

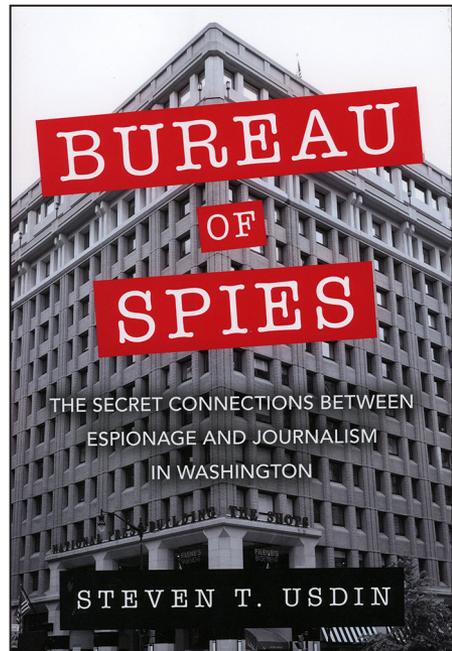
*STEVE ELLMERS won the Unitec Dean's Award for Research Excellence for his Master in International Communication thesis on the use of social media by President Duterte's supporters during the Philippine elections.*

## Riveting National Press Club tales of espionage

***Bureau of Spies: The secret connections between espionage and journalism in Washington***, by Steven T. Usdin. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books. 2018. 360pp. ISBN 9781633884762.

**D**ON'T be fooled by *Bureau of Spies'* provocative title. Steven Usdin's careful and considered account of how foreign and domestic agitators have manipulated the American media and subverted that country's democracy is thoroughly researched and extremely well written. It contains riveting descriptions of America First's Nazi propaganda efforts as well as the extent of Russian intelligence's attempts to hoodwink US delegates and voters. However, the setting for these seismic events is in the 20th Century rather than the 21st.

Usdin uses the early history of Washington's National Press Club as the backdrop for most of his tales of espionage. He eschews speculation



and confines himself to outing only those individuals whose activities can be corroborated by archival sources. Even so, he admits that much of what occurred during the tumultuous period prior to America's overt participation in the Second World War may remain uncertain. More importantly, he also reminds us that only a tiny percentage of the journalists who called the National Press Building home were anything other than your standard run-of-the-mill hacks.

Those familiar with the encyclopaedic intelligence histories produced by other researchers such as Christopher Andrew may be reluctant to give *Bureau of Spies* the credit it deserves. Yet even though Usdin has not benefited from the official support Andrew has received, Usdin's even-handedness instantly

dispels any doubts about his motives or the quality of his conclusions.

Progressives will be challenged by the number of individuals who for a variety of reasons co-operated with Moscow in order to bring about a left-wing dictatorship in the United States, or to at least discredit American claims of moral leadership. On the other hand, conservatives will be shocked by how some of America's leading plutocrats did more than just fantasise about the benefits of fascism during the 1930s.

Readers will also discover that the most successful foreign influence operation ever to target the American political system—and which employed more media and government sympathisers than all the other plots combined—was British intelligence's efforts to defeat US isolationist candidates during the 1940 presidential election. This is something British scholars have downplayed, but for which Usdin provides extensive evidence.

In its Cold War chapters, this book is on more familiar ground. The contest for media and political advantage between the KGB and the American intelligence community has already received numerous treatments. Nonetheless, it's still gratifying to encounter Usdin's exposure of previous Russian anti-secrecy organisations and activists for the proxies they really were all along.

*Bureau of Spies* benefits not just from sure-footed analysis; it's also a delight to read because of the author's background as a reporter. His accessible prose and ability to convincingly describe the journalists who created an institution that used to emphasise bourbon and poker over almost all other considerations, makes this text more than just an essential primer on the machinations of another age.

Usdin has arranged a collection of colourful and often despicable characters into a thoughtful tableau. The archives he uses to speak for them are more damning than any of the words they ever penned on behalf of others.