



State of War: The Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration

James Risen

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James Risen has broken story after story on the abuses of power of the Bush administration.

From warrantless wiretapping to secret financial data mining to the CIA's rogue operations, he has shown again and again that the executive branch has dangerously overreached, repudiated checks and balances on its power, and maintained secrecy even with its allies in Congress. In no small part thanks to Risen and *State of War*, the "secret history" of the Bush years has now come partially into view.

In a new epilogue for the paperback edition, Risen describes the two-front war that President Bush is now fighting: at home against Congress and the Supreme Court, as his administration is increasingly reined in from its abuses; and in the Middle East, where George W. Bush's great gamble to bring a democratic revolution is failing radically. We must learn the lessons of Risen's history now, before it is too late.

State of War: The Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration Details

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From Reader Review State of War: The Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration for online ebook

Ahmed Abdelhamid says

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context. He'll take one sentence to state that a certain situation is speculation and inconclusive... but carry on for 10 pages afterwards on the same topic as if it were known FACT.

A case in point: the book's epilogue ends with the poetic conclusion: "Dreams die hard, but the dreams of the Bush administration died in places like Fallujah, Ramadi, and Tal Afar." Fine, but those geographical/military references aren't explained anywhere in the book. Clearly you have to know something about Iraq going in; "State of War" is not a definitive history. That's not a problem today in the heat of the moment, but it does indicate that "State of War" is something of a quickie meant to cash in on a story now, and lay forgotten in 20 years when more information comes to light. To make a Watergate reference out of this (because everything comes back to Watergate) this is more likely to be remembered as H.R. Haldeman's "The Ends of Power", rather than "The Haldeman Diaries". He said on page 2 that the voters voting for George W. Bush expected George W. Bush to repeat what George H. W. Bush did. What is the basis for this conclusion?

He talks about checks and balances in the executive branch. Please tell me where in the constitution it says that the executive power is invested in the president, the State Department and the Department of Defense, and they are to balance the power out

Steven Kaminski says

This book goes back to how the Bush Administration acted and reacted to the 9/11 attacks and the Iraq invasion. But the more I read it the more I was sort of perturbed that Congress wasn't involved at all. Congress had no oversight which they are supposed to do, Congress didn't challenge anything about what the administration put forward and they didn't even call for any accountability. They just sort of were hands off said that the Bush administration owned this and let them screw it up. The administration had huge issues and this gets into a lot of the personalities which caused the train wreck that came forward...

- Condi Rice was a smart woman. But absolutely incompetent as a manager at the head of the NSC. She was railroaded and smacked around every time she tried to even get the council into a meeting.

- Don Rumsfeld trusted no one. He felt he only answered to the President alone and because of this he ran defense as his own little kingdom. He developed his own intelligence units because he felt the CIA was incompetent. He didn't listen to Rice because he felt the NSC was a cluster. And when he faced a revolt by his own retired generals he was really blindsided. He didn't even agree with the President's strategy for either Afghanistan or Iraq and that hampered the response.

- Iraq actually HAD a WMD program which was destroyed by the US during Desert Storm by ACCIDENT. A bomber that had excess bombs after hitting his target dropped his bombs after turning around on a secondary target (a corporate building) which actually did have a WMD program.

Some wild revelations in the book and it was fascinating but the entire time the one thread going through for me was where were the people who were supposed to hold the President accountable?...

Arun Thulasidharan says

Unbelievable facts revealed in a very shocking manner. If not for the occasional repeats, an amazing read.

Dennis Fischman says

Things you'll learn, or be reminded of and still shocked by, if you read *State of War* by James Risen:

CIA Director George Tenet got and kept his job by sucking up to power.

The CIA specifically avoided asking President George W. Bush for authorization to use torture, providing him with what the spy trade calls "plausible deniability."

The NSA started large-scale spying on Americans almost immediately after 9/11/2001, "The Bush administration...swept aside nearly thirty years of rules and regulations" to make this happen.

George W. sent clear signals that he wanted a pretext to go to war with Iraq. People who helped him get one were rewarded. People who warned that the intelligence was being skewed were punished. There was nothing like an objective assessment of the facts before we went to war.

The U.S. had every reason to know there was no active nuclear program in Iraq.

To claim there was a bioweapons program in Iraq, the U.S. relied on sources that the Europeans clearly told us were wrong.

No one had a plan for what to do in Iraq after the war except for installing a president from the outside, a man (Ahmed Chalabi) that no one inside Iraq trusted. When that proved unworkable, they had to make it up as they went along--all the while pretending they were winning.

By going to war in Iraq, the Bush administration took its eye off Afghanistan, which became the biggest exporter of opium in the world...sending a lot of the poppy right here to the U.S.

The U.S. turned a blind eye to the ways that Saudi Arabia played both sides in the "war on terror."

The U.S. may have helped Iran advance its program for obtaining nuclear weapons.

Risen focuses on the first term of George W. Bush, but he's scrupulous about pointing out when a problem actually began in the Clinton administration. He puts too much emphasis on individuals (Bush vs. Saddam Hussein, Tenet vs. Rumsfeld) and not enough on mistaken assumptions of U.S. foreign policy.

Still, this is a powerful book. I wish I, and everyone else, had read it when it came out!

Will Byrnes says

Risen writes what he calls "a secret history of the CIA and the Bush administration, both before and after

9/11" (p 10)

P 3

The absence of effective management has been the defining characteristic of the Bush administration's foreign policy and has allowed radical decisions to take effect rapidly with minimal review

Risen's obvious sympathies cloud his judgment on occasion. In talking about Louis Freeh and his hostility towards Bill Clinton he takes Freeh's self-justifying word for it that what he (Freeh) saw as Clinton playing down the role of Iran in the felling of the Khobar Towers was "at the heart of his long-running dispute with the White House." This is blindness of a high order. Freeh was an incompetent and an ideologue, who was after Clinton from the moment he took office. Khobar may have played a role in that antipathy but partisan politics played a much larger role.

On page 3 Risen claims that Clinton showed almost no interest in intelligence matters. "His first CIA director, James Woolsey, felt so isolated from the president and the rest of the administration that he lasted barely two years." Let's just say I am a bit skeptical of this and would be very interested to hear from others with an inside view. Risen also seems eager to lay at Clinton's feet the demise of the CIA, when it was Bush-1 and a very eager Congress who were the primary forces involved in slashing those budgets.

Another shows up on page 17. "Bush decided to resume the daily intelligence briefings that Clinton had abandoned." He makes no mention here of the likelihood that Bush was not up to reading the PDB's that Clinton consumed every morning, but instead wanted to have it spoon fed to him by a willing lackey.

Another on page 24, where he writes about the Abu Ghraib revelations. "The Abu Ghraib scandal eventually ebbed, in part because of the lack of proof that the president had ordered the mistreatment of prisoners." Yet he can find no ink available to point out that a Republican controlled congress was unwilling to pursue the matter and that the White House willfully refused to provide all the materials they should have presented to the weak investigations that did take place.

P 37

...the technical wizards of the National Security Agency have been engaged in a program of domestic data mining that is so vast, and so unprecedented, that it makes a mockery of long-standing privacy rules.

The PROGRAM

Risen details the expansion of NSA domestic intelligence activities. He claims that the Bushies deliberately did not seek increased rights for the NSA in Congress because they knew they would be rejected. Instead they ignored Congress and simply did whatever they wanted to do, using the ever-helpful folks in the Attorney General's office to sculpt legal rationalizations for this assault on the fourth amendment. (p 47) "The Patriot Act has given no new powers to the NSA."

An interesting observation concerns a shift in CIA focus. P7 - "If I had to point to one specific problem that explains why we are doing such a bad job on intelligence, it is this almost single-minded focus on current reporting," observes Carl Ford, a former CIA analyst and former chief of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the State Department. In the 1970s, Ford adds, "70 percent to 80 percent of CIA analysts spent their time doing basic research on key topics; today, about 90 percent of analysts do nothing but current reporting. Analysts today are looking at intelligence coming in and then writing what they think about it, but they have no depth of knowledge to determine whether the current intelligence is correct. There are very few people left in the intelligence community who even remember how to do basic research."

The Final chapter is quite enlightening. Risen describes an intel operation in which a Soviet nuclear scientist defector was used to deliver to the Iranians a flawed blueprint for making an atomic bomb. But the guy was strictly an amateur and in attempting to cover his own ass, he revealed far too much to the Iranians in a note he inserted with the plans. We may never know if the blueprints helped the Iranians or not.

There was an opportunity to cut a deal with Iran in May 2003. Iran had captured many al-Qaeda members who had fled Afghanistan. Iran wanted in return members of the Iraqi based, anti-Iranian MEK terrorist group. Dubya was up for it, reasoning that MEK was a terrorist organization anyway, so what the hell. Rummy and Wolfie killed the deal, looking to use these guys in the future. The result was the loss of some hefty Al-Qaeda personnel, included One of Osama's kids. Way to go Rummy!

By the time the CIA leadership grew the stones to tell the president the truth, it was too late.

P 220

The CIA was finally speaking up. Yet, no one was listening to the agency or its analysts any more. The CIA had suffered so many spectacular failures in such rapid succession that by late 2005, it had lost its place and standing in Washington. The CIA had been so deeply politicized by the Bush administration that its credibility had vanished.

P 221

The CIA had been the dominant force in the US intelligence community, and that had been by design. When President Harry Truman and Congress crafted the National Security Act of 1947, which established the CIA, one of their goals was to foster a system in which the nation's intelligence service was independent of the military. That was seen as a crucial check on military power. Otherwise, intelligence would be slanted to support the wishes of the general staff. Rumsfeld's power grab is in direct opposition to these goals. It creates one of the most lasting and damaging legacies of the Bush administration: the militarization of American intelligence.

I expect Risen is being overoptimistic when he says (p 222) ...by late 2005, the neoconservative moment was ending. Wolfowitz and fellow neoconservative Doug Feith, who had served as undersecretary for policy, had both left the Pentagon. John Bolton, a neoconservative at the State Department, was moved out to the United Nations. With polls showing that the majority of Americans were turning against the war in Iraq, the neoconservatives and the right-wing pundits who supported them became more defensive, re-fighting old battles over the war's rationale.

So long as Cheney remains in the White House and Rummy or equivalent at the head of Defense, their moment is very much alive. What Risen ignores is the fact that bonafide neocons are now filtering out into responsible positions beyond defense. It is not a loss, in my view, but an expansion. Bolton was certainly not less influential at the UN than he was as an undersecretary in DC. Wolfie, as head of the World Bank, although now out of there in disgrace, was in a unique position from which to inflict economic harm on the world to match the military damage.

Gary Boland says

Not great. I got it to hear more about the mission to give 'fake' nuclear plans to Iran that went wrong in a carry-on fashion. Some interesting anecdotes but not a huge amount of background or detail on the many

intelligence failures in the last 20 years

Robin Case says

Dull and dated.

Dina says

It's a good description about how the war in Iraq started and what a mess the whole thing was. Basically just a cesspool that is playing with people lives. The whole system is rotten to the core.

A.J. says

Reading this book some 8 years after it was published filled me with anger (again) about what was (and is) done in our country's collective name. Done without oversight; in fact, done with the deliberate intention of avoiding ANY oversight. There are no successes trumpeted by Risen and one can be certain given the egotistical and megalomaniac nature of the Bush Administration that any successes would have been "declassified" and brought forth then - or later. Instead, we remain in 2014 waiting for an authorized government accounting of what exactly was done, by whom, and most importantly why. And Risen? He remains haunted by the specter of prosecution under the Espionage Act by the following administration for having this book published and not naming his source(s). In sum, in State of War, Risen gives an uncomfortable and unflattering peek at our deep security state and how easily manipulated it is by those lesser angels of our nature.

Jessica says

Difficult to read and follow because so many sources had to remain anonymous. Continuously seeing the phrases "anonymous highly-placed source in the CIA" or "anonymous highly-placed source in the white house" or "anonymous high-level officer in the FBI" made the book clunky and more than a little tedious to read. The material was both enlightening and depressing as the 30 second sound bites from television news reports these last 7 years coalesced into a grand, cohesive web of power plays and deception produced by the current administration.

Tony duncan says

An excellent even handed analysis of the CIA's role in the fight against Al Qaida, and the war in Iraq. Mostly about the role in the Bush Admin. it does not spare the Clinton years.

This is just another confirmation of the lies and the manipulation that the Bush admin, especially Cheney and Rumsfeld, used to channel the CIA into a role of supporting admin policy rather than giving unvarnished intelligence.

It gives a good line of the progression from the initial policy decisions of the Administration to the totally unconstitutional unwarranted and totally destructive policies that ended up screwing up both the Iraq war, and the policy of torture that was instituted.

I like that it in no way paints the principle characters as being evil, just pig headed and part of a culture of arrogance and stupidity. it fills in some important pieces of the puzzle with certain specific events, such as the staffing of incompetent ideologues in Iraq and the CIA. The reliance on "screwball" as the only source of intelligence that there were WMD's in Iraq, and the courageous actions of a few CIA officials who were willing to ruin their careers in order to get accurate information.

reading this makes it clear that Bush Cheney, Rumseld, and a slew of Bush admin officials are guilty of war crimes and corrupting our system of Government. But it also shows they are not evil monsters intent on creating a dictatorship for their own gain. That was a subsidiary concern. As such even though they are technically guilty of treason, and undermining the constitution, I don't believe any of them are deserving of more than life in prison.

An excellent book that gives a insight into how bureaucratic institutions can be curropted to undermine the democratic principles of the country.

James Piper says

Because I have read so much on this topic, much of it wasn't new, but a worth a read.

One thing you'll conclude is Cheney used the CIA, manipulated the CIA to support his conviction that the US had to invade Iraq. It's this type of warped thinking I find repulsive. Data picking to support a conclusion and not the other way around.

I'm amazed that everyone seems to think it was the CIA's fault. They became the scapegoat. Where they failed was not being more politically savy.

Denise says

Twelve years on from its original publication date, much of what Risen writes about here regarding the blatant abuses of power of the Bush administration and the role of the CIA in the lead-up to and during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (including egregious failures on various fronts) has become fairly public knowledge. Yet, these subjects remain very much relevant today and this book very much worth reading.

Gregg Puluka says

Good book and important read. Obviously a little dated since the war continued on during the Obama administration and the revalations from Snowden and other leakers. One should also read John Tenat's own account to gain some perspective. Another great book to supplement is Horse Soldiers which discusses the ground offensive in Afganistan and illuminates the CIA role within the broader context of the role in the war.

I do think the author sometimes oversimplifies the CIA role as a mouthpiece to the administration with Bush

administration. Which is why it is important to hear from multiple points of view and construct one's own opinion.

It is clear that as a public we allowed our country to take a direction that the majority of americans would not have gone based on the wishes of a relatively few people. Also it is clear that the few who wanted to execute this policy did not take into account the better planning opinions of those more familiar with the region and the senior leadership of the military who would have taken a different approach to solving the problem.

Main take home point is that we as a public need to keep ourselves informed and make our wishes known early and often.
