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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

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SHARPENING STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE

This book critically examines the weaknesses of U.S. intelligence led by the Central Intelligence Agency in informing presidential decision making on issues of war and peace. It evaluates the CIA's strategic intelligence performance during the Cold War and post-Cold War periods as a foundation for examining the root causes of intelligence failures surrounding the 11 September 2001 attacks and assessments of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs in the run-up to the Iraq War. The book probes the root causes of these intelligence failures, which lie in the CIA's poor human intelligence collection and analysis practices. The book argues that none of the post-9/11 intelligence reforms have squarely addressed these root causes of strategic intelligence failure, and it recommends measures for redressing these dangerous vulnerabilities in American security.

Richard L. Russell is professor of national security affairs at the National Defense University's Near East and South Asia Center for Strategic Studies. He also holds academic appointments as adjunct associate professor in the Security Studies Program at Georgetown University and research associate in the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy at Georgetown University. Russell is the author of *Weapons Proliferation and War in the Greater Middle East: Strategic Contest* and *George F. Kennan's Strategic Thought: The Making of an American Political Realist*. He served seventeen years as a political-military analyst at the Central Intelligence Agency where he analyzed security issues in the Middle East and Europe. He received numerous CIA Exceptional Performance Awards, two of which were for his work during the Gulf War and the Kosovo War. Russell has been interviewed on National Public Radio, ABC News, and CNN, and his analyses have appeared in leading publications including the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *New Republic*, *Weekly Standard*, *USA Today*, and *U.S. News and World Report*. He holds a Ph.D. in foreign affairs from the University of Virginia and is a member of the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

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*For Richard F. Russell, Jr., and Leavitt E. Moulton,
gentlemen who are deeply missed.*

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You shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free.

– St. John 8: 31–32

Many intelligence reports in war are contradictory; even more are false,
and most are uncertain.

– Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*

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Acknowledgments

The art of intelligence has occupied more than a fair share of my professional life for more than twenty years. I resigned from the Central Intelligence Agency after a seventeen-year stint as a political-military analyst in July 2001, just months before the 9/11 attacks. I will show “my cards” or biases up front and tell the reader that the principal reason I resigned from the CIA was that I had come to the conclusion that working life in the Agency simply prevented me from honing expertise in international security affairs. This reason may strike the reader as odd given a public perception that the CIA is loaded with “experts,” but, as I detail in this book’s pages, nothing could be farther from the truth.

Unshackled from the oppressive bureaucratic environment at the CIA, I have immensely enjoyed my second career as a university professor. It has given me a wonderful opportunity to think more strategically about the nexus of international security and intelligence. Strategic thought is a rare commodity in the CIA because analysts as well as their managers have allowed themselves to be consumed by the constant flood of classified cable traffic coming from a variety of sources. These sources of information more often than not are tactical minutia or blades of grass in the forest of contemporary international security. They consume most of the attention of CIA analysts and managers who do not have the time, discipline, inclination, or bureaucratic responsibility to take a step back to survey the forest and look at “big picture” strategic issues. The CIA’s systemic failure to consistently and reliably do strategic intelligence was

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exposed to the American and international public with the intelligence debacles surrounding the 11 September 2001 al-Qaeda attacks and the abysmal assessments of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs in the run-up to the 2003 war.

The reader, in the interests of fair disclosure, should be aware that this book was submitted to pre-publication reviews at the CIA and the Department of Defense. The reviews were conducted to ensure that I had not inadvertently disclosed any classified information gained during my former career at the CIA or in my current position as a professor at the National Defense University. The CIA Publications Review Board requires that I publish the following disclaimer: "All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official positions or views of the CIA or any other U.S. Government agency. Nothing in the contents should be construed as asserting or implying U.S. Government authentication of information or Agency endorsement of the author's views. The material has been reviewed by the CIA to prevent the disclosure of classified information." Not to be outdone, the National Defense University insists that I print this disclaimer: "The views expressed in this book are the author's alone and do not reflect the position or policy of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government." The author can only apologize to readers for subjecting them to this fit of bureaucratic excess.

With that bit of unpleasantness out of the way, I take great pleasure in thanking a variety of distinguished journal editors who have given me the opportunity over the past several years to commit to paper some of the ideas about intelligence banging around inside my head and to share them with their readerships. I was pleased that one of the leading experts on intelligence, Loch Johnson, found my article "A Weak Pillar for American National Security: CIA's Dismal Performance against WMD Threats" worthy of publication in his journal *Intelligence and National Security* (Fall 2005). Demetrios James Caraley graciously published "CIA's Strategic Intelligence in Iraq" in the *Political Science Quarterly* (Summer 2002). Tod Lindberg kindly published "Intelligence Failures: The Wrong Model

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for the War on Terror” in the Hoover Institution’s journal *Policy Review* (February & March 2004). Nikolas Gvosdev generously published “Spies Like Them” in *The National Interest* (Fall 2004). None of these articles are reprinted in this book, but bits and pieces of their analyses and assessments are sprinkled throughout.

The use of my professional experience and academic scholarship as intellectual building blocks for the construction of the more comprehensive and in-depth analysis of what ails American strategic intelligence found in this book would not have been possible without support from the Earhart Foundation. I wish to thank the Trustees of the Earhart Foundation, President Ingrid Gregg, and Secretary and Director of Programs Bruce Frohnen for a fellowship research grant that enabled me to research and write this book. I especially appreciated the Earhart Foundation’s recognition of the importance of strategic intelligence for American security as well as its confidence that I could get the project done.

The book greatly benefited from my discussions and debates with expert colleagues and friends. I wish to thank James Wirtz and Richard Shultz, whose work on intelligence I have long studied and learned from, for their help on this book. They, as well as Loch Johnson, graciously gave their time, attention, and expertise to review my research proposal for the Earhart Foundation. Heartfelt thanks go to Kenneth Thompson, my intellectual mentor and friend since I started my doctoral studies at the University of Virginia in 1993. Mr. Thompson was a pillar of support for this project just as he had been for my two previous books. Joseph DeSutter, Herman Meyer, and Thomas Blau were good colleagues who kindly invited me to teach a course on intelligence for the National Defense University’s School for National Security Executive Education, which prompted me to read and think more systematically about intelligence. I am also indebted to the research assistance of Jessica Harris and Ryan Taugher, who both ably and cheerfully provided fast “Dominoes-like” delivery service to feed my intellectual cravings for the latest articles and books in a rapidly growing body of literature on intelligence. Those who tolerated my arguments and thoughts in these pages and offered wise

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corrections and refinements are Daniel Byman, Roger George, Robert Jervis, Paul Pillar, and Michael Yaffe. The book undoubtedly remains flawed due to my own intellectual frailties, but it was not for lack of help from these people who gave generously of their time and talents.

I would be seriously remiss if I failed to mention the invaluable help I received from my publisher, Cambridge University Press. Senior Editor John Berger was a guiding intellectual light who, in the earliest stages of work, encouraged me to make a balanced and scholarly study of intelligence and policy to distinguish it from the bulk of intelligence literature that has flooded the book market in the aftermath of 9/11, which often steers away from scholarship and into exposé. I kept John's wise counsel in mind throughout the research and writing of this book. Armed with the helpful, constructive, and thoughtful critiques and suggestions from Cambridge University Press's three superb and efficient anonymous reviewers, I hope that I have stayed solidly in the realm of scholarship and sober and balanced critical analysis. Barbara Walthall, the project manager for Aptara, Inc., and copyeditor Elizabeth Budd also were extremely efficient in ushering this book, as well as its author, into print.

On the home front, I owe my wife Lilian a thank you for her understanding and tolerance of my practice – born years ago of necessity to finish a dissertation while working full-time – of waking in the wee hours of weekend mornings to pound my laptop keys on the kitchen table in order to be close to the coffeepot. And to our young and energetic boys, Daniel and Ryan, I owe my apologies for being less than a cheerful father on weekend mornings for most of the past several years when they refused to sleep late and instead leapt down the stairs to look for breakfast. If only I could have somehow tapped a tiny fraction of their energies, I could have finished this book in much less time!

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