

The Devil's Chessboard
Allen Dulles, the CIA, and the Rise of America's
Secret Government

David Talbot

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This truly excellent biography is at least partly a biography of two men, Allen Dulles and his older brother John Foster. I write 'at least partly' because the older Dulles brother dies two-thirds of the way through the book. But he gamely calls Allen to his bedside in order to deliver rousing anti-communist words, urging his brother to not only keep up the fight but redouble his soon-to-be-solo efforts. From Allen's furtive scuttlings around post-war Europe, David Talbot (former editor of the frequently insightful on-line Salon magazine) pursues his subject into the corridors of power, even if Dulles is prone to laying the occasional false trail. The earlier chapters are mainly scene-setters (or at least, will probably be regarded as such by *Lobster* readers) but they set out in miniature what is later writ very large indeed, and it's worth resisting the effort to skip ahead to the founding of the CIA where the historical record can be compared with Mr Talbot's narrative.

The Dulles brothers set out to climb the greasy pole of Washington, and in a series of trapeze-like handovers and catches, they succeeded. Foster ensconced himself at the State Department and Allen ended up head of the CIA when Walter Beddell Smith stepped aside. The two of them then made a formidable double act, even if they didn't always perform seamlessly (episodes in which Foster issued orders to an infuriated Allen and in which Allen refused to support Foster suggest an unresolved childhood power-struggle that isn't really examined). And on the way to their eventual offices, the pair accumulated a lot of friends and a lot of wealth. Something that Mr Talbot does very well, for example, is to illustrate the extent to which Allen Dulles's eagerness to topple Iran's Mossadegh was motivated by the prospect of turning on the tap to let oil money flow into his own bank

account and those of his pals.

Mr Talbot's writing will be of interest to researchers because it does not shy away from providing parapolitical context – and a lot of it – while avoiding the trap of becoming buried in its own completeness.¹ On the other hand, that wealth of context sometimes proves to be rather simple. Take the U2 shutdown that scuppered Eisenhower's planned peace talks. There are accumulated decades of speculation about what really happened, some of it lapping at the edges of the career of a young Lee Harvey Oswald; but in Mr Talbot's telling the episode is surprisingly empty. Dulles informed Eisenhower that the U2's altitude would be out of reach of Soviet anti-aircraft defences. Dulles was wrong and Eisenhower humiliated; and that is the end of that little mystery, apparently.²

Eisenhower, for what it's worth, came to realise late in his term of office that he should have booted the Dulleses along Pennsylvania Avenue the moment he had the White House keys in his pocket. His famous valedictory warnings, against the machinations of the Military-Industrial Complex, were as much about the extent to which his military strategies had been warped by the CIA director and Secretary of State as they were about the arms merchant plutocracy emerging after the war. In fact, as Mr Talbot shows, the Dulles brothers had reduced the 'Chinese Walls' of government to such an extent that the arms industry and the government had become symbiotic. Eisenhower, incidentally, emerges from this

1 For my money, Stephen Dorril's 1998 *MI6: 50 Years of Special Operations* was rendered nearly unreadable by the denseness of its prose and the distraction of all the little sidelines that kept opening and closing to no greater purpose. It's still a great book, but unlike Mr Talbot's, it's not one you could read for pleasure

2 Talbot tells us that later, after the death of Stalin, Krushchev met with Eisenhower and observed the president's reliance on an endless stream of private notes slipped to him by the older Dulles brother, interpreting it as a sign of Eisenhower's lack of command and credibility. What Krushchev didn't know was that the Dulles brothers had firmly instructed the normally affable Eisenhower to resist smiling or giving any other appearance of warmth. Deprived of his natural ability to establish social rapport, Eisenhower became an actor being fed lines of script that were improvised for him.

book as a far more interesting character than he originally seemed, at least from a research perspective. I can't help feeling that his presidency deserves a bit more inspection by parapolitical writers, rather than the usual glossing over of his presidency as the 'old guard'. The grand warrior seems far more of a 'cusp' character than he's understood to be, more complex and conflicted; and what's more, in Mr Talbot's book, Eisenhower himself seems aware of his situation.

The passage from pre-war America to the latter half of the 20th Century is all part of the narrative sweep and one thing Mr Talbot does very neatly is to 'frame' a new narrative around the bizarre witch-hunts of the McCarthyite 1950s. For Mr Talbot, the entire episode is a show-trial (or, rather, a series of show-trials), in which the 'New Deal' crew left over from the FDR administration were identified and neutralised, effectively establishing the smear that is still in operation among the livelier elements of today's right: that FDR was an outright socialist, or even a crypto-communist. If McCarthy could squeeze in some of his personal enmities and paranoid vendettas while he was about it, so much the better. Eisenhower himself stays out of the limelight but Richard Nixon can be observed hovering in the wings throughout this section, clearly taking notes.

There is a delightful vignette in which a military intelligence officer was called before McCarthy's subcommittee and testified that he had a conversation with a CIA officer who stated ('flatly') that it might become necessary to assassinate McCarthy 'as happened with Huey Long'. This is a bit of a facer and it's hard to avoid the conclusion that this was meant to be passed to the suggested 'victim'. This is not the only instance in which Mr Talbot goes on a detour to take in show-trials. In fact they figure frequently in this work. Just off the top of my head, we are taken to the Nuremberg Tribunals, Stalin's performances during various purges, and the confessions of US personnel captured during the Korean war. The significance of this recurring motif isn't immediately apparent.

Related to this show-trial theme, in chronicling the

creation of MKULTRA ('The Manhattan Project of the mind', in Dulles's words), Mr Talbot shows that one of Dulles's genuine fears about his adversaries was well-founded, or at least comprehensible. The downed airmen who confessed to their Korean captors that they had dispersed biological weapons from their planes (including anthrax and bubonic plague) were telling the truth. Dulles, unable to comprehend the unsealing of the captives' tongues, appears to have inferred that some evil method to unlock their minds had been created. In fact it had been achieved by those time-honoured banalities of evil: stress-positions, harsh interrogations, and the old 'good cop, bad cop' routine. And the secret of the illegal bioweapons program was so weighty that Frank Olsen famously went headfirst through a window to preserve it – this being another episode on which Mr Talbot shines a critical spotlight.

Some glimpse of how involved in all this mind control Dulles became is provided by the episodes in which he committed his own unruly son to a psychiatric institution where MKULTRA research was being conducted; he also thoughtfully arranged for a CIA surgeon to give a Dulles niece a lobotomy. The fact that MKULTRA victims tended to come out of their experiences useful to neither the CIA nor society didn't crease his brow. Mr Talbot relates how one such unfortunate was returned home to a family that she could no longer recognise, unable to use the toilet. Tellingly, Dulles's son later took his parents up on their offer to book him into a Swiss sanatorium, from which refuge he refused to discharge himself until he was satisfied that his father was dead. On a lighter note, we learn that Operation ARTICHOKE was so-named because it was Dulles's favourite, er, vegetable. So there's that.

But the main dish here is, of course, the JFK assassination. Dulles effectively disappears while the book's narrative follows Oswald to Russia and back, then hovers over Lee Oswald's associates when he settles in Dallas – de Mohrenschildt, the Paine family, *et al.* George de Mohrenschildt's long-standing relationship with George HW Bush barely gets a look-in here, being relegated to the sad

and anguished exchange of letters that preceded de Mohrenschildt's suicide in 1977, while 'Poppy' Bush was in the director's chair at the CIA. As for the memos that indicate the future president was on the periphery of the assassination when it took place, they are not mentioned at all. Nor is the tantalising fact that Bush Snr's brief tenure at the Agency overlapped the formative stages of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, which is a major blind spot in all relevant research areas. This is frustrating, and the absence of this material can only have been deliberate.

When the narrative returns to 1963 and to Dulles, we learn that he made sure to appear in public (giving a speech in Virginia) on the morning of the shooting and then... he disappeared, from the author's view at least. But not for good, of course. There's a great deal of assassination evidence-wrangling, the relevance of which is often questionable, but it will not be spoiling the surprise to reveal that there are no real surprises in this bit of the book. Moreover, there are some assassination factoids that have made the cut (e.g. the paraffin cast of Oswald's cheek that tested negative for gunshot residue is trotted out, even though it was exposed long ago as an irrelevant distraction). These are certainly bum notes, and produce a wince, but the theme is loud, strong, and clear, and is therefore not spoiled by them.

At this point, the narrative turns inside-out, creating a bizarre sense of disorientation. Rather than seeing Dulles moving through events and participating in them, we get to see Dulles writing the history of an event that remains to this day largely opaque. The Warren Commission's institutional failings have often been written about, but what Mr Talbot achieves here is extraordinary. We get a lengthy and detailed close-up of Dulles driving the Warren Commission's sluggish inquiries in directions that suited his own ends, going far down some unprofitable avenues and merely squinting in the direction of some others. When he wasn't steering the Commission itself, he was subtly manipulating his fellow commissioners, setting them off in directions that would lead them to conclusions Dulles had not only anticipated but had

often arranged, so that they reported back what they believed they had learned for themselves.

Suddenly the whole Warren Commission is seen in the light of the recurring show-trials that appear throughout the whole of the book. The perspective this adds is remarkable – how a pantomime of justice with a preordained outcome was really the only possible conclusion. Talbot is far too subtle a writer to force this realisation on the reader. It's a long discordant crescendo of legal misconduct that ultimately delivers a deeper underpinning to the inevitable climax of the book.

Similarly, the book's title (which I had presumed to be a play on Zbigniew Brzezinski's geopolitics doorstopper *The Grand Chessboard*) is suddenly fulfilled in an unexpected way. Mr Talbot produces quoted remarks from Dulles about his time on the Commission, made to a former CIA colleague a year after the Kennedy murder:

'[...] The "ifs" just stand out all over it. And if any of those "ifs" had been changed it [the murder] might have been prevented... it was so tantalizing to go over that record [of events], as we did, trying to find out every fact connected with the assassination, and then to say that if one of those chess pieces that had been entered into the game had been moved differently, at any one time, the whole game might have been different.'

Dulles's slide from the language of inquiry to that of strategy was presumably an unconscious choice of phrase, and reveals the frame of mind the subject invoked in him. Moreover, if you read it again, you'll see that he could easily be saying that those crucial evidential 'ifs' were fictions of his own construction.

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