Oh, how I hate my husband,” Clover Dulles wrote in her journal in March 1947. “I want to kill him. … I will be like a fighting cock with knives on my talons, I will cut him in ribbons with sharp knives, I will cut him in the back, I will perhaps even cut his throat.”

For decidedly different reasons, David Talbot despises Allen Dulles as well. As director of the CIA, Talbot declares, Dulles exemplified the “frightening amorality that prevailed at the pinnacle of American power” at the height of the Cold War. Endowed with “boundless authority” as the guardian of national security, his agency became “a dark and invasive force — at home and abroad — violating citizens’ privacy, kidnapping, torturing, and killing at will.”

By almost all accounts, Dulles was an unsympathetic and sinister character. As a lawyer for Sullivan and Cromwell in the 1930s, Dulles protected and promoted Nazi-controlled cartels. He used his influence in the Office of Strategic Services and the CIA to shield former Nazis from prosecution for war crimes in the ‘40s and ‘50s so that he could enlist them to fight communists.

Dulles orchestrated the overthrow of Mohammad Mossadegh in Iran and Jacobo Árbenz of Guatemala. He had a hand in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, leader of the Congo. Dulles organized the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba — and tried repeatedly to kill Fidel Castro. Willing to manipulate and undercut American presidents, he did everything he could to place the CIA above the law, accountable to no one.

In “The Devil’s Chessboard,” David Talbot, the founder and former editor in chief of Salon and former senior editor at Mother Jones, examines Dulles’ career and adds several more “achievements” to his dark resume. Animated by conspiracy theories, the speculations and accusations in his book often run far ahead of the evidence, even for those of us inclined to believe the worst about Allen Dulles.

Talbot’s indictment is long, varied and sensational. He suggests that had President Franklin D. Roosevelt lived, Dulles might well have faced criminal charges for hiding the U.S. assets of German corporations and destroying incriminating evidence. He claims that Dulles supported a “no-fault surrender” with Germany that ignored the genocide against Jews.

He indicates that Allen and his brother, John Foster Dulles, cut a deal with Richard Nixon, promising to finance the young naval officer’s first congressional campaign if Nixon kept quiet about documents he had uncovered that revealed how the Dulleses had helped launder Nazi funds during World War II. In 1952, Talbot writes, the Dulles brothers (and New York Gov. Thomas Dewey) “tapped” Nixon as the Republican candidate for vice president and conveyed “their decision” to Dwight Eisenhower.

According to Talbot, Eisenhower “delegated far too much of his presidency to the Dulles brothers,” who “continually agitated for a cataclysmic confrontation with the Soviet Union” from their powerful positions as secretary of state and director of the CIA. And Talbot accepts at face value assertions in the French press in 1961 that, without the knowledge of President John F. Kennedy, Allen Dulles was “the main culprit” in a coup of military officers against French President Charles de Gaulle.

By 1963, Talbot insists, a clear consensus had emerged among corporate leaders “and within America’s deep state” that Kennedy was a threat to national security and had to be removed. Dulles, they concluded, “was the only man with the stature, connections, and decisive will to make something of this enormity happen. … All that his establishment colleagues had to do was to look the other way — as they always did when Dulles took executive action.”

On Nov. 22, Talbot writes, Dulles was away from Washington, “as he typically was at the outset of major operations.” He cried crocodile tears when the deed was done, then lobbied Lyndon Johnson to appoint him to the Warren Commission, where he saw to it that Lee Harvey Oswald would take the fall as the “lone gunman.”

When Robert Kennedy became a candidate for president in 1968, Talbot contends that he became “a wild card, an uncontrollable threat” who might bring the assassins of JFK to justice. And so they eliminated him as well. Talbot finds it “particularly intriguing” that Dulles met with experts in brainwashing and mind control techniques a few weeks after the arrest of Sirhan Sirhan, “a man who appeared to be in a hypnotic or narcotic state when he was taken into custody.”

The founding fathers of U.S. intelligence, including Allen Dulles, were liars, who shared a desire for absolute power, James Jesus Angleton, a legendary CIA spymaster, declared on his deathbed in 1987. “If you
were in a room with them, you were in a room full of people that you had to believe would deservedly end up in hell."

Angleton may have been right. But their mastery of manipulation, disinformation, subversion and secret power ought to reinforce our determination, in the name of justice, to avoid giving credence to speculation and score-settling, and apply evidence rigorously and impartially.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. E-mail: books@sfgate.com

The Devil's Chessboard

Allen Dulles, the CIA, and the Rise of America's Secret Government

By David Talbot

(Harper; 686 pages; $29.99)