Checkmate on ‘The Devil’s Chessboard’

Exclusive: Since the end of World War II, what some call the “deep state” has taken hold of the American Republic, stripping the citizens of meaningful control over national security issues, with CIA Director Allen Dulles playing a key early role, according to David Talbot’s new biography reviewed by Lisa Pease.

By Lisa Pease

David Talbot’s new book The Devil’s Chessboard is an anecdotal biography of not just Allen Dulles but of the national security establishment that he helped create. Talbot gave himself the monumental task of summing up a 25-year slice of important history.

Because Talbot has a keen eye for both the absurd and the darkly humorous, he managed to make the disturbing history of that period not only eminently readable but engaging and at times downright entertaining.

I have consumed dozens of books on Allen Dulles, the CIA and Cold War history, yet I was still surprised by numerous revelations in Talbot’s book. He often covers well-known episodes through a less well-known set of incidents and characters.

Talbot writes about the ratlines (escape routes from Europe to Latin America for Nazis), but in the context of one particularly Machiavellian character. He writes about Lee Harvey Oswald from the point of view of one of his friends who sold him down the river to the Warren Commission, likely at the behest of the CIA, a friend who later ostensibly committed suicide just as a member of the House Select Committee on Assassinations was about to interview him. Talbot talks about the CIA’s mind-control programs in the context of Allen Dulles submitting his own son to those horrors.

Talbot and his research associate Karen Croft, to whom he dedicated his book, have found all sorts of nuggets in Allen Dulles’s papers, his appointment calendar, oral histories, and other less-used sources. In addition, Talbot infuses his book with anecdotes from interviews he personally conducted. While I found some points I could nitpick in various episodes, overall this is a worthy addition and a much-needed perspective that elucidates how we came to have two governments: the elected one and the one that doesn’t answer to the elected one.

Talbot’s presentation is not linear but episodic, jumping back and forth like a checker on the chessboard in his title to keep subjects thematically together. Doing this allows him to introduce the character of Allen Dulles quickly, by
showing him handing over a World War I girlfriend, “a young Czech patriot,” to British agents who suspected her of being an enemy spy, after which, Talbot tells us, she “disappeared forever.”

Talbot demonstrates that Dulles always found a way to do what he wanted, regardless of what he had been asked to do, even from his entry into the World War II’s Office of Strategic Services, the CIA’s forerunner. OSS chief William “Wild Bill” Donovan had tried to assign Dulles to London to exploit Dulles’s cozy relationships with high-net-worth individuals like the Rockefellers whom Dulles served as a lawyer at Sullivan and Cromwell. But Dulles instead got himself assigned to Bern, Switzerland, at the near center of Europe and a financial Mecca for secret bank accounts.

Allen Dulles’s older brother John Foster Dulles had funneled “massive U.S. investments” into Germany post-World War I that flowed back to the U.S. as war loans were paid off. Both Dulles brothers enabled the Nazis financially and socially, with John Foster Dulles at one point defending the character of a Nazi lobbyist who threw a party in New York City to celebrate a Nazi victory in France.

Sparing the Nazis

Talbot makes the case that Allen Dulles was all but a “Double Agent” for the Nazis during World War II. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt knew how close Dulles was to the Germans but thought Dulles, as an American, would do the President’s bidding, serving as a lure for high-profile Nazis so they could be identified and neutralized.

In pursuing victory, FDR pushed for an unconditional surrender, but Dulles had other plans. He told an agent of SS leader Heinrich Himmler that the Allies’ declaration of the need for unconditional surrender was “merely a piece of paper to be scrapped without further ado if Germany would sue for peace.”

Roosevelt had assigned Dulles to support Project Safehaven, a program to identify and confiscate Nazi assets stashed in neutral countries. But instead Dulles, aided by his friend Tom McKittrick, the head of the Bank for International Settlements, sought to protect his German client’s accounts.

Insubordination to presidents was a running theme in Dulles’s life. But the younger Dulles brother did not yet have the power he would command later in life, so FDR’s policies won out over Dulles’s covert challenges.

Money and the power that money enabled, not ideology, was the predominant motivator for Dulles and his ilk. As Talbot noted, “It is not widely recognized that the Nazi reign of terror was, in a fundamental way, a lucrative racket, an
extensive criminal enterprise set up to loot the wealth of Jewish victims and exploit their labor."

Dulles did not appear to have a problem with the decimation of the Jews. Instead, Dulles believed the real enemy were the Communists, who had the potential to shift the balance of financial power. So Dulles found natural camaraderie with the Nazi elite, who also viewed the Soviets as their biggest threat. Dulles ignored or downplayed the reports he was receiving from escapees and journalists regarding the burning of human beings in concentration camps.

Dulles’s declassified communications showed little regard for the killing of the Jews and much more interest in psychological warfare tricks, “such as distributing counterfeit stamps behind enemy lines depicting Hitler’s profile as a death’s skull, and other cloak-and-dagger antics,” Talbot tells us.

When one reporter took a detailed report of what was happening to Dulles, the journalist said Dulles was “profoundly shocked” and thought action should be taken immediately. Yet Dulles had been receiving similar reports for more than two years and had done nothing about it, and he did next to nothing with this report as well.

Dulles wasn’t the only one keeping the atrocities from being reported, of course. First, the Nazis operated in as much secrecy as possible, so credible reports were hard to come by. But even when they came, many others in government, such as Secretary of State Cordell Hull, turned a blind eye. Hull was one of those who advised President Roosevelt not to allow the St. Louis, a ship of German Jewish refugees, to dock at an American port and who had blocked an important, detailed, first-hand account of what was going on in the camps from reaching the President.

In Italy, Dulles pursued his own secret peace agreement, which he dubbed Operation Sunrise, which flew in the face of FDR’s stated policies. And while Dulles presented himself to people as a personal representative of FDR, the absurdity of that was not lost on some of Dulles’s targets.

**Launching the Cold War**

During the Nuremberg trials, again, Dulles took the side opposite of what FDR had wanted, the meting out of stern justice for such egregious crimes. Where Roosevelt and other Allied leaders saw war criminals, Dulles saw potential spies to be rescued.

Talbot devotes several chapters to Dulles’s cooperation with and protection of the Nazis. One chapter is devoted to Dulles’s bringing the “Gehlen organization” into the fold of U.S. intelligence, with dubious results.
And, Talbot describes how James Angleton appeared to have blackmailed his way into his position of Chief of Counterintelligence by promising not to expose Dulles’s hiding of Nazi funds. That would explain how Angleton rose to such a key position despite his dubious fitness for the job. The paranoid Angleton ruined the lives of many intelligence officers whom he suspected falsely of being foreign spies, while missing the fact that his good friend in British intelligence, Kim Philby, was a Soviet double-agent. But Allen Dulles was ever Angleton’s protector.

Due to the scope of the topics covered, Talbot is necessarily unable to go in great depth into any of them. His coverage of the Hiss case feels superficial to one who has read a great deal on the subject. For example, Talbot speculates that Alger Hiss, a senior State Department official accused of spying for the Soviets, didn’t want to recognize Whittaker Chambers, the chief witness against him, because the two had perhaps engaged in a homosexual liaison.

While that may be true, I’ve always found Hiss’s own reasons compelling: Chambers had gone by another name when he had first known him; it had been many years since they had met; and Chambers’s weight had changed dramatically. That seems to better explain why Hiss claimed he didn’t know Chambers until he had a face-to-face meeting with him. Then, he recognized his long-ago tenant.

Talbot sprinkles a little sexual innuendo throughout the book. Personally, I find that takes away from the telling of history because anyone can say anything about someone else when the person is no longer alive to dispute it. In most cases, these suspicions are neither provable nor relevant. Fortunately, these are minimal interruptions to the overall tale.

Talbot makes a compelling argument that a lot of the abuses of the intelligence apparatus that we are dealing with now had their genesis under Allen Dulles’s version of the CIA. He traces the notion that the CIA is “above the law” and unanswerable to oversight to the McCarthy hearings, where Dulles earned the undying loyalty of the CIA by refusing to turn over Sen. Joe McCarthy’s targets for questioning.

McCarthy was clearly overreaching in his pursuit of suspected Communists and homosexuals as alleged national security threats but there should have been another way to deal with that than by claiming the CIA was above the law. That single act of defiance, perhaps more than anything else, paved the way to the egregious CIA abuses that have occurred in the years since, including the illegal wiretapping of elected officials, opening them up to blackmail.

In another part of the book, Talbot details the rise of Nixon under, in part, Dulles’s sponsorship. Most of us know that Nixon received illegal campaign
donations when he was running for president. But Nixon also shook down those who wanted him to run for Congress, claiming he couldn’t afford to live on the salary of a Congressman and that he’d need supplementary income if he were to run. These are the kinds of juicy details Talbot’s book provides in spades.

As CIA Director

President Dwight Eisenhower appointed Dulles as the fifth CIA director and the first civilian director in 1953, but, as Talbot makes clear, Dulles overrode some of Eisenhower’s wishes by collaborating with his brother, John Foster Dulles, who was Secretary of State. By and large, Eisenhower was okay with letting the Dulles brothers run U.S. overt and covert foreign policy as they helped shape the worsening Cold War.

Their hard-line anti-communism and sympathy for colonialism included organizing coups in Iran in 1953 and in Guatemala in 1954 and blocking a political settlement of the Vietnam conflict that would have involved elections leading to the likely victory of Ho Chi Minh. (John Foster Dulles died in 1959. The international airport outside Washington D.C. is named in his honor.)

One chapter focuses on the killing of “dangerous ideas” in the form of a lecturer at Columbia University, Jesús Galán. He and compatriots had fought in the Spanish Civil War and fled to the Dominican Republic, only to find that they had “left Franco’s frying pan and landed in Trujillo’s fire.” Galán later escaped the Dominican Republic for America and wrote a damning 750-page essay called “The Era of Trujillo,” as his PhD thesis.

Talbot reveals the role of CIA operative Robert Maheu and ex-FBI agent John Frank in the kidnapping of Galán and his delivery to Trujillo, who tortured him, boiled him alive and fed him to the sharks. With the help of Dulles’s CIA, Galán died in 1956.

Talbot also argues that the CIA was “too modest” when it claimed it was not responsible for the death of Congolese independence leader Patrice Lumumba who was assassinated just days before John Kennedy was inaugurated in 1961. The CIA basically handed Lumumba over to the people who killed him, making the Agency, at the very least, strong accessories to the plot, and hardly the failed-plot-bystanders, the story that CIA officials sold to the Church Committee.

Though Eisenhower had given the Dulles brothers a long leash for their foreign policy schemes, President John F. Kennedy had different ideas. As president, he wanted to run his own foreign policy, and this deeply rankled Allen Dulles. However, in his first months in office, Kennedy acquiesced to the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in April 1961. Furious that he let the CIA sell him on the
scheme that was hatched under Eisenhower, Kennedy vowed to rein in the freewheeling CIA.

Dulles hadn’t had to answer to anyone for a long time. But his sloppy Bay of Pigs operation cost him all credibility with Kennedy, who took the high road publicly, refusing to blame the CIA outright. But in private, he made it clear the Agency was not to be trusted and that he wanted to shatter it into a million pieces. The enmity between the pair grew.

Allen Dulles also defied Kennedy’s wishes when the President promoted an opening to the Left in Italy. Under Dulles, the CIA continued working against those same forces while supporting the Right as the spy agency and its predecessor, the OSS, had done since World War II.

Attorney General Robert Kennedy was so suspicious of Dulles’s secret reach that after the Bay of Pigs fiasco he found Dulles’s sister working in the State Department and had her fired. President Kennedy ousted Dulles in November 1961, replacing him with John McCone.

But Dulles did not go quietly into the cold night, as Talbot tells it, but ran, essentially, a government in exile from his home on the Potomac. Talbot details some of the comings and goings and how Dulles may have used his own book tour to help plan and plot the assassination of President Kennedy.

The JFK Assassination

Toward the end of the book, Talbot focuses nearly as much on President Kennedy and the plot to assassinate him as he does on Allen Dulles, with mixed results. While Talbot has the facts right in the broad strokes, if not all the small details, his focus was, in my opinion, a tad misplaced in spots. For example, he appears to believe E. Howard Hunt’s deathbed “confession,” which many in the research community do not.

Hunt, a career intelligence officer who became infamous as a leader of Nixon’s Watergate burglary team, implicated President Lyndon B. Johnson in the plot to kill Kennedy, which has never made sense to me. If LBJ was so ruthless that he killed his way to the presidency, why did he decide not to run again in 1968? Historically, when people have killed their way to the throne, they do not voluntarily abdicate it.

And Hunt’s “confession” seemed motivated more by the goal of leaving his family a little money after his death than by a desire to tell the truth. Indeed, even Talbot is puzzled at things Hunt appears not to know that he would necessarily have known had he been privy to the inner workings of the plot.
Clearly, Talbot focuses on Hunt because of Hunt’s well-documented long-term friendship with Dulles. And, I do believe, from my own research, that Hunt was likely in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, presumably as paymaster, his usual role in operations, based in large part on the fuller evidence from which Talbot created his abbreviated summary on that point. But I’m not persuaded, by this presentation or my other research, that Hunt knew the details of the actual plot.

From my own 25-plus years of research into the documentary record of the Kennedy assassination, I have come to believe it more likely that Richard Helms, James Angleton and David Atlee Phillips were the top plotters, not Dulles. But, to Talbot’s point, all of these men were beholden, at different levels, to Dulles; in fact, Angleton carried Dulles’s ashes at his funeral in 1969.

David Atlee Phillips gained power in the CIA because of his successful operations during the 1954 overthrow of Arbenz in Guatemala under Dulles. Helms was apparently insulated from the Bay of Pigs disaster in April 1961, perhaps by Dulles to keep a loyal person at the upper echelon of the CIA.

Given the hostility between Dulles and Kennedy, it remains a historical anomaly that Dulles managed to finagle his way onto the official investigation of Kennedy’s assassination. In that position, Allen Dulles was more responsible than anyone for the deliberate obfuscations of the Warren Commission. Dulles spent more minutes working for the commission than any other member. I agree with Talbot that the body should more appropriately have been named “the Dulles Commission.”

Talbot repudiated the recently resurfaced canard that Robert Kennedy had asked LBJ to appoint Dulles to the commission, a point lawyer and former House Select Committee investigator Dan Hardway has also recently made in detail recently with additional evidence. (See Section VIII in Hardway’s article “Thank you, Phil Shenon.”)

Dulles really did have ties to the family of Ruth and Michael Paine, the couple that housed the Oswalds in the months before the assassination. And Dulles really did monitor New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison’s case against Clay Shaw through the man Garrison had hired to provide “security,” Gordon Novel.

One of the most interesting people Talbot examined in the latter part of his book was JFK adviser and historian Arthur Schlesinger, who apparently had a distaste for Dulles and the CIA’s actions professionally while maintaining a personal and even warm relationship with Dulles though Schlesinger came to question that friendship in later years.
One of Talbot’s chapters, “I can’t look and I won’t look,” is named for something Schlesinger said when confronted with evidence of conspiracy in the Kennedy assassination. Here was a man so wedded to his circle that he did not want to believe someone he knew and admired could be responsible for such a heinous crime.

Toward the end of his life, Schlesinger reflected on his “truce” and friendship with Dulles’s protégé Richard Helms and later CIA Director William Casey. Talbot quoted Schlesinger as saying, “I did wonder at one’s [meaning his own] capacity to continue liking people who have been involved in wicked things. Is this deplorable weakness? Or commendable tolerance?”

The same must be asked of the public’s tolerance of secret operations that run counter to the principles of democracy in an open society. Is it commendable to tolerate assassinations and the darker deeds in the name of preserving the republic, or, more accurately, protecting the holdings of corporate leaders in the republic, or is it our weakness, as citizens of a democratic republic, that we have not raised our voices in protest of a secret, parallel government that has and no doubt will continue to pursue an independent path, out of control of our democracy?

That is the question that Talbot’s book asks between the lines. The Devil’s Chessboard gives us essential information to ponder before we make our answer.

Lisa Pease is a writer who has examined issues ranging from the Kennedy assassination to voting irregularities in recent U.S. elections.