

The Director Who Could Not Be Questioned

William Casey, the Afghan Covert Program, and the Limits of Accountability in
American Foreign Policy

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In January 1987, reporter Bob Woodward visited the hospital room of Director of Central Intelligence William J. Casey at Georgetown University Hospital. Casey was dying. A brain tumor had been removed the previous month, and according to the doctors treating him he had developed a severe form of aphasia that left him unable to understand or respond to questions.¹ Woodward, who had interviewed Casey on multiple occasions in the preceding years, asked the dying man whether he had known about the diversion of profits from the secret American arms sales to Iran into funding for the Nicaraguan Contras. In the closing pages of his book, Woodward described what happened. “His head jerked up hard,” Woodward wrote. “He stared, and finally nodded yes.” Asked why, Casey is said to have whispered, “I believed.”²

The scene was disputed almost as soon as Woodward published it. Casey’s widow Sophia denied the visit ever happened, insisting that she or her daughter had been at her husband’s bedside continuously and that Casey was incapable of speech.³ One of his physicians called the conversation medically impossible.⁴ President Ronald Reagan, in a diary entry written after Woodward appeared on *60 Minutes* describing the encounter, called Woodward “a liar.” The next day Reagan recorded that Edwin Meese and Donald Regan, who had visited Casey in the hospital, had told him that by the end Casey “was incapable of understanding or communicating.”⁵ The Senate Intelligence Committee considered an investigation into

¹Eric Pace, “William Casey, Ex-C.I.A. Head, Is Dead at 74,” *New York Times*, May 7, 1987; “Report: Doctor calls Casey deathbed interview ‘impossible,’” UPI Archives, September 29, 1987.

²Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981–1987* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), [p. TBD—original cites 581, but book is 543 pp.].

³“Did A Dead Man Tell No Tales?,” *Time*, October 12, 1987.

⁴“Report: Doctor calls Casey deathbed interview ‘impossible,’” UPI Archives, September 29, 1987.

⁵Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, ed. Douglas Brinkley (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), entries for September 28, 1987 and September 29, 1987.

Woodward's book but the panel's general counsel concluded the inquiry would be pointless because Casey was dead.⁶ Whether Woodward got into the room, whether Casey nodded, whether the nod meant what Woodward said it meant, the dispute remains unresolved. Casey died on May 6, 1987, and the architect of the largest covert action programs of the Reagan years died with the questions unanswered.

This paper argues that William Casey used the CIA directorship to make foreign policy rather than only carry it out, and that the Afghan covert program he built shows both the strategic possibilities and the democratic costs of that approach. The program funneled American weapons to the Afghan mujahideen through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence and helped force the Soviet Union into retreat. It also produced consequences that outlived the Cold War, including the rise of the Taliban and the spread of weapons the United States could not recover. The program operated with limited congressional oversight, and when Casey died the most consequential American foreign policy decision of the 1980s was left to the partial accounts of others. The Casey case suggests that covert action conceals American operations not only from foreign adversaries but from the constitutional institutions the country relies on to hold its own foreign policy accountable.

William Joseph Casey was born in Elmhurst, Queens in 1913 to an Irish Catholic family.⁷ He attended Fordham University and St. John's University Law School, became a Wall Street tax lawyer, and made a small fortune writing books that explained federal tax law to businessmen during the New Deal years.⁸ Nothing in this background pointed toward an

⁶Jeff Stein, "Woodward dismisses CIA guard's dispute of Casey deathbed visit," *Washington Post* SpyTalk blog, September 21, 2010.

⁷Joseph E. Persico, *Casey: The Lives and Secrets of William J. Casey: From the OSS to the CIA* (New York: Viking, 1990), chapter 1.

⁸Persico, chapters 2–3.

intelligence career. The decisive turn came in 1943, when Casey joined William J. Donovan's Office of Strategic Services and was sent to London. By the end of the war he was running American agent networks across occupied Europe, including operations that placed spies inside Nazi Germany itself.⁹ In a memoir published after his death, Casey described what he had drawn from those years. Clandestine intelligence and covert action, he wrote, "may be more important than missiles and satellites in meeting crises yet to come."¹⁰ The line appeared in print in 1988. Casey had been acting on it since 1981.

The postwar years found Casey moving between Wall Street and Washington. He served as chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission under Richard Nixon, headed the Export-Import Bank, and built a reputation as a fundraiser within the Republican Party.¹¹ When Ronald Reagan needed a campaign manager in 1980, Casey took the job. After the election, Reagan named him Director of the CIA and granted the position cabinet rank for the first time in its history.¹² Casey would now sit in cabinet meetings and National Security Council sessions as a principal rather than as a briefer. Joseph Persico, whose authorized biography appeared in 1990, traced Casey's confidence in covert action to his OSS years and argued that he had spent the 1940s winning a war through secrecy and never fully accepted the constraints that peacetime democracy placed on those methods.¹³

The institutional context Casey inherited shaped what he did with the position. The CIA he took over in January 1981 was an agency in retreat. The Church Committee investigations of

⁹Persico, chapter 4.

¹⁰William J. Casey, *The Secret War Against Hitler* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1988), preface.

¹¹Pace, "William Casey, Ex-C.I.A. Head, Is Dead at 74."

¹²George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 864.

¹³Persico, chapters 17–18.

the mid-1970s had exposed assassination plots, domestic surveillance, and other covert programs that drew widespread congressional and public criticism.¹⁴ Carter's DCI Stansfield Turner had cut hundreds of operations officers from the agency's clandestine service.¹⁵ Casey was hired to rebuild the agency, and he did so with the support of a president who, as Herring writes, "preferred people of action to intellectuals" and whose "instinctive unilateralism" was tempered only by the more cautious Republican internationalism of his secretaries of state.¹⁶ Herring captures the dynamic in a single sentence. "Casey on the other hand, shared the president's anti-communism and his penchant for action. Apparently with Reagan's blessing and sometimes without the knowledge of Shultz, he developed a worldwide program of covert operations to undermine Communist governments."¹⁷ The sentence describes a CIA director who was shaping foreign policy, not only carrying it out.

The largest of those programs was the operation in Afghanistan. The Soviet invasion in December 1979 had drawn an initial American response from the Carter administration, which authorized limited covert assistance to the Afghan resistance.¹⁸ Casey wanted to do far more. From the start, Herring writes, "Casey pushed to 'bleed' the Soviets in Afghanistan."¹⁹ The administration moved cautiously at first, fearing that visible American involvement might provoke Moscow to escalate or to attack Pakistan, which sat on the Soviets' southern flank and would become the geographic and operational center of the program.

¹⁴John Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations from World War II Through the Persian Gulf* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), chapter 13.

¹⁵Prados, chapter 14.

¹⁶Herring, 864.

¹⁷Herring, 864.

¹⁸Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), chapter 1.

¹⁹Herring, 883.

The decision to route the program through Pakistan was Casey's most consequential operational choice. Rather than running American weapons directly to Afghan factions, the CIA channeled aid through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, the country's military intelligence agency. The ISI then decided which Afghan groups received the weapons, training, and money. Casey himself flew secretly to Pakistan multiple times to meet with Pakistani officers managing the program, and on at least one occasion personally observed the mujahideen training. Steve Coll, in his book *Ghost Wars* documented what the Pakistan arrangement meant in practice.²⁰ Pakistani preferences favored Islamist factions over more secular Afghan resistance groups, and the largest share of CIA-funneled support went to commanders who would prove the most ideologically committed and the most independent of American influence after the Soviets withdrew.²¹ Casey traded direct American control for the political cover that came from making the operation look like a Pakistani one. The trade allowed the program to reach the scale it eventually reached. It also shaped which Afghan factions emerged from the war strongest.

The scale grew rapidly after 1985. American aid jumped from \$122 million in 1984 to \$630 million in 1987, and in March 1985 Reagan signed National Security Decision Directive 166, which formally raised U.S. objectives to driving the Soviets out of Afghanistan.²² The most famous escalation came in early 1986, when the administration provided the Afghans with Stinger handheld anti-aircraft missiles. Stingers were thought to have shifted the war by neutralizing Soviet helicopter dominance, and they have often been described as the silver bullet that drove the USSR from Afghanistan.²³ Herring is careful to note that this conclusion has been

²⁰Coll, chapters 3–4.

²¹Coll, chapter 7.

²²Herring, 883; National Security Decision Directive 166 (March 1985), available at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, raised U.S. objectives in Afghanistan to driving the Soviets out.

²³Herring, 884.

overstated. Soviet countermeasures eventually neutralized the missiles, and Mikhail Gorbachev had already decided to withdraw from Afghanistan before the first Stingers arrived, largely out of a need for American trade and technology.²⁴ Casey's program contributed to Soviet failure in Afghanistan, but it did not single-handedly cause it.

The program also produced consequences that the United States could not control. Herring lists them in a single paragraph. The Afghan operation, he writes, "bore hidden costs in the form of what the CIA calls 'blowback.'" American dependence on Pakistan led Washington to look away from Pakistan's nuclear weapons program. The cultivation of opium financed much of the resistance and undercut the simultaneous American war on drugs. Stinger missiles ended up on the international arms market, and the United States eventually had to buy some of them back at inflated prices. American aid contributed to the eventual triumph of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The Islamic fighters the United States helped train would in time turn on their benefactors, launching attacks on American assets abroad and eventually on the American homeland itself.²⁵

The accountability problem ran alongside the operational one. While the Afghan program enjoyed broad bipartisan congressional support throughout the 1980s, Casey's relationship with Congress on his other major covert programs was hostile. Herring describes the pattern in language that quotes Casey directly. He had contempt for "those assholes on the Hill" and especially for congressional oversight of covert operations.²⁶ On Nicaragua, where the Boland Amendment had forbidden the use of American funds to overthrow the Sandinista government,

²⁴Herring, 884.

²⁵Herring, 884.

²⁶Herring, 890.

Casey “had ignored, misled, or deceived legislators” from the outset.²⁷ When called to testify, Herring writes, Casey “mumbled almost unintelligibly” so that “his voice had a ‘built-in scrambler,’ according to Weinberger, and when all else failed he gave answers no one could understand.”²⁸ Lawrence Walsh, the independent counsel who spent seven years investigating the Iran-Contra affair, found in his Final Report that Casey had directly encouraged senior CIA officers to merge their work with NSC staffer Oliver North’s contra-resupply network in violation of the Boland Amendment Congress had passed to prevent that kind of aid. Walsh also documented that Casey had directed North in mid-1985 to take control of the funds going to the contras from third-country donors and private citizens, and approved North’s suggestions in late 1985 and early 1986 for restructuring the Iran initiative.²⁹ Two of Casey’s senior deputies were convicted of crimes related to misleading Congress, and others were pardoned by President Bush in December 1992 before their cases could be resolved.³⁰

The contrast between the relatively open Afghanistan program and the concealed Nicaragua program reveals something about Casey’s practice. He followed congressional restraints when Congress agreed with him and worked around them when it did not. The Afghan program was open enough that Texas Democrat Charlie Wilson became its most public congressional champion, leveraging his position on the House Appropriations Committee to expand funding well beyond what the executive branch initially requested.³¹ The Nicaragua

²⁷Herring, 890.

²⁸Herring, 890.

²⁹Lawrence E. Walsh, *Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, 1993), chapter 15.

³⁰Walsh, executive summary.

³¹Coll, chapter 6, on Charlie Wilson; see also George Crile, *Charlie Wilson’s War* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003).

program operated in defiance of explicit legislative bans. Both belonged to Casey, and the difference between them was political rather than principled.

Herring's verdict on the Afghan program is mixed, and it sets up the larger argument this paper wants to make. The Reagan Doctrine, he writes, "enjoyed major success in Afghanistan, the largest covert operation to that time," but its results were less decisive than its promoters claimed and its hidden costs proved enormous.³² The strategic gains were real and so were the long-term costs. What makes Casey's case significant for the history of American diplomacy is that the policymaker most responsible for the program operated in a way that made meaningful accountability difficult.

This is the argument the Harold Koh developed in his book *The National Security Constitution*, written in the wake of the Iran-Contra investigations. Koh argued that Iran-Contra was not an aberration but a symptom of "a chronic dysfunction in America's foreign policy process," in which presidential power over national security had expanded steadily since the Vietnam War at the expense of meaningful congressional and judicial oversight.³³ The constitutional division of foreign policy authority, the system Koh called the National Security Constitution, had broken down. Casey's career fits that diagnosis. A CIA director with cabinet rank, operating with a president who, as Herring puts it, was the most detached chief executive since Calvin Coolidge and who "refused to adjudicate the nasty disputes among his subordinates," could run programs that the Secretary of State did not know about and that the Secretary of Defense actively opposed.³⁴ When Congress objected, Casey worked around it.

³²Herring, 883.

³³Harold Hongju Koh, *The National Security Constitution: Sharing Power After the Iran-Contra Affair* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 4.

³⁴Herring, 866.

The Woodward problem deepens the argument rather than weakening it. Whether Casey actually nodded in his hospital bed in January 1987 cannot be settled. Woodward's broader account of Casey's worldview, drawn from years of reporting on the CIA, is consistent with the picture that emerges from Casey's own writings and from the documented record of his decisions. Consider another contested moment from *Veil*. Woodward reports that in early 1985 Casey went outside official channels to enlist Saudi help in a covert plot to assassinate Sheikh Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah, a Lebanese cleric the CIA blamed for attacks on American targets in Beirut. The plot failed. The Saudis then offered Fadlallah a two-million-dollar bribe to stop the attacks, and the attacks stopped.³⁵ Reagan publicly denied any knowledge of the affair and the Saudi government denied the bribe. House and Senate intelligence committees reviewed their files to see whether they had been misled.³⁶ The same pattern that surrounds the deathbed scene surrounds the Fadlallah story. Woodward describes a Casey who used foreign partners to do what American law would not allow, the principals deny knowledge, the documentary record is incomplete, and the people who could settle the question are dead or unwilling to speak. The dispute is not a sideshow. It is part of what Casey's style of foreign policy produced. A senior official whose closest associates and his president could not later agree on what he had done leaves a record that historians can only partially reconstruct.

The pattern Casey established outlived him. The Afghan fighters Casey had helped arm produced, in the 1990s and early 2000s, the Taliban regime that sheltered al-Qaeda, and the Pakistani intelligence service that Casey had relied on as a partner would later be implicated in sheltering Osama bin Laden in the years before American special operations forces killed him in

³⁵Woodward, *Veil*, 396–97.

³⁶“Did A Dead Man Tell No Tales?,” *Time*, October 12, 1987.

2011.³⁷ These later developments were not Casey's direct fault. They followed from operational decisions he made in the 1980s and from the institutional habits the Reagan-era CIA passed on to its successors.

In his diary entry for September 29, 1987, Reagan recorded what Edwin Meese and Donald Regan had told him after visiting Casey in the hospital. By the end, Casey "was incapable of understanding or communicating."³⁸ That single line, written by the president of the United States in a diary that would not be published for another twenty years, captures what is most striking about William Casey's diplomatic legacy. The man who had built the largest covert action program in CIA history, who had become a parallel foreign policy center within the Reagan administration, who had helped force the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan, could not be asked at the end of his life what he had done or why he had done it. The Senate Intelligence Committee abandoned its inquiry. The independent counsel concluded his most important witness was unreachable. Woodward came away with a contested four-minute conversation.

The Cold War ended on terms Casey would have recognized as victory. The Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, dissolved in 1991, and the United States entered the 1990s as the world's only superpower. Casey's confidence in covert action as a tool of statecraft could be read as vindicated. The fuller record is more difficult. The accountability problems that Iran-Contra exposed were structural rather than personal, and they did not end when Casey died. American foreign policy continued to rely on covert programs whose costs would only become visible long after the decisions had been made. The Afghan mujahideen who once received

³⁷On the September 11 attacks and the earlier Afghan covert program, see Coll, chapters 19–20; on bin Laden's presence in Pakistan, see Peter Bergen, *Manhunt: The Ten-Year Search for Bin Laden from 9/11 to Abbottabad* (New York: Crown, 2012).

³⁸Reagan, *Diaries*, entry for September 29, 1987.

American weapons would, a generation later, fight American troops in the same valleys. The pattern of executive power operating beyond the reach of meaningful congressional oversight, which Koh diagnosed in 1990, has only deepened in the decades since.

Casey's significance lies in the gap between what he accomplished and what can be reliably known about how he accomplished it. The deathbed scene matters less for what Casey may or may not have said than for what it shows about the kind of figure he was. A career built on secrecy left a record full of holes where his own testimony should have been. Casey was both a central architect of one of the late Cold War's major American foreign policy outcomes and a clear example of how the methods that produced those outcomes also made accountability for them difficult to enforce.