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978-0-521-87815-9 - Sharpening Strategic Intelligence: Why the CIA Gets it Wrong, and What Needs to be Done to Get it Right

Richard L. Russell

Excerpt

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1 Strategic Intelligence and American Statecraft

THE U.S. INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY SUFFERED FROM TWO of the greatest intelligence debacles in its sixty-year history with the 11 September 2001 (“9/11”) al-Qaeda attacks and the assessment of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs in the run-up to the war launched in 2003 against Saddam Hussein’s regime. Although the intelligence community is made up of some sixteen intelligence agencies with varying responsibilities and functions, the lion’s share of the burden of these failures falls squarely on the shoulders of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which had been the lead agency for providing strategic intelligence to the president in his role as commander in chief.

Taxpayers now pay about \$44 billion per year on intelligence to support the president of the United States in defending U.S. interests.¹ This is a steep increase from the 1998 intelligence community budget of some \$27 billion.² The U.S. intelligence community budget, moreover, is a sum that dwarfs the entire defense expenditures of most countries. All of the sixteen intelligence organizations that comprise the intelligence community have about 100,000 people working for them.³ Although the CIA consumes only a small portion of the total intelligence community budget, it still has a workforce of some 17,000 people, by the account of former Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) George Tenet.⁴

Yet that large annual investment and sizable manpower did not spare the United States its two most devastating intelligence failures since the

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inception of the U.S. intelligence community in 1947. United States intelligence in general and the CIA in particular failed to warn with sufficient clarity and specificity of the 11 September 2001 conspiracy that caused the deaths of nearly 3,000 civilians in the American homeland. That intelligence debacle was quickly followed by miserably inaccurate CIA intelligence assessments in 2002 that Saddam Hussein's Iraq was reconstituting its nuclear weapons program and restocking his chemical and biological weapons when, in fact, its WMD programs had been largely mothballed since the mid-1990s.

American policy makers, members of Congress, and the general public have a right to ask, "Why don't our tax dollars produce better intelligence for the president to safeguard our country and national interests?" The key to answering this question lies in probing the weaknesses of the CIA, which has long served as the "first among equals" in a sprawling intelligence community. The CIA, with its Directorate of Operations (DO) charged with conducting espionage against U.S. adversaries and its Directorate of Intelligence (DI) responsible for conducting intelligence analysis, had long enjoyed unparalleled access to the president.

Much attention has hailed the creation of the new director of national intelligence (DNI) as the cure for U.S. intelligence. The DNI position was a key recommendation of the 9/11 Commission that examined the failure of the intelligence community to provide the intelligence needed to disrupt the al-Qaeda plot.⁵ The 9/11 Commission managed to parlay the understandable emotional appeals made by the families of victims into a venerable political steamroller to flatten President George W. Bush's initial resistance to the creation of the DNI. The Bush administration, however, mistakenly caved in to the pressure and lukewarmly supported the new position. As Judge Richard Posner, who has extensively studied the *9/11 Commission Report*, rightly comments, "allowing several thousand emotionally traumatized people to drive major public policy in a nation of almost 300 million is a perversion of the democratic process."⁶

The American public mistakenly believes that our intelligence problems have been fixed, when the reality is probably that we have created

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even more problems with the reforms that have been implemented. About 65 percent of Americans believe that the reforming of the intelligence community is the best way to strengthen U.S. security, and about 40 percent of Americans give the government an A or a B for already “making the changes needed to improve U.S. intelligence and spying.”⁷ Despite the political fanfare and public support for the restructuring changes, the DNI’s responsibilities are little more than rehashed responsibilities that had traditionally been exercised by the DCI who had overseen the entire intelligence community as well as headed the CIA.

The creation of the DNI position in and of itself will do nothing to correct the fundamental and root cause of the CIA’s intelligence failures – to include many others before 9/11 and the Iraq War begun in 2003 – which is the systemic failure to deliver first-rate human intelligence and analysis to the commander in chief. Stolen human secrets and strategic analysis are critical components for deciphering for the president the innermost thinking of U.S. adversaries such as North Korea, Iran, and other states that are on the cusp of acquiring WMDs, as well as terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and Hezbollah that want to get their hands on such weapons.

This book takes a step back from the mad rush in the public debate to diagnose the problems of the CIA by examining only the events surrounding 9/11 and the Iraq War. It aims to make a strategic assessment of U.S. intelligence performance throughout the Cold War, post-Cold War, and post-9/11 periods. Only such a broad assessment provides the necessary framework for diagnosing the real systemic causes of U.S. strategic intelligence failures.

Understanding Strategic Intelligence

A great deal can be read of espionage exploits and covert action, but comparatively little research examines the use of intelligence in policy making.⁸ Retired or resigned CIA case officers, commonly referred to as “spies,” write many of the books in the intelligence literature market. To

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read only these exposés, a reader might conclude that the U.S. government recruits, trains, and sends these people abroad to live out their personal “James Bond” fantasies at taxpayers’ expense. Readers might also get the mistaken impression that U.S. intelligence and the CIA are ends in and of themselves and not instruments for U.S. power in the world.

Much of the debate and discourse on intelligence does not appreciate or even understand the nature of strategic intelligence. Strategic intelligence and its use in armed conflict has been a mainstay of international relations for thousands of years. Military historian John Keegan reminds us that statesmen and military leaders such as the duke of Marlborough and George Washington placed a high priority on strategic intelligence and that “From the earliest of times, military leaders have always sought information of the enemy, his strengths, his weaknesses, his intentions, his dispositions.”⁹ But the history of strategic intelligence stretches back even further. In the Bible, the Old Testament books of Numbers and Joshua, respectively, tell of Moses sending a reconnaissance team to the Promised Land and of Joshua dispatching spies to reconnoiter Jericho.¹⁰

To be fair, scholars have not done a lot of research to help the public, or policy makers for that matter, to understand the full dimensions of strategic intelligence. Sherman Kent, a scholar whose service in the intelligence community as head of national intelligence estimates in the wake of World War II, started the spade work in his landmark book *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy*. Kent defines strategic intelligence as “the knowledge which our highly placed civilians and military men must have to safeguard the national welfare.”¹¹ Scholar Adda Bozeman picks up where Kent left off, writing that strategic intelligence should “facilitate the steady pursuit of long-range policy objectives even as it also provides guidance in the choice of tactically adroit ad hoc responses to particular occurrences in foreign affairs.”¹² Since Kent and Bozeman, the scholarly attention to strategic intelligence has dropped off considerably. On top of that, Michael Herman rightly observes that “Intelligence power has not yet received anything like the prolonged attention given to military power, or to the diplomacy with which intelligence is connected.”¹³

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Perhaps the pendulum will swing toward a renewed interest in strategic intelligence in light of the grave consequences of recent shoddy strategic intelligence to U.S. policy makers. As potentially illustrative of a move in this direction, Loch Johnson and James Wirtz recently edited an important book in which they define strategic intelligence as that which “contributes to the processes, products, and organizations used by senior officials to create and implement national foreign and defense policies. Strategic intelligence thus provides warning of immediate threats to vital national security interests and assesses long-term trends of interest to senior government officials. Strategic intelligence is of political importance because it can shape the course and conduct of U.S. policy.”¹⁴

Strategic intelligence is contrasted with lesser-order information that is more germane to the demands of operational and tactical levels of the military. Tactical intelligence collected and analyzed for military commanders is generally not pertinent to presidential interests. A battalion commander, for example, would undoubtedly want to know the nature of fortifications and enemy strength at a hilltop he has been ordered to capture, but the president normally need not be briefed on such tactical military affairs. It is an important caveat to this generalization that, in some cases, tactical engagements might have consequences that could ripple up the chain of command with operational and strategic consequences for the president and his key policy lieutenants, but these would be exceptions rather than the rule. Bruce Berkowitz and Allan Goodman rightly point out that “Strategic intelligence is designed to provide officials with the ‘big picture’ and long-range forecasts they need in order to plan for the future.”¹⁵

In this book, strategic intelligence is information and analysis that is most germane to the interests and responsibilities of the president as commander in chief to protect the nation. Information obtained via clandestine means is an important but not an exclusive component of strategic intelligence. In the information-technology era, an enormous amount of information about world affairs is available publicly and instantaneously via the Internet. Clandestinely collected information supplements the

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massive amount of public information but will rarely be sufficient in and of itself for understanding the complexities of contemporary strategic issues.

In essence, strategic intelligence is information – both from public and clandestine sources – combined with analysis that is pertinent to presidential decision making in gauging threats of force and violence against U.S. interests as well as in guiding the commander in chief’s use of force against adversaries. The president bears unique responsibility as commander in chief for orchestrating strategy that occupies a zone between setting political objectives and wielding the threat, use, and management of U.S. force to achieve political objectives.¹⁶ Strategic intelligence accordingly often entails assessing the capabilities, intentions, and threats of adversaries to U.S. interests and citizens.

Another way of putting it is this: Strategic intelligence is the use of information, whether clandestinely or publicly acquired, that is synthesized into analysis and read by the senior-most policy makers charged with setting the objectives of grand strategy and ensuring that military force is exercised for purposes of achieving national interests. As Loch Johnson puts it, “intelligence is *information*, a tangible product collected and interpreted in order to achieve a sharper image of political and military conditions worldwide.”¹⁷ Strategic intelligence is the analytic synthesis of information from a variety of clandestine sources – to include human spies, diplomats, defense attachés, intercepted communications, satellite imagery, and electronic emissions – as well as open-source information such as newspapers, Internet, radio, and television – that, when packaged together, is of relevance to the roles and responsibilities of the president and his key national security lieutenants charged with setting and implementing policies to achieve the country’s strategic objectives.

Strategic intelligence is not the same as “military intelligence,” much of which is produced by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) and the intelligence arms of the U.S. Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps. Most of the intelligence products from these components of the U.S. intelligence community are funneled and blended into the operational

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and tactical views of the service chiefs and operational military commanders. It makes its way up to the senior-most rungs of the government in briefing books for the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the secretary of defense who are sitting in the Oval Office helping the president exercise his powers as commander in chief. The secretary of state comes prepared for Oval Office meetings with intelligence analyses provided by the Department of State's small but able Bureau of Intelligence and Research. The CIA, however, has traditionally been unique among intelligence components in having its director at the table to bring political-military intelligence and analysis directly to the president as he weighed threats of force against the United States and managed the use of U.S. force against adversaries.

This book focuses on the problems of strategic intelligence that occupy the space between the realms of politics and force. Although the DIA and service intelligence organizations produce an enormous amount of military-related intelligence on the operational side, they do not routinely marry military analysis to the political and policy-relevant dimensions attuned to presidential responsibilities to the same extent as the CIA. To be sure, the CIA produces a great array of intelligence on a variety of topics other than those in the strategic realm, such as demographics and global disease, but rarely, if ever, have intelligence mistakes on such topics had the dramatic impact on U.S. national security that mistakes on strategic intelligence revolving around issues of war and peace have had.

A core challenge for strategic intelligence is the acquisition of "secrets" and the analysis of "mysteries," which are useful distinctions made by keen observers and practitioners in the intelligence business, such as Gregory Treverton and Joseph Nye.¹⁸ Berkowitz and Goodman also make this distinction: "Secrets provide the analyst with information about issues, situations, and processes that are intended by foreign governments or groups not to be known."¹⁹ Secrets are knowable facts that can be captured by satellite photographs analyzed by the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency or communications intercepted by the National Security Agency or stolen by agents and passed on to their CIA

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case officers. Examples of secrets susceptible to theft by the CIA are military order-of-battle information, such as the numbers of tanks, soldiers, and aircraft and their organizational structure and deployment areas as well as military contingency plans.

Mysteries, on the other hand, fall in the realm of analysis and conjecture about the future in strategic affairs. According to Berkowitz and Goodman, “Mysteries are just that: questions or issues that no amount of intelligence analysis or collection of secret information will reveal.”²⁰ Mysteries cannot be answered by a spy stealing a document. Even foreign leaders and adversaries do not know the answers to mysteries. Examples of mysteries are questions such as “Is Iran primed for revolution?” or “When is the Soviet Union going to collapse?” As a general statement, secrets are the realm of CIA case officers, and mysteries are the challenge for analysts.

The CIA’s strategic intelligence in the past has helped as well as hindered presidents in carrying out U.S. statecraft. These days, statecraft is unfortunately rarely studied in the academy and in the security studies field, which must be considered a glaring hole in intellectual inquiry. As Carnes Lord astutely observes, “Although far from absent in the language of contemporary political discourse, the concept of statecraft is rarely analyzed carefully or brought into relationship with the idea of leadership. Even its basic meaning is not especially clear. The term is now used almost exclusively to refer to diplomacy or the conduct of foreign policy in a broad sense.”²¹ The use of the concept of statecraft in this book is pegged to Lord’s view that “statecraft is an art of coping with an adversarial environment in which actions generate reactions in unpredictable ways and chance and uncertainty rule. Like strategy, too, statecraft is also an art of relating means to ends. If, in Clausewitz’s formulation, strategy is the art of using battles to achieve the objectives of the war, statecraft is the art of using wars and other instruments available to political leaders to attain national goals.”²²

Strategic intelligence produced by the CIA is one of the critical instruments of national power for the president exercising his authorities as

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commander in chief. Scholar and strategist Richard Betts points out that “If capacity for informed strategic analysis – integrating political, economic, and military judgment – is not preserved and applied, decisions on the use of force will be uninformed and, therefore, irresponsible.”²³ Good strategic intelligence can magnify the power and influence of other instruments of national power. By the same token, poor strategic intelligence can weigh down and diminish the influence of other instruments of statecraft. As a Council on Foreign Relations task force assessed, “Accurate intelligence significantly improves the effectiveness of diplomatic and military undertakings; while good intelligence cannot guarantee good policy, poor intelligence frequently contributes to policy failure.”²⁴

Distracted by the Mystique of the CIA's Covert Action and Special Activities

A sustained and sober assessment of the CIA's strategic intelligence performance and the origins of its failures has been distracted by public fascination with the “sexier and exciting” aspects of the CIA's mission in carrying out covert action and special activities at the president's behest. Much ink has been spilt on the controversies surrounding covert actions, which are designed to influence affairs abroad while hiding the hand of the United States and includes such activities as planting newspaper articles abroad to supporting politicians and political parties. Special activities, on the other hand, can range from the provision of training and technical expertise to foreign military, security, and intelligence services to support for paramilitary operations.²⁵

Both covert action and special activities have taken on an importance in public policy debate in the post-9/11 environment with controversies swirling around the accusations that the United States planted newspaper stories favorable to it in budding Iraqi media as well as CIA-orchestrated renditions or covert spiriting away from the streets of suspected al-Qaeda members to a series of clandestine prisons reported to be in the Middle East and Eastern Europe.²⁶ The CIA's support to paramilitary operations

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reached an apex with the deployment of small paramilitary CIA teams into Afghanistan to pave the way for the insertion of U.S. Special Forces in the impressive 2001 military campaign that ousted the despicable Taliban regime in Afghanistan.²⁷

Reaching back into the history of the CIA's formative years, the United States successfully used covert action to advance U.S. policy interests throughout the globe. It spent some \$75 million over twenty years in Italy, as a former senior CIA official and scholar Ray Cline recalled, "to help save it from impending disaster in 1948 and to support the 'opening-to-the-left' in the mid 1960s, the United States for reasons of political prudence and economy discontinued subsidies to Italian political parties."²⁸ The CIA's covert action that returned the shah of Iran to power in 1953 is still heralded as a high-water mark for the agency's myth of covert action capabilities.²⁹ In Latin America, the CIA levied covert action in Chile, Guatemala, and against Fidel Castro's Cuba in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. These operations, as historian John Lewis Gaddis rightly observes, gave the CIA "an almost mythic reputation throughout Latin America and the Middle East as an instrument with which the United States could depose governments it disliked, whenever it wished to do so."³⁰ This reputation, largely unfounded, has had a long life and persists today among elites and publics alike, especially in the Middle East, where many are still more willing to believe that the CIA, not al-Qaeda, was behind the 9/11 attacks.

One of the largest covert action programs in the CIA's history was the military backing of the insurgency against the Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan during the Cold War. The CIA spent millions of dollars and provided tons of military arms and equipment to the Afghan insurgents over a period of years to increase substantially the costs of Soviet occupation and contributed to the Soviet decision to withdraw militarily from Afghanistan. This less-than-secret war is heralded by CIA veterans as an exemplar of covert action that contributed to ending the Cold War. Other commentators are not so sanguine and argue that the CIA covert action program gave military training, expertise, and battlefield