

Knott, Stephen E. Secret and Sanctioned: Covert Operations and the American Presidency. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

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Secret and Sanctioned has one of the best covers in recent memory. There is a double portrait of George Washington: the head-and-shoulders painting, familiar from the \$1 bill, on the left, the same image on the right but with a black highwayman's mask around the eyes and a US flag as a bandanna covering the lower part of the face.

That aside, this is a pernicious little tome. Its sole purpose is to distort, squeeze, and manipulate a "history" of covert operations to sustain the author's desire for a US intelligence service under the exclusive control of the Executive, free from the meddlesome oversight of the Congress.

Professor Knott is not concerned with the efficacy of secret activity; indeed, he offers the early disclaimer, "This study does not seek to demonstrate that covert operations offer a magical solution to the problems confronting American policy makers." (p. 6) He certainly is not bothered about moral or ethical niceties, deriding "a contemporary faith in ill-defined notions of international law and . . . an unbending devotion to process and procedures." (p. 6) His simple credo is a return to "Jeffersonian notions of the US playing a special role in the world" which, he laments, "are seen as a sign of naivete today." (p. 7) Covert action is, of course, merely a method for protecting that special position since, as Knott confidently predicts, "The CIA's role in the West's Cold War victory will become clear as the passage of time allows for the release of information chronicling the agency's successful efforts." (p. 187)

There is nothing wrong with setting out such an argument, however strongly one may disagree with it. What is troubling is Knott's invocation of the ghosts of the Founding Fathers to prop up his thesis. The device is necessary because there is no other defense in the book for covert operations. Knott does not even attempt the maxim of the end justifying the means, since at no point does he investigate the ends of secret activity. He merely preaches, "From Truman to Bush, America's presidents conducted their clandestine foreign policy in a manner that remained faithful to the practices and beliefs of their revered predecessors." (p. 187)

This immediately raises the problem that an action is not "wise" or "beneficial" or "right" simply because a Founding Father sanctioned it. One need not be Gore Vidal to posit that the motives of a Washington or a Jefferson, let alone the judgement or administrative skill, might not be exemplary. As historians ranging from Charles Beard to William Appleman Williams to Michael Hunt have demonstrated, America's revered ancestors were not immune from racism, greed, pride, and even foolishness.

Setting aside that trivial objection, it should be noted that this work shows little comprehension of the complexities of covert action. The modern use of the term does not simply mean any secret activity, such as a discreet meeting between a presidential envoy and foreign head of state; it refers to an operation which can be "plausibly denied" by the government if discovered. The ends of "covert action" vary greatly; it may be to gather

intelligence on an enemy's intention or to sponsor the overthrow of another government. Finally, it is insensible to evaluate covert action without noting its context: operations for kidnapping or assassination are arguably far different if they are pursued during peacetime rather than during war.

Thus Knott's dogged attempt to illustrate how the Contingency Fund of 1790 set a precedent for today's covert operations is undermined at the start by the author's admission that "much of this fund was actually devoted to the facilitation of traditional diplomatic functions." (p. 49) All of his examples of the Fund's use relate to the despatch of envoys on fact-finding missions, hardly the equivalent of a modern-day Bay of Pigs. Similarly, it stretches one's imagination to see how the "intelligence component" of the Lewis-Clark expedition is part of a lineage producing the U-2.

Knott is on more secure ground with examples like Jefferson's attempt to subvert the pasha of the Barbary states, with whom the US was at war. Some operations, such as Abraham Lincoln's efforts to influence European opinion during the US Civil War seem perfectly logical, despite my Southern background; others such as James Madison's stirring of insurrection in Spanish-held Florida or encouragement of an uprising in Hawaii in the 1890s appear more dubious, with no apparent defence of "national interest."

The point is that Knott, chasing his Holy Grail of an unfettered Executive, can make no distinctions. Covert action is covert action. Thus the simple facts elude him that the scale of such activity vastly increased after 1947, that this activity was institutionalized with an autonomous agency running covert operations, that the budget and personnel for covert action increased 20-fold between 1948 and 1952 alone, that this all occurred in peacetime, and, incidentally, that by the early 1970s both President and CIA were breaking laws -- not Knott's dreaded international laws but US laws -- in their relentless search for enemies at home and abroad.

If Knott wishes to debate the propriety of Congressional control, fine; however, he should not do it by distorting "history" beyond recognition. An Executive Branch unchecked in its use of covert action may achieve certain advantages but it inevitably brings dangers as well. In the end, Knott's work is no more than a polemic to evade this niggling point.

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