THE MISSION

THE CIA IN THE 21st CENTURY

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WINNER OF THE
NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

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Dedication

For Kate, Emma, and Ruby

Epigraph

We must have the greatest immorality,
and we must have the greatest morality.

—Hugh Cunningham, director of training, Central Intelligence Agency

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Prologue: The Spy and the Scribe

I first set foot inside the Central Intelligence Agency in 1988, a young newspaperman back from a long trip to Afghanistan. I had gone there to report on the CIA's multibillion-dollar arms shipments to the Afghan guerrillas, whose jihad against the Soviet invaders was the last great battle of the cold war. Before leaving, I had called up the CIA's spokesman to ask for a briefing, a request flatly denied. Off I went to Afghanistan. I hadn't been back at my desk in Washington for more than a day when the phone rang. How would I like to come in for that briefing now? I had no idea that I was about to discover my life's calling.

I made the seven-mile drive out to the woodlands of Langley, Virginia, and walked into the lobby of the CIA's headquarters. To my left, engraved in the wall, was the Gospel of John: *And ye shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free.* A thought struck me. Was it possible to know the truth about the CIA? Could I cover it as I had once covered the cops and the courts as a cub reporter? The only way to begin was to talk to its veterans, to listen, and to try to learn how a secret intelligence service operates in an open democratic society.

A few months later, I called up Richard Helms, the CIA's director for seven years under Presidents Johnson and Nixon, who had fired him for refusing to cover up the Watergate break-in on a spurious claim of national security. A charter member of the CIA at its creation, the chief of its clandestine service during the Cuban missile crisis and the early days of the Vietnam War, Helms was elegant as a British banker, an eloquent raconteur, and a

man who enjoyed a beer at lunch. Over the course of many an hour, he gave me a master class in the history of the CIA. The mission at the outset in 1947 was to know the enemy. Spies would divine the secrets of the Kremlin, scholarly analysts would assay them, and directors would report to the president of the United States. “In the beginning, we knew nothing,” Helms told me. “Our knowledge of what the other side was up to, their intentions, their capabilities, was nil, or next to it. If you came up with a telephone book, or a map of an airfield, that was pretty hot stuff. We were in the dark about a lot of the world.” The chances for enlightenment were vanishingly small. Within a year, the mission changed. The Soviets had taken over more than half of Europe. The Pentagon and the State Department ordered the CIA to fight fire with fire and roll back the forces of communism. Knowing the world through espionage took a back seat to changing the world through covert action. Helms saw this as a tragic mistake. By 1950, the CIA had raised a paramilitary army, and it tried for four years to penetrate Russia, Poland, Ukraine, China, and North Korea with recruited foreign agents parachuting behind enemy lines. These were suicide missions, their plans purloined by communist spies. They stayed secret for many years, as did the violent right-wing coups and assassination plots against foreign leaders. Helms had kept those secrets. His successors, to the CIA’s sorrow, had not.

He wanted me to understand that the agency hadn’t dreamed up the idea of overthrowing Iran or killing Fidel Castro. Every president since Truman had commanded the CIA to intervene with guns and money to control the fate of nations when sending in the Marines was not an option. Its officers did what they were ordered to do. They were executing the foreign policy of the United States. They drew their power directly from the commander in chief. And the CIA’s directors and spies and analysts depended on his faith in the intelligence they delivered; if they were not believed, they had no purpose. They learned it was perilous to tell him what he did not want to hear.

By the time I began covering the CIA for the *New York Times* in 1993, the cold war was over, the agency was in constant turmoil, and the old code of secrecy was breaking down. An astonishing number of senior officers and analysts at headquarters spoke openly with me, as did many members of the old guard, now retired after twenty or thirty years and shedding the cloak of clandestinity. The CIA slowly began to open up some of its files on cold-war covert actions in Europe and Asia and Latin America. A clearer picture of its past started to emerge. Espionage and covert action were not the glamorous and romantic adventure that the movies made it out to be. “It’s not fun and

games," Helms said. "It's dirty and dangerous." The reality was far more interesting than the fiction.

I began to grasp not only what the CIA did, but what it was like to work for it. Journalists and spies were not all that different. I could land in Khartoum or Havana and say, in so many words: "Take me to your leader." Soon thereafter I would meet the dictator of Sudan or Castro himself. CIA officers had that kind of entrée all over the world, both to the ruling class and the rebels seeking to overthrow it, if they played their cards right. Recruiting agents overseas was not unlike developing sources at the CIA, though reporters didn't pay for information and spies did, handsomely. The spy and the scribe both depended on establishing trust. They were driven by a thirst for a hidden truth. And they knew it could take years before the secrets they learned gave them a deep understanding of the way things really worked. The difference was that the journalist wanted to know the world and the CIA had the power to change it.

By the turn of the century, I had compiled a critical mass of declassified documents and conducted more than two hundred interviews. I thought it might be possible to write a history of the first sixty years of the CIA. *Legacy of Ashes* was published in 2007, in the wake of the revelations of the CIA's secret prisons and the tortures that went on therein. The CIA had been ordered to become a secret army once again, and in the name of counterterrorism, its disciplines of espionage and analysis had been diminished. Its false reporting on Saddam Hussein's arsenals had led the United States to invade and occupy Iraq, the most disastrous foreign policy decision since the Vietnam War. In some ways, the book reflected the darkness of that time.

Looking back, there was so much I didn't know about what the CIA was doing at home and abroad after the September 11 attacks—and so much to be learned about its secret history in the decades thereafter. So I set out to write *The Mission* in the spring of 2022. The book you hold in your hands is the first chronicle of the twenty-first-century CIA, told in the words of those who lived it. Once again, as when I first started out on the CIA beat, I found an amazing number of people who agreed to speak to me. They had fought in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, and a dozen other nations. They had run espionage campaigns from the Mediterranean to the Pacific. They had faced criminal investigations for their lethal counterterrorism and counternarcotics operations. They had struggled to penetrate the Kremlin and succeeded. They had built lifelines for the soldiers and spies of Ukraine. Among them was the man who created the CIA's secret prison system, the woman who helped take down the world's biggest nuclear-weapons

technology smuggling ring, a deep-cover spy who had put presidents on his payroll, station chiefs who served on four continents, and the sitting chief of the CIA's clandestine service—a man who had been undercover for thirty-three years and had never talked to a journalist in his life. Thanks to their candor, and their trust, this book was written on the record, without anonymous sources or blind quotes.

The Mission is being published in a time of great peril. The United States is governed by a man who admires dictators and despots, aspires to rule as an autocrat, despises civil liberties, and threatens to imprison his opponents. Now that the Supreme Court has ruled that presidents cannot be prosecuted for crimes committed in office, they can abuse their power freely. They can instruct the CIA to spy on Americans, to subvert their domestic enemies, to conduct political assassinations with impunity, to start a war in secret.

The CIA has been twice transformed since the dawn of the twenty-first century. In the beginning, it knew next to nothing about al Qaeda, and failed to prevent a disaster more devastating than Pearl Harbor. Then its false reporting on existential threats terrified the White House and lit the fuse for the disastrous war in Iraq. These calamities were the consequence of a lack of good intelligence. Over the past decade, with the diminution of the war on terror, the CIA has slowly returned to its original purpose of espionage. Its spies are now called upon again to understand the intentions and capabilities of America's enemies in Moscow and Beijing, Tehran and Pyongyang. A new cold war is slowly escalating toward existential danger. Only good intelligence can prevent a surprise attack, a fatal miscalculation, a futile war. But even the best intelligence will not sway a leader who will not heed it. Among the CIA's greatest challenges in the days to come will be the man in the White House, an authoritarian leader who presents the clearest danger to the national security of the United States since this century began.

Chapter One
The Dark Horizon

On the morning of April 20, 2001, George Tenet gazed out the glass wall of his seventh-floor suite at the Central Intelligence Agency, looking upon a vision of serenity, tall green trees reaching as far as the eye could see. He knew something terrible was out there on the horizon. He had tried and failed to convince the president of the United States that the nation faced a cataclysmic attack. And he feared that a great gap lay between what the CIA was capable of doing and what it would be called upon to do after the catastrophe struck.

Tenet had taken charge of the CIA in July 1997, its fifth director in six tumultuous years. The agency had marked its fiftieth anniversary that summer, and the celebration had been muted. Many of its cold war leaders were in mourning at how far American intelligence had fallen. "The only remaining superpower[1] doesn't have enough interest in what's going on in the world to organize and run an espionage service," said Richard Helms. "We've drifted away from that as a country."

The end of the cold war had devastated the world's most famous secret intelligence agency. How could it be great without a great enemy? The fall of the Soviet Union had hit the CIA like "the meteor strikes on the dinosaurs.[2] Nothing was the same afterwards," wrote Richard Kerr, its deputy director from 1989 to 1992. "It was easy, once upon a time,[3] for CIA to be unique and mystical," said the last chief of the Soviet division of the clandestine service, Milt Bearden. "It was not an institution. It was a mission. And the mission was a crusade. Then you took the Soviet Union away from us and there wasn't anything else. We don't have a history. We don't have a hero. Even our medals are secret. And now the mission is over. *Fini*."

The CIA did have a history, although the American people knew little of it. Its classified annals were filled with short-term triumphs and some long-running successes in the struggle against the Soviet empire, the individual triumphs of brave spies and brilliant analysts. But the public record was a litany of institutional failures, replete with flawed covert operations mandated by the foreign policies of every president since World War Two.

President Harry Truman had created the CIA in 1947 to prevent the next Pearl Harbor, not to fight the cold war. "The idea was that we've got to get an organization where analysts could look at everything from overseas, no matter how secret," Helms said. "The agency was created to analyze intelligence, not for covert action." Only "an accident of history" had compelled the CIA to change the world. President Dwight Eisenhower had commanded the agency to overthrow the freely elected governments of Iran and Guatemala in secrecy, but the coups were anything but silent. The CIA's officers had made a great deal of noise in executing his orders. "They attracted a lot of attention," Helms said, and "with the attention, the CIA was identified with covert action," a force freely wielded by imperial presidents in perilous times.

President John F. Kennedy's faith in the CIA had been shattered after he ordered it to invade Cuba and crush Fidel Castro in 1961; the Bay of Pigs had become an indelible emblem of disaster. The CIA had helped to avert a nuclear war during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, but thereafter rarely divined the intentions and capabilities of the Kremlin through espionage. The agency's best analysts frequently briefed Gerald R. Ford, the House minority leader and a top overseer of military spending, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. "They had charts on the walls,[4] they had figures," President Ford had recalled in retirement. "And their conclusion was that in ten years, the United States would be behind the Soviet Union in military capability, in economic growth, in the strength of our economy. It was a scary presentation," Ford said, but "they were 180 degrees wrong. These were the best people we had, the CIA's so-called experts."

In the spring of 1975, as Saigon fell, the CIA's ramparts were breached by Senate investigators. They would expose the agency's history of failed assassination plots against foreign leaders and its fraught connections with right-wing governments, generals, and goon squads. The investigations "set back our liaison relationships around the world,"[5] President George H. W. Bush, who was then the agency's director, said in 1997. "They caused many people abroad to pull away from cooperating with the CIA, and they devastated the morale" of its spies, whom Bush had called "perhaps the finest group of dedicated public servants this country has." In 1985,

President Ronald Reagan's CIA director, William J. Casey, had enmeshed those spies in a harebrained and highly illegal scheme to sell weapons to Iran, skim the profits, and slip them to the contras fighting a covert war in Central America. The stratagem had led to criminal charges against senior CIA officers, all of whom President Bush had pardoned days before he left the White House in December 1992. Among them was Duane "Dewey" Clarridge, the founding father of the CIA's counterterrorism center. In retirement, he argued that the CIA was at the point of failure. The agency was "finished as a really effective intelligence service,"[6] Clarridge had written in 1997, and it would only be reinvented "after some appalling catastrophe befalls us."

"A burning platform"

Soon after arriving in the director's suite that summer, Tenet had a nightmare vision of the future. He saw himself standing on "a burning platform,"[7] the captain of a rusting ship in a rough sea fighting a fire in the engine room. If he didn't extinguish the blaze, "the organization and all of us in it would sink into the sea."

Tenet had vowed to rebuild the CIA for the twenty-first century, and like the Soviet Politburo, he had a five-year plan. But as time passed, his goals always remained five years away. Yet officers were running some remarkable operations at the dawn of the new millennium. They were rounding up war criminals in the Balkans and shipping them to the International Criminal Court in the Hague, capturing Islamic terrorists and sending them to prison cells in Cairo, plotting to take down smuggling rings run by a Pakistani scientist selling nuclear-weapons technology to North Korea and Libya, and trying to capture Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. The CIA still had spies capable of skillful espionage and analysts with deep expertise. It still had some foreign palaces and parliaments wired; more than a few presidents and prime ministers still couldn't sneeze without the CIA overhearing. It had built new spy services in nations where the Soviets once reigned, from Poland to Uzbekistan. It maintained lavishly financed liaisons with foreign spymasters who traded intelligence for cash.

But the CIA was no longer a global intelligence agency. Many countries once deemed crucial now went uncovered. More than thirty overseas stations and bases had been shuttered in the 1990s, and many that remained were a third of the size they had been a decade before. Essential intelligence

wasn't being collected, and what was collected wasn't being thought through. At the dawn of the information age, the CIA's officers and analysts worked with outmoded technology, struggling to distinguish the clear signals of significant facts from the cacophony of background noise. Hank Crumpton, the deputy chief of the counterterrorism center, described the state of affairs in its basement offices: "We had stacks of paper[8] spread out over the floor. We had accumulated cartons of raw intelligence, with people toiling through reams of paper, page by page." This was no way to run a twenty-first-century spy service.

Americans might once have imagined the CIA as an all-powerful force, with crystal balls foreseeing the future and silver bullets that could change the world through covert action. But Tenet had warned the White House and his overseers in Congress that the agency was half-broken, starved for money, bleeding talent and expertise. The CIA's secret budget that year was roughly $3 billion—adjusted for inflation, less than at the close of the Korean War. The Clinton administration had cut it by more than $600 million, a peace dividend never reinvested. A quarter of the CIA's personnel, nearly five thousand people, many with decades of experience, had walked out the door in the 1990s, leaving the ranks desperately depleted. The clandestine service, the heart and soul of the CIA—the spies, station chiefs, case officers, and deep-cover cadres whose missions included running covert operations, recruiting foreign agents, penetrating hostile intelligence services, dismantling terrorist networks—was barely a thousand strong. As Tenet kept telling anyone who would listen, there were more FBI agents in New York than CIA officers abroad. The brain drain among the intelligence analysts was especially dispiriting, and the despair among the talented tenth who remained was deepened by the rudderless drift of American foreign policy in the post–cold war world. They longed for "a sense of direction, a sense of what the mission is,"[9] said their director, John Gannon.

Precious little new blood had infused the agency. Recruitment had dwindled to the vanishing point. When Tenet arrived, precisely six people had passed the CIA's latest six-month training course at the Farm, its boot camp for new officers outside Williamsburg, Virginia. What would motivate a talented graduate student to sign up for the difficult, often dangerous, sometimes dirty business of espionage when they could make a fortune on Wall Street or explore the frontiers of the newborn World Wide Web at Silicon Valley startups like Google? The world of information looked more promising than the world of secrets.

In the face of fierce criticism from Congress, scathing newspaper stories about blown operations and bungled reporting, and internal studies

suggesting that he was realigning deck chairs on the *Titanic*, Tenet ferociously defended the CIA in public and private, rallying his troops when their morale flagged. A charming man, affable in the extreme, a backslapper in a city of backstabbers, Tenet radiated cheer as he chatted with the worker bees in the CIA's cafeteria, barged into their cubicles unannounced to ask what was up, dribbled a basketball down the agency's pastel corridors, and enlivened seventh-floor conferences by belting out the anthems of his youth. (Aretha Franklin's "Respect" was a favorite.) Unlike some of his predecessors, Tenet was a self-made man, a son of war refugees from Greece and Albania who had settled in Queens and run a greasy spoon called the 20th Century Diner. He looked like a New York City homicide detective: corpulent, compulsively chewing damp cigars, his suits rumpled, his skin sallow, his eyes red-rimmed.

"I spent plenty of sleepless nights wondering,[10] given the monumental task before me, if I was up to the job," Tenet wrote in his memoir. "No previous experience had prepared me."*

Things kept going wrong on Tenet's watch. The CIA had botched a major covert operation to undermine Saddam Hussein; scores of its recruited Iraqi agents had been captured, tortured, and killed. Its analysts had failed to warn of India's clear intentions to test a nuclear weapon, an event that altered the world's balance of power. A former station chief in Bucharest serving as an instructor at the Farm was convicted of spying for Moscow; he had handed over the identities of three years' worth of newly minted spies. He was one among four CIA and FBI turncoats of the era who had given the Kremlin a lasting power to defeat American intelligence operations, manipulate the CIA's reporting, mislead the White House, and mystify the Pentagon. None of this was a secret. Nearly every one of the CIA's travails were front-page news in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, a recurring nightmare for its leaders and a suppurating wound to its public image and political standing.

The awful truth was that the CIA faced a dizzying disparity between its diminished capacities and its immense responsibilities. "The system is sufficiently dysfunctional that intelligence failure is guaranteed,"[11] warned Russ Travers, a career analyst who later became a top counterterrorism official, in a 1997 article published by the CIA's in-house journal. By 2001, he predicted, America might be "completely surprised" by a terrorist attack. Tenet and his peers reached an identical conclusion in a highly classified report: Unless they made "substantial and sweeping changes in the way the nation collects, analyzes, and produces intelligence," the United States soon

would suffer a "catastrophic systemic intelligence failure."[12] The date of that warning was September 11, 1998.

A month before, al Qaeda had blown up truck bombs at two American embassies in East Africa at once, killing twelve Americans, eleven Tanzanians, and 224 Kenyans. Bin Laden's ability to hit two targets at the same time, three thousand miles from his base in Afghanistan, revealed a level of strategic planning and sophisticated execution that was something new in the world—a terrorist network with the ability to strike anywhere on earth. The CIA saw for the first time that bin Laden was capable of carrying out his declaration of war against the United States. As the CIA pursued the bombing suspects across Africa, the Middle East, and the Balkans, a growing number of spies in the field and analysts at headquarters grappled with the question of how to stop the next al Qaeda attack.

Tenet saw this as the CIA's new mission. A war on terrorism might become a semblance of what the war on communism had been.

For fifty years, the CIA had served as the pointed end of the spear of American foreign policy. Every president had used it as a secret weapon. At Tenet's impassioned request, on December 24, 1998, Bill Clinton authorized the CIA to mount a manhunt in the wilds of Afghanistan and kill bin Laden with the aid of recruited Afghan warlords.*

Congress had passed and Clinton had signed a law authorizing "all necessary means, including covert action and military force, to disrupt, dismantle and destroy international infrastructures used by international terrorists." The CIA's lawyers, skilled at nuance, interpreted *infrastructures* meant anything and everything that supported a terrorist—including the terrorists themselves. But the CIA lacked the money and the manpower and, above all, the intelligence to make war against al Qaeda. It took nine months and a change in leadership at the counterterrorism center before the CIA came up with a plan that had a slim chance of succeeding. In the meantime, Clinton had lost confidence in its abilities and revoked its license to kill. A fatal mistake had diminished Tenet's standing at the White House.

The Pentagon had invited the CIA to pick a target during NATO's air war in Serbia, which aimed to oust the genocidal leader Slobodan Milošević. After the target was hit, on May 7, 1999, Gen. Wes Clarke, the commander of American forces in the Balkans, had called headquarters in a rage. "Why did the CIA tell me to bomb the Chinese embassy[13] in Belgrade?" he demanded. He'd been informed that the building was a Serb military warehouse. His smart bombs had killed three people at the embassy and wounded twenty more. The Chinese ambassador, understandably, called it a barbaric act. Tenet was in London when he got a call from Clinton's national security

adviser, Sandy Berger. “You better get back here right away,” he said. “I’m trying to save your job.” It took a lot of doing, but Tenet stayed on.

He was sure he would be fired when he met President-elect George W. Bush nine days before his inauguration on January 20, 2001. Tenet was a Clinton man, and no CIA director had survived a transition of presidential power from one party to another since Richard Helms in 1969. He had braced himself for the ax, but it didn’t fall. “‘Why don’t we just let things go along for a while and we’ll see how things work out?’” Bush said. “I was neither on the team nor off it,” Tenet recounted. “I was on probation.”[14]

So long as he didn’t preside over a catastrophe, he would remain the director of central intelligence. Three months later, on April 20, 2001, came a calamity unlike any in the history of the CIA.

Chapter Two
Denial and Deception

Tenet remembered the day as his worst at the CIA, up to that point.

That morning, the station chief in Lima, a tall young officer with a sandy moustache named Steph Milliken, had walked into the office of Roberta Jacobson, the deputy chief of mission at the American embassy in Peru. He was a happy man. "We got one!"[1] he said. "It's a great one." The CIA had scored another kill in America's war on drugs, shooting a small plane out of the clear blue sky over the Amazon jungle.

"An hour later he came back, white as a sheet," Jacobsen remembered. When Hugh Turner, the number two man in the clandestine service, saw the flash cable from Lima, he rushed down the hallway on the seventh floor to see John McLaughlin, the deputy director of central intelligence. *There's been a disaster down in Peru*, he said. McLaughin's executive assistant, Luis Rueda, a veteran of the CIA's wars in Latin America, gazed at Turner with a gimlet eye.

"What did you do?"[2] Rueda said. "Shoot down a planeload of nuns?"

An airborne covert operation had shot down a family of American missionaries. The CIA's officers had no intelligence that their plane was carrying drugs. They made no attempt to identify the aircraft before they gave the orders to attack it. Veronica Bowers and her infant daughter, Charity, had been riddled with .30-caliber machine-gun bullets and killed instantly. The pilot, Kevin Donaldson, was shot in the leg, and he screamed, "They're killing us!" before crash-landing. He had somehow survived his grave wounds, as had Veronica's husband and son.

Tenet and his top aides spent a few frantic hours that night trying to find out exactly what had happened. Over the weekend, they told Vice President