Review of David M. Barrett. “Explaining the First Contested Senate Confirmation of a Director of Central Intelligence: John McCone, the Kennedy White House, the CIA and the Senate, 1962.” *Intelligence and National Security* 31:1 (January 2016): 74-87. DOI: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2014.928474](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2014.928474)

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Writers of articles often do their best work when they stay within a box they draw with a descriptive title. David Barrett has done a fine job coloring within the lines of his box. He keeps the introductory back story to a minimum, noting simply that the first three people to hold the position of Director of Central Intelligence (DCI)—Admiral Roscoe H. Hillenkoetter (1947-1950), General Walter Bedell Smith (1950-1953), and Allen Dulles (1953-1961)—faced little questioning in committee hearings before being approved by unanimous voice votes in the Senate. Given the back-stories of each of these individuals, that is not really surprising.

Barrett’s target subject is stated clearly “Why were there any speeches and votes against the [John] McCone nomination?” (75) Barrett is well positioned to address this question, having previously published a work covering the relations between the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Congress from the Agency’s beginning until the Kennedy administration.¹ And his extensive research reaches into both primary and secondary sources, including newspaper material, private correspondence, declassified CIA records, congressional hearings, and floor speeches and debates in the Senate.

There is a quick answer to Barrett’s central question: Very few Senators cared much about the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) until the very public failure at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961. That, however, does not encapsulate Barrett’s response. He notes criticisms beginning in 1958 of perceived CIA failures to forecast such events as the launch of the Soviet Union’s earth-orbiting satellite, the violent rioting that greeted Vice President Richard Nixon on a visit to Venezuela, and the bloody overthrow of the pro-American Hashemite monarchy in Iraq. The shoot-down on 1 May 1960 of the U-2 flight over the Soviet Union brought even greater controversy. Nonetheless, it was the departure of Dulles in the wake of the Cuban debacle that was the

catalyst for substantial debates over who should hold the position of DCI and who should be keeping watch over what the CIA was doing.

President John F. Kennedy’s nomination in September 1961 of John A. McCone, Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission in the previous administration, took almost everyone by surprise. McCone had “a reputation as an extremely capable but outspoken, conservative, hawkish Republican” (78). McCone received a recess appointment as DCI-designate in November, so his formal confirmation hearings did not begin until January 1962. Barrett highlights the negative responses and even active opposition to McCone’s appointment by Senator Eugene McCarthy (D-Minnesota) and investigative journalist Drew Pearson. McCarthy clearly used the nomination to argue for the creation of a joint congressional committee on intelligence to provide an enhanced oversight role for Congress in such matters as the decision to invade Cuba. On the other hand, Pearson raised conflict-of-interest issues arising out of McCone’s longtime business activities. In the hearings before the Armed Services Committee, Senator Margaret Chase Smith (R-Maine) questioned McCone on his lack of intelligence experience when compared to previous DCIs. However, neither that nor conflict-of-interest questions prevented the nomination from being reported out of committee unanimously.

The vote in the full Senate was 71 for confirmation and 12 against. Additionally, two absent senators paired their ‘no’ votes with two others who supported confirmation. Of the fourteen senators in opposition, all but two were Democrats voting against their sitting president. The Democratic ‘no’ votes included the influential J. William Fulbright (D-Arkansas), chair of the Committee on Foreign Relations. Barrett posits four main themes that were present in the debate over McCone’s nomination. One dealt directly with McCone personally, including conflict-of-interest issues, lack of intelligence experience, and an unsuitable temperament for the job. The other themes dealt more with the CIA, its operations, and the need for greater presidential and congressional control of the Agency. Barrett does not mention that this issue of legislative control or ‘oversight’ simmered and at times percolated in the Senate (as well as in the House of Representatives) for another fourteen years before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) was established in 1976.

Barrett’s conclusion that it is doubtful any DCI nominee could have gained a unanimous vote at this time is probably on the mark. Some of the senators voting against McCone’s confirmation did so because of “strong doubts that the … CIA was properly controlled by US [United States] political authorities” (87). These concerns would have been present no matter who was nominated. McCone may have been the first DCI nominee to encounter difficulties in his confirmation process, personal and otherwise; but he was not the last. Barrett provides a tightly written and informative look at McCone’s problems. Waiting for a similar treatment are such later controversies as the withdrawal in 1977 of President Jimmy Carter’s nomination of Theodore Sorensen in the face of strong opposition by some senators, and the pulling of President Ronald Reagan’s nomination of Robert M. Gates to be DCI in 1987 when it seemed the Senate was likely to reject it because of controversy about Gates’s role in the Iran-Contra debacle. Gates achieved a degree of redemption when the Senate confirmed his second nomination for the position in 1991.

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