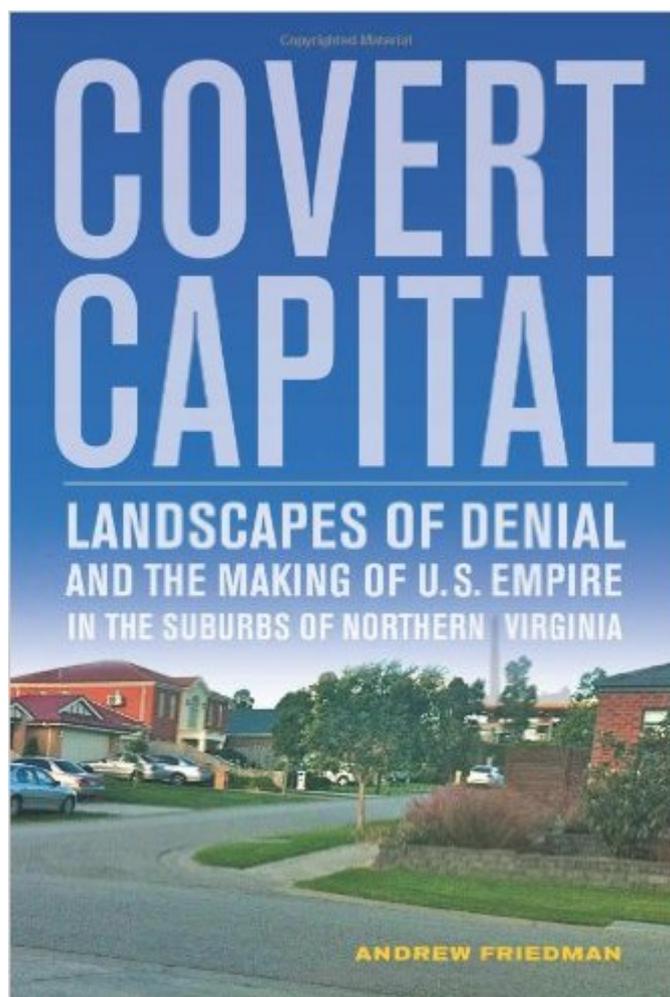


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Covert Capital: Landscapes Of Denial And The Making Of U.S. Empire In The Suburbs Of Northern Virginia



Synopsis

The capital of the U.S. Empire after World War II was not a city. It was an American suburb. In this innovative and timely history, Andrew Friedman chronicles how the CIA and other national security institutions created a U.S. imperial home front in the suburbs of Northern Virginia. In this covert capital, the suburban landscape provided a cover for the workings of U.S. imperial power, which shaped domestic suburban life. The Pentagon and the CIA built two of the largest office buildings in the country there during and after the war that anchored a new imperial culture and social world. As the U.S. expanded its power abroad by developing roads, embassies, and villages, its subjects also arrived in the covert capital as real estate agents, homeowners, builders, and landscapers who constructed spaces and living monuments that both nurtured and critiqued postwar U.S. foreign policy. Tracing the relationships among American agents and the migrants from Vietnam, El Salvador, Iran, and elsewhere who settled in the southwestern suburbs of D.C., Friedman tells the story of a place that recasts ideas about U.S. immigration, citizenship, nationalism, global interconnection, and ethical responsibility from the post-WW2 period to the present. Opening a new window onto the intertwined history of the American suburbs and U.S. foreign policy, *Covert Capital* will also give readers a broad interdisciplinary and often surprising understanding of how U.S. domestic and global histories intersect in many contexts and at many scales.

American Crossroads,
37

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Customer Reviews

Covert Capital is a really engrossing read. Like *City of Quartz*, it mines the deep history of a region (encompassing the colonial and Confederate context of northern Virginia), while, in the tradition of *Fast Food Nation*, it investigates how a specific industry--security, in this case--shaped a landscape. All of this in rapid-fire, breathless prose, and filled with a wealth of details (did you know the Pentagon has 600 drinking fountains?). People interested in the history of American wars, especially as they impact the homefront, will find new revelations and models for thinking about American engagement in the Vietnam War and Iran crisis. Feminists, in particular, will find Friedman's analysis of the wives of diplomats and bureaucrats, and how they parlayed influence through personal networks and leisure activities, such as dinner parties, fascinating. Friedman's account of Eleanor Dulles's power brokering read like histories of Renaissance autocrats Catherine de Medici or Lucretia Borgia! Design buffs will appreciate Friedman's analysis of the architecture of institutions (CIA headquarters at Langley and Dulles Airport) and domestic structures (the suburban fortresses of Dulles and his relocated Vietnamese and Iranian strongmen), as well as the descriptions of the layout of entire cities (Washington, D.C., Edge City) and the infrastructure, such as highways and airports, built to service these cities. Familiar names such as Philip Johnson and Eero Saarinen appear in very unfamiliar contexts--the construction of our nation's paranoid security complex. I found Friedman's sharp, unmitigated prose the most exciting aspect of the book. Gone are the tired euphemisms--he uses "torturer" instead of "interrogation expert" and "colonial independence" for what Americans call Vietnamese "recalcitrance", making a small but significant reparation for the first casualty of war, language.

Surprising and unique in its approach, and impressive in its scope. Draws a clear line from the early days of the CIA straight through to the rise of the Homeland Security state after 9-11, showing how the cultural logic of the intelligence community in the early Cold War morphed over time and helped to give us Vietnam, the Iran-Contra affair, and now drone strikes in Pakistan, etc. He does it largely by focusing on the day-to-day world and physical landscape in which the CIA and other intelligence guys actually lived -- their houses, their offices, their social connections in Northern Virginia and abroad. Really gives a sense of how these people came to think the way they did, the context that gave rise to the policies they pursued. Demonstrates how U.S. foreign policy shaped and was shaped by the Virginia suburbs, but also, in a bigger sense, how the experience of becoming an imperial power has changed America. Thought-provoking and often very disturbing.

This book provides an interesting look at the CIA in Northern Virginia by studying its architectural

history. Each chapter is an essay in and of itself. While the text is highly scholarly, a layperson can appreciate the historical photographs of Eleanor Dulles' swimming pool and the Kennedy men in a Hickory Hill dining room with a sheepdog. In lieu of ever touring the CIA Langley headquarters themselves, readers can learn about its construction, landscaping, tour bus stops, and interior maintenance issues within these pages. In response to facility maintenance problems, the author shares this old joke, "Maybe the agency should abandon the Langley headquarters and start all over in a bordello in Pittsburgh." The author makes a good point in juxtaposing the evils of CIA imperialism abroad and the laconic suburban lifestyle in Northern Virginia built on gender stereotyping. The question readers may ask is can the modern day security-industrial-complex create similar enclaves in new locations? Kudos to Andrew Friedman for providing insights in a subtle and unique manner.

Some interesting history of the intelligence community in northern Virginia, but it takes a huge effort to tease his history out of the atrocious academic writing style. He never discusses why he has focused on northern Virginia, while ignoring the Maryland suburbs of DC and the NSA at Fort Meade. The book reads like a doctoral dissertation that was badly adapted for publication (and probably is). Friedman looks for profound meanings in rather mundane architectural details while saying little about the real "covert" sociology of Fairfax County. He also makes no attempt to integrate the story of the growth of the intelligence community into the much larger story of the booming growth of northern Virginia over the past 30 years. Much of that growth was spurred by the internet companies such as AOL, and had only indirect connections to the intelligence community. His notion that the "Dulles Corridor" was named for the Dulles bothers and their sister is absurd. The name emerged from the simple fact that businesses located along the Dulles Airport Access Road for the sake of proximity to the road to the airport and to Washington, DC.

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