



## The Deep State, Hegemony, and Democracy

As late as 2013, as Donald Trump began to ruminate publically that he might run for president, the concept of an American Deep State was still largely seen as a paranoid conspiracy theory, and certainly not one to be given a serious hearing by conservatives. Few would have guessed that it would be right-wing pundits and White House officials raising charges that an American Deep State was conspiring against a president. As with so many other things, Donald Trump's presidency has disrupted the norm.

Long dismissed by mainstream political scientists and journalists as just another crazy conspiracy theory, the existence of an American Deep State can no longer be discarded cavalierly as paranoia. Many pundits and journalists still do, but the idea has gotten some traction in the mainstream press. In 2013, Mike Lofgren a long-time Capitol Hill staffer and author of the widely read and respected *The Party's Over*, entitled a follow-up book, *The Deep State: The Fall of the Constitution and the Rise of a Shadow Government*.<sup>1</sup> In the same year, two mainstream journalists co-authored *Deep State: Inside the Government Secrecy Industry*.<sup>2</sup> Suspicion about a Deep State has begun also to take root more broadly in American political culture. In response to a question defining the Deep State as the "existence of a group of unelected government and military officials who secretly manipulate or direct national policy," a Monmouth University poll in March 2018 found that about a quarter of respondents thought that a Deep State definitely exists, and a little less than half thought it probably exists.<sup>3</sup> And this was before Donald Trump himself explicitly endorsed the idea of its existence in May 2018.

President Trump discerned conspiracy afoot in the National Security Agency's surveillance of several of his associates and campaign staffers and in leaks coming from within the intelligence community, the FBI, and possibly Special Counsel Robert Mueller's office about possible collusion between his campaign and Russian operatives. Trump also fumed repeatedly about former director of the FBI, James Comey, whom he accuses of soft peddling an investigation into possible violations of national security laws by Hillary Clinton in her use of a private email server while she was Secretary of State. For a little more than a year Trump refrained from characterizing his alleged enemies within the security establishment as a "Deep State," but even before he began using the term several of his supporters, including his son, Eric, alleged that the "Deep State" was conspiring to bring down his presidency.

The more prominent discussion of a "Deep State" in American public discourse rang alarm bells in some quarters that taking the theory seriously would undermine the country's "soft power," that is, its positive image as an attractive economic and political model for the rest of the world. In March 2018, the *Voice of America*, the official voice of US public diplomacy, tried to maintain a tone of dismissal about "intimations of 'Deep State' conspiracies in the United States [that] have bubbled to the surface from the depths of the far left and right." VOA featured politicians and academic experts warning of the folly of entertaining this idea.<sup>4</sup> But on May 23, 2018, the president himself, referring to a Justice Department report critical of former Director Comey, tweeted, "Look how things have turned around on the Criminal Deep State. They go after Phony Collusion with Russia, a made up Scam, and end up getting caught in a major SPY scandal the likes of which this country may never have seen before! What goes around, comes around!"

Trump had plenty of motivation to raise the specter of a bureaucratic conspiracy against his presidency, one including sectors in the American security establishment. This message deflects attention from the fact that many of the leaks animating him seemed to originated within his own White House staff. But can we say there is no foundation to think that his radical shift in US policy toward European allies and NATO, his undermining of the liberal international trade order, his embrace of Russia, and his mercurial personality would motivate some within the security establishment to seek his downfall? A cloak of secrecy shrouds so much of the activity associated with "national security," and its abuse has repeatedly been a central element of the most notorious American political scandals of the post-World War II era. Yet the dominant view in political science

has been that the American state is impervious to the kind of conspiracies carried out by military and intelligence operatives in other countries, even though many of these enjoyed significant encouragement or aid from the United States. Only recently have some political scientists question whether American state is immune to authoritarianism, with democracy now threatened by a president little constrained by constitutional limits on his power.

However much many soldiers, spies, and intelligence analysts may be genuinely motivated by patriotism and personally committed to democracy, they exercise power in ways hidden from the public. Samuel Huntington, a conservative and close advisor to several presidents, including President Jimmy Carter whom he served as Coordinator of Security Planning for the National Security Council, once wrote, “The architects of power in the United States must create a force that can be felt but not seen. Power remains strong when it remains in the dark; exposed to the sunlight it begins to evaporate.”<sup>5</sup> What if power in the dark sees a threat in a president that does not share its worldview and openly questions its loyalty? This is at the heart of conspiracy theories about John Kennedy’s assassination and to some degree about how effectively the political system responded to Watergate and the issues raised by the Vietnam War. Now the theme of the Deep State is being raised out of the White House itself.

But Trump’s relationship with the national security establishment is more complex and ambiguous than his public attacks suggest. While attacking the “Deep State” rhetorically, and although his 2016 campaign included criticizing the trillions of dollars spent on wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, in the first year of his presidency Trump increased deployment of troops in the Middle East and South Asia, sent new training missions into Africa, continued providing arms and assistance to Saudi Arabia’s bombing campaign in Yemen, and extended the same to the Philippines for its fight with Islamist insurgents. Like President Obama, Trump increased the drone strikes and missions by Special Forces under control of both military command and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Though his Twitter criticism still sometimes impetuously targets the CIA or publically exposes sensitive secrets, in 2018 most of his invective was aimed at the criminal justice system and those investigating possible collusion of his campaign with the Russians. Domestically, Trump deployed the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents in mass detentions of undocumented immigrants in operations violating due process. He has unambiguously sided with police and against the Black Lives Matter movement, repeatedly raising the specter of rampant criminal violence in American cities.

These actions have raised the danger that *parapolitics*, dark political activities closely associated with the concept of the Deep State, is becoming more deeply rooted in domestic politics in the United State. Parapolitics can be defined as political activity in violation of constitutional and legal norms and characterized by secrecy and deceit, often carried out by groups in concert with but formally separate from military, police and other parts of the coercive apparatus of the state. Its normalization is being fostered, the latter part of this chapter will argue, by its increasing presence in pop-culture movies, games, and television programs.

As with “Dark Money,” I do not treat the “Deep State” as a conspiracy in itself but as an opaque realm of political power that gives rise to both conspiracies and to conspiracy theories. From the government military and security agencies and from allied forces in the private sector there has emerged a steady parade of scoundrels and profit-seekers masquerading as patriots but engaged in parapolitics. Their activities become somewhat visible in major scandals that have punctuated American politics with regularity since World War II; but the collective historical memory of what happened tends to fade, beginning with assurances that the system worked to bring the threat to a close. When public officials, elected representatives, and investigative journalists threaten the central institutions associated with the national security state, a kind of conspiracy panic has usually been employed to discourage digging too deep. To suggest that a Deep State exists under the surface of constitutional democracy, they are dismissed as paranoid style conspiracy theorists.

This chapter proposes that rather than *a priori* dismissing the Deep State and “parapolitics” as paranoid conspiracism, these themes ought to be serious part of a political science dedicated to democratic values. There are signs of political science turning in this direction (see Chapter 8), and this chapter argues that the concept of operational conspiracies can be useful tool for this purpose.

### WHAT IS THE DEEP STATE? WHAT IS IT NOT?

Lofgren, a former senior Republican congressional staffer who worked 16 years on the budget committees of both the House and Senate, broadly defines the Deep State to include almost the entire administrative state and well-heeled lobbyists in the capital.<sup>6</sup> So defined, the Deep State would envelope any bureaucratic agency positioned to obstruct,

delay, or mutate the policies put in place by Congress or the White House. For purposes of this chapter, I use the original conception of the Deep State, one well-articulated by Sonam Sheth in a critique of accusations made in several Breitbart articles alleging that Trump faces subversion by a coalition of national security agencies and their allies in financial and the military–industry complex. In an article for *Business Insider* Sheth writes,

If we understand “real power” to mean not absolute, last word power then it is possible, even allowing for the obvious interest of Trump in portraying himself as a victim of dark force, to acknowledge that possession of license to coerce (much less kill or torture) is, to put it mildly a significant source of power subject to abuse.<sup>7</sup>

Conceptualizing the Deep State and parapolitics as together a sphere of politics prone to conspiratorial activity avoids treating the Deep State as monolithic or unchanging. It makes little sense to treat the Deep State as a unitary, coherent actor in carrying out a conspiracy—be it the alleged assassination of JFK, the transfer of arms sale money from Iran to the Nicaraguan contras, the implementation of warrantless surveillance and “enhanced interrogation” after 9/11, or Trump’s claim that the “Deep State” is conspiring to bring down the Trump presidency. Bureaucratic infighting, ideological divisions, contentious or cooperative relations with colleagues in other domestic and foreign services, conflicts between professional and political obligations, all influence and complicate the relationship of the American Deep State to the larger liberal democratic state to which it is supposed to be subordinate.

On the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, the *New Yorker Magazine* asked its Pulitzer Prize winning author, Jane Mayer (and other contributors to the magazine) a series of questions, including about how this seminal event—which has led to two major wars, was used to impose a state of emergence that in 2018 entered into its seventeenth year, and unleashed widespread fear of Muslims—had affected her. The Pulitzer Prize winning journalist responsible for bringing Dark Money into the light (see Chapter 6) had earlier authored *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals*,<sup>8</sup> which gathered together stories revealing the existence of “black site prisons” and warrantless domestic surveillance. Mayer’s book joined shelves of studies<sup>9</sup> by other

investigators, including many who have served in the military and intelligence sectors. They provide compelling reasons to doubt that clandestine operations, propaganda campaigns, and intervention abroad defend democracy. Indeed, they provide clear evidence of how these kinds of operations in the “dark” threaten it.

Citing her heightened sensitivity to the “importance and frailty of human rights,” Mayer prefaced her concern with an acknowledgement that I want to keep in mind constantly as we move on to explore here the Deep State and its corollary, “parapolitics.” Mayer wrote,

I think all that I have seen and learned in this area has profoundly changed me, as it has many others. I developed huge admiration for those who protected the country’s laws and values, sometimes at great personal risk, including F.B.I. agents, military and C.I.A. officers, and civil liberties lawyers who refused to degrade the country by engaging in torture.<sup>10</sup>

I share Mayer’s judgment and caution. The Deep State, as I conceive it, is not monolithic or all-powerful, and many working within it primarily see their function as defense and promotion of liberal democratic ideals. However, the professionalism and patriotism of many of those who work in military and intelligence and domestic security institutions do not prevent clashes between the national security state and democracy or invalidate President Dwight Eisenhower’s warning when in his farewell address he said, “In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military–industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists, and will persist.”<sup>11</sup>

There seems to be a consensus, shared by critics and proponents alike, that the “Deep State” is derived from the Turkish *derin devlet*, which refers to an intricate network made up of government officials, often including those from the military and intelligence communities, whose primary goal is to subvert a democratically elected leader’s agenda or even conspire to remove that leader from power—by assassination if necessary. David Remnick, a skeptic that the idea applies to the United States, refers to the Deep State as “a network of embedded members of a government’s agencies or military...operate against a democratically elected government. It might work to undermine an elected president’s authority or legitimacy and has been common in countries such as Egypt and Turkey.”<sup>12</sup>

Another way to define the Deep State is to consider what it is to those who reject the idea that such a thing exists in the United States. *Politico* magazine weighed-in accordingly,

Like the Death Star, the American Deep State does not, of course, exist. An appropriation from countries such as Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan and Algeria, where real networks of intelligence, defense and interior ministry officials exercise real power to drive policy, sideline elected officials and eliminate opponents, the American Deep State is nothing more than an invention of President Donald Trump and his allies.<sup>13</sup>

There are good reasons to suspect Trump's motives, but that does not mean we should dismiss from consideration the possibility of American security institutions wielding power to undermine presidential authority or even depose a president. The persistence of JFK assassination theories suggests that many Americans do not readily dismiss this notion.

The Deep State is often linked to the stubborn persistence of the theory that Lee Harvey Oswald may not have acted alone, especially the variant suspecting involvement of the CIA, as postulated in Oliver Stone's movie *JFK* (1991). The dismissal of Stone's portrayal of a plot to kill Kennedy often combines an admission of its superior cinematic qualities with complete contempt for its message, such as when *The Guardian's* Alex Tunzelmann wrote, "*JFK* is a cleverly constructed, tightly written and sometimes breathtakingly well-acted movie – and one of the most appalling travesties of history you're ever likely to see."<sup>14</sup>

For the most part the notion of an American Deep State remains subject to "conspiracy panic."<sup>15</sup> Conspiracy panic (see Chapter 3) is a way of disqualifying certain modes of thought and discourses that challenge American exceptionalism and ultimately the hegemony of a particular political regime. As Bratich puts it, "The scapegoating of conspiracy theories provides the conditions for social integration and political rationality. Conspiracy panics help to define the normal modes of dissent. Politically it is predicated on a consensus 'us' over against a subversive and threatening 'them'."<sup>16</sup> The "Deep State" has been pushing against the ramparts of the regime of truth, forcing doubters to discuss rather than to ignore it. The need to constantly and repeatedly dismiss the idea that a conspiracy of some kind was behind the assassination of Kennedy, to label it a "conspiracy theory," demonstrates the panic among most intellectuals at the thought that it could be true.

Greg Grandin, a progressive historian, writing in the leftist *The Nation* early in Trump's first year, worries that focusing on Deep State will distract us from abuses of private power.

The problem with the phrase "Deep State" is that it is used to suggest that dishonorable individuals are subverting the virtuous state for their private ambitions...It's this public virtue/private vice false opposition that makes so much of the "Deep State" writing slide into, if not noxious Bilderberg anti-Semitism, then "we are a republic, not an empire" idiocy.<sup>17</sup>

His critique includes an approving reference to Frederik Jameson's widely cited assertion, "Conspiracy, one is tempted to say, is the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age."<sup>18</sup> As we have seen (Chapters 4 and 5), there is little evidence that poor and working-class people are more likely attracted to conspiracy theory than the wealthy. Furthermore, the historian Kathryn Olmstead, while endorsing the Hofstadter view of conspiracy theories as the "paranoid style", concedes in her study of twentieth-century conspiracy theories in the United States that sometimes they empower ordinary people to obtain accountability from public officials. Even conspiracy theories that have little warrant, such as the belief that President Franklin Roosevelt knew in advance of Pearl Harbor, produced investigations that brought to light serious malfeasance and abuses of executive authority.<sup>19</sup>

Although he too sees conspiracy theory through the lens of the paranoid style, Tim Melley's work on conspiracism in popular culture actually catches the essence of the concept of the Deep State by characterizing the way movies, games, and TV depict what he calls the "covert sphere."<sup>20</sup> But Melley sees conspiracy theory only as a symptom common people's uneasiness. He attributes their attraction to such entertainment as a symptom of "agency panic," their discomfort with the influence of hidden forces and institutions in their lives. Conspiracies expressed in fiction—elite and popular level cultural products—encourage irrational conspiracy theories to proliferate in a culture infused with "agency panic" (see in Chapter 1).

Melley shows that to a surprising degree the plots of popular fiction mirror how American intelligence operatives play the same spy games that other states do, and they bend the rules because the "the ticking bomb" justifies their actions. Even more surprising, many of these mass entertainment productions are actively created or supported by the



institutions of this “covert sphere” (a theme to which we will return later in this chapter). Likewise, Charles Knight, another keen observer of conspiracism in American culture, takes a similar view of conspiracy theories. “It is arguable that a culture *of* conspiracy has become an implicit mode of operation in American politics, with the rise of the national security state over the last half-century,” he says.<sup>21</sup> Yet like Melley he regards conspiracy theory as *ipso facto* irrational, reflecting mass distrust of elites but not getting to the roots of people’s concerns.

Though skeptical of Deep State conspiracy theories, Melley himself shows in *The Covert Sphere* that fictional conspiracy theories can be a major part of what the most veiled institution of the national security state, the CIA, is charged to produce. The CIA, FBI, and other security agencies all carry out operational institutional conspiracies that are fodder for film television plots.<sup>22</sup> Deep State networks include a more nefarious sector, organized criminals, and even terrorists, providing plenty of villains and ambiguous moral hazzards for plots. Many morally hazardous relationships arise out of covert operations and reliance upon informers, what the CIA calls “assets.” They involve the agencies in parapolitics abroad, and these often blowback into the United States. In the next four sections of this chapter discuss some of the ways this happens in reality before returning to how contemporary popular culture helps hide this reality in plain sight.

### PARAPOLITICS

As already indicated, closely related to the concept of the “Deep State” is the notion of “parapolitics.” Scott describes parapolitics as a level of politics that is “repressed and denied” by mainstream journalists, pundits, and academics. This is a sphere of politics where actors resort “to decision-making and enforcement procedures outside as well as inside those publicly sanctioned by law and society.”<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere, he writes, somewhat evocative of Huntington but more ominously, “Power ‘in the dark’ is the essence of what I...[mean] by a Deep State: a power not derived from the constitution but outside and above it, ‘more powerful than the public state.’”<sup>24</sup>

Theorists associated with parapolitics the Deep State, see the exercise of elite power quite differently than envisioned by most political scientists. The latter’s orthodoxy is embodied in pluralism, a paradigm that maintains elite politics to be not inherently undemocratic. In a democratic polity, say pluralists, elites are competitive, that is, they have

conflicting interests among themselves, and must ultimately appeal to the democratic processes of representative government, especially elections.<sup>25</sup> This school of thought has long been opposed by “elitism”, of which C. Wright Mills was and is the foremost exponent.

In his influential *The Power Elite*, Mills wrote, “America is now in considerable part a formal political democracy than a democratic social structure, and even the formal political mechanics are weak.” Already in the middle of Eisenhower administration (1953–1960) Mills warned of “the decline of politics as genuine and public debate of alternative positions.” Mills avoided romanticizing the character of democracy American past, but he recognized that the erosion of what Deep State theorists would call the “public state” owed much to the changed role of the United States in international affairs and the growth of “military capitalism.”<sup>26</sup> Eisenhower expressed a similar sentiment in his famous farewell address warning about the unwarranted influence of the military–industrial complex.

Although Scott’s books have received positive reviews in some quarters, his work is often stigmatized with the dreaded “conspiracy theory” label, especially his *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK*. Though not his first book on “deep politics”, his questioning of the “lone gunman” theory in this book made what is still the most coherent, plausible case for investigating Kennedy’s murder as the result of a conspiracy. Perhaps better than the author himself, the moderator of a radio debate between Scott and Gerald Posner, whose *Case Closed* defended the Warren Commission’s finding that Oswald was the lone assassin, defined “deep politics” as “the links of mutual interest between [J. Edgar] Hoover and the FBI, organized crime, big business, and the intelligence community” that he believes led to McCarthyism, Watergate, Iran-Contra, as well as the JFK assassination.<sup>27</sup> The typical reaction to Scott’s work, when it is given any attention at all, is summed up in a review by the progressive journalist, Max Holland, who characterized *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK* as “an unreadable compendium of ‘may haves’ and ‘might haves,’ non-sequiturs, and McCarthy-style innuendo, with enough documentation to satisfy any paranoid.”<sup>28</sup>

Scott’s style does bear some of the hallmarks of the paranoid variety of conspiracy theory, with unusually copious notes and a tendency sometimes to back controversial claims with shallow citations, sometimes of his own previous work. Yet, at the same time, Scott relies extensively on public record, scrutinizing primary sources, uncovering contradictions

and gaps in the public, asking reasonable questions about why they exist, and asking what might explain the anomalies in the record. Like other kinds of radical scholarship, the very nature of his hypotheses are controversial by nature, but “innuendo”, as Holland puts it, is not part of his repertoire. And unlike many other conspiracy theorists, Scott does not hesitate to point out alternative interpretations to his own. He is often criticized for supposition, but supposition is difficult to avoid in researching conspiracies. Exposing what is “hidden” almost inevitably comes with some whiff of conspiracism. Maintenance of official secrets, often long after any threat to security exists, requires a degree of speculation because so much of the record is unavailable, lost, destroyed, or forgotten, and thus unavailable to researchers.

The secretive activities of military and intelligence institutions are not necessarily illegal. However, conspiracies are not solely defined by their being illegal. Some covert activities are legal under national laws but are done in secret mainly because they violate international norms or law. For example, in four of the many notorious interventions carried out by the CIA, such as the 1953 plot to overthrow Mohammad Mossadegh of Iran, the 1954 plot to oust President Jacobo Árbenz of Guatemala, the 1961 invasion Cuba, and the subsequent efforts to assassinate Fidel Castro (“Operation Mongoose”), all were authorized by the Executive Branch with its full consent and knowledge. In no way were these operational conspiracies carried out by rogue agents. What made them notorious was their blatant violations of the code of conduct of international relations, specifically, respect of the sovereignty of other governments. That the first two leaders were democratically elected adds to the notoriety of the Agency’s operations. Nor were these operations authorized by fully disinterested parties. The Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles and his brother, Allen, Director of the CIA, both had done legal work in private practice for oil companies in Iran and the United Fruit Company in Guatemala.

As Scott puts it, “Covert operations, when they generate or reinforce autonomous political power, almost always outlast the specific purpose for which they were designed...To put it in terms I find more precise, *para-politics*, the exercise of power by covert means, tends to metastasize into *deep politics*, an interplay of unacknowledged forces over which the original parapolitical agent no longer has control” (italics in original).<sup>29</sup> In this way, the Deep State arises from the covert exercise of coercion and surveillance by the institutions entrusted with those powers in the name of security.

The covert nature of operations can lead to activities that exceed authorized boundaries. Off-the-books money, often generated by the drug trade and other forms of trafficking, create myriad opportunities for corruption. Undercover agents may engage in what otherwise would be criminally sanctioned behavior. This often makes it difficult to ascertain whether illegal actions were corrupt, authorized, or undertaken by rogue actors.

One of the most notorious examples of metastasized corruption was the Bank of Credit and International Commerce (BCCI). The bank's seamy operations were disclosed by investigative reporting and by scrutiny from the New York Federal District Attorney. Their revelations were summarized by the *Washington Post*: "BCCI made phony loans, concealed deposits, hid huge losses, and was the bank for a host of shady customers ranging from terrorists and spies to drug runners and dictators."<sup>30</sup> Another report, by the *New York Times*, was blunt: "The bank maintained secret accounts for a collection of people and institutions that reads like a list of characters and organizations for a spy novel: Saddam Hussein, Abu Nidal, Manuel Noriega, the CIA and an assortment of drug runners and arms merchants."<sup>31</sup> An estimated \$5 billion was unaccounted for in bank records. The bank is estimated to have bribed prominent politicians in 71 different countries, prominent among them areas where American forces were involved in counter-insurgency, destabilization, or counter-criminal operations.

A US Senate Foreign Relations Committee investigation documented a long ongoing relationship between the CIA and the bank, but only after overcoming Agency resistance to providing information. The Committee report found that the CIA's use of the bank began with its efforts to investigate narco-dollar laundering, but the Agency discovered its capabilities might be of use for its own purposes. Even the Senate Foreign Relations Committee could not or would not draw a clear conclusion about whether the Agency's use of the bank was authorized or not. "The unofficial story of BCCI's links to U.S. intelligence is complicated by the inability of investigators to determine whether private persons affiliated with U.S. intelligence were undertaking actions such as selling U.S. arms to a foreign government outside ordinary channels on their own behalf, or ostensibly under sanction of a U.S. government agency, policy, or operation," according to the report. The bank's owners and clients were scattered around the globe, but key money came from Middle Eastern sources and management expertise was provided by Pakistanis.<sup>32</sup>

The BCCI might still be operating today were it not for the Iran-Contra scandal. Space here does not permit a full exploration of the

giant reach of the scandal. Suffice it to say that according to the Senate report its tentacles reached not only into the CIA, but also into Hill and Knowlton, a public relations firm that played a key role in creating public support for the First Iraq War; to Kissinger Associates; and to Clark Clifford and Robert Altman, highly connected Washington lawyers. The Senate report said, "The correspondence also highlights BCCI's focus on doing business with, and ability, given its \$23 billion in reported assets and 73 countries of operation, to attract interest from some of the most politically well-connected people in the United States."<sup>33</sup>

In the case of Iran-Contra operations, National Security officials were careful to maintain "plausible deniability" for President Reagan. This tactic itself is a type of conspiracy—a kind of prophylactic cover-up, but with the eyes of officials in the public state half open. Its purpose is to limit damage to the presidency should their activities come to light. Reagan was known to have taken a keen interest in supporting the Nicaraguan Contra insurgency against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. The operational conspiracy to bring down the democratically elected Sandinista government was, in fact, unlawful under international conventions to which the United States was a signatory, was a violation of an explicit Congressional prohibition on spending to support the Contras, and upon revelation did subject its perpetrators to a high degree of domestic embarrassment, given that it was funded in part by arms sales to Iran and its revolutionary government. However, the operation was not "rogue." It was carried out under the direction and approval of officials that otherwise were authorized to initiate covert activities. Here, the "Deep State" was not evading the authority of the executive branch but the democratic, constitutional authority of Congress.

If the belief that the CIA and other actors of the national security apparatus were part of a conspiracy to murder President Kennedy were ever to be fully substantiated (an unlikely prospect), this would constitute a rogue operation more akin to the way that similar agencies often operate in Turkey, Pakistan, Egypt, and other politically unstable regimes. But "the Deep State did it" is not much of a hypothesis. Even if a "smoking gun" implicating the CIA or other national security actors in the assassination is ever found, this does not mean that these agencies and their employees acted in one coordinated manner to kill Kennedy or to set him up to be killed. In fact, the history of the US Intelligence Community is rife with bureaucratic rivalries and competition for turf

and resources. We should not assume that the 17 national intelligence organizations and their 70,000 employees<sup>34</sup> would all be collectively guilty of such a major crime.

The Manichean logic of the Cold War and the fact that the first generation of CIA officials were employed in dirty operations rationalized by anti-communism lends some credence to the claim that many in the military-industrial complex had motive to assassinate Kennedy. It is often a criticism of conspiracy theories that they rely on motive as proof; that is a fair point, but we should not regard motive as immaterial to a conspiracy belief. Perhaps no career illustrates this phenomenon more than of the CIA's James Angleton. Testifying to the Church Committee, Angleton himself asserted, "It is inconceivable that a secret arm of the government has to comply with all the overt orders of the government."<sup>35</sup> His ruthlessness makes one wonder just what limits, if any there were on his dedication to thwart anything he perceived (real or not) that might lead to retreat from victory over Moscow. His career illustrates how the secrecy and culture of the US intelligence community make it an incubator for conspiracies and conspiracy theories.

Angleton's career began during World War II in Italy in the CIA's predecessor, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). In his training and service in that theater, he forged relationships with Allen Dulles, William Donovan, Richard Helms, and other major figures of the Cold War era CIA. In line with the priorities of American foreign policy in the post-World War II era (i.e., not acting as a rogue agent), Angleton played an important role in covert efforts to undermine the Communist Party, which had emerged as the single most popular political party in Italy, thanks in part to its leading role in the Resistance. To this end, he worked with the two most powerful institutions in Italian society, the Catholic Church and the Mafia, and he also rehabilitated many officials associated with Mussolini's Fascist party to enlist them in the anti-communist cause. From this milieu, he returned to the United States, and from 1954 to 1974 he headed the CIA's Counter Intelligence Staff. Jefferson Morley, the most recent of several Angleton biographers, describes Angleton as a "dogmatic and conspiratorial operator whose idiosyncratic theories paralyzed the agency's operations...at the height of the Cold War, and whose domestic surveillance operations targeting American dissidents had discredited the CIA in the court of public opinion."<sup>36</sup>

One of the most chilling accounts of Angleton's fanaticism and capacity for cruelty comes from Gerald Posner's *Case Closed*, which is dedicated to arguing that Oswald acted alone to assassinate Kennedy.<sup>37</sup> Angleton was obsessed with ferreting out Soviet plants inside the spy agency. He was convinced that a defector, Yuri Nosenko, who claimed that Oswald was little regarded by Soviet intelligence and therefore not likely to have acted on their behalf, was a double agent. Besides being convinced that Nosenko was a mole, Angleton thought the defector was hiding information linking Oswald to the KGB during the former's time in Russia. Angleton's suspicions convinced Richard Helms, then a deputy director, to persuade the Warren Commission not to rely on Nosenko as a witness.

According to the Posner, the CIA denied the FBI access to Nosenko. Starting on April 4, 1964, after putting him through a lie detector test administered by a biased technician, Angleton had Nosenko subjected to a strip search and imprisoned in a tiny attic room in the capital, with nothing but a metal bed fastened to the floor for furniture. He was told he would be kept in the room, without heat or air conditioning, for 25 years, fed minimally, and subjected to harsh interrogation. He was moved after 16 months to a CIA training camp and kept in a concrete bunker, with subsistence food only, and monitored by closed-circuit TV. He was finally allowed some exercise. Nosenko never broke, infuriating Angleton and his co-conspirator, Tennant "Pete" Bagley, who at one point urged liquidating the defector. In 1969, Nosenko was finally released and accepted as a real defector.

There have been disputes over the veracity of Nosenko's account of his treatment and about his status, but the main point here is that Angleton's paranoia about Soviet defectors trumped in his mind any need to have Nosenko provide information undermining the notion that the Soviets and Cuba might have been involved in Kennedy's murder. Kennedy was a Cold Warrior, and projections about how the Cold War could have come to a much earlier end and terminated the arms race, a theory mounted in the opening minutes of Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) are wildly, speculatively optimistic. Less speculative, however, is the singular paranoia of Angleton, Hoover, and many of their contemporaries in the Cold War era who were convinced that Kennedy was moving toward what later, in the Nixon/Kissinger years, could be called a *détente*. They had fought communism by cooperating with Mafioso's, funded rebel armies in Southeast Asia and corrupt warlords in China,

abetted drug running, carried out surveillance of private US citizens, carried out and attempted assassinations of Third World leaders, experimented with brainwashing techniques and mind-altering drugs, among many other operations dedicated to that cause. That they participated in a conspiracy to assassinate Kennedy is far from proven, but neither can it be dismissed. That they participated in one conspiracy—obstruction of an investigation into the murder of the President of the United States—is a fully warranted. Why remains unanswered.

### THE CONSPIRATORIAL ROOTS OF NATIONAL SECURITY IDEOLOGY AND INSTITUTIONS

The origins of the national security complex are often traced to National Security Act of 1947, which provided the legal basis for coordination of the military services, the creation of the CIA and the National Security Agency, and the National Security Council, among other measures. However, planning for a large permanent military and intelligence establishment began even before the United States entered into World War II, and in quite conspiratorial fashion. In September 1939, more than two years before Pearl Harbor, the New York-based and Rockefeller Foundation funded Council and Foreign Relations approached the State Department about collaborating on a secret study of how various outcomes of the ongoing European war would affect the interests of the United States. The 1947 legislation later linked the results of this study to the concept of “national security,” a phrase that was not part of American political language before World War II. The idea was linked in turn to “containment” of Communism, implying the need for a defensive response to a world conspiracy. The Department of War (as it had been called since 1789) was renamed the “Department of Defense.”

The foundational legislation for the national security state coincided with the unparalleled power enjoyed by the United States at the time and the determination of internationalist elites to use that power to lay the basis for a liberal international economic and political order. Having emerged from World War II with its economic infrastructure virtually unscathed, and with much of Europe and Japan (the only industrialized economy in Asia) in ruins, a mythology developed around the notion that in building a permanent military establishment and war economy the United States, unselfishly and without pretense to a territorial



empire of any size, simply found itself called upon to take up the burden of world hegemony in defense of freedom and the quest for global peace and prosperity. It would thus seem that hegemony was thrust upon Americans, not sought after.

In contrast, the pre-war War-Peace Studies<sup>38</sup> brought together corporate elites, key State Department planners, and intellectuals from the nation's top universities, all of whom constituted the vanguard of an internationalist elite that had been frustrated by the political obstacles posed by isolationists to expansion of American leadership after World War I. Among key conclusions drawn by the group two stand out. One was that the United States could cope with German domination of the European continent but could not permit the markets and natural resources of the European empires, especially the British Empire, to fall into German hands. The elites also rejected acceptance of Japanese competition for influence in Asia and recommended an embargo, which President Roosevelt implemented.

The other conclusion was that the United States would have to break with its tradition of dismantling its war economy and reducing the size and funding of the military after the conclusion of the war. Elites planned in secret, with absolutely no public consultation, to make perhaps the most important decision about the country's future after the war. The Study concluded that the "foremost requirement of the United States in a world in which it proposes to hold unquestioned power is the rapid fulfillment of a program of complete rearmament." Rather bluntly, the elite made clear that the measures should be taken to ensure that war aims (already assuming the United States entry into the war) not be stated in a way that they "seemed to be concerned solely with Anglo-American imperialism." The interests of Africans, Latin Americans, and Asians, not only Europeans, should be stressed because "This would have a better propaganda effect."<sup>39</sup>

The War-Peace project comes as close as we may ever see to fitting criteria for that rare occurrence, a "grand" conspiracy to construct a world order (see Chapter 2). It was conducted in the strictest secrecy, and its results were maintained classified until well after the war. Even after publication, the collusion among some of the country's most powerful economic and political elites as well as influential academics was largely ignored in post-War literature in political science and history; its prescient pre-war consensus on militarization and propaganda remained veiled by the myth of the beneficent hegemon.

One must admire the capacity of the internationalist-minded planners to envision a post-World order that would avoid the calamities that ensued after World War I. But like virtually all conspiracies, their project could not prosper in the absence of historical, social, and economic conditions that suited the moment. Furthermore, not everything unfolded as the elite cabal anticipated or wished. Most importantly, we cannot attribute the emergence of the post-War order to the elite collusion. Their secret planning must be categorized as an operational, not a grand conspiracy, despite scale of their vision for the post-War world. Besides the propitious social and economic forces, the scale of destruction helped make the War/Peace blueprint viable at the end of the war. The elites were not omniscient about the way the war would be conducted. Certainly, they did not anticipate nuclear weapons. There would be significant divisions in elite circles about post-war relations with the Soviet Union, with President Roosevelt anticipating integration of the Soviet bloc into the new world order, and other liberal and conservative elites more bent on isolation or containment.

Absent historical accounts of the secret pre-War planning by internationalist oriented elites, we fail to capture the role of human agency in the process. Viewing the elite planning process as an operational conspiracy brings into question the kind of “manifest destiny” approach to American hegemony and the nation’s imagined role as a “beacon” showing the way to a liberal world almost utopian in its conception. Conspiracy theory serves as a gateway to recovering historical memory and our understanding of our place in history. It also highlights how effectively the processes of democracy were insulated from the transition of US political culture from one of suspicion of a military establishment to a permanent war economy and national security state. The pre-war origins of US international policy teach us to raise questions about the neoliberal “new world order” that President George Bush saw emerging in a speech after the First Gulf War in 1991, in particular about its “inevitability” (see Chapter 5).<sup>40</sup>

### INSTITUTIONALIZED CONSPIRACY

The most secretive institution of American liberal democracy to come out of elite planning is the CIA. The CIA’s authorization to carry out covert operations, that is, conspiracies abroad, was not clearly authorized by its founding legislation, the National Security Act of 1947. That Act

charges the CIA only with various advising, evaluation, and coordinating function for the new National Security Council, plus assuming other functions and duties assigned it by the National Security Council. These latter assigned functions were subsequently interpreted to include covert operations; presidential directives and congressional budget authorization provide some further legal grounding for covert operations.<sup>41</sup>

We can classify the CIA's operational section's activities as "institutionalized conspiracy." A recent use of "institutionalized" in another context may clarify its nature and distinctiveness. In December 2016, the World Doping Agency (WDA) produced a report detailing "systematic doping" of 1000 Olympic athletes in 30 different sports from 2011 to 2015, attributing the cheating to a conspiracy among the Russian Sports Ministry, national anti-doping agency, and the Federal Security Service (a domestic intelligence organization). This was a secret ongoing operation that clearly was sanctioned by the Russian state, not a rogue operation by coaches or bureaucrats in these agencies. No Russians laws were broken; the doping was undertaken for reasons of state, and it was secret. For this reason, the WDA has no hesitation in identifying the Russian operation as an institutional conspiracy.<sup>42</sup> So too can we say this about CIA covert activities. The thesis here is the Agency is an institutional incubator of conspiracies; most are authorized, but the environment also spawns rogue operations.

In *The Covert Sphere*, Melley provides a chilling account of several early operations and experiments carried out by the CIA, never really authorized through a deliberative democratic process, nor given significant oversight by the elected Congress. Melley argues that a short-lived brainwashing episode of the early Cold War shaped the "cultural imagery of the covert sphere" in an emblematic way. The CIA's obsession with brainwashing started with an unfounded belief that soldiers who chose to remain in North Korea at the end of the war must have been brainwashed to make such a choice, and that some of those returning could be domestic plants. *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) film would seize on this conspiracy theory as a plot device. The CIA programs to thwart the imagined Korean operation soon turned into an attempt by the Agency to gain the ability to brainwash and to refine methods of torture used in interrogations. Melley writes, "Brainwashing began as an orientalist propaganda fiction created by the CIA to mobilize domestic support for a massive military build-up. This fiction proved so effective that elements of U.S. intelligence believed it and began a furious search for a real mind-control weapon."<sup>43</sup> That search was futile, but, it provided

the model for “enhanced interrogation” that Trump, though he says he defers to the CIA’s rejection of its use, would support reinstituting.

Maintaining support for institutional conspiracy requires that the public be convinced of its necessity. This can be demonstrated to the public in a number of ways, through popular culture, leaked reports, and dramatization in hearings and trials. The trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg provided such an opportunity, says Melley. Acknowledging that Julius almost surely did pass secrets to the Soviets, Melley nonetheless shows that the court proceedings against both Rosenbergs were a show trial in which evidence of secrets allegedly passed to the Soviets had the propaganda effect of demonstrating the need for and function of a covert sphere. What was most important about the atomic spying trials of the 1950s, he says, “was not their secret *content* (italics in the original), but their purported revelation of the covert sector itself. They offered the public a window into the shadow world of spies and government agents and government agents operating beneath the rational public sphere.”<sup>44</sup> Though Melley eschews the concept, I contend that such a “shadow world” is emblematic of a Deep State.

Even the official histories or informed accounts of historians and analysts without an axe to grind against the CIA and other agencies reveal activities not only subject to moral and legal objections but also replete with plans and secret technological research that border on science fiction. Many of these activities were revealed by the post-Watergate Senate investigations (the Church Committee).<sup>45</sup> For a few years, less than a decade, the Committee’s work produced increased restraint and congressional oversight. Temporarily, the Deep State became shallower. That state of affairs did not last long, beginning to disappear during the last years of the Carter administration with the decision in 1978 to support Mujahedeen fighters against the Soviet supported government in Afghanistan, and then it almost vanished in the Reagan years.

The Iran-Contra scandal generated congressional hearings but in retrospect, we can see that compared to the post-Watergate investigations, these had much less impact on the resurgent Deep State. Consider the career of Elliot Abrams, who was one of the key orchestrators of Iran-Contra and was convicted of withholding information from Congress about the affair. What he withheld was important information about one of the most notorious civilian massacres (El Mozote) by a US trained and armed Salvadoran military unit during the War in El Salvador. He also negotiated a \$10 million contribution from the Sultan of Brunei to

the Contras, who were actively engaged in terrorist activities against the Nicaraguan people.<sup>46</sup> As Assistant Secretary of State for InterAmerican Affairs, Abrams worked under William Casey, one of the veteran Cold Warriors of the CIA, who served as Reagan's campaign treasurer and his CIA director from 1981 until 1987. Despite his key role in one of the most notorious scandals and as a key shaper of US policies in Central America in the 1980s, Abrams went on to serve in the Bush (junior) administration, and today he is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and serves on the Committee of Conscience of the US Holocaust Museum.<sup>47</sup> He has never expressed regret for his role.<sup>48</sup>

The attempt by Reagan officials to use the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), an agency vital to the capacity of the state to respond to catastrophes (natural or human-made), to suppress dissent illustrates the persistence of threats to liberal democratic norms posed by Deep State actors. The most visible human actor in this episode was Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North. North was joined by other administration hawks in a plot that seems more like an updated remake of Sinclair Lewis's 1935 novel *It Can't Happen Here*<sup>49</sup> than the serious, actual covert operation that its authors planned to carry out. But it was hardly fiction.

Reduced to its essentials, in 1984 North, while serving as the National Security Agency liaison to FEMA, drafted a plan to suspend the Constitution, impose martial law throughout the United States, put FEMA in control of the US government, and appoint military commanders to control the state and local governments. North's plan built upon plans that already existed in the blueprint for continuity of government (COG) in case of nuclear attack or a widespread national catastrophe.<sup>50</sup> North at that time was also coordinating the illegal, secret aid and training program for the Nicaraguan Contras. North and his colleagues hatched a plan to use expanded FEMA authority to roundup and detain protesters against American military intervention in Central America in agency camps. Anticipating that a direct American invasion in Central America could generate mass protests like those of the Vietnam War era, North wanted to be prepared. At the time he and his colleagues were also planning to have American troops invade the scarcely populated northeast corner of Nicaragua and place the Contra political leadership in control, then have the US recognize that group the legitimate government of Nicaragua.

Attorney General William French-Smith vetoed the plan, which had already been presented to President Reagan in the form of an Executive Order for him to sign—but not to reveal publicly until an actual

emergency would be declared. Whether Reagan ever actually signed it is not clear. The operation was scuttled when Attorney General William French-Smith became alarmed and protested the plan to National Security Advisor Robert McFarland.

Days before North was to appear before the Senate Iran-Contra Committee, Knight-Ridder Newspapers carried an investigative report detailing the plan based on a secret draft report compiled by the Senate Committees chief counsel, Arthur Liman.<sup>51</sup> When North appeared, Congressman Jack Brooks (D-Texas) began to question the Lieutenant Colonel about the plan, but he was gavelled out of order by the chairman of the joint committee, Senator Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii), who insisted that testimony on the matter could only be taken in closed session, justifying his action on grounds that “continuity of government” (see below) was a sensitive national security priority.<sup>52</sup> As a result, the Committee’s Iran-Contra report, while highly informative and detailed in many respects, never touched upon what its chief counsel regarded as a highly sensitive matter—and the full plot, though reported in a few newspapers, remained deeply submerged.

Institutional checks, specifically, the action of the Attorney General, scuttled the North plan on Nicaragua, but one can question whether they would have worked had Edwin Meese, Smith’s predecessor, who was involved in Central American planning and had a close relationship with General Efraín Ríos Montt, Guatemala’s fierce dictator, been still in office. It is questionable whether any institutional check would have responded effectively once US troops were on the ground in Central America. Protests, which at already involved hundreds of thousands of opponents of US Central America policy, would have mobilized at even greater levels, but the repression would have been exercised more ruthlessly as well.

Liman’s report, according to the Knight-Ridder story, depicted North’s Central America planning group as a “government within a government,” effectively a rogue operation. However, as already noted, North directly reported to the National Security Advisor, and supporting the Contras was one of few policy matters (the other being “Star Wars” missile defense) that Ronald Reagan intensely cared about. His Vice President, former CIA director George H. W. Bush, was charged with special responsibility for Central America policy. In other words, the FEMA plan was an institutional conspiracy, not a rogue operation. Though it ultimately unraveled, this suppressed plan may be considered the most threatening conspiracy lending warrant to the theory presented

here that the Deep State is a product of a national security culture and an institutional milieu (“sphere”) that spawns conspiracies of this nature.

Given the nature of world nuclear armaments, increased threats of mass violence by non-state actors, and the scale of destruction and casualties that could occur from some plausible natural disasters (e.g., mass epidemics), the notion of planning for COG is rational. This is precisely why involving FEMA in surveillance and social control is not only threatening to democracy but also threatening to one of the very basic functions of government, dealing with calamities that require social and national solidarity. One well-documented confounding of FEMA’s legitimate mandate with abuses of privacy and other rights was carried out in 1981, around the same time as the Iran-Contra operation, when FEMA and other government bureaucracies launched the secret Project 908. FEMA, the FBI and other agencies at all levels of government started systematically searching out facilities outside of anticipated blast zones in the event of war. Certainly, in this respect planning is prudent, but the program also, according to the journalist Garret Graff, included identifying possible counterintelligence and spying threats, assessing local immigrant populations, running background checks for possible criminal connections of owners of buildings and businesses, and investigating political affiliations.<sup>53</sup> All of this was done in an era before terrorism replaced Communism as the enemy, and in a period where the American propensity toward “know-nothingism” was in relative abeyance. We cannot know whether similar plans exist in some version today.

We can draw a contrast between how the investigation of Russian collusion has become so partisan with how the Congressional Committee investigating Iran-Contra of 1987 drew firm, bipartisan boundaries designed to wall off public debate about what should have been a very troublesome aspect of the affair, the COG/FEMA plans. This willingness can be attributed to a bipartisan effort to protect the presidency as an institution. In 1992, President Clinton seemed to have ended COG planning altogether, but what his executive order did was only to end planning for a nuclear attack. President Reagan, in two executive orders of November 18, 1988, had already expanding COG and FEMA planning for any emergency and assigned the FEMA director to advise the National Security Council on preparedness.<sup>54</sup> In fact, Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney had continued to practice how COG would be implemented during the Reagan years and later as civilian CEOs of major corporations. On September 11, 2001 they put some of that practice into motion and implemented a number of measures still available to the president and the

Deep State today, including readying Executive Order 13,224, authorizing the president independent of the courts to take measures against “persons who commit, threat to commit, or support terrorism.” Subsequent actions long before readied include putting together a legal team to implement more measure concentrating power in the executive branch and (led by John Yoo) a justification for torture (“enhanced interrogation”).<sup>55</sup>

Coming little more than a decade after the Vietnam debacle and Watergate, and after seven years under Reagan of restoration of American capacity to intervene with open use of force overseas, (beginning with the invasion of Grenada in 1983 and continuing with deployment of American “trainers” in Central America), American elites were reluctant to fully expose the depth of the conspiracy conceived by North and company. Polarized partisanship is unlikely to spare the Trump presidency in this same way, but this is counterbalanced by the staunch partisan defense of Trump by Congressional Republicans.

The questions about COG should have arisen in another important government investigation, that of the special commission to examine the 9/11 attacks. Scott, who has not endorsed any version of Truther theory, has suggested that “[Vice President] Dick Cheney responded to 9/11 by using devious means to install a small cabal of lawyers – most notoriously John Yoo – who proceeded conspiratorially in the next weeks to exclude their superiors, while secretly authorizing measures ranging from warrantless surveillance and detention to torture.”<sup>56</sup> Cheney and Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense, were colleagues going back to the Ford administration (1974–1976). Cheney was the ranking Republican Representative on the joint congressional Iran-Contra Committee, where he played an instrumental role in limiting the Committee’s investigatory reach. He and Rumsfeld have been ardent exponents of strengthening the executive prerogatives of the presidency. Scott’s article relies largely on the work of mainstream, respected investigative reporters and recently (2016) declassified files to make a strong circumstantial case that Cheney and Rumsfeld used 9/11 as a pretext for a declaration of emergency, now in its 18th year, having been extended by both Presidents Obama and (in September 2017) Trump.

We should not assume that the interests and motives of security agencies have remained unchanged since their founding. Specifically, the kind of cutthroat, feverish anti-communism of the first decades of the Cold War, which make plausible (but not fully warranted; see Chapter 2) suspicions about involvement of security agencies in the assassination of John F. Kennedy, does not necessarily define the global perspective of



these agencies today. The collapse of the Berlin Wall and then the Soviet Union led to a shift for a decade away from spying to get the upper hand in geopolitical conflicts, as defined by the Cold War ideological rivalry, to intelligence to aid American business to compete in the new neoliberal global order that seemed to be taking root. The attacks on the Twin Towers and Pentagon on September 11, 2001, shifted priorities once again toward fighting an amorphous and war without end, baptized the “War on Terrorism.” The work of intelligence agencies has also been impacted by new challenges posed by cyber communications technology and by the debacle of the neoconservative-engineered second-Iraq War.

Trump’s use of executive power demonstrates how the failure of Congress to expose the North plan for martial law and abuse of FEMA authority during Iran-Contra may come back to haunt us. In reaction to Black Lives Matter protests and to protests aimed at blocking the controversial North Dakota Access Pipeline, Trump issued an Executive Order calling for a review of laws stiffening criminal penalties, not only for alleged violent incidents at protests but also for illegal action in general. More than 30 states by May 2017 had bills pending stiffening regulation of nonviolent protests. Advanced in the context of mass demonstrations against police killings of blacks and several deadly ambushes of police officers, these bills cast a broad net that in some cases would reverse the burden of proof in some criminal cases, virtually requiring defendants to produce surveillance video to demonstrate their innocence of charges of obstructing not only police, but also in some cases civilian federal employees.<sup>57</sup>

Probably few readers need to be convinced that in many ways the rhetoric and some of the policy positions of Trump, should they come to be fully implemented, represent a dramatic break from the worldview articulated in the War-Peace Studies represents. The inconsistencies and vagaries of Trump’s appointments and policies since the election portend not so much a break with American hegemonic pretensions so much as a confused and conflicted worldview. What is significant about Trumpism is not a clean break with internationalism so much as a threat to the domestic hegemony of American hegemonic leadership. It certainly represents a severe threat to the optimistic view of the post-Cold War world articulated by George H. W. Bush in 1991 in his speech heralding a New World Order—which subsequently and quickly, we should note, was appropriated as the moniker for revival and dissemination of conspiracy theories about United Nations black helicopter sightings and myths evocative of the Illuminati.

## DONALD TRUMP AND THE DEEP STATE

What does all this mean for the claims by Donald Trump that the Deep State has attempted to scuttle his presidency? The Deep State is not, I have argued, a “conspirator,” but an opaque sphere of politics where security agencies, the military, police, and (increasingly) actors to whom intelligence, military, and police functions have been privatized. To address the politics of the Deep State we must first ask in what ways Trump might threaten parts of the Deep State by his policies, rhetoric, decisions, and behavior, and how might the relevant Deep State actors respond. The fact that sectors of the Deep State might differ in this respect, as well as the opaque nature of politics in this sector, make the answers somewhat difficult to ascertain. Ultimately, any conspiracy theory must show more than motive; it must address evidence.

The Deep State sphere of politics has acquired more prominence in our politics, but its relationship to Donald Trump is considerably more complicated than it has been with any past president, possibly excepting Kennedy. The theme of a Deep State became a weapon of discourse for an administration that even before Trump inaugurated president. Without using the term directly at that time, the president-elect decided to go on the offensive against several national security institutions, including the FBI, the National Security Agency, and the CIA. Yet, throughout his campaign and presidency, Trump has draped his positions and policies in the mantle of hypernationalism and sought to significantly increase the autonomy of police and military. He has placed high military staff in positions, including Secretary of Defense, usually reserved for civilians. Trump has outsourced to theater commanders approval of both Special Forces operations and drone strikes in the territory of other sovereign countries to theatre commanders around the world. This autonomy may be something that military commanders resist returning in the future. At home, Trump regime encourages with its rhetoric alt-right groups that include some sectors with paramilitary tendencies.

Trump repeatedly called for investigations of leaks from the FBI and of alleged illegal surveillance by the National Security Agency, and on multiple occasions suggested that the Agency’s finding of Russian interference in the election was fabricated to bring his legitimacy into question. Clearly, Trump has political motives to cast doubt on these agencies. Throughout 2017 and early into 2018, the headlines, when not generated by the words of the president himself, were dominated by

leaks from sources in the White House but also from the security bureaucracy and possibly investigators that are part of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's team. Trump's claims about leaks are not at all implausible—even acknowledging that many seem to have originated within the White House itself. Cristopher Wray, appointed FBI Director after Trump replaced Comey, reassigned the agency's top lawyer in a move that raised questions about leaks and about NSA surveillance.<sup>58</sup>

There is historical precedent for the security establishment to contribute to the fall of a president. Members of the national security apparatus, most notably within the FBI, contributed to President Richard Nixon's fall by leaking information to the media about Watergate. In fact, Oliver Stone, who is most notorious among those who reject conspiracy theory for *JFK*, made a film, *Nixon* (1995), with a plotline in which Richard Helms, the Director of the CIA at the time, plays an instrumental role. Under threat of a lawsuit, the scene with Helms was withheld from the theatrical release, only to be reinstated in the subsequent video.

In the film, Nixon visits Helms, concerned that the CIA has maintained files stemming from the politician's vice-presidency that would be politically embarrassing. The records have to do with Nixon's chairing the "special operations" group that oversaw some the Agency's most notorious projects, including efforts to overthrow Fidel Castro. In the film, Nixon wants Helms to gather up and deliver the files. Helms turns the tables, making it clear that Nixon's constitutional authority is no match for the most powerful figure in the Deep State, a man accustomed, despite his reputed skepticism about covert and paramilitary operations, to the exercise of authorized (under domestic, not international law) covert power. Helms had been involved in ruthless and violent covert operations overseas in places like Vietnam, Guatemala, the Congo, Indonesia and myriad other bloody battlefields of the Cold War. Though there was no love lost between Helms and Nixon, this account, much like key scenes in *JFK*, consist mostly of Stone's attempting to fill gaps in the historical record with a Deep State conspiracy theory. In fact, the CIA directorship is a civil service; its director is not subject to removal by the president. Ultimately Helms did resign at the beginning of Nixon's second term, accepting an ambassadorship to Iran.

While Stone is an accomplished filmmaker, he is reviled in many corners, accused of disregard for historical fact and tagged with the dreaded label, "conspiracy theorist." However, as Melley maintains in *The Covert State*, we largely rely upon fiction to depict the reality of the politics of

national security. And there is nothing fictional about the questionable constitutionality of the power wielded by Helms and Nixon as the CIA and other agencies carried out covert operations in the Cold War. Besides Helm's involvement in overseas and destabilization operations abroad, it is noteworthy that under Helms directorship, according to reporting by the *New York Times* reporter Seymour Hersh in 1974, "[I]ntelligence files on at least 10,000 American citizens were maintained by a special unit of the C.I.A. that was reporting directly to Richard Helms, then the Director of Central Intelligence."<sup>59</sup>

There are indications that many career military and intelligence officers are deeply concerned about the Trump administration. Josh Campbell, a Special Agent in the FBI for ten years, wrote an op-ed column for the *New York Times* explaining that he was resigning, "So I can join the growing chorus of people who believe that the relentless attacks on the bureau undermine not just America's premier law enforcement agency but also the nation's security. My resignation is painful, but the alternative of remaining quiet while the bureau is tarnished for political gain is impossible."<sup>60</sup>

American security has been associated closely with the exercise of hegemony, and Trumpian populism and policies have shaken the consensus about these principles. Campbell's claim, however, is also that the bureau's reputation is being tarnished for "political gain." This refrain, leaving aside its truth or falsity, is a common complaint of security forces in countries where political corruption is especially rampant. Political corruption may not be as pervasive in the US as in countries where episodes of military rule occur frequently. But the public dissension of some retired American security officials is a sign of divisions and discontent characteristic of countries undergoing decay of civilian control of the military and democratic political institutions.<sup>61</sup>

This chapter neither argue that the Deep State killed John F. Kennedy, nor does it find persuasive Truther theories about Bush administration involvement in the 9/11 attacks. They are certainly not "warranted" in the sense of having the credibility of Watergate conspiracy theories. However, I do agree with Scott, probably the prominent exponent of the claim that the United States has a Deep State, when he argues that recurrent scandals in American politics since World War II point to patterns of "parapolitics" carried out by agencies that operate activities undercover, engaging in institutional conspiracies and abuses of power that commissions investigating them and the representative organs

of Congress are unwilling or unable to fully bring to light.<sup>62</sup> What serves us best is to research, as Scott advocated on the eve of the 2016 election, “the politics of 911, Iran-Contra, the assassinations and duplicity of the Vietnam War era, and other large-scale Washington scandals.”<sup>63</sup> The polarization of US politics Trump is likely to make that even harder to achieve regarding Russiagate and Spycgate alike.

Transparency in all security matters may be an illusory ideal. Confidentiality and secrecy are justifiable in the face of actual threats to security, with respect to individual privacy, and in order to facilitate negotiations and in diplomacy. However, virtually every major scandal in American politics since World War II has had a connection to the institutions associated with the Deep State. McCarthyism was enabled by the uncommon power and political autonomy of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. McCarthy’s chief counsel, Roy Cohn, served as Federal Prosecutor in New York, and played an instrumental role in Trump’s rise to national celebrity. The Watergate burglars were a team called the “White House Plumbers,” formed to “plug leaks” from inside the Nixon administration and included CIA veterans E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy. The Iran-Contra operation, including the transfer of receipts from arms sales to the Nicaraguan contras, was coordinated out of the National Security Administration as a way of evading Congressional restrictions of funding for the insurgents, who used terrorist tactics in their war against the Sandinistas.

Although Scott’s work has attracted considerable notoriety for the questions it has raised about the Kennedy assassination, his questioning of the handling anomalies and suspicions about 9/11, Watergate, and Iran-Contra have contributed to bringing out of the shadows the way that US military and intelligence agencies (and increasingly, privatized security services) have worked closely with counterpart agencies and forces abroad that severely violate human rights, engage in paramilitary activities, and are entangled with various forms of trafficking and the underground economy. Referring to the likely involvement of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) with militants connected to the 9/11 attacks, Scott writes,

[T]he mystery of 9/11 must be unraveled at a deeper level, the ongoing groups inside and outside governments, in both Pakistan and America, which have continued to use groups like al Qaeda and individuals like Ahmad [referring to ISI chief, Lieutenant-General Mahmoud Ahmad], for

their own policy purposes...The ongoing collaboration of the ISI and CIA in promoting terrorist violence has created a complex conspiratorial milieu, in which governments now have a huge stake in preventing the emergence of truth.<sup>64</sup>

Going to a “deeper level” requires us to delve more deeply into the origins of the national security state, and also to ask why the serial scandals involving its institutions usually seem to disappear from our collective historical memory. It also is the kind of research that is subject to discipline by the regime of truth, and it will be as long as terming secretive collaboration among elites is treated as taboo.

Many of Trump’s most passionate opponents hold the theory that he owes his occupancy of the presidential office to collusion between his campaign and Russian operatives acting under direction of President Vladimir Putin. Trump’s ability to avoid removal from office by Congress may ultimately depend upon him and his media allies’ attempts to discredit an investigation of his campaign’s collusion with Russians seeking to influence the election. To accomplish this goal, Trump supporters responded with their own conspiracy theory, arguing that the collusion story has been hyped by the mainstream “fake” media and fed by leaks from a “Deep State” of Washington bureaucrats and national security agencies.

On March 9, 2017, Sean Hannity, the *Fox News* commentator and staunch Trump supporter, called for Trump to remove Obama era holdovers more rapidly from the federal bureaus. The *Fox* headline for his editorial read, “Opinion: Trump must purge deep-state bureaucrats now.” The next day, the administration dismissed 46 federal prosecutors appointed by President Obama. The replacement of federal prosecutors by a new president is not itself unusual, but calling for a “purge” of all holdovers of the previous administration from the federal government certainly is. One would have to go back to the McCarthy era to find right-wing media referring to career civil servants as political “saboteurs,” as Hannity does. Perhaps not coincidentally, one of the fired prosecutors, New York’s Preet Bharara, had been asked by watchdogs from the federal bureaucracy to investigate Trump for allegedly violating the emoluments clause of the Constitution.

On June 6, 2017, Trump used a tweet to promote Hannity’s evening show referring to leaks to the *Washington Post* as the work of the Deep State. Trump’s son, Donald Trump Jr., tweeted on July 7, 2017, “If

there was ever confirmation that the Deep State is real, & endangers national security, it's this. Their interests above all else [sic]," said Trump Jr., referring to an article in the right-wing Free Beacon claiming that leaks were happening on a daily basis.<sup>65</sup> Throughout Trump's first year in the presidency his supporters used the megaphone of *Breitbart News*, *Fox News*, and other right-wing outlets, including Alex Jones' notoriously conspiratorial *Infowars*, to accuse the intelligence community of conspiring to remove Donald Trump from the presidency through selective leaks of damaging allegations about his campaign's collusion with the Russian government to influence the 2016 election.

The response campaign was set in motion by *Breitbart News* when it published a warning of trouble four days before the members of the Electoral College were to vote. Entitled "The Deep State vs. Donald Trump" and written by "Virgil," widely believed to be Steve Steve Bannon's pen name, the editorial contended that the Democratic Party, the mainstream media, and "affluent residents of the Washington swamp" were "operating behind the scenes" to block, or at least delegitimize and "cripple" Trump's presidency. The article warned readers that the CIA had twisted and exaggerated evidence to promote the theory that Russia's Vladimir Putin had his "hand of the scale." Virgil alleged that the agency had been coopted by "liberal apparatchiks" implanted during the Obama years; establishment Republicans, said the opinion piece, had joined them in opposition to the President.<sup>66</sup>

As argued in Chapters 2 and 4, an assessment of this conspiracy theory does not require an absolute rejection or acceptance. Given the disruptive nature of the Trump presidency—putting neoliberal globalization into question, breaking alliances, directly attacking the institutions of the national security state, motive exists for the Deep State to want Trump removed. He would, after all, be replaced by a vice president that has a warm relationship with the Dark Money lords (see Chapter 6) and economic elites in general. Motives to undermine Trump exist not only among career civil servants in domestic agencies but also for at least a significant part of those serving in the military and intelligence bureaucracy and the foreign diplomatic corps.

A clue to the levels of concern among foreign policy elites about Trump can be found in the comments of Republican Senator Bob Corker, chair of the Senate Armed Service Committee. Corker said that most Republican senators realized that Trump was a threat to the general world order. Referring to Trump's "volatility," Corker said, "[They]

understand the volatility that we're dealing with and the tremendous amount of work that it takes by people around him to keep him in the middle of the road," adding, "As long as there are people like that around him who are able to talk him down when he gets spun up, you know, calm him down and continue to work with him before a decision gets made, I think we'll be fine."<sup>67</sup> *Breitbart News* interpreted Corker's remarks as indicating that "that most Republican senators realized that Trump was a threat to the general world order."<sup>68</sup> The *New York Times* report on Corker's concern did not refer to a "general world order," but did say that Corker, who had announced his retirement from the Senate, felt most of his colleagues agree with his words. According to the *Times*, "Mr. Corker, speaking carefully and purposefully, seemed to almost find cathartic satisfaction by portraying Mr. Trump in terms that most senior Republicans use only in private."<sup>69</sup>

Many liberals and Democrats seem to have accepted, if not welcomed, the advance of military influence into key roles within the White House, especially the role assumed by John Kelly, the White House Chief of Staff who took control of access to Oval Office. The alternative, were Kelly to leave, would be greater influence by the radical, alt-right in Trump's inner circle, especially that of presidential counsel Stephen Miller. Miller along with Bannon once boasted that *Breitbart.com* was a platform of the alt-right. Miller is largely responsible for formulating Trump's anti-immigration policies, including separation of children of detained families from their parents, defending the policies in thinly veiled white nationalist rhetoric.

Polarized politics and decay of constitutional norms generate legitimate moral issues for conscientious military officers. Air Force General John Hyten, commander of the US Strategic Command, has said that he would disobey an illegal presidential order to launch a nuclear strike.<sup>70</sup> Remaining unanswered is, just who determines what is "illegal"? Do we think that military officers, or for that matter thoughtful enlisted soldiers, have not considered these issues? Recall that in during the Watergate scandal, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger notified key commanders only to obey orders given within the chain of command because he anticipated that President Richard Nixon, constitutionally commander-in-chief, might give a direct order to deploy troops to prevent his removal from the White House. The liberal *Daily Beast* recalled Schlesinger's precautions, calling it "the most patriotic act of treason in American history."<sup>71</sup>



So far, we have concentrated on ways that Trumpism conflicts with the interests of Deep State actors, but there are sectors of the Deep State whose interests are in alignment with the administration. Particularly well-placed vis-vis Trump are corporations that have benefitted from privatization of certain aspects of military operations and the criminal justice system. The “security” functions of the state have increasingly been hived off to the private sector in the era of neoliberalism. This privatization has added an additional reason to heed Eisenhower’s warning about in his farewell speech about military–industrial complex, which largely referred to arms manufacturers.<sup>72</sup> Now private capitalism is investing in actually engaging in combat and intelligence activities, using Washington’s infamous “revolving door” between the bureaucracy and corporations extends to advance this objective. The latter has close ties with members of Trump’s cabinet who are strong advocates of deregulation and privatization in general.

According to investigative journalists Matthew Cole and Jeremy Scahill, Erik Prince, a former Navy Seal who co-founded the Blackwater USA private security corporation, and John Macguire, with assistance from Oliver North (of Iran-Contra fame), in December 2017 proposed to Trump campaign officials setting up a “global, private spy network that would circumvent official U.S. intelligence agencies.” These agencies would counter what Prince and Macguire see as “Deep State” enemies engaged in undermining the new administration.<sup>73</sup> Blackwater’s mercenary forces and other activities perfectly fit the concepts of paramilitary and parapolitics. Blackwater attained notoriety in September 2007 after a reported 20 Iraqi civilians died in a shootout involving company guards escorting State Department employees.<sup>74</sup> In August 2017, Prince had already proposed that American troops, excepting a few Special Forces personnel, be replaced by a private army of 5500 private contractors, backed by a 90 aircraft.<sup>75</sup>

Prince’s sister, Betsy DeVos, is Secretary of Education and a strong proponent of privatizing public education. Prince donated \$250,000 to the Trump campaign through a Dark Money conduit headed by Rebekah Mercer. He is an ally of Steve Bannon, who, though banished from the White House, should not be given his political funeral prematurely given the mercurial nature of Trump’s personality. Jared Kushner, Trump’s son-in-law, has developed an alliance with Prince in promoting contracting out military functions. A *Washington Post* story on the Prince-Trump campaign connection highlights the role played by the United Arab Emirates in attempting to facilitate Prince’s access to the

Trump White House, including meetings taking place in New York and in the Seychelles Islands.<sup>76</sup>

Prince's relationship with Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law, has attracted critical attention in the mainstream media, but it is not all that new. According to Steven Simon, who was a National Security Council senior director for the Middle East and North Africa in the Obama administration, "The idea of using business cutouts, or individuals perceived to be close to political leaders, as a tool of diplomacy is as old as the hills. These unofficial channels are desirable precisely because they are deniable; ideas can be tested without the risk of failure." Were this meeting simply about the back-channel attempt to foster better relations between two nuclear powers, they could be considered, as Simon indicates, a justifiable, confidential effort at diplomacy. But in this case, the coordination has more to do with the efforts by Prince's Blackwater and other large companies that offer private military forces (PMFs) to expand their role (and profits) in the private security business.

Prince's efforts can be considered as a step toward the transnationalization of Deep State politics. If he can succeed, other PMFs, who already provide significant military and intelligence services (such as Dyncorps, Booz Allen Hamilton, among others), may grow even more rapidly than they have since the 1990s, when they first began to take over support services previously handled within the military. PMFs recruit heavily from Special Forces services around the globe. Their emergence was facilitated by the widespread availability of second generation but nonetheless highly lethal military equipment and ordnance after the collapse of the Soviet Bloc states and the apartheid regime in South Africa.<sup>77</sup>

The departure of Bannon from Trump's favor in early 2018 may have slowed the transfer of military functions to private paramilitary organizations. Also, the generals serving in Trump's inner circle seem intent on resisting the expansion of PMFs in combat roles. But PMF's are likely to become more, not less attractive to American politicians worried about eventually being held accountable by voters for an endless "War on Terrorism", much of it in remote corners of the globe. Consider the powerful rational Prince laid out his proposals in a *New York Times* op-ed piece, one that offers a truly Faustian bargain to politicians keen on avoiding taxation and unpopular casualties in Afghanistan.

My proposal is for a sustainable footprint of 2000 American Special Operations and support personnel, as well as a contractor force of less than

6000 (far less than the 26,000 in country now). This team would provide a support structure for the Afghans, allowing the United States' conventional forces to return home...

Prince claimed his company would save American taxpayers \$40 billion. He concluded,

Just as no one criticizes Elon Musk because his company SpaceX helps supply American astronauts, no one should criticize a private company—mine or anyone else's—for helping us end this ugly multigenerational war.<sup>78</sup>

Some obvious moral hazards should come to mind. The profitability of PMFs ultimately hinges on the continued prosecution of such a war, not necessarily winning it. As some degree of sovereignty will remain in the hands of nation-states, these companies' continued presence will necessarily engage them in deep diplomacy over their continued presence. And as international alliances shift, will PMFs find themselves at some time fighting one another? Will their clients want to deploy these transnational private armies against US troops in some future conflict? The transnational PMFs ultimately could bring the mercenary warfare of Renaissance Machiavelli's Italy, an era rife with conspiratorial politics, on the global stage that hosts warfare in the twenty-first century.

While many in the military high command may resist privatization of warfare, meeting the personnel and budgetary demands of global warfare may ultimately sway them. General Raymond A. Thomas, commander of the US Special Operations Command, testified in May 2017 at a House Armed Services subcommittee meeting that the pace of deployment of his forces around the globe was "unsustainable." He testified that 8000 Special Ops troops are deployed in 80 different countries.<sup>79</sup> Altogether, the total number of Special Forces troops ranges between 70,000 and 100,000, though there are support personnel and less elite (in terms of combat training) included. These trends threaten to further undermine the constitutional principle of presidential responsibility and accountability for authorization of war-making and rules of engagement.<sup>80</sup>

Military and intelligence functions are being increasingly integrated with one another. Under CIA Director Mike Pompeo, the CIA significantly boosted its involvement in counterterrorist operations, especially in Pakistan, where its clandestine status means that it can undertake missions that would be politically awkward for regular military troops.<sup>81</sup> Pompeo's move to Secretary of Defense puts him in a position to

counter the unease of the armed forces with this merging of functions. The tendency to more deeply involve the agency directly in operations rather than only intelligence assistance to military forces is not entirely without precedent. A most notorious prior example was Operation Phoenix, involving the forcible resettlement of Vietnamese peasants into strategic hamlets in order to “drain the water” to kill the fish (National Liberation Front insurgents), in which both the CIA and special operations forces participated. The program included interrogations, torture, and assassinations. Estimates of deaths ranged from 21,000 to 40,000 people, including many civilians caught up in the same net with NLF forces.<sup>82</sup>

In addition to deployments of Special Ops teams and intelligence combat units to Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia, these elite forces have been deployed in the so-called “anti-drug wars” in various geographical theaters. I say “so-called” because these operations often take place in countries where the United States has geopolitical or economic interests, what Dawn Paley calls “Drug War Capitalism.”<sup>83</sup> In Mexico and Central America, the United States has trained thousands of agents and assisted in wiretapping, interrogation, and cultivating informants, without much success in reducing trafficking, and with mounting violence in which government forces are complicit. Drug Enforcement Agents have been implicated in serious human rights violations, including the massacre of civilians in Honduras. In Colombia, forces trained for anti-drug operations were also involved in anti-insurgency operations with forces that operated as death squads. The US Department of Justice has suppressed efforts to bring some of those responsible for mass murders to justice.<sup>84</sup>

Repeatedly, from the earliest days of cooperation with the Italian Mafia and of operations to ease the immigration of tainted German scientists, continuing through the Vietnam War period with cooperation with drug runners in South East Asia, through the Reagan years with funding and arming the Contras and other unsavory allies in Latin America, and today with reliance on warlords in Central Asia, American law enforcement, intelligence, and special operation forces have engaged in relationships with allies complicit in trafficking and gross human rights violations. These alliances are made as part of “low intensity conflicts” that take their toll in lives abroad, but they also reinforce an “ends justify the means” mentality that can blowback into domestic operations and encourage the militarization of domestic law enforcement. Paramilitary and parapolitical operations are often protected by secrecy

and subterfuge, but just as often they are hidden in plain sight. Melley's work on the depiction of the covert sphere elucidates how this happens.

### CONSPIRACY FICTION, CONSPIRACY REALITY

Given that part of the mandate of the CIA is to carry out covert operations, we should hardly be surprised that the ways its employees and high-level officials operate in a conspiratorial culture are very well depicted in the novels of former spies, such as John le Carre and Ben Macintyre. Referring to le Carre, critic Sarah Lyall recently commented,

Early in his writing, le Carré introduced the subversive hypothesis that the spies of East and West were two sides of the same tarnished coin, each as bad as the other. It was a stunning idea, espionage painted not in black and white but in shades of gray...His later books are angrier, more polemical, their worldview darker, reflecting the chaotic morality of the post-Soviet era and often presenting the United States — with its exceptionalism, its flouting of international norms, as he sees it — as the villain in the post-Cold War era.<sup>85</sup>

Regarding Trump's dismissal of the dossier put together by former British spy Christopher Steele alleging that Vladimir Putin has blackmail information on Trump (see Chapter 2), Macintyre, a former British operative, commented, "I can tell you what the veterans of the S.I.S. [the British Secret Intelligence Service, or MI6] think, which is yes, *kompromat* was done on him. Of course, *kompromat* is done on everyone. So they end up, the theory goes, with this compromising bit of material and then they begin to release parts of it. They set up an ex-MI6 guy, Chris Steele, who is a patsy, effectively, and they feed him some stuff that's true, and some stuff that isn't true, and some stuff that is demonstrably wrong. Which means that Trump can then stand up and deny it, while knowing that the essence of it is true. And then he has a stone in his shoe for the rest of his administration."<sup>86</sup>

Playing with truth is endemic in the Deep State, especially when it comes to maintaining the fiction that there nothing imperialistic in US covert operations. Melley maintains that "the ideological disavowal of imperialism was dramatically assisted by the segregation of state policy into overt and covert sectors."<sup>87</sup> The institutionalization of deniability for government actors encourages a culture where "I don't know, and

don't really want to know" prevails. "Geographical melodrama" in popular fiction helps promote this bifurcation of the overt and the covert. It serves the function of portraying, often with considerable accuracy, the dirty nature of warfare but ultimately justifies this bending of rules or worse, including thuggish threats and torture, as a necessary adaptation to a threatening international environment, rarely examining underlying roots of terrorism. "The dirty work of empire disappears," says Melley, and American exceptionalism persists as a widespread civic belief. Covert war, not so different from the Cold War, defends "freedom", and our warriors abroad are the heroes who risk their lives for our "way of life," the envy of all other nations under the umbrella of the Pax Americana.

Popular fiction does not so much make the "Deep State" invisible as wipe popular memory clean of the stain of scandal, extra-constitutional parapolitics and the seamy side of American foreign intervention. Melley highlights popular films and TV programs as having set the trend for adapting the covert sphere of politics to the post-Cold War era. *Sum of All Fears* (2002), *The Siege* (1998), and *Enemy of the State* (1998) are typical of the genre in which an act of terrorism or threat of such an attack brings a response from the state that is also personally threatening to an American hero who, at least at the start, fights a typically lonely fight against the enemy. Only later does the hero see that corrupt forces in the state bureaucracy or an out-of-control national security official have actually been the ones to provoke the terrorist plot in the first place. In the Jason Bourne series (films starring Matt Damon, based on Robert Ludlum's novels), our hero, an assassin who has had his memory cleansed by the CIA, must battle the bad guys *and* the Agency, defeating both.

In *The Bourne Identity*, the first in the series, Bourne finds he was sent to kill an African dictator, a very bad man to be sure, but he does not complete the act because the man's wife and children would have also been killed—an allegory to the myth that Americans do all possible to avoid collateral damage in warfare. What has to be done is done, but the basic goodness of the American soul prevails. The myth of American exceptionalism—our country retains its liberal values—is reinforced, and at the same time the threats of an evil world are real and justify responses inconsistent with those values.

*Zero Dark 30*, released in 2012, one year after Navy Seal Team 6 assassinated Osama Bin Laden, features Jessica Chastain as a CIA analyst on the trail of Bin Laden. Her character, Maya, based on an actual female operative who identified Bin Laden's presence at the location where the raid took place, is portrayed as reticent to employ torture. The brutality

of the war on terror teaches her the importance of doing what needs to be done, including enhanced interrogation, i.e., torture, to succeed in locating the man who publicly professed to have organized the 9/11 attacks. The film concludes with Navy Seal Team 6 carrying out its operation to kill Bin Laden. The Team kills only in self-defense in the raid, and the film ends with Maya softly crying as she leaves. Is it for the loss of innocence? Her own and America's?

Much of the film is based on fact, including realistic scenes of torture and battles. The main character's actual career is misrepresented, however. Jane Mayer (the author of *Dark Money*) among others found that the real CIA operative involved was not new to her work, as portrayed in film; she participated in intelligence blunders that contributed to failures to anticipate the 9/11 attacks. She "gleefully" participated in torture sessions and misled Congress about the use of torture in interrogations.<sup>88</sup> And is not at all clear that the Seal Team's killing was only done in self-defense. The filmmakers certainly did not sanitize torture, but they certainly reinforced the humanity of the film's protagonists who engaged in torture and extreme violence, especially with the final scene. Both the CIA and Defense Department cooperated with the filmmakers.

The two most influential, long-running television series of this type are *Homeland* and *24*. *Homeland* began in 2011 and entered its seventh season in 2018; *24*, starred Jack Bauer, leader of a counterterrorism unit. Both programs feature the "ticking bomb" plot device, the race against time to prevent a terrorist attack. Both portray national security agencies in a far less than flattering light, but as with *Zero-Dark 30*, the protagonists' and agencies flaws' are set against a do-what-is necessary background. Amnesty International has harshly criticized both programs for justifying torture.<sup>89</sup> Something similar is portrayed in the screenplay for *Red Sparrow*, a 2018 film starring Jennifer Lawrence, which reprised the early years of the Cold War and was written by a retired CIA agent with more than three decades of service. Brutality is evident on both sides, but that's the point. It's a dirty world and it has to be fought with the dirty means. The Cold War theme that fighting dirty wars to stop the Communist "menace" resonates similarly in fictional depictions of way the "war on terrorism" is conducted.

That terrorism may at least in part have emerged from the kind of world built by Western imperialism and presided over by the United States since World War II is hardly explored at all in these fictional plots. The impact of drone attacks, past interventions abroad, Tomahawk missiles, "enhanced interrogations," rarely appears, and usually only as

background, except in a few instances (e.g., *Three Kings*, 1999, set in the Iraq War comes to mind). Films, such as the oeuvre of Costa Gavras (*Z*, *State of Siege*, *Missing*, others), that explore more troubling themes usually are relegated to the Art House circuit.

In places where the US footprint has been heavy, we ought not to be surprised that conspiracy theories about the United States tend to proliferate. Examining Pakistani conspiracy theories about Blackwater, Humeira Iqtidar, a lecturer in politics at King's College, London, notes that the US response to these theories usually attributes their rise to ignorance of the locals and their failure to appreciate their own responsibility to deal with terrorist cells on their own territory. American officials, including Hillary Clinton when she was Secretary of State, called on Pakistanis to cease blaming their problems on the United States, for their own good. Coupled with an admission of US lapses in protecting civilian in some cases serves to signal to the audience, says Iqtidar, "a maturity on the part of the U.S. that Pakistan has yet to achieve."<sup>90</sup>

Taking note of two stories that ran on consecutive day in May 2010 in the *New York Times*, the first claiming, "Conspiracy is a national sport in Pakistan," and the second reporting that General Petraeus, military commander at the time, had ordered a "broad expansion" of secret operations throughout the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Horn of Africa against al-Qa'eda, Iqtodar commented, "The sense of humor that allows such reporting on consecutive days is surely one that is developed in a space free of daily threats, actual occurrences of bombings and American-sponsored 'disappearances' of young men."<sup>91</sup> A similar ironic critique might be made of reports highlighting conspiracy theories that circulate in Iran. Many of these beliefs are outright anti-Semitic, but not all of them are. Either way, they are nurtured by the very real history of intervention and unsavory activities of the United States and Israel. For example, the Israeli Mossad has been linked to the murders of five Iranian scientists working on the country's nuclear program, an operation all but confirmed by Israel's own Defense Minister.<sup>92</sup> Similar themes characterize American views of drug trafficking and violence in Mexico. Plot lines in several recent films and TV shows feature violent conflicts in Mexico. While they often include corrupt American's in league with trafficking, they contribute to Trump's stereotyping of Mexicans as rapists and criminals.

In 2017, three new TV programs featuring themes forgoing of moral hazzards facing American warriors debuted with plots and characters drawn from Special Forces. *NBC* touted *The Brave* as a "fresh, heart-pounding journey into the complex world of America's elite



undercover military heroes” as each week another “ticking bomb plot” plays out. The casting carefully includes two actresses with South Asian surnames, and plots include operations being aided by “the world’s most advanced surveillance technology from headquarters in D.C.”<sup>93</sup> *Valor*, produced by CBS and Warner Brothers and aired on the CW Network, is based on the real-life 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne)—once again an opportunity to elide fiction and reality. Both these shows struggled for renewal, but not so the third program, *Seal Team*, produced by CBS.

*Seal Team*, as CBS touts it, “follows the professional and personal lives of the most elite unit of Navy SEALs as they train, plan, and execute the most dangerous, high stakes missions our country can ask of them. Jason Hayes is the respected, intense leader of the Tier One team whose home life has suffered as a result of his extensive warrior’s existence.”<sup>94</sup> This tension felt by military families is portrayed realistically, though, as Melley would point out, ultimately such plot devices serve to reinforce the domesticity of the home front, stressing the need for Americans to show appreciation for “heroes” and their families, who are protecting us all at enormous costs. *Valor* does this especially well by including a character who has had to overcome opioid addiction because of wounds. As in other films and TV program just discussed, *Seal Team* depicts intelligence operatives working closely with the highly trained combat units. The combat is depicted very realistically, not to horrify but to reassure the audience that it is unavoidable.

Despite the brutality and even cynicism of some programs, none of the TV programs about Special Forces depict other troubling parts of the record of special ops, such as unpunished involvement in unjustified violence and collateral damage to civilians, including the troubling record of *Seal Team 6* itself, i.e., the unit that carried out the Bin Laden raid. The Team’s “quiet killings and blurred lines” were revealed in an extensive, in-depth investigation by a team of *New York Times* reporters, who concluded that special operations force “has been converted into a global manhunting machine with limited outside oversight.”<sup>95</sup> The *Times* reporters documented lack of civilian oversight; failures to adequately investigate reports of civilian casualties, even when reported by European allies; front companies set up to arm proxy forces. US officials justify the use of Seals and other such operatives because they can be deployed into undeclared war zones, about which a retired admiral admitted, “you certainly don’t want that out in public.”

A surge in use of Special Forces was ordered by Obama in 2006, and their daily raids resulted in 10 to 25 deaths per night. One Seal Team

6 former officer commented, “These killing fests had become routine.” Although team members are supposed to maintain a code of silence, and many closely adhere to it, others have told stories, including providing accounts of the bin Laden raid. “The Team 6 members routinely performed their missions at night, making life-or-death decisions in dark rooms with few witnesses and beyond the view of a camera. Operators would use weapons with suppressors to quietly kill enemies as the slept,” according to the *Times* report. Not surprisingly local populations often give different accounts of civilian casualties in such conflicts.

The films and TV programs we have reviewed all began their runs or production before Donald Trump assumed the presidency. But their depiction of Muslims as the enemy, lack of context, and adaption of Cold War memes to the war on terrorism helped prepare the turf of Trump’s anti-Muslim policies, his stereotyping of Muslim and other Third World nations, and the militarist attitudes evident at his rallies. And these memes are also now common in movies and television programs that depict domestic crime and police pursuit of criminals, often tied to the “ticking clock” plot device. Television programs are rife with such tropes, especially police procedurals, such as the various *NCIS* (which stands for Naval Crime Investigation Service) shows. They often depict anti-trafficking efforts or involve these specialized anti-crime forces in efforts to protect Third World officials visiting or living in the United States and threatened by nefarious forces from their home government. Sometimes the plots depict bureaucratic or corrupt politicians throwing obstacles in the path of the cops, justifying their bending of rules.

*NCIS* is one of the few shows that sometimes beats professional football in ratings. The plots are driven by the primal need to attract an audience that can be sold to advertisers, but this comes at the expense of distorting the reality of law and order in America. A summary of research on crime procedurals and reality finds that (among other distortions) these programs magnify the crime rate in urban areas; they exaggerate the percentage of suspects of crimes that are people of color and also the reliability of forensic proof; and they underplay civil rights violations.<sup>96</sup> This distorted image of urban America and the nature of crime, we should note, closely resembles the distorted picture of crime and its threat to white Americans that Trump traded-on in his campaign.

The long-running *NCIS* began as a procedural based in Washington D.C. The show and its various spinoffs rapidly became more violent and more focused on plot lines emphasizing big city corruption. This meme is

especially strong in *CSI NCIS New Orleans*. For example, Episode 24 in Season 2 featured a plotline where the “NCIS team uncovers a mole in the ranks while working with the Department of Homeland Security to locate 900 missing pounds of explosives that pose an imminent threat to New Orleans.”<sup>97</sup> The teams’ work is made more difficult by corruption in the city administration, up to the mayor himself. In the end, the “ticking bomb” plot shows that our heroes are working against bureaucratic obstructionism, in the form of too much concern about the team violating rules.

One way that the nature of the war on terrorism blows back into American civil society is through the employment of returning military officers in police occupations. For the individuals involved, this transition requires a transition from a “warrior culture” to a “guardian” role.<sup>98</sup> At the same time, police forces have become significantly militarized in respect to the kinds of equipment they utilize, including the war-grade vehicles and artillery, and to the common use of paramilitary SWAT teams, especially in difficult urban situations and in confrontations with right-wing paramilitary situations. No fully reliable data on how many veterans hold police jobs exists, but a recent study jointly conducted by the Marshall Project (a nonpartisan, nonprofit collective of news organizations that researches law enforcement issues) and *USA Today* estimated approximately one in five police today are recruited from the ranks of military veterans. That study claims that while many police benefit from military experience and adapt well to their new challenge.

The Marshall study concludes that “...data from two major-city law enforcement agencies, and considerable anecdotal evidence, tentatively concluded (pending more research) that veterans are more likely to get physical, and some police executives agree.” The study also raises another caution very salient to the theory of a Deep State and to parapolitics. It warns that “...any large-scale comparison of the use of force by vets and non-vets is hampered by a chronic lack of reliable official record-keeping on issues of police violence.” The alarming question here is, why is there so little record-keeping on police violence, whether that of former soldiers or other police?

Despite limitations, the Marshall study felt that three findings more clearly emerged: (1) Veterans in police forces are “more vulnerable to self-destructive behavior — alcohol abuse, drugs and, like William Thomas, attempted suicide.” (2) “Little or no mental health screening” or treatment opportunities exist for veterans returning from military employment, something the study attributes, among other factors, to “a culture of machismo and a number of legal restraints.” (3) White

veterans tend to benefit more from hiring preferences, contributing to forces less likely to reflect the demographic profile of their communities.

As with media depictions of special ops teams, the militarization of police has become a theme in much the same way. Some relatively new TV programs depict America's urban landscape not so differently than Trump did in his campaign, as free fire zones of death and destruction. *S.W.A.T* is a carnage filled drama in which cops fight crime and race against the clock in "ticking time bomb" plots, dressed in military gear that might make you think Los Angeles, where it is set, is actually Baghdad. *Training Day* (CBS) and *A.P.B.* (Fox) feature rogue cops who will resort to torture, teaching younger, more naïve partners that the times and circumstances require breaking rules. Bureaucrats and corrupt officials need to get out of the way of guardians of order.<sup>99</sup> In real life, some urban police forces have engaged in much worse military-style practices that these programs never depict. For example, in 2015 (during the Obama administration, we should note) reporters in Chicago discovered that over 7000 inmates, 6000 of whom were black, were detained, mostly on suspicion of narcotics, and interrogated virtually incommunicado, without access to lawyers in a warehouse complex in Homan Square. The Chicago police justified the center, which drew comparisons to Guantanamo, as a necessary measure to protect the identity of undercover officers.<sup>100</sup>

Reviewing a book that detailed the many bungled operations carried out by the CIA since its inception, Evans Thomas, an editor at *Newsweek*, concluded, "Is an open democracy capable of building and sustaining an effective secret intelligence service? Maybe not. But with Islamic terrorists vowing to set off a nuclear device in an American city, there isn't much choice but to keep on trying." No better quote summarizes how conspiracy fiction serves the interest of a state-sanctioned manufacturer of conspiracies.

## PARAPOLITICS AND BLOWBACK

The ascendancy of Trump to the presidency came at a time when surveillance, cybersecurity, use of new technologies (such as drones), reliance on special forces, use of torture under the euphemism "enhanced interrogation", cybersecurity, police violence all were converging together as serious issues. Each of them involves actors and issues that play out as much in the grey parapolitical sphere as in the public sphere of politics. On the one hand, Trump, who had endorsed waterboarding on the campaign

trail, chose James Mathis, an opponent of “enhanced interrogation,” as his Secretary of Defense. However, Trump also appointed several officials who were connected directly or indirectly to the Bush administration’s employment of rendition and “enhanced interrogation.” Gina Haspel appointed as deputy director of the CIA, ran a “black site” prison in Thailand where waterboarding was employed destroyed film evidence of the practice.<sup>101</sup> In May 2018 Haspel rose to the position of Director of the Agency. Steven Engel, appointed to lead the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel, was among those who reviewed the Bush administration 2007 memo framed to legalize waterboarding.<sup>102</sup>

Edward Snowden’s release in 2013 of a massive cache of classified files from the National Security Agency’s program of gathering communications between American citizens and foreigners brought into public scrutiny one way that parapolitics is infecting the domestic political game. It is notable that the actual work of surveillance was largely done by Snowden’s employer, Booz Allen Hamilton, a large contractor for defense and intelligence.<sup>103</sup> The debate over the propriety of Snowden’s actions and the NSA’s role in monitoring US citizens has distracted us from the way that this program obscured further the line between public and private government, just as it has been by the deployment of private mercenaries for military purposes. Furthermore, the surveillance program was not a national operation but a transnational one. It was begun with agreements among the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand to create a global system, code named ECHELON, aimed mainly at the Communist bloc during the Cold War but took on a role of conducting economic espionage in the 1990s, during the period between the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the start of the “war on terrorism” in 2001.<sup>104</sup>

Surveillance issues are prominent in the sprawling Russiagate scandal, centered on allegations of Russian interference into the electoral process, including allegations that the Democratic National Committee was hacked and that Russian operatives passed to Wikileaks emails revealing prejudicial actions favorable to Clinton and harmful to her chief competitor, Bernie Sanders. Wider hacks into corporate and financial institution files have been attributed to a group called the Shadow Brokers, likely Russian. It turns out that Shadow Brokers had somehow obtained the codes used by the National Security Agency to hack and sometimes to sabotage computer information systems in other countries.<sup>105</sup> The United States itself had been carrying out hacks in other countries for industrial espionage and political reasons for years before using the

technology stolen by the Shadow Brokers. In 2009 and 2010, security experts believe that the United States with Israel deployed a cyber weapon, Stuxnet, designed to destroy Iranian nuclear centrifuges.<sup>106</sup>

Dueling conspiracy theories about Deep State politics continued to dominate headlines as Donald Trump neared the end of the end of the second year of his presidency. Opponents of Trump, inclusively among political elites, celebrities, and public, subscribe to the conspiracy theory that his campaign colluded with Russian operatives closely connected to the government of Vladimir Putin, to which in response Trump and his supporters allege a conspiracy among mainstream news organization, Deep State institutions, and political opponents to undermine his presidency. Significant corollary conspiracy theories grow out of these principal theories. On the anti-Trump side, conspiracy theorists argue that Russian President Vladimir Putin influenced American elections, seeking to ease economic sanctions by placing the more sympathetic Trump in office and to undermine confidence in American electoral institutions. A second anti-Trump corollary theory argues that the president, even if not directly involved in collusion, engaged in obstruction of justice to cover up collusion involving close associates, including his son and son-in-law.

Trump's "disruptive" rhetoric and the anti-patriotic aura around Russiagate both threaten the narrative of what Melley calls the "geographical melodrama" (discussed above). Trump's excoriating denouncements of the Deep State are disruptive of heroic image of the CIA, the FBI, National Security Agency—contradicting the depiction of the police, soldiers and spies in popular fiction as "heroes" and self-less "first responders." At the same time there are ways that Trump's policies and discourse may be appealing in certain corners of the Deep State. His hypernationalist rhetoric and promotion of increased military spending are two examples. These conflicting aspects of Trumpism is consistent may provoke riffs in the Deep State between elements who find Trump's "Make America Great Again" and "America First" philosophy appealing and those who find his attacks on the FBI, CIA, and National Security Agency personally offensive, institutionally threatening, or simply obstructing fulfillment of their missions. That hypothesis is highly speculative, but leaks and public statements by employees retiring from the security sector suggest that political polarization exists within the security establishment. These evident divisions should caution us about depictions of the Deep State as a monolithic conspiracy and argue for my conception of it as a sphere of politics prone to generating conspiracies.

In January and February 2017 skirmishing broke out between Democrats and Republicans over the release of a memo prepared by the David Nunes (R-CA) Chair of the House Intelligence Committee, which purported to show abuse of FBI surveillance of a Trump campaign official, part of an effort to undermine the credibility of Muller, the Special Counsel. Democrats prepared a memo in response defending the integrity of the FBI. As numerous commentators have suggested, the dispute put on display a remarkable turnout—liberals defending an agency they often have criticized for abuse of power, conservatives said to be undermining the rule of law. Trump in his first year also launched attacks direct attacks on the CIA, prompting Democrats and centrist Republicans to defend the agency.

The Nunes memo focused in part on the FBI's citing a report prepared by the retired British spy, Christopher Steele, which alleged collusion between Trump campaign officials, and was paid for by opponents (first within the GOP, later Clinton supporters) of Trump. In fact, much more was involved in the FBI obtaining the warrant from the Court. But here again, we might note that the entire affair should remind us of the new element of conspiratorial activity that may be routine in our politics. The very fact that the American electoral process now seems to include as routine campaign strategy hiring former intelligence officials to do opposition research is a sign of how transnational the invisible campaign has become, and how dirty. Besides Dark Money, American candidates for office now tap into the sphere of international Deep State politics to advance their cause.

We should take note that Deep State operatives have had roles in other elections as well. Besides using the Plumbers to break into Democratic headquarters at the Watergate, Richard Nixon and H. R. Halderman, his campaign chief of staff, attempted to sabotage Johnson's plans in October 1968 to advance peace talks, using Anna Chennault, a GOP fundraiser who had a back channel to the South Vietnamese government. William Casey, a campaign official for Ronald Reagan, who would become his CIA Director, allegedly supervised an attempted deal with Iran to prevent any release of hostages before the 1980 election, thwarting an "October Surprise."<sup>107</sup> What is of interest here is that in both cases, the political class eventually came together to end to further damage from explosive revelations. In contrast, President Trump publicly accused Democratic members of Congress of "treason" simply for failing to stand and applaud any part of the January 2018 State of the Union Address. Republicans,

at least through early March 2018, were not especially keen to work with Democrats to bring an ending where the pundits and politicians could claim, as they did after Watergate, “The system worked.”

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