

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Through 10 transitions from 1952 to 2000, the Intelligence Community has provided intelligence support to the presidents-elect. This support, endorsed by each of the sitting presidents, has been designed primarily to acquaint the incoming president with developments abroad that will require his decisions and actions as president. A second goal has been to establish a solid working relationship with each new president and his advisers so the IC could serve him well, once in office.

The IC has been generally, but not uniformly, successful in accomplishing these goals. Overall, it has proved easier to help the new president become well informed than to establish an enduring relationship. Both aims have been met better in recent transitions than during some of the earlier ones. One key variable is that the IC in recent years has made a much more organized and concerted effort to provide intelligence support to the president-elect and the national security team.

The background and attitudes the president-elect brings with him obviously are powerful variables in determining the extent to which the IC's effort will succeed. Ironically, prior familiarity with the Intelligence Community and experience with foreign developments—or lack thereof—do not by themselves predict much of anything. In the period under review, Presidents Reagan, Clinton, and George W. Bush, for example, were by any objective measure the least experienced in foreign affairs at the time of their election, yet by Inauguration Day each had absorbed an immense amount of information. Once in office, their dramatically different operating styles dictated the nature of their equally different relationships with the CIA and the IC.

At the other extreme, Presidents George H. W. Bush and Eisenhower provide clear cases of individuals who had had long experience with intelligence and foreign affairs before their election. Here too, however, their management styles, personal interests, and backgrounds determined their different relationships with IC after inauguration—informal and close in one case, formal and aloof in the other. The Agency had provided good substantive support to each during the transition.

In the three cases where the CIA's relationship with the White House was to prove the least satisfactory—or the most volatile, a different but equally challenging matter—the president either brought a grudge with him or quickly became disillusioned with intelligence. President Nixon felt the CIA had cost him the 1960 election; President Kennedy was immediately undercut and disillusioned by the Bay of Pigs misadventure; and President Johnson was alienated by the Agency's negative assessments on Vietnam. In each of these cases the relationship was not helped by the fact that CIA had not succeeded in providing good intelligence support to, and establishing ties with, any of the three before their inauguration.

The obvious but sometimes elusive key for the IC, and particularly its director, is to grasp each new president's needs and operating style and accommodate them during the transition and beyond. Individual proclivities aside, however, some generalizations can be offered about how the IC can best approach its unique mission of providing substantive support during presidential transitions. Most of the evidence suggests that the Community has learned from its past experiences and built on them.

Patterns of Support

In looking at the intelligence support provided the early postwar presidents before their inauguration, it is necessary to set aside President Truman, who came to office before the creation of the modern IC, and Johnson, whose elevation to the presidency came suddenly amid extraordinary circumstances that one hopes will never be repeated. Concerning the others, it is notable that each of them—Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Nixon—received intelligence briefings both in the preelection period and during the postelection transition. Kennedy and Nixon received few briefings; Eisenhower was given somewhat more, including several presented by the DCI. However, not one of the presidents-elect during the 1950s and 1960s read the Agency's daily publications or met with a CIA officer for daily updates during the transition. Only Kennedy received a briefing on covert activities and sensitive collection programs before being sworn in.

During the first 25 years of its existence, CIA enjoyed no significant success in its efforts to establish a close and supportive relationship with each president. The reverse was true: these relationships went downhill after Truman. He had received intelligence information at the weekly meetings of the National Security Council, read the Agency's daily and weekly intelligence publications, and received in-depth weekly briefings from the DCI. His successor, Eisenhower, was perhaps the best at using the NSC as a vehicle for receiving intelligence, but he did not read the publications regularly and did not routinely see the DCI for separate intelligence briefings. Kennedy, John-

son, and Nixon also received intelligence information at NSC meetings, although they relied less on the formal NSC system. Once in office, these three presidents did read a daily intelligence publication, which took a different form for each. However, no president through the early 1970s read the daily publications with the assistance of a briefer, as has generally been the custom in more recent years.

No DCI during the Agency's early decades was able to replicate on a continuing basis the relationship that Bedell Smith had established with Truman. During the early Johnson years, John McCone attempted to restart regular briefings of the president, but Johnson became impatient and ended them before long. The third DCI to serve under Johnson, Richard Helms, saw that an alternative approach was needed and managed to establish an excellent relationship with the president by providing him intelligence at the famous Tuesday luncheons and via short, highly pertinent papers. But even Helms could not sustain his access or influence with Nixon. During Nixon's years in office, the relationship between the president and the CIA reached the lowest point in the Agency's history.

The presidents who have come into office since the mid-1970s have, during their transitions, received more intelligence information on developments abroad and on the activities of the US Intelligence Community than their predecessors did. Like their predecessors, they all received worldwide overview briefings from the DCI, DNI, or other senior officers. Unlike their predecessors, however, they also read the PDB throughout the transition. With some variations in how it was done, each of them met daily during the transition with an officer of the IC, who provided oral briefings to supplement the PDB. Almost all of this group—Carter, Reagan, George H. W. and George W. Bush—were given in-depth descriptions of covert action and sensitive collection programs during the transition. Clinton did not receive such a briefing; outgoing DCI Robert Gates decided to use his one briefing opportunity with Clinton to concentrate on substantive issues and to leave discussion of sensitive activities until after the inauguration. Ford was aware of such programs from his service as vice president.

Once in office, all recent presidents received intelligence at meetings of the NSC and read the PDB regularly. Distinguishing them from their predecessors, however, was the fact that most recent presidents, with the exception of Reagan, while in office have read the PDB with a briefer in attendance. Usually, a briefer from the IC was involved, although for a portion of Ford's presidency and with Carter the national security advisor was with the president as he read the book and IC officers were not present on a daily basis. For most of the Ford and Clinton presidencies and during both Bush presidencies, IC briefers were

in attendance when the president was in Washington. Briefers also accompanied George W. Bush when he traveled.

The single most critical test of whether the IC is properly supporting the US policymaking process is the effectiveness of the intelligence support provided the president. Overall, the level of that support deteriorated somewhat during the IC's first 25 years but improved and strengthened during the period between the early 1970s and 2008. To a substantial extent, this positive trend resulted from the leadership of one man, George H. W. Bush. Bush ensured that full intelligence support was given to Presidents Ford, Carter, and Reagan, and his own presidency was a high point in terms of the CIA's relationship with the White House. He saw to it that President-elect Clinton and his national security team received extensive intelligence support during the transition and encouraged his son, George W. Bush, to receive the PDB daily. The latter, in 2008, directed that extensive support be provided his successor, Barack Obama.

What the Presidents Recommend

Interviews with four former presidents eliciting their opinions on why the system of intelligence support worked better during some transitions and administrations than others unearthed one immediate, common, and obvious reaction: each president is different. Ford, in particular, stressed that point, asserting that “the backgrounds and circumstances of the various presidents are so different that there can be no one formula for future support. Eisenhower or Ford or even Kennedy were so much more familiar with intelligence than a Clinton or a Reagan.” Ford went on to underscore that “the Intelligence Community has to be prepared to be flexible to accommodate the different experiences.”¹

Carter had some of the most concrete advice on how the CIA ought to go about establishing its relationship with each president-elect. As a start, he urged the Agency to “give a new president-elect a paper on what previous presidents had done regarding intelligence support. Let the next incumbent decide—show them the gamut of material.”²

In discussing how presidents and times change, Carter noted that, if he were in the White House in later years, he would have welcomed computerized intelligence support in the Oval Office. Pleased to hear that the Agency had

¹ Ford interview, 8 September 1993. Subsequent observations by Ford also come from this interview.

² Carter interview, 23 June 1993. Subsequent observations by Carter also come from this interview.

been experimenting for some time with a system for making real-time intelligence available via a computer terminal on the desk of senior consumers, Carter volunteered, "If I was in the White House now I would welcome it. I feel comfortable with computers and would use it, not as a substitute for the other support, the PDB and the briefings, but in addition to it." He explained that when a question arose about developments in a particular country he would "like to have access to something where I could punch in a request for the latest information."

The IC's experience indicates that a critically important variable in establishing a successful relationship is the approach taken by the DNI (formerly DCI). Comments of the presidents who were interviewed reinforced that impression. During every transition, the director has been involved personally in providing at least one, and in some cases many, briefings. In those cases where the relationship was established most effectively, the common factor was that the director succeeded in bringing the institutions of the IC into the process so that intelligence professionals could assist him and carry the process forward after his role diminished or was discontinued. In one form or another, this has been accomplished with each of the presidents elected since the mid-1970s.

When the institutional link between the IC and the president was not properly established, it was usually because the director attempted to handle the relationship singlehandedly. Two cases show that this can happen in quite different ways. DCI Allen Dulles, for example, chose to support the incoming Kennedy administration almost entirely on his own, giving three briefings to Kennedy and involving only one other CIA person. Those briefings reportedly did not impress Kennedy, and the relationship between the two men, complicated immensely by the Bay of Pigs fiasco, unraveled within months.

In the case of Nixon, Helms was involved in one briefing immediately after Nixon's selection as the Republican nominee and in a perfunctory discussion at the White House after his election. Unfortunately, the handoff of responsibility from the DCI to the CIA career officers positioned in New York to provide support did not succeed in its fundamental purpose. Nixon was never seen personally, and he read very little Agency material. Given his deep suspicions of the CIA and Henry Kissinger's determination to monopolize all contact with the new president, it is doubtful that the relationship could have been handled any better. The Agency's inability to establish a satisfactory relationship at the outset continued throughout the Nixon presidency—arguably, to the detriment of both the president and the Agency.

While vigorous and effective action by the head of the IC clearly is a determining factor in establishing the Community's institutional relationship with a

new president, it does not follow that such involvement solidifies the position of the DCI or DNI himself with the new president or administration. Directors who were the most involved in transition support activities included Smith with Eisenhower, Dulles with Kennedy, George H. W. Bush with Carter, and Turner with Reagan. Sadly, each was disappointed with the role he was given, or not given, by the incoming president.

Generally, directors of the IC retained from one administration to the next are not destined to succeed. All in this category were dismissed or resigned prior to the end of the term of the president who kept them on. Dulles, for example, was very successful serving under Eisenhower but lasted only a few months with Kennedy. McCone served successfully under Kennedy but quickly wore out his welcome with Johnson. Helms was among the Agency's most successful directors during the Johnson years but was later dismissed by Nixon. Colby served in particularly difficult circumstances under Nixon, only to be dismissed later by Ford.

The two most recent cases in which a director was held over, those of William Webster and George Tenet, illustrate a larger point as well. Webster was appointed by Reagan and served successfully in a rather formal relationship with him. Webster had a fairly extended period in the George H. W. Bush administration as well, faring better than any predecessor to that time who had been extended from one administration to the next. On the other hand, he never established with Bush and his key White House aides the close relationship that his successor, Robert Gates, enjoyed as a result of his prior service as deputy assistant to the president for national security affairs. Tenet, likewise, had an excellent relationship with President Clinton, who appointed him as his third DCI, and, initially, with George W. Bush and his staff as well. Politically charged intelligence issues soured the relationship, however, and Tenet resigned in frustration near the end of Bush's first term.

It is often suggested that for each of the directors who was obliged to resign there was a single explanatory cause. For Dulles, the argument goes, it was the Bay of Pigs; for McCone, the Agency's independent analysis of the war in Vietnam; for Helms, the failure to cooperate on the Watergate coverup; for Colby, his failure to alert the White House in advance of the public exposures of the Agency's misdeeds, and so on. A more careful analysis, however, indicates that every director encountered serious difficulties of one kind or another, including some that were an embarrassment to the White House. Most of these problems, however, did not lead to the DCI's dismissal.

Each of the former presidents interviewed underscored that it is of the highest importance for a president to have an intelligence director in whom he has confidence and with whom he feels comfortable. Opinions were mixed regard-

ing the best background or qualifications, whether a nominee should be an intelligence professional or an outsider, and concerning the importance of the candidate's political background. Recalling his nomination of Gates, George H. W. Bush explained, "It helped that Gates had been a professional, but I picked him because he did such a good job sitting right here [on the deck of the Bush home at Kennebunkport, while serving as deputy national security advisor]. Actually, I had known Bill Webster better over the years socially, from tennis and so on, than I had Bob Gates."³ With the unique perspective that came from having been CIA director as well as president, Bush refused to be pinned down on the issues of whether a CIA professional should hold the director's job and whether there should be a turnover of directors at the end of each administration. Rather, he suggested, "There should be no set rule. It would be good for the Agency to know that one of their own could be [director]. We should never feel like the torch has to pass [at the end of an administration]."

Like Bush, Ford had no strong feelings on the question of whether a director should continue in office from one administration to the next. He pointed out that he "had inherited one and appointed one. You need the right person that you are comfortable with. I worked well with both Colby and [George H. W.] Bush." Ford underscored repeatedly that he had the highest confidence in Colby's handling of the Agency's intelligence collection and analytic activities, but he concluded midway through his term that he simply had to appoint a different director to defuse tensions with Congress over the CIA's past activities. Ford was most charitable in his characterizations of Colby, euphemistically referring to his "resignation" and noting, "I offered him the job of ambassador to Norway, but he declined."

All of the former presidents interviewed, with the exception of Reagan, expressed the feeling that the individual selected to run the IC should be apolitical. Carter, for example, volunteered that, although Bush had proved to be a very capable director of the Agency, his selection had been ill advised because of his role as chairman of the Republican Party—"he was too political." Without, ironically, discussing his own initial choice of Kennedy political adviser Theodore Sorensen to serve as DCI, Carter stressed that the man who did serve as CIA director in his administration, Stansfield Turner, had been a career military officer without any political ties who was also experienced in using intelligence.

More than one of those interviewed was critical of, and used as an example, the selection of William Casey as CIA director. Bush, who like Helms was a forceful advocate of the need to keep intelligence and policy separate, volun-

³ George H. W. Bush interview, 6 May 1993. Subsequent observations by Bush also come from this interview.

teered, “Casey was an inappropriate choice. We would be having a cabinet discussion of agriculture and there would be Casey. That shouldn’t be—the DCI should not enter into policy discussions.”

Kissinger wrote that Nixon also believed that the job of CIA director should not be a political plum and that this led him to retain Helms rather than appoint a new director. Nixon’s decision was made against a backdrop in which his two predecessors, Johnson and Kennedy, had retained a CIA director from the previous administration. Kissinger records Nixon retained Helms despite Nixon’s reservations about CIA as an institution and his lack of comfort with Helms personally. Nixon’s discomfort allegedly derived in part from the fact that Helms moved in Ivy League and Georgetown social circles.⁴

On 15 November 1968, Nixon offered Helms the job of CIA director apparently in large part because outgoing President Johnson had twice recommended him to Nixon. The most recent occasion on which Johnson had commended Helms had been four days earlier, on 11 November, when Johnson, Nixon, Helms, and others had met in Washington at the White House.

The inescapable lesson from the history of the IC—albeit a lesson that neither presidents, DCIs, or DNIs are eager to draw explicitly—is that it works better when a new president appoints his own director. In the intelligence business innumerable delicate actions are undertaken that have the potential to embarrass the US government and the president personally if they are mishandled or if misfortune strikes. In these circumstances the president must be comfortable with his director, trust him implicitly, be associated with him politically, and, above all, give him routine access.

The alternative thesis argues that some things are more important than a close relationship with the president. According to this view, appointing a career intelligence officer as director and routinely carrying over a DCI or DNI from one administration to the next is the best way to protect the IC’s nonpolitical status and operational and analytical integrity. Appealing as this notion is to professionals, history does not treat it kindly. The incidence of occasions in which the IC has become embroiled in politically stupid or even illegal actions does not correlate with whether its leader was a political appointee or an intelligence professional.

The relationship of trust between president and director occasionally derives from close personal or professional associations in the past, witness the cases of Ford and Bush, Reagan and Casey, and Bush and Gates. Alternatively, there have been several cases where the president did not personally know well the individual he appointed as DCI, but was willing to accept the assurances of

⁴ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1979), 11, 36.

others that the nominee would serve with distinction. Such cases included Kennedy and McCone, Johnson and Helms, Carter and Turner, Clinton and Woolsey, and Bush and Tenet. Some of the cases where there had been no close past association worked well, but several did not.

Keeping Out of Politics

Perhaps the most challenging of the political issues with which the IC must grapple in establishing and sustaining its relationship with a new administration is how to support the president without being drawn into policymaking. It frequently takes some time for a new administration, and for a new director, to understand that the IC's proper, limited role is to provide policymakers relevant and timely raw intelligence and considered, objective analysis, including analyses of the probable ramifications of different US courses of action. Experience has shown that the IC should not take the additional step and become involved in recommending policy.

Not infrequently, IC directors during transition periods have been offered tempting opportunities to go beyond the bounds of proper intelligence support into policy deliberations. DCI Smith reportedly was highly alert to these potential pitfalls and held to a "strict constructionist" view of his responsibilities. When Eisenhower, not wanting to rely solely on the US Army's analysis of how the war in Korea was going, called for a CIA briefing that virtually invited a different interpretation and policy involvement, Smith—an experienced general officer and once Eisenhower's chief of staff—was very careful to stick to the facts and make no recommendations.

The line between intelligence and policy was not respected so carefully by those providing support to the two following presidents. The written record leaves little doubt that IC analysts' independent assessment of developments in Castro's Cuba was not solicited by or offered to Kennedy when he began his deliberations leading up to the Bay of Pigs operation. Not even the informal assessments of the working-level operations officers were included in the presentations given the new president and his team. CIA's senior managers, including Allen Dulles and Deputy Director for Plans (Operations) Richard Bissell, perceived an obligation to devise and execute a program that would "do something" about Castro. Some consciously proceeded against their better judgment of the probable outcome but, ironically, did not want to let down either Eisenhower, who was pressing for action, or Kennedy, who had committed himself to their program.

Johnson presented a temptation of a different sort to the DCI he retained from the Kennedy period. The president found that John McCone would give

him independent assessments of the course of the war in Vietnam. McCone's candor and outspokenness led Johnson to solicit from him advice on what should be done regarding the conflict and concerning the assignments of diplomatic personnel—matters that were not properly part of McCone's responsibilities. Flattered by the new president, McCone offered advice going beyond his brief in a manner that soon put him at odds with his counterparts in other government departments and, before many months had passed, with the president himself.

The lesson that Dulles and McCone had been burned by their involvement in policymaking was not lost on Helms, who served as DCI for the bulk of the Johnson and Nixon presidencies. More than any previous director, Helms was careful to limit his role to providing intelligence while staying out of policy discussions. He also recognized and stressed the need to get intelligence facts and analysis to the president at a length and in a form that was digestible.

Kissinger has written perceptively of the challenge an intelligence director faces in walking the fine line between offering intelligence support and making policy recommendations. Probably more than any other national security advisor, he was sensitive to the reality that an assessment of the probable implications of any US action can come across implicitly or explicitly, intended or not, as a policy recommendation. He wrote in *White House Years*, "It is to the Director that the assistant first turns to learn the facts in a crisis and for analysis of events, and since decisions turn on the perception of the consequences of actions the CIA assessment can almost amount to a policy recommendation." Of Helms, he said, "Disciplined, meticulously fair and discreet, Helms performed his duties with a total objectivity essential to an effective intelligence service. I never knew him to misuse his intelligence or his power. He never forgot that his integrity guaranteed his effectiveness, that his best weapon with presidents was a reputation for reliability.... The CIA input was an important element of every policy deliberation."⁵

The Arrangements Make a Difference

Through the Bush transition in 2000, CIA alone handled the briefings of presidents-elect. The Agency made efforts to include analysis from the other agencies, but success was limited and uneven, dependent wholly on the determination of the senior briefer on the scene. That briefer always received unquestioning support from CIA but there was in place no institutional supporting framework to introduce information from the Community into the mix.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 37, 487.

From the earliest years, comments by the presidents-elect or their senior staffs revealed that they were aware of this problem. Eisenhower, for example, lamented that he was not receiving regularly both Army operational assessments and CIA information on the situation in Korea. Kissinger, speaking for Nixon, at one point insisted—without result—that information and/or personnel from the State Department accompany the Agency's daily support. In 1992 one of the first questions the Clinton staff raised with the Agency's representative in Little Rock related to how the various agencies of the Intelligence Community worked together and whether the CIA officer would be including their information in his briefings.

The intelligence units of the policy agencies, notably the Departments of State and Defense, during transitions historically had concentrated on helping their departments prepare for their incoming secretaries, rather than focusing specifically on the new president. It was not until the ODNI assumed responsibility for transition briefings in 2008 that the several agencies making up the IC became meaningfully involved in the process.

Concerning more basic logistics arrangements, CIA's experience over the years had indicated that the system works best if the briefing support team was in place in the city where the president-elect had set up his offices. The CIA attempted to do this from the outset but had mixed results. During the Eisenhower transition, for example, the support operation established in New York City was never utilized by Eisenhower himself and provided relatively minimal support to his senior assistants, notably Sherman Adams. Because Kennedy spent much of the transition period in Washington, albeit with extended stays at Hyannisport and Palm Beach, there was no separate team set up specifically to support him. Provision of daily intelligence had been approved by outgoing President Eisenhower, but a satisfactory system to provide continuous support was never established with the incoming Democratic president. This clearly was a missed opportunity to establish a good relationship with Kennedy and his senior assistants, many of whom were unfamiliar with and suspicious of the Agency.

In the cases of Nixon and Carter, support operations were established that succeeded in making intelligence available on a daily basis. Retrospectively, however, it may be that the officers who supported the Nixon transition in New York were too junior to gain the necessary entree. Nixon never received the Agency's representatives, although Kissinger did so frequently. Carter personally received an Agency officer each day, but he was more a courier than a substantive expert.

The system has worked best when the CIA and the IC have made available to the incoming president—on a continuous basis and on the scene—an expe-

rienced senior officer who can engage in some substantive give and take on the spot. The two contrasting cases where a vice president moved up to the presidency in midterm provide an instructive example of the benefits of having established a familiar relationship for the discussion of substantive issues one-on-one. Ford had been receiving daily briefings from a senior member of the PDB staff for many months before his accession to the presidency. This compared favorably to the difficult situation where Johnson, as vice president, had been specifically denied the president's daily intelligence publication and had received no regular briefings. He had been sent a copy of a less sensitive daily intelligence publication, to which he paid little attention.

In recent transitions—for Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Clinton, and George W. Bush—the IC dispatched more senior officers who were experienced in supporting policymakers and were familiar with the full range of substantive issues about which the president-elect would be reading each day. In fact, in a great many of the daily sessions, the president-elect would simply read through the PDB with few if any questions. On other occasions, however, he would ask follow-up questions about subjects treated in the written material or, less frequently, ask for an update on issues not discussed at all in the publication. In each of these cases it proved valuable to have senior officers in place who could elaborate on the material presented. Occasionally they explained IC collection programs or the way the material related to covert action efforts under way.

Fortunately, modern technology has provided a solution to what had been a problem in several early transitions: communications links with bandwidth sufficient to transmit securely the most timely and relevant intelligence information to the president-elect wherever he may be. Now it takes only the installation of a portable computer and printer in a hotel room to provide printed material on-site that is literally indistinguishable from that which the president receives in Washington. This communications capability permits the support team to draw on the full resources of the IC in Washington and around the world to provide text, high-quality imagery, and graphics.

By the time anyone reaches the presidency, that individual has long-established work habits that are not going to change. The military approach of Eisenhower or the highly disciplined styles of Truman, Carter, or George W. Bush, for example, were vastly different from the more relaxed and less predictable approaches of Kennedy, Reagan, or Clinton. The job of the intelligence director and his representative is to accommodate each person's style. Flexibility is critical on matters ranging from the scheduling of appointments to the presentation of the substantive material, where the length, level of generality, and subject matter must be within parameters suitable to the incoming president.

The IC must provide support not only to the incoming president but also to his senior assistants. This does not mean subordinates should be shown the most sensitive material prior to inauguration, a practice successive outgoing presidents have made clear is not acceptable. Nevertheless, designees to cabinet posts and other close aides to the president-elect have intelligence needs and can be shown a full array of less sensitive materials. The IC in the past has sometimes served these individuals well and on other occasions has ignored them. Meeting this responsibility in a prompt and well-organized way helps establish a better relationship with an incoming administration. Other things being equal, it is obviously easier to accomplish this if the outgoing president and national security advisor are sympathetic to the need for a smooth transition, as George W. Bush and Steve Hadley were in 2008. It is easier still if the transition is between two presidents of the same political party.

In the preelection period, it has proved feasible and desirable to provide intelligence briefings to candidates from both or even multiple political parties. For the most part, this has been done; it certainly should be continued. For various reasons intelligence support was not provided to a few major-party candidates over the years. For example, Barry Goldwater declined the Agency's offer. George McGovern and Walter Mondale displayed only limited interest and when scheduling difficulties arose, the prospective CIA briefings fell by the boards. Robert Dole apparently was not offered a briefing. All of those who have been elected to date have accepted and benefited from the proffered intelligence support.

Material That Was Welcome

Whether in the preelection period, during the transition, or once in office, presidents almost without exception have concentrated on the current intelligence that related directly to the policy issues with which they were grappling. Similarly, they were also the most interested in oral briefings that related to those same issues. Written items or briefings were welcome if they were concise, focused, and accompanied by graphics or imagery that helped get the point across quickly. The best received briefings were those delivered by experts who were obviously masters of their subject—in recent years, typically the NIOs. Worldwide overviews provided by intelligence directors were politely received but on a few occasions were judged to have repeated material available in the newspapers.

The substantive topics addressed in the material presented to a given president-elect are obviously a function of contemporaneous international developments and, therefore, vary significantly with each incoming administration. There have been some nearly constant themes, however, such as develop-

ments in Russia, China, North Korea, and the Middle East that are subjects the IC knows it will be called on to address during each transition. North Korea's Kim Il-song and his family were probably the only foreign leaders whose activities were the subject of intelligence reporting over the whole period under review.

IC officers are well advised to be acutely conscious of the issues debated in the election campaign. Presidents-elect typically are well informed on such high-profile issues; in those areas they require only continuing updates and help in sorting the vital nuggets from the torrent of information they will receive. The IC's greater challenge with a new president is to provide useful intelligence on important issues that have not been highlighted in the campaign. On a continuing basis, roughly 60 percent of the items covered in the PDB are not addressed in the newspapers. This body of information, in particular, is likely to be unfamiliar to a prospective president.

With virtually every new president, the IC has experimented with offerings of supplementary written intelligence to elaborate issues raised in the PDB. Only two presidents-elect have clearly welcomed such supplementary material and read it thoroughly when it was offered. Those two were otherwise quite different individuals: Eisenhower and Reagan. Other presidents who were presented such background material, especially Nixon and Clinton, showed no sustained interest. Supplementary material should be made available to, but not pushed on, a president-elect who is already overburdened with reading material and short on time.

The staff aides who support the president on security issues showed a deeper interest in the extra information. The best known of them, Kissinger, once told Helms, "You know the most useful document you fellows turn out is that *Weekly Summary* that you put together. That's much more valuable than the daily stuff. That I can sit down on a Saturday morning and read and bring myself up to date and I think it's a good publication."⁶

As a result of the presidents' preference for material that can be digested quickly, it has always been a challenge to interest them in longer analytic studies and the Intelligence Community's formal national intelligence estimates. As a rule, presidents have read carefully only those studies or estimates specifically urged on them by the DCI or the national security advisor because they related directly to a policy matter of high, ongoing interest. Otherwise, the IC has found the most success when it has gisted the findings of longer papers and integrated a summary into the PDB. Indeed, the Agency has been told by national security advisors that the PDB was the only publication on

⁶ Helms interview, 21 April 1982.

any subject that they could be absolutely confident their principal would read on any given day.

From the IC's perspective, there are clear advantages to having a new president come into office well informed not only about developments abroad but also about covert action and sensitive collection programs. Ford, Carter, Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush all were well briefed on such activities. Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Clinton entered office with limited familiarity with the Agency's sensitive activities. Two others, Johnson and Nixon, had no up-to-date knowledge of those programs when they took office.

Familiarity with sensitive programs does not necessarily result in support for them. Carter, for example, ordered a halt to some of the Agency's sensitive undertakings within weeks of taking office. A president's early awareness of such programs is, nevertheless, essential for him, the country, the IC, and the CIA. He needs to be in an informed position to defend and support these often politically charged activities or to change them if necessary to ensure their consistency with his overall foreign policy objectives. If the Bay of Pigs fiasco taught nothing else, it was that administration policy should drive covert action; covert action projects should not drive policy or color the intelligence provided.

There has been an almost unbroken pattern over the years in expanding the support provided a new president and his team in areas beyond daily intelligence. Beginning with the Nixon transition, his key staff aides—Kissinger and Eagleburger—were provided significant quantities of material for their own policy-planning purposes. For Clinton, the Agency provided background material for use by the president- and vice president-elect and their senior staffs for telephone calls with foreign leaders, speeches and press conferences, and internal policy deliberations. The key to success in these efforts, as with intelligence generally, is to stick to the facts. The new team must know that the IC is neither defending policy for the old administration nor creating it for the new one.

There has never been any doubt that the PDB, right up to Inauguration Day, is designed to address the interests of the president in office. Realistically, however, as the time for the turnover draws closer and as the incoming president is reading the PDB with care, the inevitable and probably appropriate tendency is to select and address substantive items in a way that meets the needs of the new president as well as the outgoing one. Fortunately, in practice this usually amounts only to adjustments on the margin.

The IC's experience in providing intelligence to 11 presidents—through 10 quite different transitions—has led many of its officers to appreciate the wisdom President Truman displayed in a speech he gave on 21 November 1953:

The office of President of the United States now carries power beyond parallel in history. That is the principal reason that I am so anxious that it be a continuing proposition and the successor to me and the successor to him can carry on as if no election had ever taken place.... That is why I am giving this president—this new president—more information than any other president had when he went into office.⁷

President Truman was the first and the most senior of the intelligence briefers to be involved in the more than half-century series of briefings from 1952 to 2004. Truman personally had provided an intelligence overview to General Eisenhower on 18 November 1952. In his speech at CIA three days later he said, “It was my privilege...to brief the man who is going to take over the office of President of the United States.” It has been the IC’s privilege as well, many times.



⁷ *New York Times*, 22 November 1952, 1, 10.