Blinking Red: Crisis and Compromise in American Intelligence after 9/11

Michael Allen (Potomac Books, 2013), 284 pp.

Reviewed by Roger George

The far reaching intelligence reforms of 2004—formally called the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act (IRTPA)—are now a decade old, and a number of participants have recounted their own views of those reforms. Indeed, in 2012 *Studies* published an insightful personal account by Philip Zelikow, who served as executive secretary of the 9/11 Commission and had worked on earlier intelligence reform projects.[1] The Zelikow account offered an explanation of how various institutional and organizational models were considered to deal with the twin failures of 9/11 and the 2002 Iraq/WMD estimate, as well as marry together traditional foreign intelligence processes with new homeland security concerns.

Blinking Red takes a different approach. Michael Allen's very readable legislative history of the 2004 intelligence reforms focuses more on the personalities than the organizations per se. The title, taken from former Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet's reputed warning prior to the 2001 attacks, certainly captures the urgency that the process took on. However, later in the book Allen quotes another senior official that the "fix was in," which more accurately describes the actual course of events. In sum, it was the personalities and the legislative process, more than simply the organizational tussles, that explain why those reforms proved to be less than many expected.

Allen, was in a position to watch the legislative struggle unfold. Moreover, he participated in the Bush administration's internal debates on how much to embrace reforms it had initially hoped to avoid. In 2004 he served as the legislative affairs officer in the Homeland Security Council when the White House was formulating its response to the 9/11 Commission recommendations.

This put Allen in the Deputies Committee meetings as cabinet members argued over the extent of the new authorities of the Director of National Intelligence and the role of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC). Likewise, he represented the White House in many high-level congressional negotiating sessions, where the legislation was finalized. This eyewitness account also benefited from extensive interviews of the players, complete with citations—a practice that separates this work from many other journalistic and often unsourced narratives of the Bush years. Insights drawn from many senior officials starting with President Bush, Vice President Cheney, and DCI Tenet and including key congressional and intelligence officials give the reader a 360-degree view of the executive-legislative process.

For CIA and other IC officers who lived through this critical period, Allen's narrative explains why the result seemed predetermined to be less than many reformers had hoped. That explanation is told through chapters that follow the legislative process chronologically; however, he makes it far more personal and real by seeing the process through the eyes of the many executive and legislative branch players, starting with the president, his key cabinet and intelligence advisers, principal House anti-reformists like Duncan Hunter (R–CA) and James Sensenbrenner (R–WI), and Senate reformers like Susan Collins (R–ME) and Joseph Lieberman (I—CO). Added to this mix of

[1] Philip Zelikow, "A Personal Perspective: The Evolution of Intelligence Reform, 2002–2004," *Studies in Intelligence* 56, No. 3 (September 2012): 1-20. The article provides readers with a quick summary of prior reform efforts as a backdrop to the author's own views on the various options which were considered and ultimately compromised to gain legislative approval.

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in this article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

players were other key figures, 9/11 Commission cochairs Thomas Kean and Lee Hamilton, along with Zelikow. Indeed, the narrative is really a story of the clash of personal perspectives and less strictly an executive-legislative struggle.

Allen describes a number of informal opposing alliances that bridged the usual executive-legislative divide. For example, Duncan Hunter, Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, was deeply committed to preserving the Secretary of Defense's budgetary control over defense intelligence agencies at the expense of a new DNI's authorities. Knowing that his House members would be more persuaded by a Pentagon appeal, he maneuvered Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Richard Myers into providing a letter backing his views; it came with the tacit support of Rumsfeld, who felt similarly but would not publicly disagree with the White House. In fact, Allen describes three factions within the executive branch – a White House interested in a strong DNI, a CIA interested in strengthening the DCI's authorities and a Cheney-Rumsfeld view that there should be no DNI or NCTC. What this highlighted was the absence of executive branch consensus, which allowed the arguments to be fought out on Capitol Hill.

The battles on Capitol Hill are also well described, highlighting the roles of reformers like Collins and Lieberman, whom Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist selected principally because they were liked by the 9/11 families, supported intelligence reform, and worked well together.[2] However, as Allen recounts, this decision was mocked since their newly formed Homeland Security Committee was considered full of "novices" on intelligence matters and would have to protect its new turf from the powerful Armed Services and Intelligence Committees, not to mention the strong opposition to reform among the key House committee chairmen.

From the beginning, the reform process seemed destined to fall short, as so many previous attempts since the creation of CIA in 1947. Allen describes how a perfect storm of the 9/11 attacks' audaciousness, lobbying by the 9/11 Commission and victims' families, and an approaching presidential election all conspired to force the Bush administration to accept potentially unworkable reforms. The White House and the Intelligence Community would have preferred making some practical changes via executive orders mandating better information-sharing or prioritization of counterterrorism operations, for example. Similarly, senior intelligence advisers at the time would have been content with strengthening the DCI's budgetary role rather than creating a new bureaucracy.

But the "fix was in," in the sense that the 9/11 Commission and the victims' families wished to punish the CIA for a perceived intelligence failure. Decoupling a new DNI from the CIA would make the CIA less "central," but it would also deprive the new DNI of the power that DCIs before him derived from leadership of a major IC component, the CIA. Without it, the DNI has less authority over the sprawling community.

Intelligence professionals like DDCI John McLaughlin and Director of NSA Michael Hayden believed at the time that a DCI with a bit more authority could have handled the job better than an untried DNI. Seeing the process unfold, McLaughlin and Hayden, joined by then National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency Director James Clapper, believed that a DNI had to have more budgetary authority to compensate for the lack of a CIA leadership role. One of the most revealing exchanges described in the book took place when Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld called in Hayden and Clapper and over lunch berated them for holding a position that was diametrically opposed to his view and his department's interests.

Allen presents no recommendations or explicit lessons learned. He appears to lean toward the conclusion that the legislators did not go far enough in providing the DNI more of the features of a Department of Intelligence or the proximity and power of being located in the White House, either of which might have advanced real reforms. The 2004 IRTPA now has been operating for nearly a decade under four DNIs who, with varying intelligence backgrounds and connections to their presidents, have performed unevenly. Allen does not comment explicitly on current DNI James Clapper's stewardship, other than to say that five decades in the profession, probably

[2] The Zelikow account, in contrast, would seem to imply that the Homeland Security Committee was seen as the most appropriate as reforms needed to integrate new domestic and homeland security considerations as well as traditional military and foreign intelligence responsibilities.

makes him the most fully qualified DNI one could expect to have.

Nonetheless, this does raise questions for the future. First, the two wars that partly shaped the winning arguments against giving the DNI more authority over defense intelligence budgets, are now ending, so should there be a rebalancing of IC priorities away from military matters? Second, the era of easy money is over and reductions in intelligence budgets have begun. This may well confront the DNI with major budgetary battles within the IC. However, given his limited authorities, can a DNI gain control over defense intelligence dollars to reset priorities, or will DoD continue to dominate the budget process? Finally, has the effectiveness of the DNI already reached its zenith with the tenure of someone like Clapper, whose experience and good relations with IC leaders and secretaries of defense have made his office function as well as it can? At a minimum, the next DNI's job is likely to be far harder unless some additional reforms are considered, at which time those considering them would be well advised to review Allen's comprehensive history.

❖ ❖ ❖