

1988

VEIL: The Secret War of the CIA 1981-1987

John R. Young
U.S. Navy

Bob Woodward

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Young, John R. and Woodward, Bob (1988) "VEIL: The Secret War of the CIA 1981-1987," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 41 : No. 2 , Article 29.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol41/iss2/29>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

120 Naval War College Review

officials based on accumulated information from these unnamed sources. A trained intelligence officer could theorize that persons trained to protect intelligence sources, activities, and products could have undermined Hersh's project by volunteering mendacious information. By his own admission, the Soviets allowed Hersh to research the story there so that he would conclude "that [KAL 007] was an intruder." Others may also have been trying to use Hersh for their own personal reasons.

What were Hersh's motives in writing this book? They are revealed to this reader with the subtlety of an artfully crafted subliminal suggestion. The main target of his attack is the Reagan administration. He faults the President, Secretary of State George Shultz, U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, and the American public at large for making up their minds too soon and without careful consideration of what might happen as a result of their enraged rhetoric. He is largely skeptical that anyone in the administration can deal with the Soviets.

He criticizes Secretary of State Shultz for compromising sensitive intelligence sources and methods the day after the shootdown. Yet, he has no compunction about revealing similar information from his unnamed sources and other published material. He even sounds frustrated at one point in his book that information was withheld from him that was so sensitive, even his unnamed sources "would not say anything" about it.

Any trained aircraft accident investigator knows that even when you have an eyewitness to an accident, no matter how good the story is, an eyewitness account is only one person's opinion. In drawing his conclusions about the shootdown, Hersh fails to caution the reader that his is only one possible scenario. He points out in one passage, quite properly, that we may never know what really happened to KAL 007. Yet, he persists in his version of the events. Being the recipient of a Pulitzer prize harms neither credibility nor sales, yet, this book is not without flaws.

JAMES W. SPENCER
Major, U.S. Air Force

Woodward, Bob. *VEIL: The Secret War of the CIA 1981-1987*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987. 543pp. \$21.95.

This book has been reviewed, re-reviewed, and dissected by the finest critics in virtually every major magazine and newspaper. Rather than provide, by comparison, a relatively uninformed critique of style and artistic worth, it seems more appropriate to allow the prejudices and concerns of a career military officer to provide another measurement of value (or loss). In *VEIL*, Bob Woodward provides, for the price of one hardback edition, national security secrets that should have been impossible to obtain at any price.

Woodward begins his treatment of this controversial subject early in

1979 when William Casey was hand-picked to take over as Ronald Reagan's campaign manager. It chronicles in detail the political dealing and maneuvering necessary to form an effective transition team following Reagan's victory. Although Casey was not shy in expressing his preference for the position of either Secretary of State or Defense, his past ties with the Office of Strategic Services and his strongly held beliefs about badly needed changes in the U.S. intelligence system provided enough incentive for him to accept the job as Director of Central Intelligence. Casey's wife, Sophia, called it a "love-story job" for him.

The author carefully outlines the myriad of consultations and team-building actions done by Casey to establish an effective leadership posture and working team during the Reagan transition period. Any student trying to grasp the "inner workings and hidden mechanisms" of the political realities of our Government would gain a wealth of understanding from this portion of Woodward's case study.

According to Woodward, Casey expressed three primary objectives for his tenure at the CIA. They included, in order of priority: improving the quality of the written intelligence estimates sent to the White House, obtaining a new Presidential order to loosen the restrictions on intelligence gathering, and finding more money and manpower for intelligence. Unfortunately, while it might have been instructional to evaluate Casey's performance in

reaching these key objectives, Woodward quickly detaches himself from any objective treatment of the subject in favor of a witch-hunt to find "out-of-control covert actions."

It is difficult to assess factuality in *VEIL* for a variety of reasons. First, it becomes apparent before reading too far, that Woodward, in conducting his 250 interviews, kept asking leading questions until he got a response that fitted his preconceived ideas. The absence of dissenting or counterbalancing views is suspicious. His technique of reconstructing conversations verbatim through his interpretations of the best recollections of a second party gives undue credence to questionable, thirdhand information.

Woodward, after discussing the limitations of journalistic reconstruction in his prologue, states ". . . I realize that it will by no means be the last word or even come close to it. Accordingly, this book is much closer to journalism than to history, particularly as the Iran-contra hearings and the various investigations continue." It is much easier to agree with his later assessment which allowed, "You have to get the kind of evidence that is persuasive as a story. On Casey, (and the Iran-contra diversion), I don't have something conclusive. I'm still working on it. . . . It didn't pass the threshold test for a news story."

Apparently many members of Government who were in the book agree. Even some of Woodward's "informed sources" dispute several inaccuracies in meetings, plane flights, and conversations. Zbigniew

122 Naval War College Review

Brzezinski, one informed source who was willing to be identified, stated, "The bottom line, then, what's in it that is not new is true, and what's in that is new, is probably not true."

So for the sake of a story, Woodward presents disputed data gathered from questionable sources and interview techniques. Polls indicate that most reasonable people do not continue to have a great deal of faith in the accuracy of today's newspapers. To say that his story does not meet the "threshold test" for a news story is indeed a damning indictment, particularly when weighed against the potential damage done to U.S. national security.

Allowing the prejudices of a career military officer to run rampant, the most obvious question is, "Why take the chance on compromising national security information for the sake of a story of questionable accuracy and marginal literary value?"

To answer that effectively, one must first decide on the degree of compromise and the potential damage to national security. Following is one glaring example of compromise and damage that has no relationship whatsoever with Casey's tenure with the CIA and the Iran-contra diversion.

According to Woodward, an extremely sensitive submarine operation involving tapping Soviet under-sea communication cables had been compromised in 1981. The operation was allegedly code-named "Ivy Bells." Woodward devotes nearly twenty pages to detailing the location of the operation, the nature of the

equipment used, and the processing of the intelligence data obtained. Here's a brief excerpt so the reader can form his own opinion.

One of the most hazardous aspects of the Ivy Bells system was retrieving the tapes with the stored communication. A specially equipped U.S. submarine had to return to the Sea of Okhotsk. Navy frogmen, using a minibus or even an underwater robot, had to locate the pod and change the tapes. The tapes were sent to the NSA for transcription and possible decoding. Though the messages that were gathered were months old, the operation had provided important data.

Of particular interest were communications that involved Soviet ballistic-missile tests. Missiles from many such tests landed around the Kamchatka Peninsula near the Sea of Okhotsk, and Soviet communications about these missiles and tests were sent through the cable.

The Soviets thought that their under-sea communications cables or underground landlines were virtually impregnable to interception by the United States. Accordingly, less than the most advanced and highest-grade coding systems were used on some of the channels on the Sea of Okhotsk cable.

If those revelations were not damaging enough, he goes on to list the Government's estimates of probable Soviet political and military intelligence reactions, including future countermeasures, and the uncertainties about just how much the Soviets actually knew about the mission's intelligence value.

While Woodward claims to share Government concern about the potential risk in releasing this information, his story clearly shows how he and his editor chose to disregard the often strident warnings from

Casey, the Director of the National Security Agency, and even the Secretaries of State and Defense that release of such vital security information had to be harmful to national interests. Casey felt so strongly that he persuaded President Reagan to call Katharine Graham, chairman of the board for The Washington Post Company to ask her to intervene and not publish the story.

A series of articles about Ivy Bells began in *The Washington Post* the next day. Gary Thatcher, in the 2 October *Christian Science Monitor*, quotes yet another unnamed Government official:

"Does the public really want to know all these details? Woodward could have

made his main points without most of them" and saved valuable intelligence sources and millions of dollars to make up for the revelations, and could possibly have saved a few agent's lives, the intelligence official says.

"How is Woodward any different from someone caught spying when he publishes such sensitive information for all to read?" asks the senior official with long diplomatic and intelligence experience. "What is the difference between what he has done and what the Walkers did and were jailed for? . . .

"One can only conclude that he did it to make the book sexier, to sell more copies."

I agree.

JOHN R. YOUNG
Commander, U.S. Navy

RECENT BOOKS

Asprey, Robert B. *Frederick the Great: The Magnificent Enigma*. New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1986. 715pp. \$29.95

King Frederick the Great of Prussia has been the subject of several recent scholarly books, but Robert Asprey's stands out as the most readable and most attractively produced. Having not only examined the documents in a variety of languages, ploughing much new archival ground for the views of contemporary witnesses, Asprey has also visited the major battlefields and is able to write with the keenest appreciation for the military aspects of the story. The excellent index is particularly useful. Asprey's *Frederick the Great* is essential reading for anyone interested in one of the great military commanders of the 18th century and especially for those who have a particular interest in the relationship between Frederick's actual conduct of war and his much quoted *Les principes généraux de la guerre*.

Chelminski, Rudolph. *Superwreck*. New York: Morrow, 1987. 254pp. \$17.95

Subtitled *Amoco Cadiz: The Shipwreck that Had to Happen*, Chelminski's book tells the story of the grounding of the supertanker *Amoco Cadiz* off the Breton Coast in 1978. Her steering machinery failed while she was carrying 220,000 tons of crude oil in a force 8 storm, and she ran aground on the rocks within sight of the shore. The