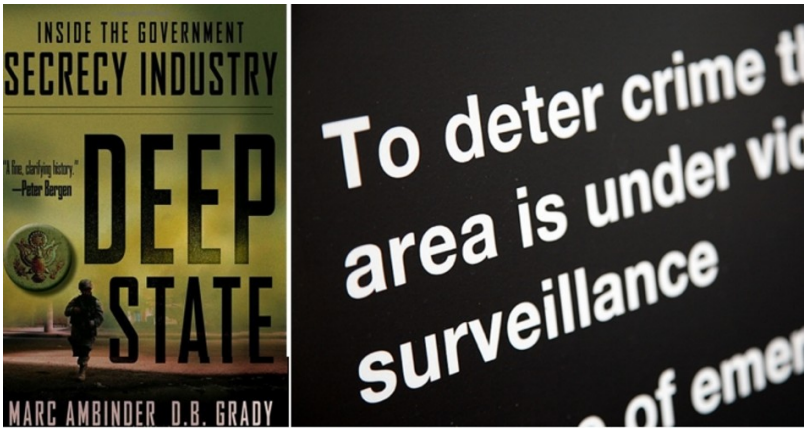
Book Review: Deep State: Inside the Government Secrecy Industry



"There is a hidden country within the United States. It was formed from the astonishing number of secrets held by the government and the growing ranks of secret-keepers given charge over them." So begins a synopsis of *Deep State*, a new book by Marc Ambinder and D.B. Grady.

While the book certainly delivers on dishing some of the stories surrounding past and present activities carried on in secret by the federal government, it does so in the form of a book that reads like an encomium rather than an indictment.

The accommodating and aggrandizing tone of the book is off-putting, especially in light of the publisher's claim that "*Deep State* … disassembles the secrecy apparatus of the United States and examines real-world trends that ought to trouble everyone from the most aggressive hawk to the fiercest civil libertarian."

From the first page, the authors seem smitten with the notion of painting with broad strokes the picture that there are "certain secrets necessary to defend the republic."

Some of the hidden history laid out in *Deep State* includes the story of the surveillance program established by the National Security Agency (NSA) in the days after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Ambinder and Grady describe this warrantless wiretapping as "controversial" rather than with the word it deserves: unconstitutional.

The Fourth Amendment protects "the right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures." Any attempt by the NSA to monitor the electronic communication of an American without probable cause and without a warrant is a direct violation of that constitutional protection for a fundamental right.

Although this program is practically praised by the authors of *Deep State*, *The New American* interviewed Thomas Drake, an eyewitness to the NSA's assault on the Constitution.

Drake was a senior executive at the NSA who made the "mistake" of revealing to the *Baltimore Sun* that the NSA's Trailblazer Project — intended to analyze data carried on in the United States and elsewhere through the Internet, cellphones, and e-mails — not only violated the Fourth Amendment's proscription against unwarranted searches and seizures, but it was a "billion-dollar computer boondoggle."

Other similar revelations found in *Deep State* include "how the increased exposure of secrets affects everything from Congressional budgets to Area 51, from Seal Team Six and Delta Force to the FBI, CIA, and NSA."

While it is certainly human nature to want to hear secrets and the more exclusive the club of those in the know the better, the authors of *Deep State* seem to take that natural inclination to new heights of

hagiography.

Although much of what the authors write is fodder for the hype machine, there is one paragraph that is perhaps the most accurate and the most chilling of all the book's reported revelations. Regarding Facebook, Ambinder and Grady write:

> Mark Zuckerberg runs a giant spy machine in Palo Alto, California. He wasn't the first to build one, but his was the best, and every day hundreds of thousands of people upload the most intimate details of their lives to the Internet. The real coup wasn't hoodwinking the public into revealing their thoughts, closest associates, and exact geographic coordinates at any given time. Rather, it was getting the public to volunteer that information. Then he turned off the privacy settings.

From such statements, the authors move on to praising behavior that should be condemned. Consider, for example, the description of the despicable practice of torture (the authors use the convenient "enhanced interrogation" euphemism) carried on by or on behalf of American officials. "Enhanced interrogation techniques provided a crucial dot connecting Osama bin Laden's preferred method of communication (courier) to his whereabouts (Abbottabad)."

Then, they soft-pedal the torture, claiming, "The government was torturing people in our name for little apparent benefit." That oblique criticism seems to indicate that if the interrogators could have derived a lot of benefit from the torture then it would have been acceptable.

Additionally, there is an air of omniscience in the book, with the authors demonstrating an apparent ability to read minds and know with surety the motivations of people involved in the society of secrecy. The government, they write, "tries to do what it says it will do," and when it lies, "it almost invariably does so to further a redeeming interest."

Can't get much more congratulatory than that.

Consider the statement that "every president believes that the secret activities he orders or permits are both moral and in the interest of the nation."

How can anyone — including award-winning journalists — possibly be privy to the private thoughts of a president? How can they be so certain that President Obama is genuinely convinced that he is acting morally when he orders a drone strike on a village in Yemen, Afghanistan, or Pakistan? In short, they cannot.

Another startling demonstration of the authors' omniscience is their declaration regarding the assassination of John F. Kennedy: "There was no cover up. There was no conspiracy." Case closed.

Finally, with regard to the operation that reportedly resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden, Ambinder and Grady brag that "no boundaries separated the intelligence community from the military or one military unit from another."

While Americans should rightly be proud of the efficacy of our armed forces, they should be equally thankful for the incorporation of timeless principles of freedom enshrined in our Constitution. Many of these principles are regularly sacrificed by the secrecy apparatus on the altar of national safety.

The praise for the Osama bin Laden operation doesn't stop there. On page 114, the authors describe the raid as "legal enough."

Legal enough is not the standard that the people of the United States should apply to those elected and appointed officials acting in their name. We must not let our fears — legitimate or manufactured —

trump our principles. When it comes to the president's keeping of a kill list of America's suspected enemies and his habit of sending drones to cull names from that list by way of state-sponsored assassination, Americans must demand that Congress exercise a check on such autocratic executive power.

In their book, Ambinder and Grady assert that Congress' "silence provides the consent that the president seeks for the employment of his secret army." And, as for the escalation of the drone war, they declare that this program "was greeted with some dismay, but was arguably a necessary development."

Some dismay? What of the opinion of the "fiercest civil libertarians" the publisher claims will be addressed? Even those considered moderate libertarians look upon the drone war and the concomitant death of due process with a little more than "some dismay."

Senator Rand Paul (R-Ky.) is one of that brand of civil libertarian and he and several of his colleagues in the U.S. Senate were so angered by the president's betrayal of core constitutional principles in his use of drones that they carried out a 13-hour filibuster in March. The point of the filibuster was to hold up the confirmation of the president's nomination of John Brennan to head the CIA until the administration defined the boundaries of its power to kill enemies by drone.

Striking a similar tone, the authors of *Deep State* write that, "the missiles [launched by drone] began to go astray and invariably innocents were killed."

That pretext misses the point entirely. The relevant constitutional consideration is that even when the "right target" is killed, that suspect is denied due process. Once the policy of summary execution is normalized, the only barrier to names on a presidential kill list being populated by political enemies is the classification of that person as a "terrorist" or "suspected militant."

Finally, *Deep State* makes the familiar claim that President Obama spent his first few months in office putting out fires sparked by his predecessor.

Likewise, they predict that President Obama's successor will suffer the same debilitating fate because of the "curse of the Twenty-Second Amendment."

The Twenty-Second Amendment limits the president to two terms in office. Reading between the lines, it seems that the Ambinder and Grady believe that many of the mistakes made by increasingly omnipotent executives could be obviated if the Constitution could be amended allowing the president to serve three or more terms of office.

Given the very insignificant policy disagreements among presidential candidates put forward by the two major political parties, it is unlikely that the trend toward tyranny would change no matter who occupied the Oval Office or for how long.

Deep State is published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. and is available now.

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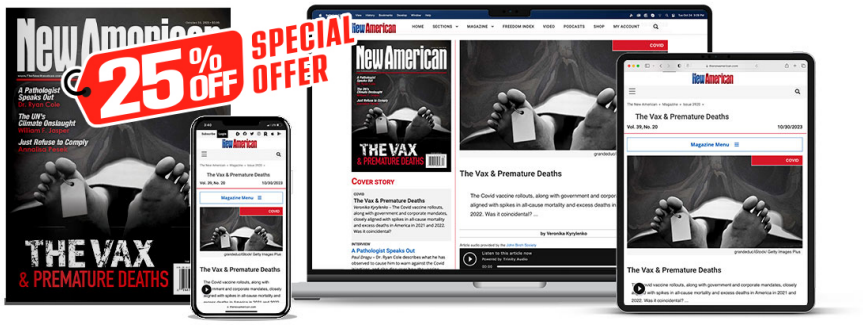

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