
Reviewed by Peter McDonald

Weighing in at almost 800 pages, this new compendium of readings on the nature of government secrecy is a must for any academic or public library. An antidote, perhaps, if not an exegesis of state secrecy, this edited work delves into the bloated paranoia that pours billions of taxpayer dollars into preserving a veil of official concealment that permits the American government to operate its global empire. No small potatoes, when one considers how steeped in secrecy a president like George W. Bush was, a chief executive who made light of the matter at an Alfalfa Club dinner in Washington (1/26/2008) quipping that the biggest secret of the day wasn’t the NSA but details of his daughter Jenna’s wedding, “Mom gave her a toaster, Dick [Cheney] here sent over a gift I could tell he’d picked out personally – a paper shredder!” The Washington Post reports the Alfalans present burst into loud guffaws of approval.

But as Government Secrecy makes plain, this is no laughing matter. It was not always so in these United States, though several of the lead-in essays to the chapters by the editors suggest concerns of government secrecy date back to the plays of Euripides. But as a letter from Thomas Jefferson in the first entry says: “The people are the only censors of their governors,” whereupon stating, the only way to safeguard our liberty as citizens “is to give them full information of their affairs through the channel of the public papers…” How quaint. Obviously a time when “their affairs” e.g. the people’s and the government’s were synonymous, and the “public papers” mentioned were a vigilant and independent press, not the supine cheerleaders of empire that the popular press has become. But even in Jefferson’s day, as a note in Jan Goldman’s “Introduction” to Chapter 5 says, Benjamin Franklin by contrast was adamant that secrets of government must be kept even from the mob of elected officials of the government itself. “We find, by fatal experience, the Congress consists of too many members to keep secrets.” By the 1830’s, of course, Alexis de Tocqueville was decrying the penchant for government secrecy as Susan Maret describes in her own opening “Introduction.”

The compendium’s selection covers historical letters, seminal essays, investigations and recent government and NGO reports, an impressive range grouped topically into “chapters” that delve variously into perspectives of government secrecy including a short history, the regulations of secrecy, organizational aspects, alternative views, and a post 9/11 wrap-up. In all, 52 entries from authors as diverse as former CIA directors to government watchdog dot-orgs.

This reviewer confesses he did not read the book in its entirety, but he did read all the introductory remarks by the two editors, and a good selection
of the entries. But he did order it for his library and was pleased to be reading that copy. The editors are clearly steeped in the topic to hand. Dr. Susan Maret is a lecturer at the SLIS at San Jose, where she teaches courses on information secrecy. Dr. Jan Goldman teaches intelligence courses at the National Defense Intelligence College which is a branch of the Defense Intelligence Agency. What is noteworthy of their approach is that respective introductory entries each gives to the separate chapters are both insightful and analytical, providing exegesis of the articles that follow, an invaluable tool for anyone approaching a compendium such as this by helping the reader pick the essays deemed most useful in an overview.

One comes away from a reading of this book with very mixed feelings, however, with regards to the oft-quoted statement that government secrecy is indeed a “practical necessity.” Doubtless it is. But from the vantage of the progressive journal where this review is appearing, the fascination and machinations of secrecy seem to be an industry unto themselves, a prognosis that from those Left (sic) outside seems creepily hermetic and insular in extreme. And while the majority of the authors included in this work accept the premise of secrecy’s practical necessity, the alternative views included, such as they are, tend to focus on the issue from a position “inside the beltway,” that is to say, from within the intellectual corridors of secrecy studies and its practical uses and applications. A telling sub-heading in an excellent essay by Dennis Thompson, a Kennedy School professor at Harvard, is titled, “Transparency: How Thick is the Veil.” It is hard to know if Thompson is being ironic or just plain honest, but it certainly sums up the overarching view of secrecy as a practical necessity that permeates this exhaustive study. One realizes that all talk of transparency is always bookended by an a priori assumption of what’s not included and who’s excluded.

The four entries I enjoyed the most were Timothy Ericson’s “Building Our Own ‘Iron Curtain’: The Emergence of Secrecy in American Government” (2005, p. 146) because it got me up to speed on key issues quickly; Lewis Coser’s “The Dysfunction of Military Secrets” (1963. p. 311) because it is an impassioned insight into the topic at the height of the Cold War, re: Cuban Missile Crisis; Thomas Blanton’s “National Security and Open Government” (2003, p. 600) in part because it opens its polemic with these contradictory sentences: “National security is not a value in itself, but rather a condition that allows a nation to maintain its values. In contrast, open government is both a condition and a value of democratic societies.”; and finally, the entry from old liberal war-horse Patrick Leahy of Vermont’s impassioned plea from the Senate floor: “Attempts to Obtain Administration Memorandums” (2004, p. 627) mostly because the good senator is even today seeking publicly to investigate the Bush administration’s malfeasance regarding “state secrets” and illegal surveillance.

One minor quibble, to be sure, and true, nowhere do the editors state that the book is intended to peer into the veil of government secrecy from the far fringes of the debate (either from the hard Left or the Libertarian right
who, as it happens, come together on this topic like strange bedfellows to excoriate the “practical necessity”), but one would have enjoyed some sort of inclusion exploring the absolute necessity of government watchdog groups (think ACLU) and a vigilant press (alternative journals like The Nation, In These Times and Counterpunch, and one would hope, someday, The New York Times and the networks) in unveiling the sackcloth that permeates all of our government’s covert ops (read “secrecy,” be they budget debate allocations in White House corridors, behind-the-scenes legislation in Senate chambers, to CIA assassinations, name your country) and what have you. What is evident in reading this book, is that the unveiling of government secrecy cannot be left to scholars or policy makers alone as is clear from the included authors, for in the end their approach is respectively too polite, and on the other, too accommodating.

As noted, a minor quibble. The best kept secret about this important book is that it covers the waterfront admirably and is likely to stand as the go-to text for years to come. It is beautifully footnoted, amply indexed, well edited, and the selections are uniformly broad in scope and satisfyingly informative. It should stand on every library’s shelf along with Naomi Wolf’s The End of America: Letter of warning to a young patriot, Alasdair Roberts Blacked Out: Government secrecy in the information age, Harry Helm’s Inside the Shadow Government: National emergencies and the cult of secrecy, and Athan Theoharis’s A Culture of Secrecy: The government versus the people’s right to know.

They are all in my library. Yours?

Notes
1. “Alfalfa Club Hears Bush speak as President for Last Time, By Marissa Newhall. Washington Post Sunday, January 27, 2008; Page A05
2. Letter to Edward Carrington (1787)