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**Civics 101**

**Episode 114: The CIA**

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:00] Civics 101 is supported in part by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

**INTRO:** [00:00:04] Who is the current speaker of the house? Don't even know. Will they rule in the president's favor or will they send it to the Supreme Court? You can't refer to a senator directly by their name. Congressional redistricting. Separation of powers. Executive orders. The national security Council. Civics, civics, civics 101.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:24] This is Civics 101, the podcast refresher course on how democracy works. I'm Virginia Prescott. The CIA, the Central Intelligence Agency, calls itself the nation's eyes, ears, and sometimes its hidden hand. In movies and on TV, the CIA often runs with maximum efficiency with elite operatives trailing terrorists or conducting espionage in foreign cities. The agency's real world legacy is more complicated. With a laundry list of controversial and botched operations from the Bay of Pigs to the agency's use of torture and post 9/11 black site prisons.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:01] So what is the CIA and what is its role in American democracy? Journalist Tim Weiner schooled us on the FBI. Now he's here as author of Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA, to fill us in. In his research for the book Weiner examined more than 50,000 documents and conducted hundreds of interviews with CIA veterans including 10 directors. Tim great to have you back.

**Tim Weiner:** [00:01:25] My pleasure.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:27] What is the Central Intelligence Agency for? What's it do?

**Tim Weiner:** [00:01:31] The CIA is without question the most powerful intelligence service in the world. The CIA was created in 1947 at the dawn of the Cold War. The idea was not so much to fight the Cold War. No one knew how that could be done. But to prevent another Pearl Harbor. To allow the president the information he needed to see over the horizon. At that time America bestrode the world like a Colossus and yet we were afraid because the Soviet Union had pushed westward and taken half of Europe, consolidating its power after the defeat of the Nazis. And there were two schools of thought. One was to contain the Soviets and the other was to push them back to the borders of Russia. In these warring schools of thought was the crucible in which the C.I.A was formed.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:41] What is central intelligence? I mean what does that actually mean?

**Tim Weiner:** [00:02:47] The United States had never had a peacetime intelligence service. Now we were new a t this. The Russians had been at it since Peter the Great. The British, since Queen Elizabeth the first. And the Chinese since Sun Tzu wrote The Art of War 26 centuries ago. But we were new at the game of espionage. And the warring schools of thought within the CIA were: are we going to simply gather intelligence, which means stealing secrets, or are we going to try not just to understand the world but to change the world through covert action, which means secret action essentially designed to change the course of history. The more aggressive "change the world" faction won out.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:03:45] Who sets the budget for the CIA?

**Tim Weiner:** [00:03:47] The president requests and the Congress approves. It has rubber stamped increases in the intelligence budget, what's called the black budget. Which has doubled and tripled and quadrupled since 9/11 to the point where, and this budget is secret by the way, but it currently is an estimated 60 billion dollars a year. Now that's half the size of the entire military and espionage budget of Russia.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:04:18] So 1947. Harry Truman is president. This is post-war America. The Soviet Union gaining power and moving westward. There is an argument for needing peacetime intelligence in order to either contain or to push back the Soviet Union. Were there arguments against having what is in effect a secret police agency in the United States?

**Tim Weiner:** [00:04:45] Well the CIA has no police powers within the United States. It is a foreign intelligence service. That's in its charter. Latterly, it would be discovered that the CIA had been spying on Americans and violating its charter. But the great fear about the CIA was best expressed by the Secretary of State Dean Acheson who said these guys will be up to things that the president will never know about and there will be no way of controlling what they do. They'll be a loose cannon rolling around on the ship of state.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:05:19] So double-dealing right from the beginning. Spies, counterspies, double agents, paramilitary launches. What gives the CIA the authority to take this kind of covert action?

**Tim Weiner:** [00:05:34] The CIA's charter is very short at six pages long. And there's a phrase in its charter that says the CIA could conduct quote "other operations from time to time". OK. And those other operations turned out to be the tail that wagged the dog in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s President Eisenhower who knew a thing or two about secret military operations - he had after all organized the D Day invasion - tried mightily to get a hold of the CIA. And over the rest of American intelligence operations.

[00:06:12] But the head of the Director of Central Intelligence Allen Dulles did things that he never told the president about. And at the end of Eisenhower's eight years in office he sat down with Dulles and other military and intelligence chiefs and said, I've been trying for eight years to get this operation, American intelligence, under my command and control and I will leave to my successor, who is John Kennedy the president-elect,. I will leave my successor a Legacy of Ashes. Three months later came the Bay of Pigs.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:06:48] The Bay of Pigs was far from the only controversial operation. There are cases of American spies disappearing in the Soviet Union, of the Iran Contra affair, for example... The hostages taken in Iran unbeknownst to intelligence services. Why so many missteps?

**Tim Weiner:** [00:07:06] This tug of war within the CIA--are we going to try and know the world or are we going to try and change the world? - never resolved itself until the Cold War was over. What you have is a series of... For example coups. We overthrew the government of Guatemala and its freely elected leader. We overthrew the government of Iran and its freely elected leader under Eisenhower in the 50s. And these were deemed great successes. And the CIA thought it could successfully change the world. Well those two early successes were not matched as the years went by. The failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion led to attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro, which were wild schemes. An exploding conch shell that would kill him when he was scuba diving. A poisoned cigar. A poisoned ice cream. This led to, you know, well it was just a series of failures.

[00:08:13] Now at the same time the CIA had developed the U 2 spyplane which looked down on Cuba in 1962 and saw that there was a Soviet military installation with nuclear missiles 90 miles from the American mainland being constructed. And that intelligence derived from technology more than spies basically prevented the threat of World War III. So you have to measure the successes of intelligence versus failures of covert action. And it is a decidedly mixed record. But the point is a superpower with a standing army has to have intelligence. Otherwise you are flying blind.

[00:09:01] On the intelligence gathering front which I would argue is much more important than the covert action front. The great failure during the Cold War was we never really had great spies American spies inside the Soviet Union. So you know in the 1980s as the spy networks fell apart we had to rely on our spy satellites who looked down at the Soviet Union and counted how many missiles they had. But that is not the true measure of strength of a country. Had they looked at the right things, potatoes rotting in the field because there was no gasoline for the trucks to take them to market, they would have seen the Soviet Union was very weak and that is why the collapse took America by surprise. Now in this day and age the CIA doesn't have one big target. One main enemy. It has endless enemies and the agency is spread mightily thin. Trying to know what's going on in the world. You need intelligence.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:10:13] The CIA missed the terrorist attacks of September 11th. How did that happen?

**Tim Weiner:** [00:10:19] Going back to the beginning when the rationale for the CIA was to prevent a second Pearl Harbor. Now came the second Pearl Harbor. An attack on the United States directed by terrorists. The proximate cause of the success of the 9/11 attacks was a failure of the FBI and the CIA to work together. Al Qaeda had people in this country to hijack the planes. Once they were in this country, it largely fell to the FBI to detect their presence and to track them. The impetus behind Al-Qaeda overseas was the responsibility of the CIA. And these two agencies famously in competition since 1947 would not and could not share intelligence and work together. Like Pearl Harbor, the bits and pieces of the puzzle were all there but nobody put them together.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:11:21] So what does Gina Haspel being nominated to replace Mike Pompeo as director of the CIA, what does that show you or eveal to you about where you think the CIA is now focusing its operations?

**Tim Weiner:** [00:11:35] It's important to understand that the CIA has to report to the president. It's the president's secret army. It's the president's intelligence service. And Donald Trump has explicitly endorsed torture. The CIA carried it out on the secret but explicit orders of President George W. Bush. Now in the nomination of Gina Haspel to become head of the Central Intelligence Agency who in the course of a distinguished 30 year career also ran one of the black sites in Thailand where suspected terrorists were tortured and latterly in 2005 presided with her boss over the destruction of videotapes of torture. So presumably she has an open confirmation hearing.

**Tim Weiner:** [00:12:33] We will for the first time in public seriously address the moral aberration of the CIA on orders from President Bush torturing terror suspects.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:12:48] This idea of covert operations, the use of torture, paramilitary forces used to fight on foreign soil in wars not declared by Congress. It's difficult to understand the place of the CIA with in a democracy, within a constitutional framework.

**Tim Weiner:** [00:13:08] This is the constant tug of war that has been going on since the CIA was created more than 70 years ago. If you're a superpower you need intelligence. If you are a democracy you presumably operate on certain principles. Now what the CIA does overseas is illegal. Espionage is illegal everywhere. OK. It is punishable by imprisonment and sometimes death. You're recruiting people to commit treason. OK. The CIA officer overseas is a species of legal criminal in that what he or she does is authorized by presidential authority. But what is done overseas is a crime and a serious crime. Walking this tightrope has been very difficult for Americans. It goes to who we are. Do we need secrecy and deception to survive in this world? I think that's a settled issue. We do. When intelligence succeeds it can save lives. When intelligence fails people die. We want it to succeed. And we want for example to avoid a third Pearl Harbor. Dwight Eisenhower once called intelligence a distasteful but necessary function of American government. And you know I have studied the CIA for more than 30 years. When I was young I came into it thinking, well the secrecy and democracy are irreconcilable. The problem is we have to reconcile them.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:15:08] Tim Weiner. Thank you so much for speaking with us.

**Tim Weiner:** [00:15:10] My pleasure.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:15:19] That is it for Civics 101. This episode was produced by Justin Paradis. Our executive producer is Erica Janik. Music from Broke for Free. If you've got a Civics 101 question top secret or otherwise, give us a call at 202-798-6865. You can find us online at civics101podcast.org and on Twitter @civics101pod. I'm Virginia Prescott. Civics 101 is a production of N ew Hampshire Public Radio.