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“Award-winning FBI historian Theoharis . . . brings a unique perspective to the question of how and why the intelligence community failed to uncover the 9/11 terrorists and prevent the attack . . . An important, provocative book, sure to be widely discussed.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“Theoharis’s compelling and timely book showcases the history of civil liberties in our society. *The Quest for Absolute Security* is a thorough, well-supported exploration of how the centralization of our government and increased surveillance power undermines civilian rights . . . A penetrating, persuasive assessment of the risks to personal freedom involved in the pursuit of security.”
—Nadine Strossen, President, American Civil Liberties Union;
and Professor of Law at New York Law School

Combined Failure of FBI and CIA to Keep the U. S. Safe

THE QUEST FOR ABSOLUTE SECURITY

The Failed Relations Among U.S. Intelligence Agencies

Athan Theoharis

Athan Theoharis is generally considered the dean of historians of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. With *The Quest for Absolute Security*, he reveals his deep knowledge of the FBI as he reviews the relationship over many years between U.S. presidents and intelligence forces. He concludes that the combustible combination of expanded surveillance powers of the president coupled with secrecy is a recipe for disaster.

Theoharis describes how the nation’s periodic fears of internal security threats—whether during World Wars I and II, the Cold War, or post-9/11—have almost always

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resulted in violations of individual liberties—without advancing the nation’s security interests. The failure of intelligence to anticipate espionage, and then terrorism, was due not to a lack sufficient authority but in part to the overall difficulty of the task, and in part to the essentially political decisions driving intelligence operations.

In its 2004 report on 9/11, the Kean Commission criticized U.S. intelligence for having failed to anticipate the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. Interpreting its findings in the context of absolute security, the commission faulted the FBI for not adopting a creative and aggressive approach to the terrorist threat, and both the FBI and the CIA for their lack of cooperation. But, we learn from Theoharis, *absolute security* is an illusory quest that is certain to nurture disappointment—and worse.

The Quest for Absolute Security’s compelling analysis traces the troubled history of relations/communications among American intelligence agencies and points out the historical myopia that characterizes the Kean Commission’s recommendations and the government’s response to them. As Theoharis shows, the secret and administrative decisions of U.S. presidents and the nation’s intelligence agencies, dating from the 1930s, *have* been based on the need to anticipate internal security threats—espionage and subversion during World War II and the Cold War, espionage and terrorism since the 1990s.

Thus the authority of the intelligence agencies has been expanded to ensure greater cooperation between them. But the evidence shows that these efforts, particularly by the CIA and FBI, have led not to enhanced security but rather to abuses of power and violations of civil liberties.

The Quest for Absolute Security is a cautionary reminder of the costs to a democratic society of policies that expand the governments surveillance powers yet may bring us no closer to perfect safety.

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ATHAN THEOHARIS is emeritus professor of history at Marquette University. His many books include: *Chasing Spies*, *The Boss*, *From the Secret Files of J. Edgar Hoover*, *Spying on Americans*, *Beyond the Hiss Case*, *Seeds of Repression*, and *The Yalta Myths*. He lives in Milwaukee.

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