invited by friendly foreign nations to help foil communist or criminal plots. Remarkably, in a funhouse mirror inversion of the real history of covert action in the 1950s, episodes were often set in countries like Iran or Guatemala. Except, rather than instigating coups in these places like their real-life counterparts, this show's American officer abroad helps foil the attempted overthrow of a number of governments, including Iran's. Once again, American spies (although never directly identified as such in the movies) were there to defend democracy against foreign subversion, and were never themselves engaged in acts of covert aggression abroad.<sup>13</sup>

One noteworthy exception to this widespread taboo on discussing American covert operations proves the rule. In 1954 a series of three high profile articles were published in the *Saturday Evening Post* by husband-and-wife team Richard and Gladys Harkness, which for the first time revealed the

CIA's involvement in the Iranian and Guatemalan coups.<sup>14</sup> The CIA had assisted the Harkness' with their research and Director of Central Intelligence Allen Dulles sat with them for an extended interview. The articles appeared in the aftermath of Senator McCarthy's attacks on the Agency, who claimed, characteristically, that the CIA had been infiltrated by communist agents. The Agency needed publicity that, contra McCarthy's allegations, portrayed them as a vital lynchpin in the struggle against communism. With impeccable timing, the Harkness articles appeared, celebrating the CIA's role in helping to topple governments in Iran and Guatemala that the Harknesses portrayed as indisputably wedded to the Soviet Union. Indeed, even though these articles broke with convention by acknowledging US covert operations abroad, they did so within a broader narrative framework that nevertheless portrayed the United States acting *defensively* in reaction to Soviet provocation. In Guatemala, according to the Harknesses' account, the CIA's hand was forced by the Soviet Union after they discovered that they had been supplying weapons to what the Harknesses describe as 'Red-dominated Guatemala'.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, the 'strategic little nation of Iran was rescued from the clutching claw of Moscow' by the CIA's intervention.<sup>16</sup> Even this first acknowledgment of CIA covert operations in a major American news outlet could not rationalize America's covert interventions abroad without framing it as a form of defensive reaction to Soviet provocations. Even more telling, is that although these well-publicized articles blew the lid on the CIA's involvement in Guatemala and Iran, among other places, the American media continued to ignore covert action. As the *Times* journalist who had been in close contact with CIA officers in Tehran during the Iran coup later remarked, the Harkness articles were 'an exception' in that they acknowledged the CIA's role in the events that led to Mossadegh's downfall. Despite this, Love noted, 'it appears not to have influenced subsequent accounts [of the Iran coup] and if later writers have quoted the Harknesses, I am unaware of it'.<sup>17</sup>

Despite their awareness of CIA covert action, including detailed knowledge of specific operations, American journalists, filmmakers and radio and television producers consistently refused to write stories that featured aggressive US covert action. Coupled with the 'spy-mania' that gripped the nation in the 1950s amidst the hysteria of red politics that imagined a contagion of Soviet subterfuge, the popular image of espionage and covert operations in American culture during this period fixated almost exclusively upon Soviet plots, and the counter-espionage efforts of the United States to unearth and foil them. When texts like Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* did try to puncture the myth that American espionage was purely defensive, they were met with consternation from the American press and public, and in the case of *The Quiet American*, adapted into a screenplay that safely returned the subject of covert operations to an exclusively communist/Soviet activity, bowdlerizing the original point of Greene's novel in the process. It was not until the debacle at the Bay of Pigs, a disastrous CIA covert operation too big to ignore, that the American media began to take on American covert action in earnest.

### Controlling the past: The Bay of Pigs and the first wave of critical histories of the CIA

The Bay of Pigs marked an important turning point in CIA-press relations. For the first time a major CIA covert action appeared across the front pages of the American newspapers, and the CIA's role in it was openly discussed. The planned invasion of Cuba was simply too big of an operation to keep secret. Indeed, details of the planned attack appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* 10 days *before* the invasion!<sup>18</sup> Although Kennedy later blamed the *Times* for blowing the operation, they were actually late to the game. News of Cuban exiles training at a CIA camp in Guatemala made the headlines of Guatemala's leading national newspaper, *La Hora*, on the 30 October 1960, almost six months prior to the invasion.<sup>19</sup> Whilst attempts were made to keep this reporting out of the American newspapers, stories still trickled out, and among the Cuban exile population in Miami it was an open secret.<sup>20</sup> In the aftermath of the invasion the floodgates opened. It was such a public failure that Kennedy had little choice but to openly acknowledge U.S. involvement and accept responsibility for the debacle. A week later Kennedy chastised the press in a speech at the

American Newspaper Publishers Association, warning them that the publication of classified material might aid the Soviet Union.<sup>21</sup> The genie, however, was out of the bottle. A wave of reportage and opinion pieces weighed in on whether Kennedy or the CIA were to blame for the disaster. Kennedy helped to fan the flames of this speculation by famously declaring that 'victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan'.<sup>22</sup> In the months and years that followed a public relations war was waged between the CIA and President Kennedy's defenders, with each side seeking to blame the other for the disaster.<sup>23</sup> For the first time, a CIA covert action was subjected to widespread public scrutiny, and for the first time far-reaching questions began to be asked about whether the CIA should engage in such activities.

*The Invisible Government* was part of this wave of critical press scrutiny of CIA covert operations in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs. Although it was not published until 1964, Wise and Ross were journalists for the *New York Herald Tribune* and *Chicago Sun-Times* respectively, and penned numerous articles on the CIA in the wake of the Bay of Pigs, some rehearsing the thesis that they would later develop in *The Invisible Government*.<sup>24</sup> The pair had also worked on the Gary Powers U-2 Spy Affair story, and co-wrote a book about the incident.<sup>25</sup> Their reporting on the CIA and their collaboration on the U-2 book was the basis for *The Invisible Government*. Despite their experience covering other CIA activities, the Bay of Pigs became a dominant focus of the book. The opening four chapters were about the invasion and its aftermath. Covert operations, Wise and Ross argued, 'cannot become so unwieldy that they are irreconcilable with the kind of society that has launched them. When that happens, the result is disaster. This was nowhere better illustrated than on the beaches of Cuba'.<sup>26</sup>

*The Invisible Government*, however, was not the first book to re-examine the history of the CIA and covert action in the wake of the Bay of Pigs. A number of books appeared in the aftermath of the invasion that offered the first wave of critical histories of the CIA and covert action. Andrew Tully's *CIA: The Inside Story* (1962) was the first. By the standards of the books about the CIA that would soon follow, Tully's criticisms of the Agency were relatively mild, and they were accompanied by tales of derring-do and spy ingenuity that were drawn from the CIA's own public relations department. Although peppered with anecdotes that reflected favourably on the CIA, Tully's book did contain a few arguments that troubled the Agency. The first was the already-established thesis that the Agency was heavily comprised of Ivy Leaguers. The second was that the CIA had too-often supported right-wing regimes on the basis of their anti-communist credentials, whilst turning a blind eye to their corrupt practices which failed to improve the lot of local populations. The third critical argument, floated gently by Tully but later rammed home by David Wise and Thomas Ross in their book, was that the CIA had occasionally overstepped the boundaries of policy by taking decisions on the ground in operations that might otherwise not have been authorized by elected officials. In one telling example, Tully argued that the CIA had managed, against Eisenhower's wishes, to persuade the Japanese Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi, to cancel Ike's visit due to communist agitation in the country. According to Tully, Eisenhower was left furious with the CIA's decision to go behind his back.<sup>27</sup>

One of the ironies of *The Inside Story* was that it was, to an extent, a product of CIA public relations. Tully had interviewed Allen Dulles whilst researching the book, and many of the newspaper clippings that his account relied upon were handed to him by Stanley Grogan, the CIA's publicity chief.<sup>28</sup> Dulles and Grogan were merely extending the same courtesy to Tully that they had to so many other American journalists, and it is doubtful that they told him any more or less than they told others previously. But Tully, realizing the publicity value of touting the idea that the CIA had assisted him in writing the book, included a foreword in which he thanked numerous senior officials for their assistance with the book, including Allen Dulles and Stanley Grogan 'of CIA'. Dulles, now retired, and Grogan, still working as the CIA's head of public affairs, were furious. Not only had Tully written what they regarded as a deeply damaging book for the CIA's public reputation, but he had also advertised the cursory assistance they gave him to lend authority to his narrative. Enraged, Dulles wrote to the publisher demanding that they remove the offending foreword, which they did in subsequent print runs, and condemned the book as a 'compilation of rumor, hearsay and



republication of previous published speculation about the C.I.A. by Moscow and other Communist centers'.<sup>29</sup> Dulles also took to the airwaves. Ten days before the book was published he appeared in a pre-taped interview on NBC's *Meet the Press* in which he quipped that *The Inside Story* would better be described as the 'upside-down story of the CIA'.<sup>30</sup> Not content with condemning the book himself, he also sought to shape the critical reaction to it in the press. He invited the *New York Times* correspondent Jack Raymond for one of his customary off-the-record discussions, in which he repeated his condemnations of *The Inside Story* and furnished Raymond with the letter he had written to the publisher denouncing the book.<sup>31</sup> Raymond promptly wrote a review of the book for the *Times* in which he quoted liberally from the former Director's letter of protest to the publisher, stressed that Tully had exaggerated his claims of insider access, and repeated Dulles' accusations that it was riddled with factual errors and repetitions of Soviet propaganda.

In response, Tully penned a letter to the *Times* noting that he had been careful to relay this story from one step removed, as an account cited in Edwards and Dunne, and in no way accepted the version as true. Pointedly, he also rebuked Raymond for depending so heavily in his review upon his interview with Dulles, who had already condemned the book as the product of Soviet propaganda: 'Surely we are past the time', Tully wondered out loud, 'when all that is necessary to discredit a work is to say that it says what communists say. The question is not who says what, but whether what is said is so'.<sup>32</sup> Despite Tully's furious rebuttal, there was some truth to Dulles' claim that Tully had reproduced Soviet propaganda. In particular, Tully had quoted from a biography of Allen Dulles ostensibly written by the British Member of Parliament Bob Edwards and his co-author Kenneth Dunne. But in reality, this damning portrayal of Dulles was penned in Moscow by a senior KGB officer named Vassily Sitnikov.<sup>33</sup>

Whilst Dulles, now a private citizen, went on the offensive to defend his former agency, and his reputation, the CIA itself wavered. Within the Agency several senior officers urged Dulles' replacement as Director of CIA, John McCone, to publicly condemn the book, and take action to limit its impact. Lyman Kirkpatrick, the CIA's Executive Director was particularly vocal, insisting that something should be done about this 'terribly damaging book from the viewpoint of the CIA'. But McCone and his Deputy Director Marshall S. Carter disagreed: 'there is simply no point in getting into you know what kind of a match with a skunk', they told him. Kirkpatrick's initial plan to counter the book was relatively modest. After months of research and agency-wide consultations, Sherman Kent, the so-called 'father of intelligence analysis', produced a lengthy scholarly rebuttal of Tully's book. It was an exercise in extreme punctiliousness, running to forty-eight pages in length with an entire section devoted to pointing out Tully's spelling mistakes, followed by seven pages of bullet-points that simply listed all the factual inaccuracies in Tully's account. Kent also dedicated considerable space to placing excerpts from Tully's book side-by-side with the original sources they were based upon, essentially accusing Tully of extensive plagiarism. Like Dulles, Kent condemned Tully's reliance on Soviet propaganda, describing it as 'the tired old space garbage that circles in the wake of a secret organization. It passes from journalist to propagandist to journalist again ... It is a bad book', Kent concluded, 'a shoddy piece of goods. From the purely technical point of view it is by all odds the worst bad book that this reviewer has ever encountered'.<sup>34</sup>

Kent published the review in the CIA's in-house classified journal, that he edited, *Studies in Intelligence*. Kirkpatrick's plan, however, was to have the article declassified, and to distribute a hundred copies of it to influential diplomats, politicians, and journalists. In addition, he recommended a campaign of persuasion to convince influential figures in government, 'and perhaps to a certain extent ... publishers and reputable journalists', that 'this book is the complete phony document that it is'.<sup>35</sup> After serious consideration of Kirkpatrick's proposals, however, McCone demurred, fearing that any CIA response would simply draw more attention to the book, which by the time Kent had compiled his review, had slipped off the bestseller list. McCone also noted that many of the people he had discussed the book with believed it was, on the whole, quite positive about the CIA, despite Tully's occasional relaying of anti-CIA Soviet propaganda.<sup>36</sup> Clearly the research materials that the CIA had passed to Tully had some impact. But if McCone thought that

the disappearance of *The Inside Story* from the bestseller list was the last time he would have to deal with a bestselling critical history of the CIA, he was mistaken. The next popular histories of the Agency to be published in the wake of the Bay of Pigs, unlike Tully, would pull no punches in their criticism of the Agency, and firmly establish the idea in the American psyche that the CIA constituted an invisible government, capable of directing America's foreign policy from behind the scenes.

In the spring of 1964, the CIA quietly obtained advanced copies of two manuscripts that, upon publication, might further damage the Agency's public reputation. The first of these was a history of the Bay of Pigs invasion by the *Washington Evening Star* columnist Haynes Johnson.<sup>37</sup> What made Johnson's account unique, was that, unlike previous books about the CIA, it was based almost entirely on unofficial sources, and Johnson received no help from the Agency in putting his account together. This represented a decisive break from the previous era when official support or endorsement was almost a pre-requisite for non-fiction accounts of the secret state to be taken seriously.<sup>38</sup> Instead of interviewing CIA leadership, or other officials in Washington, Johnson told his story from the perspective of the Cuban exiles who fought in the invasion, and who were recently freed by Castro from Cuban prisons in exchange for a ransom of \$53 million in food and medical supplies.<sup>39</sup> As an internal CIA memo pointed out, the book was potentially damaging in several respects. First, and perhaps most problematic for the Agency, the book claimed that CIA planners had told the exile forces to 'go ahead and land even if Washington canceled (sic) the operations'.<sup>40</sup> As one reviewer later put it, perhaps Johnson's most serious charge in the book is that 'the CIA operated as an *imperium in imperio*', or in other words, an 'invisible government' willing to ignore and override orders from Washington. But despite Johnson's criticism of the CIA's involvement in the Bay of Pigs, his criticism of the Agency was not unwavering, and in his conclusion he reiterated the essential role the CIA played in maintaining the security of the United States.

### The CIA's attempts to censor "the Invisible Government"

Unlike Johnson's book, the other pre-publication manuscript that the CIA had obtained in the spring of 1964 pulled no punches in its criticism of the Agency. David Wise and Thomas Ross' *The Invisible Government* is one of the two or three most important books ever written about the CIA. It had a profound impact, demonstrably altering attitudes towards the CIA at a pivotal moment in the history of US foreign policy, and the American people's attitudes towards that policy. A few months after the book's publication, an incident in the Gulf of Tonkin provided President Johnson with a pretext to commit conventional US military forces to open warfare in Vietnam. It was that war, more than anything else, that altered the American people's attitudes towards the US foreign policy establishment, including the CIA. And it was *The Invisible Government*, more than any other book about the Agency in this period, that became a key text for student protestors and the anti-war movement.

In clipped prose *The Invisible Government* outlined the history of CIA covert operations. Contrary to the claims of the book's many critics within the intelligence community, the authors did not deny that these operations were authorized at the highest level by the President and his 'Special Group' of advisors. Nor did it argue that the CIA set its own policy. This latter claim, according to Wise and Ross, was 'oversimplified'. What they did argue, however, was that within the broad parameters laid down by the President and his advisors, the CIA had considerable room to 'shape events in the field', and to 'influence policy and chart their own course within the flexible framework laid down by Washington'.<sup>41</sup> It was not as radical of a book as its critics later perceived, but that was not how the CIA saw it, and the nuances of its argument would get lost in the furor that accompanied the book's release.

Sometime in late April 1964 the CIA surreptitiously obtained a pre-publication copy of *The Invisible Government*. Immediately, DCI John McCone ordered the formation of a CIA task force on the book to determine its implications for the Agency. Over a single frantic weekend the task force reviewed the manuscript. The Office of Security were drafted in to assess the damage, but



they could not 'identify any specific security violation breached' and therefore concluded that the 'chances of prosecution, particularly of a successful one, were not very high'. Despite their inability to identify any specific threats to national security posed by the book's publication, the task force nevertheless recommended that 'an approach at the highest level to the book publisher be considered, either to stop the book from being printed or to have deletions of at least some of the material' on the grounds that it was 'most harmful'. This appeal, they concluded, should be 'made in the name of national interest'. They cautioned, however, that the CIA would need to play dumb in their initial approach to the publisher, and request a copy of the manuscript, 'since the present one was gotten through irregular channels'. If this approach failed, they concluded, 'CIA may have to secure unfavorable book reviews' from 'such assets as CIA may have' in order to 'lessen the book's impact and to cast doubt on the validity of its claims'.<sup>42</sup>

The Agency's campaign to discredit *The Invisible Government* in the American press was, however, a consequence of their failure to prevent its publication. Throwing caution to the wind, Director John McCone invited the authors to a meeting a few months prior to the book's publication. He told them that the book would certainly damage US national security, and would provide 'a vast stockpile of material for critical speeches and editorials' in nations unfriendly to the United States.<sup>43</sup> According to Wise, McCone then produced a list of 10 national security breaches that the CIA wanted removed from the book. Noting that the list was stamped 'Top Secret', Wise refused to look at it, and said that he could not possibly leave the Agency's headquarters building with it in his possession. Lyman Kirkpatrick then appeared with a pair of scissors and snipped off the classification markings.<sup>44</sup> The authors refused to cooperate with the CIA's request.

Undeterred, McCone approached Mike Cowles, a co-founder and editor of *Look Magazine* that was due to serialise the book, and asked him to stop publication, or to remove sections that were potentially damaging. 'I think you are unduly agitated about [Wise and Ross'] story', was Cowles' sharp reply, 'my observation of the material is there is little told that is new'.<sup>45</sup> The next stop was the book's publisher, Random House. McCone approached one of their editors, Robert Loomis, and pleaded with him to remove damaging sections in the book, even threatening him with the Espionage Act. In fairness, the CIA did offer to compensate the publisher for revenues lost by buying up all 2000 pre-publication copies of the book.<sup>46</sup> Loomis and Random House chose instead to persevere with publication.<sup>47</sup> Failing these personal overtures to the authors and their publishers, the CIA's lawyers went to the Department of Justice, and asked the Assistant Attorney General to put out a temporary restraining order. It would have been a remarkable move, pre-empting Nixon's famous showdown with the American press over the publication of the Pentagon Papers more than seven years later. The Assistant Attorney General's office advised the CIA that such an injunction might be possible, but eventually the CIA's leadership balked, fearing that a prolonged legal battle would simply provide additional publicity for the book.<sup>48</sup> In a last ditch attempt to head off the book before its release, McCone approached the President of the United States, Lyndon Baines Johnson, and asked him to hold a news conference at which he would publicly condemn the book. Johnson, 'ever attuned to his personal image', demurred.<sup>49</sup>

Realising they had failed to prevent *The Invisible Government's* publication, the CIA went into damage limitation mode, and instigated its previously stated 'plan B', by mobilizing friendly CIA assets in the media to discredit the book. According to veteran CIA clandestine operative Joseph Burkholder Smith, '[a]ll stations were deluged with dispatches giving instructions how to handle the matter'. The CIA's propaganda section wrote fake book reviews, and sort to get them published in the foreign press.<sup>50</sup> Another CIA asset prepared a review and sent it to *Life Magazine*. They rejected it, so they then submitted it to *Reader's Digest*.<sup>51</sup> The CIA also leaked information to friendly journalists, including Marquis Childs who reported that 'high government officials' had revealed that the book contained 112 breaches of security, some of them serious.<sup>52</sup> Numerous other press reports citing 'intelligence sources' or 'government officials' reported similar security breaches.<sup>53</sup> This contradicted

the CIA's own internal review by the Office of Security which concluded that no security breaches could be found in the book.

The CIA's campaign against the book, both before and after its publication, failed. It was profoundly influential, a bestseller in the United States, and with the help of Soviet propagandists and prominent leaders of the decolonization movement, it also achieved worldwide influence. What made its impact so long-lasting, however, was its timeliness. Upon its release, in 1964, John Le Carré's sinister vision of Western espionage in the Cold War in his landmark novel *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* topped the fiction bestseller list. For a while, *The Invisible Government* hovered around the top of the non-fiction bestseller list, whilst Le Carré's equally damning vision of Western intelligence sat atop the fiction list. Attitudes were beginning to change. The tide was about to turn. In the years that followed the book's release the United States' deepening involvement in the Vietnam War, accompanied by frequent revelations of sinister secret state activity in the United States confirmed the 'invisible government' thesis in many Americans' minds. It became a clarion call for the anti-war movement and helped budding conspiracy theorists hone and lend weight to their claims that a hidden government hand was behind President Kennedy's assassination. The 'deep state' narrative was starting to take hold, and despite their best efforts, the CIA had failed in their attempts to block the publications of one of its foundational texts.

### **A lasting legacy: the widespread influence of *the Invisible Government***

*The Invisible Government* had an immediate impact upon public discussions about intelligence and covert operations. It shot to the top of the non-fiction bestseller lists in many newspapers, although much to the authors' chagrin, remained in the number two spot on the *New York Times*' bestseller list for 22 weeks, second only to Ernest Hemingway's *Movable Feast*. 'We were a bit disappointed', recalled Wise, 'but ... if we had to be second to someone, Hemingway was it'.<sup>54</sup> The book's critical reception was polarized, revealing a nascent faultline in American society between those critical of American foreign policy and its institutions, and those who sought to defend it. Ben Badikian's review in the *New York Times*, for example, highlighted the book's central significance in disabusing the American population of the naïve belief that the United States were not involved in aggressive covert operations. Until very recently, Badikian noted, it was perfectly reasonable for members of Congress and the general public to be entirely naïve of CIA covert operations, and assume they were not engaged in them. 'Today this ... would be so naïve as to border on the stupid', Badikian remarked. 'In 1964 every serious newspaper reader knows that American agencies are engaged in "operational activities" – secret manipulations and subversion of foreign societies – all over the world, not only keeping others from doing unto us but also doing unto others'.<sup>55</sup>

William Buckley Jr., the renowned conservative commentator and former CIA officer, was less sympathetic: 'the thesis that the CIA is an invisible government is so palpably absurd that one must conclude that the purpose of the book, notwithstanding its sanctimonious pretensions, is simply to make a little scandal, and make a little money'. Buckley repeated the claim made by Marquis Childs that the book contained serious security breaches, including 'naming 26 persons who are CIA agents in deep cover'. Though it appears that the CIA leaked this claim to Childs and other friendly journalists, their own Office of Security could find no security breaches, and Random House strenuously denied the allegation.<sup>56</sup> John Chamberlain, a veteran reporter and one of Buckley's close friends, also penned an article for his syndicated column defending the CIA. He described Wise and Ross' anti-CIA attacks as a 'contagion' that was spreading dangerously across American society, which risked undermining one of the nation's strongest bulwarks against the Soviet Union.<sup>57</sup>

'Contagion' was of course a loaded term; it was a common Cold War metaphor to describe the spread of communism.<sup>58</sup> But the book was certainly influential, including among Soviet propagandists and domestic protest movements in the United States that the U.S. intelligence community and many of its defenders in the press deemed suspicious. In 1966, for example, a wave of anti-CIA protests on university campuses were directly inspired by Wise and Ross' account. One of the first

took place in February 1966 at Grinnell College, Iowa. A group of students picketed a presentation by a CIA recruiter, holding signs reading 'Where there is an invisible government there is no democracy'.<sup>59</sup> The students also lifted their central point of contention with the CIA from the pages of Wise and Ross' book: 'Our main concern is that, rather than relaying the information gathered through its intelligence operations to responsible government officials, the agency frequently takes action on its own ...'<sup>60</sup> Later that year students at Boston University staged a similar protest. They produced an information pamphlet on the history of CIA covert action, and cited Wise and Ross at length, again echoing the argument that the CIA had acted outside the authority of elected officials: 'Time after time the C.I.A. has created American policy', they wrote, and listed examples lifted directly from *The Invisible Government* where Wise and Ross argued that the Agency had acted without informing relevant policymakers.<sup>61</sup> The 'Contagion' begun by Wise and Ross soon spread to numerous other college campuses. Almost invariably, the pamphlets the students produced to rationalize their anti-CIA protests cited *The Invisible Government*, with some borrowing the same title.<sup>62</sup> Students at Emory University, for example, having already quoted liberally from Wise and Ross, charged that the 'CIA is guilty of putting its own institutional interests above that of the American people. It is guilty of sabotage of our foreign policy when such policy does not agree with its own'.<sup>63</sup> Other student protestors, although still greatly indebted to *The Invisible Government*, took a slightly different position. For example, in February 1968, amidst the Tet offensive that would dramatically undermine public support for the war in Vietnam, the Wisconsin chapter of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) produced a pamphlet titled 'The CIA: Or Who Was that Dictator I Seen Ya With?' The pamphlet repeated many of the charges from Wise and Ross' history, and cited it as the most significant source upon which the pamphlet was based. However, instead of regarding the CIA as a rogue organization that corrupted US foreign policy, they instead saw the former as the apotheosis of the latter:

The CIA is not an aberration in an otherwise democratic society. The point is not that the CIA has been an 'invisible government', nor that it has dictated American foreign policy, but that its activities constitute a particularly outrageous aspect of that policy. It is an internal part of a political and economic system which oppressed and misleads its own people just as it does the people of other lands for the benefit of those whose profits come from racism and exploitation. It is because the SDS opposes this system of exploitation and racism that it opposes the CIA.<sup>64</sup>

The SDS' more systemic critique of the CIA that was nevertheless still indebted to *The Invisible Government* was shared by other influential critics of U.S. foreign policy in this era. Influential world leaders and several major voices for the decolonization movement often invoked *The Invisible Government* to support their claims that the United States were engaged in a form of neo-colonialism. CIA covert operations, which often targeted former European colonies in the developing world, were regarded as imperial interventions, replacing the cruder and more overt forms of European colonialism from the previous age of empires. Kwame Nkrumah, for example, the President of Ghana and a leading pan-Africanist, published an influential book in 1965 titled *Neo Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, which cited *The Invisible Government* at length in support of its thesis that Western powers, and particularly the United States, continued to dominate and dictate life in ostensibly post-colonial nations.<sup>65</sup> The 'extended tentacles of the Wall Street octopus', he wrote, with 'its suction cups and muscular strength are provided by a phenomenon dubbed "The Invisible Government" ...'<sup>66</sup> Admittedly, the CIA were frequently attacked in the Ghanaian media even prior to the publication of *The Invisible Government*. In February and March 1963, a series of articles in the Ghanaian press accused the CIA of assassinating Premier Qassim in Iraq. One article in the *Ghana Evening News* was headlined 'Neo-Colonialist Terror in Iraq Menacing Threat Against Africa'. The weekly Ghanaian newspaper *Spark* also carried a front page story titled 'The Secret War of CIA: The Killer at Your Door', which noted that '[t]he murderous game, which goes by the innocent-sounding name of intelligence, has its Western-world nerve-centre in America's Central Intelligence Agency ...'<sup>67</sup> *The Invisible Government*, it seemed, gave credence and a powerful narrative

framework to an idea that was already taking root in Ghanaian society. Nkrumah was not the only leading figure in the decolonization movement to cite *The Invisible Government*. The first President of Algeria Ahmed Ben Bella, Indonesia's Foreign Minister Subandrio, and of course, Fidel Castro, all cited the book at length in support of their protests against US-led neocolonialism.<sup>68</sup>

The CIA believed, accurately, that *The Invisible Government* would be a great boon for Soviet propagandists, and much of their criticism of the book internally, and to friendly journalists, emphasized this.<sup>69</sup> The State Department likewise issued a circular telegram to all American diplomats and consular staff, warning that the book would likely damage the American image abroad, and advised them to 'muffle' the impact of the book 'as far as possible' by avoiding statements or actions that might arouse further curiosity in it.<sup>70</sup> Their fears were soon realized when the Soviet press jumped on the book with relish. *Pravda* journalist Victor Maevsky, for example, borrowed heavily from Wise and Ross' account to pen a history of controversial CIA covert interventions.<sup>71</sup> When Admiral Raborn replaced John McCone as the Director of Central Intelligence in the spring of 1965, *The Invisible Government* provided another *Pravda* journalist with a framing device to cast Raborn's links to big business as sinister: 'For good reason the CIA is called the "invisible government" of the United States and the "state within a state". Behind the scenes there was ... a bitter struggle of the owners of big industrial concerns for the right to place their own man at the helm of this spy state. And the choice fell on Raborn, the president of a gigantic corporation ...'<sup>72</sup> Media outlets in Eastern bloc countries also used the occasion of *The Invisible Government's* publication to mount attacks against the CIA. One Romanian journalist, for example, concluded that the title of Wise and Ross' book 'admirably reflects the position occupied by the CIA in the United States.'<sup>73</sup> In Slovakia, the Hungarian language daily newspaper of the Slovakian communist party, *Slovak Daily*, published an entire series of articles on the CIA inspired by *The Invisible Government*.<sup>74</sup>

In response to this global impact of Wise and Ross' book, DCI John McCone ordered a 'comprehensive report' to be written on the 'usages of "The Invisible Government" by unfriendly countries for unfriendly purposes or for unfriendly purposes by friendly countries – in other words, all inclusive'. The Director added that although the exact use to which the report would be put was yet to be determined, it was very likely that portions of it 'might be made a matter of public disclosure and it is therefore essential to annotate sources as well as to indicate the possible sensitivity of source disclosure'.<sup>75</sup> Later that year, the CIA released the report to friendly journalists, leading to a raft of stories in the American press reporting on the Soviet Union's anti-CIA disinformation campaign, and citing *The Invisible Government* as a favourite source of Soviet propagandists.<sup>76</sup>

Perhaps the most lasting legacy of *The Invisible Government* was its impact upon conspiracy theories, and what would later become the 'deep state' narrative. The book was published less than a year after the Kennedy assassination, when many Americans were still coming to terms with the President's death. Conspiracy theories, including those alleging CIA involvement in Kennedy's death, emerged almost immediately, though they grew in popularity as the long 1960s wore on.<sup>77</sup> Anxieties about government secrecy, piqued by *The Invisible Government*, compounded popular suspicions that Kennedy had died at the hands of a conspiracy, perhaps orchestrated by the invisible government itself. The CIA and the FBI's reticence in the face of the Warren Commission enquiry, refusing, for example, to share details of the CIA's attempts to assassinate other foreign leaders, or their surveillance of Kennedy's assassin Lee Harvey Oswald in the months prior to the event, suggested to some that they had something else to hide. When these revelations of CIA assassination plots and other details they had withheld from the Warren Commission were made public during the 1975 Congressional enquiries into the activities of the US intelligence community, some began to question why the CIA had refused to cooperate with the commission. Thus, *The Invisible Government* was published at the beginning of an era of public revelations about the more nefarious activities of the US intelligence community, especially the CIA. Its central thesis, when read retrospectively through the lens of these subsequent scandals that seemed to implicate the CIA in a whole range of morally questionable activities, was easily exaggerated into an all-encompassing explanation for the moral quagmire into which

US foreign policy seemed to be slipping. For popularizers of 'deep state' Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories like Hollywood director Oliver Stone, the explanation for this descent was simple: Kennedy represented the myth of Camelot, a young and idealistic President who, had he lived, would have avoided the disastrous intervention in Vietnam. The CIA, among other shady benefactors of the military-industrial-complex, wanted war in Vietnam. And so they killed the President. For Stone this was personal. As a Vietnam war veteran he regarded the Kennedy assassination as the event that sealed his fate, committing him as a young enlistee to fight in an immoral war. What Stone, and other popularizers of this myth ignore, of course, is that Kennedy's record in Vietnam was one of escalating U.S. involvement, and that his record suggested that he was certainly not a 'dove' in his foreign policy.<sup>78</sup>

Stone's 1991 drama *J.F.K.* popularized this particular Kennedy assassination conspiracy theory for a new generation. But it was a narrative that was by then decades old. Stone's film romanticized the efforts of New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison to prosecute David Ferrie for Kennedy's assassination. Garrison insinuated that Ferrie had been part of a much greater government conspiracy instigated by secretive government officials. Garrison used *The Invisible Government* as part of his background research in preparation for the trial, and was clearly inspired by it. In a book he published shortly after the trial, Garrison repeatedly uses the term 'invisible government' to describe the development of the US intelligence apparatus after the war, concluding that the Warren Commission had 'validated the existence and ascendancy of invisible government in the United States'.<sup>79</sup> Though Garrison had not used this line in his closing argument at Ferrie's trial, Oliver Stone lifted this quote almost verbatim in his dramatization of Garrison's speech to the courtroom, which forms the film's emotional apogee and denouement: 'Who determines our "national security"?', asks Kevin Costner's Garrison to a packed courtroom in the film's final scenes. 'What "national security" permits the removal of fundamental power from the hands of the American people and validates the ascendancy of the invisible government in the United States?'<sup>80</sup> Another inspiration for Stone's film was another well-known popularizer of the 'invisible government' or 'deep state' JFK conspiracy theory: Leroy Fletcher Prouty.<sup>81</sup> In his 1973 book *The Secret Team* he cites *The Invisible Government* as one of the central inspirations for his own thesis, describing it as 'that most valuable book' that first outlined and provided the descriptive vocabulary for understanding the presence of an unaccountable secretive elite within the United States intelligence community, capable of influencing and even directing US policy.<sup>82</sup>

These influences demonstrate the profound legacy of Wise and Ross' book. But they were not necessarily legacies of their own making. Propagandists, politicians and conspiracy theorists exaggerated *The Invisible Government's* eponymous thesis for their own purposes. What began as a still somewhat measured critique of the CIA's lack of accountability, was repeatedly invoked to support more radical conspiracy theories that saw a secret cabal dictating American history and foreign policy, up to and including the assassination of the President. In this sense, the CIA and the State Department were right – Wise and Ross had provided grist for the Soviet propagandists' mill, and damaged the United States' image abroad, and at home for that matter. But the CIA's contention that this might justify censorship, regardless of the lack of any evidence of security breaches in the book, was a dangerous proposition, implying that the United States government could veto uncomfortable narratives, even if the facts mobilized to support a particular story were true. Moreover, if the threshold for censorship was the inclusion of arguments that might be harnessed by enemies of the United States, then virtually any narrative critical of U.S. policy could be banned. As Tully remarked in response to the CIA attacks on his own far-from-radical history of the Agency: 'surely we are past the time when all that is necessary to discredit a work is to say that it says what communists say. The question is not who says what, but whether what is said is so'.<sup>83</sup> Although, as was customary when the CIA reviewed books that it objected to, the Agency punctiliously identified 'several hundred petty errors on such matters as dates and alleged statements of fact which are actually one individual's opinion', they also conceded that the book was 'in general accurate and revealing'.<sup>84</sup>

This final acknowledgment unsettled the Agency. As one senior CIA officer reflected in his notes on the book, made in preparation for the Deputy Director:

I still find it very difficult in my own mind (and I think this is true of most others in the Agency as well) to determine or define what really constitutes a security breach or a damaging revelation in a book like 'The Invisible Government'. We all agree that such books are terrible and damaging but we don't have any professional definition of what makes them so

<sup>85</sup> Perhaps part of this confusion was a failure to come to terms with the fact that a book like *The Invisible Government* might be 'terrible and damaging' for the CIA, without containing direct security breaches, as the Agency's own security office conceded. This was perhaps because the CIA were still relatively unaccustomed to such negative publicity about their covert operations. In this respect Wise and Ross had written a landmark text. Only later, via lawsuits against apostate CIA officers like Victor Marchetti and Frank Snepp, as well as major First Amendment rulings such as the Pentagon papers trial, would some of the ambiguities around which 'terrible and damaging' books could be censored, and which could not, would be clarified. Nevertheless, *The Invisible Government* was an important early example of a book that probed the boundaries of freedom of speech and national security. Perhaps more importantly, it provided the content, language and a narrative framework that would inspire many future generations of CIA critics.

## Biographical details

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4. Hadley, *The Rising Clamor*.
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6. "Allen Dulles Accused by McCarthy".
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28. Kirkpatrick, "Memorandum for the Deputy Director".
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34. Kent with Slautterback, "A Bad Book by Andrew Tully".
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37. 'CIA Request for Advance of Bay of Pigs'.
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39. Smith, "Negotiating With Fidel Castro".
40. 'CIA Statement on "The Bay of Pigs" by Haynes Johnson'.
41. Wise and Ross, *The Invisible Government*, 351.
42. 'Report of the Task Force to Analyze "The Invisible Government"'.
43. McCone "Letter to Thomas Braden".
44. Binder, "Washington Talk".
45. Cowles, "Letter to John McCone".
46. Childs, "Issue of Secrecy".
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