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# GETTING TO KNOW THE PRESIDENT

*Third Edition*

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## INTRODUCTION

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It was President Harry Truman, in whose administration the Central Intelligence Agency and the postwar Intelligence Community (IC) were created, who instituted the custom of providing candidates for the presidency classified briefings on foreign developments. In 1952 he authorized the CIA to brief Gen. Dwight Eisenhower and Governor Adlai Stevenson so that the successful candidate would be as well informed as possible on the world situation when he took office. The briefings would also position the CIA to develop a close working relationship with the new president and his advisers. These two objectives have guided the efforts of the Agency and the IC during presidential transition periods ever since.

Thus it was, after Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton won the 1992 election, that CIA moved quickly to establish a presence in Little Rock to provide intelligence support to the new president-elect. As CIA's deputy director for intelligence, I was sent to meet with the governor and his staff to describe the materials the Agency proposed to make available and to elicit the governor's agreement to receive regular briefings from the CIA. Events unfolded in such a way that I became the head of a team that spent most of the period from November 1992 through January 1993 in Little Rock providing daily intelligence updates to the president-elect.

In keeping with President Truman's initiative, the Agency wanted to help the new president-elect prepare for his foreign policy responsibilities and acquaint him and his staff with the IC's capabilities for collecting, analyzing, and delivering intelligence that would be vital to them when they took office. As we made arrangements for briefing Governor Clinton, we attempted to learn as much as possible from the

Agency's experience in previous transition periods. What we discovered was that the CIA had provided pre-inaugural intelligence support to all eight presidents elected since the Agency was founded, but had no systematic records of those efforts. There was no body of organized information to indicate what had worked before and what had not. Such records and memories as we did have, however, made clear that we needed to make decisions quickly on how to proceed in a number of areas that would have an important bearing on whether we met our two primary goals.

The key variables that seem to determine whether the IC is successful in serving a new president fall into four general categories. The first of these relates to the level and type of person or persons the Community puts forward to represent it. In some transitions the director of central intelligence (DCI), and now the director of national intelligence (DNI), has been personally and extensively involved; in others the DCI took no active role. Sometimes the IC has fielded very senior officers as its briefers but in other instances relied on much more junior representatives. When senior officers do the briefings they generally give the Community's product and approach greater credibility and access, but their selection also increases the likelihood that the exercise will be seen as political.

A second category of key variables concerns other political considerations to which the Intelligence Community must be sensitive to ensure that it and a new president come to work together well. Foremost among these is the background of the president-elect himself, particularly as it relates to his familiarity with the IC and its products. It is quite a different matter, for example, to establish a relationship with an individual who has moved up from the vice presidency in the way that Presidents Gerald Ford and George H. W. Bush did, as contrasted with individuals who have come to the position with no Washington experience in the manner of Presidents Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. Similarly, the IC's experience has varied significantly depending on whether or not the new president has come from the same political party as his predecessor.

The DCI's or DNI's own political or career ambitions have sometimes raised delicate political problems. It is not unlikely, for example, that during a transition period the interests of the leader of the IC as

an individual would not correspond with those of the IC itself. A most important political variable is the attitudes of the outgoing president and the national security advisor. Their support for the Community's efforts to establish an early and effective relationship with a new administration facilitates matters immensely.

The third group of key variables concerns logistic arrangements for the briefings. Should briefings be given prior to the election to both, or even multiple, candidates? Alternatively, should they be postponed until after the vote and provided exclusively to the single president-elect during the transition? How many briefings should be given and with what frequency? Experience shows that it matters, too, where the briefings are given and whether only the candidate is briefed or staff assistants are included as well.

Finally, concerning the substance of the information provided, there have been considerable variations in the amount and the type of material made available. All presidents-elect in recent years have valued receiving the *President's Daily Brief* (PDB), the intelligence summary created exclusively for the president. Some have wanted to receive additional, supplementary intelligence publications during the transition period. A few have wanted oral briefings by a number of substantive experts as opposed to hearing from a single Agency briefer each day; others have found multiple briefers confusing or overwhelming.

An important issue to be faced by the IC during each transition concerns how much information derived from sensitive human sources and technical collection efforts and regarding covert action programs should be included in the material given a president-elect, and when. Presidents in office are always informed of such programs, and careful attention is given to the timing, level of detail, and content of the presentation. And finally, concerning the substance of the support provided, there have been dramatic variations in the amount of tailored assistance the IC has provided presidents-elect and their national security teams to prepare them for pre-inaugural planning and policy deliberations, speeches and press conferences, and, in particular, their meetings and communications with foreign statesmen.

Given the importance of these variables in determining whether the IC will come to work well with a new president during the transition period and beyond, it seemed desirable for the Community's own

purposes to create a record of what we have done in the past, noting what has worked and what has not. Even a cursory examination of the IC's experience over the past half century reveals that it is often not intuitively obvious or self-evident what approaches will translate into success. In preparing this study I have been pleased to discover, or confirm, that certain of the intelligence briefings provided to incoming presidents have turned out to be of genuine and lasting historical importance in their own right. To use one example, the DCI and the CIA's deputy director for plans (operations) provided President-elect Kennedy information on the Agency's plans for what would become the Bay of Pigs operation in Cuba. This occurred at a meeting with only the three of them present. A great deal of what has subsequently been written by others about what Kennedy was told, when he was told it, and what he said in response, is substantially wrong. I hope this account can clarify the circumstances of this and other important briefings provided to presidents over the years.

Finally, because the IC's role during transitions is unique, the Community seems to me to have an obligation to record what it has done and to make its account as widely available as possible. Perhaps this material will be of use not only to intelligence officers charged with meeting the Community's briefing responsibilities in the future, but also to others interested in IC contributions during these important chapters of our national history.

John L. Helgerson

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## CHAPTER 1

### TRUMAN AND EISENHOWER - LAUNCHING THE PROCESS

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On 22 November 1952, newspapers reported that President Harry Truman, shortly after noon the previous day, had stolen away from the White House to give an “impromptu” speech at the Central Intelligence Agency. Truman had come to CIA at the invitation of the fourth director of central intelligence, Gen. Walter Bedell Smith, to address a training course of government officials. In that speech—delivered on a Friday afternoon almost two weeks after the national election—Truman revealed a great deal about his motives in founding the CIA and his aims in having the Agency provide intelligence briefings to the new president-elect, Gen. Dwight Eisenhower.

The president reminisced with his audience about how there had been no CIA when he had succeeded to the presidency in 1945. At that time, by many accounts, he had been surprised to discover how much information relating to intelligence and national security matters had been withheld from him. The most dramatic evidence of how ill-informed he was came on his 12th day in office when Secretary of War Henry Stimson briefed him for the first time on the Manhattan (atomic bomb) Project, about which Truman had heard only hints while serving as vice president and on key Senate committees.<sup>1</sup>

Truman also recalled how difficult it had been for him to obtain information from the various government departments, each of which seemed “walled off” from the others. On various occasions Truman had lamented to Smith that he “used to do all this myself.” The president noted that this situation had been corrected over the intervening

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1. David McCullough, *Truman* (Simon and Shuster, 1992), 376–78.



*Gen. Walter Bedell Smith (left) relieves RAdm. Roscoe H. Hillenkoetter as Director of Central Intelligence in 1950.*

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years, saying that the CIA's global intelligence operations and procedures for forwarding information had made it possible to "keep the President informed better than ever before." In a rather backhanded compliment, Truman said he believed that "we have an intelligence information service now that I think is not inferior to any in the world."<sup>2</sup>

Truman was responsible for the very existence of that intelligence service. Within a year of his becoming president, in January 1946, he formed the Central Intelligence Group (CIG). In the president's mind, its key responsibility was to ensure that he personally received intelligence reports on a timely basis. On 15 February 1946 the CIG launched the *Daily Summary*, and in June a counterpart *Weekly Summary* was produced for the first time. Both these publications were sent to the White House for the president. Both the daily and weekly publications

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2. *New York Times*, 22 November 1952, 1, 10

continued to be published after CIG became the Central Intelligence Agency in September 1947.

There was much bureaucratic wrangling throughout the early years of the CIG and CIA about their proper role in the production of current intelligence. Virtually all key players involved with intelligence—in the military services, the War (later Defense) Department, and the State Department—had serious reservations about the new intelligence agency duplicating their work in current intelligence. The president was virtually alone in expecting to receive a daily, comprehensive current intelligence product, whatever the formal charters of the CIG and CIA might say. Needless to say, his expectations carried the day.<sup>3</sup>

To consolidate the production of current intelligence, CIA in January 1951 formed the Office of Current Intelligence (OCI), which existed until the late 1970s when its functions were assumed by other offices. The CIA officers who formed OCI were already preparing a closely held, all-source weekly intelligence publication, the first of its kind, called the *Situation Summary*. This was a global review, built around the Korean situation and its worldwide implications that formed the basis for General Smith's weekly briefings of the president. Shortly after the establishment of OCI, two new publications were inaugurated for wider distribution. The daily publication became the *Current Intelligence Bulletin*, first issued on 28 February 1951; in August a companion weekly publication, the *Current Intelligence Weekly Review*, was begun.

Managers of OCI felt their early efforts had been rewarded when Truman, vacationing in Key West, Florida, wrote of the new publication, "Dear Bedel [*sic*], I have been reading the intelligence bulletin and I am highly impressed with it. I believe you have hit the jackpot with this one. Sincerely, Harry Truman."<sup>4</sup> The *Current Intelligence Bulletin* continued largely unchanged for the next 25 years.

While Truman received, read, and expressed his appreciation for the Agency's daily and weekly publications, it had become clear over the years that he especially valued the oral briefings delivered by the directors of CIA. The president experimented with various procedures for these briefings, and in the early years there were periods when he

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3. In early 2019, CIA's public release of issues of Truman's *Daily Summary* totalled more than 3,000 pages. See Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room in [www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov)

4. Harry Truman, letter to Bedell Smith, 8 March 1951.

received them on a daily basis. What finally proved most satisfactory, however, were weekly worldwide intelligence updates.

The weekly briefings worked best during the extended period when “Beedle” Smith served as DCI. Smith briefed Truman each Friday, accompanied at the White House by a CIA officer, Meredith Davidson. Davidson would assist the director in the preparation of his material (a notebook was left behind with the president each week), but he did not normally go into the Oval Office. The briefing was based primarily on the *Situation Summary*, which was prepared with the president’s needs in mind. Davidson’s reward was to join the DCI and the president’s special consultant for national security affairs, Sidney Souers (who had served as the first DCI for a five-month period in 1946), for coffee and a postmortem on the president’s reactions and follow-up requests.<sup>5</sup>

Mindful of how useful the weekly briefings were to him, Truman determined that intelligence information should be provided to the candidates in the 1952 election as soon as they were selected. In the summer of 1952, the president raised this idea with Smith. He indicated he wanted the Agency to brief Gen. Dwight Eisenhower and Governor Adlai Stevenson, remarking at the time, “There were so many things I did not know when I became president.” Smith suggested to Truman that Davidson might be the proper individual to brief both Eisenhower and Stevenson to ensure they were receiving the same information.

Later, during his speech at the Agency on 21 November, Truman explained his rationale in providing briefings to the president-elect. The office of the president of the United States, he told his audience, “now carries power beyond parallel in history...that is the principal reason why I am so anxious that it be a continuing proposition and that the successor to me and the successor to him can carry on as if no election had ever taken place. I am giving this president—this new president—more information than any other president had when he went into office.”

Referring to a widely publicized meeting he had held with Eisenhower at the White House to discuss foreign policy issues earlier that

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5. Meredith Davidson, interviews with the author in Frederick, Maryland, 26 March and 25 October 1993. Unless otherwise indicated, the numerous references that follow concerning Davidson’s briefings of Stevenson and Eisenhower come from these interviews.

same week, Truman said, "It was my privilege a few days ago...to brief the general who is going to take over the office on the 20th of January." Truman did not mention in his address that on that occasion he had given Eisenhower a comprehensive *National Intelligence Digest* prepared by the CIA. Keyed to an NSC policy outline, the *Digest* summarized, in Smith's words, "the most important national intelligence on a worldwide basis."<sup>6</sup>

Eisenhower wrote in his memoirs more than a decade later that his meeting with Truman "added little to my knowledge." He recalled that Truman "received me cordially; however...the conversations... were necessarily general and official in nature. So far as defense affairs were concerned, under the instructions of the President, I had been briefed periodically by Gen. Walter Bedell Smith and his assistants in the Central Intelligence Agency on developments in the Korean war and on national security."<sup>7</sup> According to Davidson, Truman told Smith he "had kept it general on purpose, for political reasons."

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## **Strained Relations Complicate the Arrangements**

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In his remarks at the Agency, Truman could not bring himself to be completely deferential to his successor. In a mild dig, he observed that Eisenhower had been "rather appalled at all that the president needs to know in order to reach decisions." In private, Truman was bitingly critical of his elected successor. The press, for its part, was reporting that the meeting of the two men at the White House had been "coolly formal." The *New York Times*, for example, noted "there was some evidence of tension between Mr. Truman and his successor," observing also that "the President-elect looked serious and was somewhat brusque when he left the President's office."<sup>8</sup>

While Truman's motives appear to have been straightforward in providing information to enable Eisenhower to assume the presidency fully informed, the implementation left something to be desired and prompted suspicions on the part of Eisenhower and his staff. Indeed, tensions between the two came close to undermining the planned

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6. Walter Bedell Smith, memorandum for the president, 9 January 1953.

7. Dwight Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change, 1953-1956* (Doubleday and Co., 1963), 85.

8. *New York Times*, 19 November 1952, 1, 18.

briefing process and with it the Agency's access to the president-elect during the important transition period. Ironically, the ultimate result was to elicit from Eisenhower a statement making clear he saw the CIA as a relatively apolitical provider of information. In the end he was willing to hear from the CIA things he was unwilling to hear from others.

A difficult private exchange between the president and his eventual successor had begun shortly after the Republican convention, when Truman sent telegrams to Eisenhower and Stevenson inviting them to lunch with his cabinet on Tuesday, 19 August. Truman proposed that he ask Smith and other CIA officers to brief "on the foreign situation" and have the White House staff report on other issues as well. In his telegram, Truman also extended an offer of weekly intelligence briefings for both candidates.<sup>9</sup>

Eisenhower declined the invitation. In reply, he told Truman he thought he should receive "only those communications from the outgoing administration that could be known to all the American people." He added, "The problems which you suggest for discussion are those with which I have lived for many years." The general concluded with a paragraph indicating he would welcome weekly reports from the CIA, but he wanted it understood that his possession of those reports "would not limit his freedom to discuss or analyze foreign programs as he wanted."<sup>10</sup>

The White House, obviously irritated that Eisenhower had declined Truman's personal invitation, released the texts of the telegrams from both men. What was not released to the public—nor, so far as I can tell, known to senior CIA managers at the time—was a very direct note that Truman had written by hand and sent to Eisenhower at his campaign headquarters in Denver on 16 August. In that note Truman indicated he was sorry if he had caused Eisenhower embarrassment with the luncheon invitation, but he underscored that his intention was to provide information that would permit a continuous, uninterrupted foreign policy despite the change of administrations.

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9. Harry Truman, telegram to Dwight Eisenhower, 14 August 1952. A similar telegram was sent to Adlai Stevenson.

10. Dwight Eisenhower, telegram to Harry Truman, 14 August 1952.

In language only Truman would use, he wrote, "Partisan politics should stop at the boundaries of the United States. I am extremely sorry that you have allowed a bunch of screwballs to come between us." Truman added, "You have made a bad mistake, and I'm hoping it won't injure this great Republic. There has never been one like it and I want to see it continues regardless of the man who occupies the most important position in the history of the world. May God guide you and give you light."<sup>11</sup>

After reading Truman's note, Eisenhower obviously decided there was no point in responding in kind and sent back to Truman, on 19 August, a relatively conciliatory reply, also handwritten. Eisenhower reiterated the thought that, for political reasons and in the absence of any national emergency, he should not meet with the outgoing president and cabinet and thus had declined the invitation. He repeated his appreciation for the offer to send him weekly CIA reports, opined that those would be sufficient to keep him up-to-date on developments abroad, and assured Truman of his support for a bipartisan foreign policy.<sup>12</sup>

Although Eisenhower had taken a relatively moderate tone in his reply to Truman's outburst, he clearly was bothered by the overall exchange and indicated as much in separate correspondence with Smith. The general felt free to be open with Smith; they had worked closely together during the war in Europe when Smith served for an extended period as his chief of staff.

Following Eisenhower's nomination, Smith had sent a note of congratulations that Eisenhower had not acknowledged before the exchange with Truman over the briefings in mid-August. In a letter stamped "Personal and Confidential" dated 14 August, Eisenhower thanked Smith for his note of congratulations the previous month, but then launched immediately into some observations on his exchange with Truman. "The past two days my whole headquarters has been in a little bit of a steaming stew over an incident in which, according to the papers, you were at least briefly involved. It was the meeting that Governor Stevenson had with the president and the cabinet. According to the reports reaching here, you were brought in to help brief the Gover-

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11. Harry Truman, letter to Dwight Eisenhower, 16 August 1952.

12. Dwight Eisenhower, letter to Harry Truman, 19 August 1952.

nor on the world situation.”<sup>13</sup> Eisenhower expressed his understanding that the briefing of Stevenson had taken only a very few minutes but added, “To the political mind it looked like the outgoing administration was canvassing all its resources in order to support Stevenson’s election.” The general went on to stress the importance of doing what is right, recalling the challenges he and Smith had faced together in Europe during the war.

The lecture from Eisenhower caused great pain to his longtime friend and admirer (one former Agency officer recalls that “it upset the hell out of Beedle”). Nevertheless, in a reply to Eisenhower dated 18 August, Smith made no mention of the critical note. Rather, he offered in rather formal language the briefings that Smith had discussed with the president and which the president, in turn, had offered to Eisenhower. Smith proposed that he provide Eisenhower information on the world situation like that the president received each Friday morning, and that this information should be delivered by an officer of the CIA. Smith’s letter was delivered to Eisenhower in Denver.<sup>14</sup> Fortunately for the Agency, in light of the tension that had developed, Eisenhower accepted the invitation to receive CIA briefings.

Eisenhower’s “turning over of command” ceremony had been held at SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe) in Paris on 30 May 1952. The following day the general, Mrs. Eisenhower and Eisenhower’s personal staff departed Europe for Washington. Although he had been on leave without pay from his post as president of Columbia University since early 1951, Eisenhower had continued to use the university home at 60 Morningside Drive in Manhattan when he was in the city. This residence became his headquarters for the next several months, and it was here that the first briefing by the CIA occurred.

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## **Preelection Briefings**

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The first briefing was on Saturday morning, 30 August, by Melvin Hendrickson, then head of the military branch in OCI’s “Indications Staff.” Like many Agency officers at the time, Hendrickson had sev-

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13. Dwight Eisenhower, letter to Walter Bedell Smith, 14 August 1952.

14. Walter Bedell Smith, letter to Dwight Eisenhower, 18 August 1952.

eral years of Army experience; his last post had been assistant military attaché in Oslo.<sup>15</sup> With military precision, Eisenhower entered the library of his residence exactly at 7:45 a.m. to receive Hendrickson and an accompanying security officer, the two being introduced as “the gentlemen from CIA.” Eisenhower suggested that they move to an adjoining smaller room.

The general took about 20 minutes to read carefully through the briefing material but paid scant attention to the information on the disposition of Soviet and satellite armed forces after confirming with Hendrickson that there had been no significant changes in their deployment since his briefings by the US Army in Europe some months earlier. There was more extended discussion of the situation in Iran, of France’s growing difficulties in North Africa, and regarding trade between Japan and China. The latter subject was discussed in the context of the war in Korea and the ongoing armistice talks. Eisenhower commented specifically, “Since trade is one of our most powerful weapons, it seems to me that we should employ it to its maximum. Where are the Japanese going to get their materials if they can’t get them from China?” Concerning the North African situation, the general’s bottom line was a cryptic, “If the French don’t do something fairly soon, they will have another Indo-China on their hands.” At the conclusion of this first substantive discussion, Eisenhower indicated that he would like to receive future similar briefings.<sup>16</sup>

During the remaining weeks before the election on 4 November, Eisenhower received three additional briefings from CIA. The second in the series took place on 25 September when the general was in the

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15. Melvin Hendrickson, interview with author. in McLean, Virginia, 23 March 1993. Unless otherwise indicated, the references to his briefings of Eisenhower come from this interview. In discussing that first briefing, Hendrickson said his most vivid memory was of Eisenhower’s powerful welcoming handshake, saying, “You had to be careful or he would squeeze your fingers off.”

16. Melvin Hendrickson, “Briefing of General Eisenhower—30 August 1952,” memorandum for the record, 5 September 1952. As a reminder of how things change in 40 years, one cannot help noting that the Agency’s New York office provided the visiting CIA team a chauffeur-driven Cadillac for their 20-minute trip from midtown to Columbia University on the upper west side. Conversely, some things never change. The team reported in their memorandum for the record that, when they returned later that day to New York’s LaGuardia Airport for their flight to Washington, they discovered their reservations were for a flight departing from Idlewild (now JFK) Airport. They changed their reservation and arrived back at CIA’s “Que” building in Washington by midafternoon. Among the stories Hendrickson told his colleagues was an account of his pleasure at having met not only General Eisenhower but also Mrs. Eisenhower and their grandchildren.

midst of an extended whistle-stop campaign tour. He had flown from New York to Moline, Illinois, and from there had traveled virtually nonstop through numerous small towns in Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Missouri, West Virginia, and finally Maryland. CIA's Hendrickson boarded the train in Silver Spring, Maryland, and briefed Eisenhower during the short trip into Baltimore.

During a subsequent period of almost nonstop campaigning, Eisenhower blocked out two weekends for rest. One was when the Eisenhowers were staying at the Brown Palace Hotel in Denver, Mrs. Eisenhower's hometown. Hendrickson provided the third preelection briefing at the couple's Brown Palace suite on 11 October, again a Saturday morning. On this occasion, Eisenhower, in turn, provided Hendrickson one of the more unusual experiences intelligence officers have had. Hendrickson recalls being invited to join the general and Mrs. Eisenhower at a rodeo in Denver that weekend. The Eisenhowers were driven around the rodeo grounds in a stagecoach. Hendrickson rode shotgun, up top with the driver.

The fourth and final preelection briefing was on 25 October, 10 days before the election. Eisenhower had been campaigning in Detroit and had taken an overnight train to New York. This time Hendrickson boarded the campaign train in the early morning at Harmon Station, New York, and briefed Eisenhower as they traveled to Grand Central Station in New York City.

During each of the briefings during the preelection period, Eisenhower spent 15–20 minutes studying the written material and, typically, another 10–15 minutes discussing that material and other items on his mind. He asked few specific factual questions but did make comments on a wide spectrum of issues, primarily the Soviet, Korean, and Iranian situations, which were at the forefront of US government attention in 1952. Eisenhower also read carefully and commented on Agency materials relating to security arrangements for the prospective Middle East collective security alliance then under consideration.<sup>17</sup>

The package of written briefing materials presented to Eisenhower (and Stevenson) at each meeting typically included 20 or more short

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17. Hendrickson prepared very brief memorandums for the record concerning the second and fourth briefings, dated 29 September and 28 October, respectively; no written record has been found of the third briefing, held in Denver.

items—one or two paragraphs in length—summarizing the current situation in a specific country of interest. Events in the USSR, Iran, Korea, Egypt, Yugoslavia, and Japan were included in almost all sessions, but in the course of the briefings more than 50 countries were addressed. In addition, there was normally one longer article on a priority country, Iran being the most common. Each package also contained the “Conclusions” of one or two recently published national intelligence estimates. The latter typically assessed the prospects for communist expansionism in different regions of the world.

The general, while a candidate, was appreciative of the preelection briefings, commenting that they had been very helpful. At the conclusion of the fourth session, however, he added—clearly referring to the Soviet Union and Korea—that he “missed the G-3 information” (US military plans and operations) that he observed “was essential for a complete understanding of those situations.” Eisenhower also commented that “if he got the job, some other arrangement would have to be made for the briefings.” He mentioned specifically securing clearances for some of his staff so that they, too, could benefit from the information being provided.

In an intriguing parting comment, Eisenhower mentioned to Hendrickson, “When you get back to Bedell Smith, tell him if I get elected I’ve got a job for him.” Decades after the fact, it has proved impossible to establish whether this comment was passed to the DCI personally. In an interesting coincidence of timing, however, Smith, less than a week later on 1 November, forwarded to President Truman a written request to resign his post as DCI and to retire from active military service.<sup>18</sup>

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### **Support to the President-Elect<sup>19</sup>**

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One day after he was elected president, Eisenhower on 5 November 1952 traveled to Augusta, Georgia, for two weeks’ vacation. When the

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18. Walter Bedell Smith, letter to Harry Truman, 1 November 1952.

19. Memorandums for the record have not been found in CIA files regarding the postelection briefings of Eisenhower, and there is reason to doubt that any exist. Davidson, who accompanied Smith to the first two sessions, remembers asking the DCI after the first meeting “whether there was anything he wanted me to write. He said no. Beedle would have been happy if nothing had been written.” This attitude of the DCI also explains why the memo-

CIA briefings resumed late in the month, the most significant thing that had changed was that they were no longer given by Hendrickson but by General Smith, accompanied by Davidson. The first session following the election was held on 21 November, this time again on the train as the president-elect traveled from New York to Washington for a reunion dinner of his US Military Academy classmates at the Army-Navy Club. The train stopped at Baltimore to permit Smith and Davidson to board and talk with the president-elect on the remaining leg into Washington.

By coincidence, Davidson, while still working in Army Intelligence, had briefed Eisenhower on a couple of occasions at the Pentagon just after the war. To Davidson's astonishment, when he was escorted into the president-elect's car, Eisenhower immediately brightened as he recognized him and extended a warm greeting. In a jocular exchange, Davidson explained that he had not served in Europe as Eisenhower had, rather he had been fighting "the big war in the Pacific."

Smith cautioned Eisenhower that "you had better watch out, he has been briefing the opposition," referring to Davidson's sessions with Stevenson in Springfield, Illinois. This joking remark caused Eisenhower to turn deadly serious. Davidson was impressed that Eisenhower wanted to hear no jokes about Stevenson and was very positive about the Agency's briefings of the governor. Eisenhower observed that he thought very highly of Stevenson because he had kept the campaign on a high plane and demonstrated mastery of foreign affairs.

The relaxed social exchange with the Eisenhowers (both General and Mrs. Eisenhower were in dressing gowns) continued almost until the train had completed its late-evening run to Washington. The substantive part of the briefing, therefore, continued while they were parked at Union Station. Subjects of particular interest again included events in Korea and the negotiations under way to bring the conflict to an end. But Smith also provided an overview of the general world situation.

Because the DCI himself was now conducting the briefings, and because of the preexisting relationship between Eisenhower and Smith, the session involved substantially more give-and-take than had been

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randums written by Davidson and Hendrickson, even about briefings in which Smith did not participate, were so cryptic.

the case before the election. A more serious analysis of the issues was also to be expected because Eisenhower, like all presidents-elect, realized he would have to grapple with the world's problems within a matter of weeks. Eisenhower asked a number of questions, particularly about the political aspects of the Korean quagmire. He especially wanted to clarify in his own mind what China was up to and to understand better that country's role and motivations in the conflict. Eisenhower asked, for example, "I never did know why we let the Chinese call themselves volunteers?" In reply, Smith explained the nuances of the situation, concluding by saying, "We didn't have to bomb Peking—that's why we acquiesced."

Well after midnight, Smith and Davidson took their leave of the president-elect at Union Station. General and Mrs. Eisenhower spent the night in their Pullman car on the train. Mrs. Eisenhower had been an active participant throughout the discussions. Davidson recalls that "she gave me the impression of being much more political than Ike."

In his memoirs Eisenhower recalled, "In a Detroit speech on October 24, I announced my intention, if elected, to go to Korea before the following January and to determine for myself what the conditions were in that unhappy country." For some days Eisenhower and his closest advisers had been discussing the wisdom of making this dramatic proposal public.<sup>20</sup> Once it was announced, the idea was very well received and, in fact, has been cited by many observers as having clinched the Eisenhower victory 10 days later.

After the election, while preparing for his trip to Korea, Eisenhower telephoned Smith to inform him that he was not comfortable relying exclusively on US Army information regarding what was going on in Korea; he wanted the DCI to come to New York to give him the Agency's independent assessment. The president-elect called at virtually the last moment and emphasized that their visit should be given no publicity.

In keeping with their interpretation of Eisenhower's instructions, Army security officers took Smith and Davidson to the briefing location in New York via a circuitous route. The two were led in the front door of a drugstore and out the back, for example, in a counterintelligence maneuver that served only to enrage the always-impatient

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20. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change*, 72.

Smith. Ironically, they reached Eisenhower's office in the Commodore Hotel for an afternoon appointment that had been wedged into a day filled with a dozen other well-publicized visitors. Smith and Davidson were waiting in an outer office as a luncheon group hosted by Eisenhower broke up. Smith was surprised to see Gen. William Donovan, the founder of the Office of Strategic Services, among those leaving the general's office.

Because the president-elect had requested Smith's frank and personal assessment of the situation in Korea, the two generals were alone for most of the briefing session. Near the end of the session, Davidson was called in to answer two or three factual questions. Eisenhower departed secretly for Korea early the following day, 29 November.

Smith took very seriously his responsibility to provide an independent assessment. He had insisted that his CIA staff derive facts about military developments from the US Army and Navy but jealously guarded his prerogatives as DCI to make assessments and estimates based on those facts. By chance, Smith and Davidson ran into John Foster Dulles in the lobby of the Waldorf Astoria Hotel shortly after they had seen Eisenhower at the Commodore. Dulles elicited confirmation that they had seen Eisenhower and asked what they told him. Smith responded with a curt, "That's between him and me."

The late-November visit to the president-elect's office also created a bit of momentary tension with the Secret Service. Smith was sometimes reluctant to have a protective officer from the Agency's Office of Security accompany him and would override vigorous recommendations to the contrary by CIA's director of security, Sheffield Edwards. In this case, the DCI adamantly opposed having additional people accompany him to New York given the ground rules Eisenhower had set regarding secrecy. Edwards earlier had approached Davidson, insisting that he become weapons-qualified so he could protect the DCI. On the train from Washington to New York, the DCI learned that Davidson was carrying a weapon and challenged, "Edwards got to you, didn't he?" The DCI's reaction was mild, however, compared with that of Secret Service officers when they discovered that Davidson was carrying a weapon during incidental conversation in the president-elect's outer office.

The private meeting between Eisenhower and Smith on 28 November went on for more than an hour and allowed the two to conduct some intelligence business beyond their discussion of Korea. During that session Smith secured Eisenhower's approval of a proposal that CIA should establish a briefing facility in New York City to provide continuous support to Eisenhower and his staff. The facility was subsequently set up, but not as close to Eisenhower's as Smith would have liked. Agency officers recall that Sherman Adams, who was to become Eisenhower's chief of staff, intervened to ensure that the CIA office was "a broom closet some distance from the President's office." Adams obviously did not want Smith to have the same access to the new president that he enjoyed with Truman.

The Agency maintained its office in the Commodore from 28 November through the end of the transition period in January 1953. A CIA briefing officer representing the DCI was present at all times. For most of the period the officer was Ed Beatty, a former newsman who was editor of CIA's *Current Intelligence Bulletin*. Each day a courier from Washington would bring to the New York office the latest current intelligence products for use by the president-elect and his staff. Eisenhower's staff did utilize this facility, and Adams himself came by seeking information on at least one occasion. Eisenhower, however, relied exclusively on the briefings provided by the DCI.

During the transition period in late 1952 the press occasionally wrote of the DCI's "weekly" briefings of the president-elect. But, in fact, the general's schedule did not permit briefings on any regular schedule. His trip to Korea and the Pacific took more than two weeks, with the result that the next CIA briefing did not occur until 19 December. Eisenhower was accompanied at that meeting by Adams and Smith by Deputy Director for Intelligence Robert Amory. Specifically labeled "off the record" on Eisenhower's calendar, it was a session Smith would rather not have attended. He entered Eisenhower's office in high spirits but came out crushed. Sitting in morose silence all the way back to Washington, he finally muttered, "And I thought that it was going to be great." Smith never explained what had happened.

He had offered his resignation in writing to President Truman some six weeks before, obviously hoping for a challenging appointment from his old friend and colleague. It was widely known at the time

that Smith aspired, perhaps unrealistically, to be chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Agency historians have surmised that Eisenhower informed Smith he would not be appointed chairman of the Joint Staff, asking him instead to serve as under secretary of state.

Smith did, in fact, serve in the number-two job at the Department of State during the first year and a half of Eisenhower's first term. But it was no secret that he did not enjoy being the under secretary. He felt uncomfortable with the nonmilitary way the department functioned, he did not like John Foster Dulles, and he was uneasy about Allen Dulles's appointment as DCI.

The last occasion on which Smith is known to have met with Eisenhower while serving as DCI was on 14 January 1953 in New York City. There Smith joined John Foster Dulles and other Eisenhower advisers and appointees for an extended foreign policy conference with the president-elect. Less than a week later, on 20 January, Eisenhower was inaugurated.

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## **The New President as an Intelligence Consumer**

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To no one's surprise, Eisenhower's preferences on how he should receive intelligence support did not change once he became president. CIA histories indicate that the day after his inauguration in 1953 the Agency's director of current intelligence, Huntington Sheldon, sent to James Lay Jr., the executive secretary of the National Security Council, a list of publications the Agency could furnish the White House. It quickly became apparent, however, that the president did not want to receive written intelligence materials on a regular basis and had no interest in frequent briefings by CIA experts. As had been his preference during the transition period, the president relied instead on periodic high-level briefings.

The practice that developed and continued throughout the eight years of the Eisenhower presidency involved the DCI, Allen Dulles, providing weekly briefings to the National Security Council. Eisenhower chaired these NSC meetings, and under his leadership they were more regular and more formal than under any president before

or since. He told President-elect Kennedy in 1960 that the NSC “had become the most important weekly meeting of the government.”<sup>21</sup>

The NSC met every Thursday morning at 9:00 a.m. and with rare exceptions opened its meetings with an intelligence briefing by the DCI. The briefing addressed subjects mutually agreed with Lay of the NSC staff, representing the interests of the president’s special assistant for national security affairs, Gen. Robert Cutler. If the president, Cutler, or Lay did not have specific subjects they wanted addressed, the CIA was free to propose its own agenda, although the Agency’s ideas were always vetted with Lay before the briefing.

Agency veterans remember a wide variety of subjects being addressed at the NSC meetings, reflecting the president’s broad interests. He was intrigued with matters ranging from Italian elections, to the battle of Dien Bien Phu, to periodic updates on Agency covert action operations. Eisenhower would interrupt periodically with questions and, within limits, permit questions from others as well. When his patience ran out, however, he was not at all reluctant to cut off discussion, saying “OK Allen, let’s go ahead.”

According to Gen. Andrew Goodpaster, who served as secretary of the White House Staff, Eisenhower expected Dulles to provide the latest intelligence on the crisis of the moment but, more important, to concentrate primarily on providing the intelligence background to whatever larger or longer term planning issue was on the agenda. Because of this long-term focus, most of the briefing materials used by the DCI were prepared by CIA’s Office of National Estimates. Goodpaster recalls that Eisenhower frequently would ask, “How solid is that information—where does it come from?” Dulles was reluctant to answer “with fourteen people in the room.” Eisenhower, Dulles, and one staff aide (sometimes Goodpaster and sometimes Senior Staff Assistant Gordon Gray) would then hold a smaller, follow-on meeting after the regular NSC to answer the president’s more probing questions.<sup>22</sup>

The briefing process during the 1950s had several important advantages from the Agency’s point of view. Among these was the fact that

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21. Dwight Eisenhower, *Waging Peace* (Doubleday and Co., 1965), 712.

22. Andrew Goodpaster, interview by the author in Washington, DC, 26 September 1993. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Goodpaster’s observations come from this interview.

the DCI was able to provide intelligence on important matters on a predictable schedule in a forum that included not only the president, but also the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the secretaries of state and defense, and other key players in the foreign policy decision making process. The single-most-important advantage of the system, however, was that it was unambiguously obvious each week whether the president was interested in, and well served by, the intelligence he was receiving. With this feedback, CIA was able to be responsive to his needs and those of the NSC. Senior Agency officers believed the system worked well. Sheldon summed it up by saying, "The Director got used to the procedure and was happy with it, and everybody was happy with it; it simply remained that way until the next administration."

The DCI himself provided the vast majority of the briefings of the NSC. It was clear to all involved, however, that Dulles was much more comfortable with political and economic subjects than with scientific and military issues. Quite often the director would permit a specialist to brief on such subjects, always designating personally the individual he wanted to do the job. Herbert Scoville Jr., the assistant director for scientific intelligence, gave many of the briefings on scientific subjects, and the Agency's nuclear specialist, Herbert Miller, distinguished himself with briefings in that specialized field. Amory, the Agency's DDI, from time to time would brief on military matters.

White House records make clear that attendees at the NSC meetings noticed the difference between briefings delivered by the DCI and those delivered by the substantive experts. Gray addressed this subject in a meeting on 11 January 1961 when he discussed transition matters with McGeorge Bundy, representative of President-elect John Kennedy. Responding to questions by Bundy about whether the president should have daily briefings and, if so, who should deliver them, Gray wrote in his memorandum for the record, "I had made a note several months ago to discuss with my successor intelligence briefings in the Council. I believe that these should be crisper and should be conducted by more junior officers with a special briefing competence. . . . I acknowledged to Mr. Bundy that this would cause serious personal problems and I was not sure I would advise him to tackle it. It was simply a question I left with him." In that same conversation, however,

Gray asserted that the practice of having the DCI brief the NSC every week was “a very useful device.”<sup>23</sup>

Goodpaster recalls that Eisenhower “had a lot of respect for Allen Dulles growing out of Dulles’s work during the war. The president thought he was very skilled at top-level intelligence—collecting it and analyzing it.” Eisenhower would read enough of the Intelligence Community’s estimates to get the point and the highlights and, according to Goodpaster, “felt the formal estimates and papers were the genuine view,” meaning they were not politicized.

But there were some problems. Eisenhower had been struck, for example, at how the “bomber gap” of the mid-1950s turned out to be a false alarm. When the Intelligence Community and the US military began writing of the Soviets’ great progress in missile production during the late 1950s, “Eisenhower was more than skeptical; he was unconvinced, challenging repeatedly, ‘what do they base this on?’”

According to Goodpaster, Eisenhower believed there were at least two reasons why the bomber and missile issues turned into serious political problems. One difficulty was that there was a lot of contact between elements of the Intelligence Community, particularly the Air Force, and Capitol Hill, in which Congress “heard this continual drumbeat about how we were falling behind.” The other problem, in Eisenhower’s view, was that “there was a lot of self-interest in the intelligence assessments of the military services—they were out to promote their own programs.”

Throughout his presidency, Eisenhower avoided reading daily intelligence reports from any one agency. In fact, he normally read no daily reports. Instead, Goodpaster, with the help of the president’s son, Lt. Col. John Eisenhower, each morning would review the separate reports from CIA, State, Defense, and the Joint Chiefs. They would meld this material into one early morning oral briefing. In those sessions, Eisenhower occasionally would ask to see a specific raw report or analytic paper, or task additional work.

Agency veterans recall that Sheldon and Deputy Director for Intelligence Loftus Becker in early March 1953 did discuss the idea of producing a brief, all-source, daily current intelligence publication ex-

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23. Gordon Gray, memorandum for the record, 17 January 1961.

clusively for the president. As the Agency came to understand Eisenhower's preferences, however, this idea was never followed up. In any event, no such publication was actually produced until the Kennedy administration. One innovation that was begun in the early Eisenhower years and continued throughout his administration was the practice of cabling a daily intelligence report to the president while he was traveling abroad. That practice has continued to the present.

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## **Briefing Governor Stevenson in 1952**

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During the 1952 presidential campaign, it proved considerably easier to arrange briefings of Governor Adlai Stevenson than it was to arrange the briefings of Eisenhower. For a start, the governor accepted President Truman's invitation to lunch and an initial round of discussions on 19 August at the White House. Thereafter, he was briefed every two to three weeks by the CIA at the Governor's Mansion in Springfield, Illinois. Those sessions took place on 30 August, 15 September, and 1 and 20 October.

In the initial division of labor, it was decided that Davidson would travel to Springfield to brief Stevenson. The plan had been for him to brief both candidates, but as luck would have it they requested their first briefing on the same day. The material Davidson took to Illinois was almost exactly the same as that provided Eisenhower. The exception—a distinction not observed in subsequent years—was that Eisenhower received material that included information derived from communications intelligence. Stevenson lacked experience with this sensitive material and did not receive it.

Stevenson was an even more gracious host and careful reader than Eisenhower. During their Saturday afternoon sessions, he invariably offered his CIA visitor refreshments and had numerous questions and comments about the material he read. It was clear from the outset that Stevenson had the background and the intellect to take full advantage of the intelligence the Agency was providing. Thinking back on the briefings more than four decades later, Davidson still commented with awe, "I was impressed with the questions he asked. He was well ahead of all of us."

Of the many substantive issues that arose during the intelligence briefings in 1952, the single one in which Stevenson was most interested was Iran. Mohammed Mossadeq had become prime minister in April 1951, and shortly thereafter he had secured passage of a law nationalizing the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. In the succeeding months, relations between Iran and the United Kingdom steadily worsened and approached the crisis point during the fall of 1952. Diplomatic relations were severed in October.

The United Kingdom was concerned about oil, prestige, and compensation, and the United States was worried that Mossadeq might be deposed by the Tudeh (Communist) Party. Stevenson, like Eisenhower, wanted to follow the situation very carefully. Fortunately for the Agency, it was not until after the election that serious discussions began between the United States and the United Kingdom about a covert action program to remove Mossadeq. Whether to brief a presidential candidate on a covert action program as important as the one that was implemented in Iran the following year was a question that did not arise.

Supplementing the briefings he received during the 1952 campaign, Stevenson asked a number of questions to which the Agency responded with written memorandums. In one case, for example, DCI Smith personally sent a memorandum to the governor analyzing Josef Stalin's address to the 19th Communist Party Congress, held on 15 October. In addition to a factual account of the points Stalin had made, Smith included an analysis that comes across in retrospect as a policy lecture to the candidate. The memorandum concluded with the observation, "It is extremely unwise to underestimate the importance of any of Stalin's statements, although sometimes it is not as easy as in the present instance to highlight their actual meaning. The significance of the above is unmistakable."<sup>24</sup>

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## **The Challenger Briefed Again in 1956**

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During the 1956 presidential campaign, President Eisenhower continued to receive routine intelligence briefings at NSC meetings just

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24. Walter Bedell Smith, memorandum for Governor Stevenson, 16 October 1952.

as he had for the previous four years. Without hesitation, Eisenhower authorized the resumption of support to Stevenson during the 1956 campaign along the lines of the briefings he and the governor had received four years earlier.

The responsibility for keeping Stevenson informed in 1956 fell primarily to the Agency's deputy director of current intelligence, Knight McMahan. This time the logistics of the briefings were not as simple as they had been in 1952 when the candidate worked out of one location in Springfield. McMahan briefed Stevenson on 10 September at the Biltmore Hotel in New York City, on 17 September and 1 October at the Sheraton Park Hotel in Washington, and on 29 October in Boston. McMahan conducted these briefings alone, except that on 17 September in Washington he was joined by the deputy director of central intelligence, Gen. Charles Cabell.

Like his predecessor four years earlier, McMahan observed, "One could not help being impressed with Stevenson; he was a very informed man, but what he read brought him up to date and included things he didn't know anything about."<sup>25</sup> Much of the information provided Stevenson in 1956 addressed the crisis in Hungary. Beyond that issue, the governor studied very carefully material presented to him on Soviet disarmament policy. He was also interested in developments in India and in the warming relationship between India and China. He had questions on the Sino-Burmese relationship, developments in Malaysia and Singapore, the disputed islands off the China coast, and Russia's threatening activities in the vicinity of Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands.

Stevenson's interests in Hungary and the Asian issues, however, were secondary to his primary concern, which was the developing Suez Crisis, caused by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's refusal to allow Israeli shipping access to the Canal, in violation of longstanding agreements. Agency memorandums for the record show that during the first three briefings Stevenson asked a number of questions about the Suez situation.<sup>26</sup> He cross-examined McMahan closely on such de-

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25. Knight McMahan, interview by the author in Hanover, New Hampshire, 18 April 1993. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to McMahan's briefings of Stevenson come from this interview.

26. McMahan drafted memorandums for the record following his first three sessions with Stevenson, dated 12 September, 18 September, and 2 October 1956. No record is available

tails as the convention of 1888 that governed Canal operations, Israeli shipping, developments in the UN, the attitudes of the nonpermanent members of the Security Council, possible solutions to the controversy, the status of international funding for Nasser's Aswan Dam project, and the failure of Britain's blue-ribbon negotiating mission. As the crisis continued to build, Stevenson probed the legal aspects of Nasser's position and the Egyptian leader's ability to maintain his government against expected economic sanctions. And he was interested in regional aspects of the problem, including tensions between Israel and Jordan and the buildup of British forces on Cyprus.

On 29 October, McMahan was, in his own words, "caught in the worst situation possible for an intelligence briefer: briefing Stevenson in Boston on the day Israel attacked Egypt." McMahan had taken the train from Washington to Boston the previous day while the interagency "Watch Committee" was reviewing newly available intelligence confirming that Israel, with British and French support, was completing its mobilization and would attack Egypt. Because the evidence came from intercepted communications, this sensitive material was not included in the written briefing materials prepared for Stevenson. Instead, McMahan intended to handle this breaking story orally.

To McMahan's chagrin and embarrassment, he had no more than settled into a chair to begin his briefing of Stevenson when one of the governor's aides burst in to inform him that the press was reporting that Israel had attacked. McMahan had not yet said anything. In 1993, McMahan still remembered this encounter clearly, recalling, "Stevenson took the news in stride, surprised that he had heard it first from the media rather than from us. But he reacted with consternation and concern." Stevenson was more gracious than his running mate, Senator Estes Kefauver. According to McMahan, "Kefauver [who was briefed separately] gave me a very hard time—he couldn't believe that the French and the British had shut us out of the planning process."<sup>27</sup>

Looking back on the Agency's exchanges with Stevenson in 1956, it is clear that he asked the right probing questions concerning the Suez Crisis as it unfolded. He wanted to know not only about the situation in Egypt but also about developments in Israel, Jordan, and Cyprus

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of his fourth session, held on 29 October in Boston.

27. Memorandums for the record, dated 1 and 8 October 1956, are available for only two early briefings of Kefauver.

that were key to understanding the intentions of the parties involved. McMahan discussed with Stevenson all aspects of the intelligence reporting but was not at liberty to review with Stevenson the politics of intelligence collection and policy support that had been unfolding as well. Agency officers had noted, for example, that Secretary of State Dulles gave the impression that he did not want to receive detailed information regarding the UK buildup on Cyprus lest the knowledge of the US government, accompanied by its silence, represent approval. Particularly in the early stages of the crisis, there had been a clear assumption by key policymakers that Israel and its backers, knowing of Eisenhower's opposition to a military move, would somehow hold back.

Although the US Intelligence Community was, in fact, not aware of all of the details of the Israeli, French, and British cooperation, it did not report some of the details it did have. The increase in tensions had been well documented in the intelligence reporting but clear warnings of coming hostilities were issued only a week ahead. When the attack occurred, the president and the Democratic candidates were furious with the European allies and less than proud of their own handling of the crisis.

From the Agency's point of view, thanks to the problems with the Suez Crisis, the briefings for Stevenson in 1956 ended on an awkward note. In all other respects, however, the sessions with Stevenson and Kefauver were a great success. Stevenson personally wrote Acting DCI Cabell to thank him for the briefings provided by McMahan, observing that they were "excellent and I found him very well informed."<sup>28</sup>

Agency officers who met with Stevenson during his two campaigns came away deeply impressed with his knowledge of foreign affairs and his interest in and appreciation of the intelligence product. More than that, it had been a great personal pleasure to deal with him. McMahan recalls, "He was a very courteous, polite man. I remember thinking it was a blessing he was not elected, in light of the public and personal attacks to which our presidents are subjected."

28. Adlai Stevenson, letter to C. P. Cabell, 11 September 1956.

