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052158096X - Reshaping National Intelligence for an Age of Information

Gregory F. Treverton

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Reshaping National Intelligence for an Age of Information

The world of intelligence has been completely transformed by the end of the Cold War and the onset of an age of information. Prior to the 1990s, U.S. government intelligence had one principal target, the Soviet Union; a narrow set of “customers,” the political and military officials of the U.S. government; and a limited set of information from the sources they owned, spy satellites and spies. Today, world intelligence has many targets, numerous consumers – not all of whom are American or in the government – and too much information, most of which is not owned by the U.S. government and is of widely varying reliability.

In this bold and penetrating study, Gregory Treverton, former Vice Chair of the National Intelligence Council and Senate investigator, offers his insider’s view on how intelligence gathering and analysis must change. He suggests why intelligence needs to be both contrarian, leaning against the conventional wisdom, and attentive to the longer term, leaning against the shrinking time horizons of Washington policy makers. He urges that the solving of intelligence puzzles taps expertise outside government – in the academy, think tanks, and Wall Street – to make these parties function as colleagues and co-consumers of intelligence, befitting the changed role of government from the doer to convener, mediator, and coalition-builder.

Gregory F. Treverton is Acting President and Director of Studies at the Pacific Council on International Policy and Senior Consultant at RAND. He has also served as Vice Chair of the National Intelligence Council in Washington, DC, as a staff member of the National Security Council, and as a professional staff member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. Dr Treverton also headed RAND’s International Security and Defense Policy Center from 1995 to 1998. He is author or coeditor of more than a dozen books on international relations and American foreign policy, including *Rethinking America’s Security* (1992, coedited with Graham T. Allison).

Cambridge University Press

052158096X - Reshaping National Intelligence for an Age of Information

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Additional Praise for Reshaping National Intelligence for an Age of Information

“This highly readable analysis by a former head of intelligence examines the challenge of transforming the Intelligence Community with the end of the Cold War and the global spread of technology. Sharply argued, it is timely – and controversial. It contains brilliant insights and some harsh judgements – perhaps too harsh – yet it lays bare the problems of intelligence in the decades ahead. Well worth careful study.”

– James Schlesinger, *Former Director of Central Intelligence, Former Secretary of Defense*

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052158096X - Reshaping National Intelligence for an Age of Information

Gregory F. Treverton

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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*Editor: Charles Wolf, Jr., Senior Economic Advisor and Corporate
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Cambridge University Press
052158096X - Reshaping National Intelligence for an Age of Information
Gregory F. Trevorton
Frontmatter
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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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052158096X - Reshaping National Intelligence for an Age of Information

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Frontmatter

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Contents

Foreword	<i>page xi</i>
Preface	<i>xiii</i>
Note on sources	<i>xvii</i>
1 The imperative of reshaping	1
Failing in India	3
The legacy of hot war and cold	5
Open sources vs. secrets	8
Puzzles vs. mysteries	11
Aiding war-fighters	13
The intelligence of policy	15
A guide for readers	18
2 The world of intelligence beyond 2010	20
Redefining America’s interests in the world	20
Forms of power	25
Global processes	28
“New old threats”	35
“Threats without threateners”	43
The coming of the market state	46
Changing public and private roles	51
The intelligence of the market state	54
What kind of America?	56
3 The militarization of intelligence	62
What mission for intelligence?	63
Retargeting the Cold War legacy	65
<i>Plus ça change</i> , or forward to the past	70

Cambridge University Press

052158096X - Reshaping National Intelligence for an Age of Information

Gregory F. Treverton

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii	<i>Reshaping national intelligence for an age of information</i>	
	Cold War reconnaissance: who controls?	74
	National and tactical: new missions for old systems	79
	NIMA: creating an imagery stovepipe	81
	Which systems, at what cost?	84
	Owned by whom?	89
	Serving intelligence's national purposes	91
4	Designated readers: the open source revolution	93
	America's Cold War intelligence	98
	Intelligence for an age of information	102
	Distributed intelligence?	104
	Open sources and secrets	108
	Learning to read: using open sources	113
	Processing information, not secrets	119
	Organizing for tactical support	120
	The tactical franchise	123
	And the strategic franchise	125
	Addressing mysteries: national intelligence estimates	127
	Doing well at addressing mysteries	129
	Bringing outsiders inside	132
	Estimating as process	134
5	Spying, looking, and catching criminals	136
	The range of clandestine operations	137
	Shaping America's clandestine service	138
	Framing an assessment	141
	The culture of spying	145
	To spy or not	150
	Reshaping the clandestine service . . . in service of NSA?	152
	Spying for money	157
	Hiring lookers	161
	Law enforcement	167
	The Bureau and the Agency	170
	The question of covert action	173
6	The intelligence of policy	177
	Analysts and policy-makers	179
	The messenger and the message	185
	Questions not asked and not answered	191
	Questions asked	195

Cambridge University Press
052158096X - Reshaping National Intelligence for an Age of Information
Gregory F. Treverton
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

	<i>Contents</i>	ix
	The bright line	197
	Commanders and assessments	202
	Changing the culture	205
	Challenging mind-sets	208
	Erasing the line?	211
	Intelligence for whose policy?	213
7	A reshaped intelligence	216
	Retargeting the Cold War legacy	220
	A new paradigm	225
	The rise of the market state	229
	The role of the DCI	234
	The collection “market”	240
	The split franchise of analysis	243
	Collecting what is free	246
	Points of leverage: a practical agenda	248
	Making the case publicly	253
	Index	257

Cambridge University Press

052158096X - Reshaping National Intelligence for an Age of Information

Gregory F. Treverton

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Foreword



This book is a happy collaboration between RAND and the Twentieth Century Fund, now The Century Foundation. In fact, it became a tripartite collaboration, including Cambridge University Press, with which RAND inaugurated a new book series of policy analyses, a series edited by Charles Wolf, Jr., just as Greg Treverton joined RAND. Greg had left the vice chair of the National Intelligence Council during the Clinton administration to come to RAND to run the International Security and Defense Policy Center. At the same time, he joined a Twentieth Century Fund task force on intelligence that produced a report several years ago, *In From the Cold*. Greg contributed a background paper to that report, a paper that began to develop the issues treated in this book, and he played a major role in pushing the report to conclusion.

Our premise in this collaboration is the same as Greg's: Not only has the world of American intelligence been upended by the end of the Cold War, but the necessary reshaping of intelligence will itself have to result from a more open discussion of it than has been the norm in the American democracy. RAND and The Century Foundation share an interest in that reshaping of intelligence as an important part of America's capacity in foreign affairs. For RAND, U.S. intelligence is a client and an increasingly important one. As intelligence strives to adapt to a changed world, a range of RAND capacities — from regional analysis, to budgeting and manpower planning, to thinking about costly systems against an uncertain future — is more and more relevant. For its part, The Century Foundation's task force on intelligence followed an earlier one, focused on the question of covert action. The Foundation continues to foster discussion of the adequacy of current governmental arrangements in light of the changed world, and intelligence is an important part of those arrangements.

Cambridge University Press

052158096X - Reshaping National Intelligence for an Age of Information

Gregory F. Treverton

Frontmatter

[More information](#)xii *Reshaping national intelligence for an age of information*

This book by Greg Treverton is fine policy analysis, enriched by his own experience and his examples, drawn from his various angles of vision on intelligence — Senate investigator, White House consumer, and intelligence community manager. His central propositions are the basis for the discussion of intelligence that ought to happen but hasn't, despite several blue-ribbon panels during the late 1990s. He argues that intelligence is no longer in the secrets business but rather in the information business; that it now has too much information, not too little; that it now has many consumers, not few, and that many of those new consumers are non-Americans and people from the various private sectors; and that while collection used to be the problem, selection now is the central task for intelligence. His own bias is that intelligence needs to be both contrarian, leaning against traditional wisdom, and attentive to the longer term, leaning against the time horizons of Washington, which seem shorter and shorter.

It is a pleasure for our two institutions to join with Cambridge University Press in publishing this book. We can only hope that it will help provoke the serious discussion of reshaping intelligence for which it calls. That discussion is both necessary and long overdue.

James Thomson
President, RAND

Richard Leone
President, The Century Foundation

Preface



When I took over the national estimates process as vice chair of the National Intelligence Council (NIC) at the beginning of the first Clinton administration, I had been a Senate investigator of intelligence, a White House consumer of intelligence, and an academic student of intelligence. But this was my first time in what is called, slightly quaintly, the “intelligence community.” As with other such locutions in life, the word *community* describes precisely what it is not; it is somewhere between a fiction and an aspiration.

I vowed that I would stay only as long as I could laugh at aspects of the organizational culture in which the NIC worked — we took bed and board from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) at its headquarters in Langley, Virginia — that struck me as Cold War throwbacks, such as the fact that my daily schedule, neatly typed and frequently revised each day, was classified “secret.” I never did figure out why it was so classified, but I did leave, for other reasons, about the time I stopped laughing.

More to the point, I felt like the candidate member of a priesthood, with both the positive and the negative connotations of that label. Positively, the CIA analysts who were my most immediate colleagues and helpers reinforced the impression I had formed of them in earlier executive programs I had taught: they made me proud of the public service. They were, and are, person for person, the match of any American organization, public or private. Their savvy and dedication belied all the tired, unfair chestnuts about Washington bureaucrats. Theirs was a true calling.

Yet the other connotation of *priesthood* was also apt. Intelligence analysts thought of their calling as one apart, with whiffs of superiority and condescension in their view. A lot had changed over the previous decade or so — those changes are a theme of this book — but there

Cambridge University Press

052158096X - Reshaping National Intelligence for an Age of Information

Gregory F. Treverton

Frontmatter

[More information](#)xiv *Reshaping national intelligence for an age of information*

were still hints of the view that said we're in the business of speaking truth, and if those policy types downtown don't listen, the hell with them. There are books to be written about the organizational culture of the CIA — about the organizational cultures, really, because the CIA's three main directorates, for operations, analysis, and science and technology, are worlds apart. My Harvard colleague Ernest May described them as about as integrated as the military services, and sometimes he would add, "in 1947"! Organizational culture is not the subject of this book but is its theme, for the revolution confronting intelligence ultimately is one of mission and culture.

The aim of my teaching and writing about intelligence had been to better connect it, and especially analysis, to the needs of policy. So when I had the chance to try my ideas out not on my students but on myself, I could hardly resist. It was a happy irony that the person who offered me that chance was Bob Gates, the director of central intelligence in the Bush administration and an old friend from government service. Bob knew I had been helping Bill Clinton's campaign against his president but made me, in the months before the election's outcome was apparent, a nonpartisan offer rare in these days: "Come to the NIC. If President Bush is re-elected, you'll have some years to see if your ideas can make intelligence estimates better. If he's not, I'll be a lame duck, and you can decide whether to serve the new administration at the NIC or elsewhere." In the event, my old friend and colleague Joe Nye became chair of the NIC, and I stayed, happily.

But I owe Bob a debt for giving me the chance to try my ideas on myself. I also owe a clutch of intellectual debts, ones I eagerly acknowledge without tarring any of those creditors with responsibility for this book's shortcomings. Joe Nye and I had known each other since my days in graduate school, but we had never worked closely together. Doing so became a treat for me. Joe gave me enough discretion in managing the national estimates process, and, more important, he gave me the example of a mind that is clearer at framing issues than any I have known.

I owe debts both pecuniary and substantive to the Twentieth Century Fund, now The Century Foundation. The fund's 1991 task force on covert action gave me a chance to try my ideas, already formed, on interested colleagues; their 1995 task force on intelligence gave me the opportunity to begin to assemble the ideas that became this book, with financial support from the fund. I am grateful for both, and especially

Cambridge University Press

052158096X - Reshaping National Intelligence for an Age of Information

Gregory F. Treverton

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xv

for the criticism and encouragement of the Fund's president, Richard Leone, and his colleagues, Morton Halperin and Janne Nolan. My recent professional home, RAND, has been a fortunate one in many respects. RAND's book series with Cambridge University Press was an ideal place to publish this book, and I appreciate the flexibility of the three institutions — RAND, the Foundation, and Cambridge Press — in making this tripartite collaboration a reality.

RAND was good enough to regard writing this book as part of its broader public service, and it has supplied me with both interested colleagues and able graduate students. Among my colleagues, I am particularly indebted to Kevin O'Connell and to Dick Neu. As always, Robert Klitgaard — happily a colleague again, at RAND — helped me think through the framing of central issues. Loch Johnson, with whom I first became interested in intelligence while working for the first Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, often called the "Church committee" after its chair, Senator Frank Church (D-Idaho), gave me characteristically insightful comments. I also appreciate the wise comments I've received from David Gompert, Dick Kerr, and John Koehler. Of graduate students, I particularly thank Lorne Teitelbaum, who served as both research assistant and intellectual sparring partner; and Brett Neely, who was enormously helpful in tracking down all those final details.

As a condition of my employment at the NIC, I had agreed to a CIA review of any manuscript on intelligence. The review of this manuscript was more arduous than I expected, although the officials of the CIA Publications Review Board were unfailingly helpful and good natured. The problem was that my subject is broad, so the manuscript had to be farmed out to a number of agencies. Some of the first responses were so sweeping as to underscore the need for a dramatic change of culture in intelligence; in two cases, I was asked to delete material that agency heads had discussed publicly. In the end, though, we agreed on a score of changes, all of which affected details and not major points of analysis or conclusions. Most of the changes were quite minor, but in several cases, I do indicate in footnotes that deletions were made, lest the reader think that bland or convoluted prose is the result of my or my editor's falling down on the job.

Finally, this book is dedicated to my wife, Karen. Pursuing her to California may have delayed finishing the book, but it surely enriched my life in the interim.

Cambridge University Press

052158096X - Reshaping National Intelligence for an Age of Information

Gregory F. Treverton

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Note on sources

This book assesses recent history to suggest the future shape of American intelligence. The “age of information” in the book’s title is a purposive double meaning. It is meant to connote the rush of developments, mostly technological, that is now regularly described by the label “information age.” At least as important, though, is that the phrase is intended to call attention to another dramatic feature of the future world in which intelligence will operate: Technology, but not just technology, is producing overwhelming amounts of information. Intelligence’s future world is both an information age and an age of information.

The book is analysis. To sharpen the analytic points and make them more vivid, it uses anecdotes from my various vantage points on intelligence — Senate investigator, White House consumer, outside student, and, most recently, National Intelligence Council producer. In that respect, the book is like intelligence, for I have come to believe that most people, including most policy officials, grasp analytic points more readily if they come tethered to a fact, or caselet or anecdote.

Analyzing intelligence has become easier over the last generation, but it is still not easy. It is not so much that information is in short supply (though that is true in critical particulars). The last few years have produced not only memoirs but histories and cases, and intelligence remains fascinating enough to induce a steady stream of investigative journalism.

Rather, all these sources have their defects. The temptations of memoir writers are all too well known. Current history, written in the absence of documents, is vulnerable to reproducing errors just because they were ferreted out of *Aviation Week and Space Technology* or uttered in an interview. Journalism is all the more vulnerable. Even case-

Cambridge University Press

052158096X - Reshaping National Intelligence for an Age of Information

Gregory F. Treverton

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xviii *Reshaping national intelligence for an age of information*

writing has recently turned competitive, with insiders selectively declassifying documents to prove their points.

I try to hedge my judgments appropriately. About intelligence processing and analysis, I am confident. I have used, produced, and studied intelligence analysis. I am less confident in two other areas, and I try to point that out.

One is espionage, clandestine collection. There, it is not so much that I lack experience — for I have been a consumer of espionage in several jobs — as that I am, to some extent, surely the prisoner of my own perspective. I outline my judgments in chapter 5, and they are harsh. But that harshness no doubt reflects my own preoccupation with broad strategic mysteries, not specific tactical puzzles. If I had been working on, for instance, the Hamas terrorists or the Cali drug cartel, my judgments about espionage might be gentler. As I suggest in chapter 5, a first step in any serious restructuring of the clandestine service would be a retrospective evaluation of U.S. spying, including eminent outsiders, in order to develop a record of where the United States has done well and where poorly, and why.

The other area is technical collection, and here I feel still less confident. My situation is not so different from that of intelligence's senior managers and congressional overseers: We generalists can hardly know enough about the systems to begin to connect what we'd like to know about Iran with where to fly or point a satellite, much less about which new system to build. I am like the ballistics expert I describe later; I have strong hunches but cannot justify them in a fully analytic way. Those who do know the technical details well enough are very far from the policy officials they are trying to help and may, to boot, have acquired deep stakes in "their" collection systems. The first need here, one I discuss in chapter 3, is for something like the Pentagon's Policy Analysis and Evaluation (PA&E) shop to give decisions about major intelligence systems the same analytic scrub that major weapons decisions receive.

For both human and technical collection, as well as for the rest of intelligence, the margin of what is debated publicly needs to be dramatically widened. Only if they know more about what they are buying will the American people be prepared to pay for it. In any event, that is the premise of this book.