

THE DECIDERS

The opening sentence of C. Wright Mills' *The Power Elite* might have seemed unremarkable. "The powers of ordinary men are circumscribed by the everyday worlds in which they live, yet even in these rounds of job, family and neighborhood they often seem driven by forces they can neither understand nor govern."

When the book was published in 1956, however, it exploded into a culture riddled with existential anxiety and political fear. Mills—a broad-shouldered, motorcycle-riding anarchist from Texas who taught sociology at Columbia—argued that the "sociological key" to American uneasiness could be found not in the mysteries of the unconscious nor in the battle against Communism, but in the over-organization of society. At the pinnacle of the government, the military and the corporations, a small group of men made the decisions that reverberated "into each and every cranny" of American life. "Insofar as national events are decided," Mills wrote, "the power elite are those who decide them."

The argument met with criticism from all sides. "I look forward to the time when Mr. Mills hands back his prophet's robes and settles down to being a sociologist again," Arthur Schlesinger Jr. wrote in *The New York Post*. Adolf Berle, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, said that while the book contained "an uncomfortable degree of truth," Mills presented "an angry cartoon, not a serious picture." Liberals could not believe a book about power in America said so little about the Supreme Court, while conservatives attacked it as leftist psychopathology ("sociological mumbo jumbo," *Time* said). The Soviets translated it in 1959, but decided it was pro-American.

“Although Mills expresses a skeptical and critical attitude toward bourgeois liberalism and its society of power,” said the introduction to the Russian translation, “his hopes and sympathies undoubtedly remain on its side.”

The Power Elite found an eclectic audience at home and abroad. Fidel Castro and Che Guevara debated the book in the Sierra Maestra. Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir published excerpts in their radical journal, *Les Temps Modernes*. In the United States, Mills received hundreds of letters from Protestant clergymen, professors and students, pacifists and soldiers. This note came from an Army private stationed in San Francisco: “I genuinely appreciate reading in print ideas I have thought about some time ago. At that time, they seemed to me so different that I didn’t tell anyone.” In the aftermath of the global riots of 1968, the CIA identified Mills as one of the most influential New Left intellectuals in the world, though he had been dead for six years.

The historical value of *The Power Elite* seems assured. It was the first book to offer a serious model of power that accounted for the secretive agencies of national security. Mills saw the post-ideological “postmodern epoch” (as he would later call it) at its inception, and his book remains a founding text in the continuing demand for democratically responsible political leadership—a demand echoed and amplified across the decades in books like Christopher Lasch’s *Revolt of the Elites* (1995), Kevin Phillips’ *Wealth and Democracy* (2002), and Chalmers Johnson’s *Sorrows of Empire* (2004).

Much of *The Power Elite* was a tough-talking polemic against the “romantic pluralism” embedded in the prevailing theory of American politics. The separation of powers in the Constitution, the story went, repelled the natural tendency of power to concentrate, while political parties and voluntary societies organized the clash of interests, laying the people’s representatives open to the influence of public opinion. This “theory of balance” still applied to the “middle levels of power,” Mills wrote, but the society it envisioned had been eclipsed. For the first time in history, he argued, the territories of the

United States made up a self-conscious mass society. If the economy had once been a multitude of locally or regionally rooted, equal units of production, it now answered to the needs of a few hundred corporations. If the government had once been a patchwork of states held together by Congress, it now answered to the initiatives of a strong executive. If the military had once been a militia system resistant to the discipline of permanent training, it now consumed half the national budget and seated its admirals and generals in the biggest office building in the world.

The “awesome means of power” enthroned upon these monopolies of production, administration and violence included the power to prevent issues and ideas from reaching Congress in the first place. Most Americans still believed the ebb and flow of public opinion guided political affairs. “But now we must recognize this description as a set of images out of a fairy tale,” Mills wrote. “They are not adequate even as an approximate model of how the American system of power works.”

The small groups of men standing at the head of the three monopolies represented a new kind of elite, one whose character and conduct mirrored the antidemocratic ethos of their institutions. The corporations recruited from the business schools, and conceived executive training programs that demanded strict conformity. The military selected generals and admirals from the service academies, and inculcated “the caste feeling” by segregating them from the associational life of the country. Infrequently did local apprenticeships serve as a passport to the government’s executive chambers. Of the appointees in the Eisenhower administration, Mills found that a record number had never stood for election at any level.

Above the apparent balance of powers, Mills said, “an intricate set of overlapping cliques” shared in “decisions having at least national consequences.” Rather than operating in secret, the same kinds of men—who traded opinions in the same churches, clubs and schools—took turns in the same jobs. Mills pointed to the personnel traffic among the Pentagon, the White House and the corporations. The nation’s three top policy positions—secretary of state, treasury

and defense—were occupied by former corporate executives. The president was a general.

Mills could not answer many of the most important questions he raised. How did the power elite make its decisions? Did its members cause their roles to be created, or step into roles already created? Around what interests did they cohere? He asserted a “coincidence of interest” partially organized around “a permanent war establishment,” but he did little more than assert it. Most of the time, he said, the power elite did not cohere at all. “This instituted elite is frequently in some tension: it comes together only on certain coinciding points and only on certain occasions of ‘crisis.’” Although he urged his readers to scrutinize the commanding power of decision, his book did not scrutinize any decisions.

These ambiguities have kept *The Power Elite* vulnerable to the charge of conspiracy-mongering. In an essay in *Playboy*, “Who Rules America?”, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. repeated his earlier skepticism about Mills’ argument, calling it “a sophisticated version of the American nightmare.” Alan Wolfe has pointed out that while Mills got much about the self-enriching ways of the corporate elite right, his vision of complacent American capitalism did not anticipate the competitive dynamics of our global economy. Of late, we have seen that “occasions of crisis” do not necessarily serve to unify the generals with the politicians.

Yet *The Power Elite* abounds with questions that still trouble us today. Can a strong democracy coexist with the amoral ethos of corporate elites? Can public argument have democratic meaning in the age of national security? The trend in foreign affairs, Mills argued, was for a militarized executive branch to bypass the United Nations, while Congress was left with little more than the power to express “general confidence, or the lack of it.” Policy tended to be announced as doctrine, which was then sold to the public via the media. Career diplomats in the State Department believed they could not truthfully report intelligence. Meanwhile official secrecy expanded its reach. “For the first time in American history, men in authority are talking

about an ‘emergency’ without a foreseeable end,” Mills wrote in a sentence that remains as powerful and unsettling as it was 50 years ago. “Such men as these are crackpot realists: in the name of realism they have constructed a paranoid reality all their own.”

