

## Former CIA Officers Writings about Intelligence, Policy, and Politics, 2016–17

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**Former CIA officers have gradually emerged as voices to be heard, often offering timely insights and opinions on the business of intelligence, current foreign policy challenges, and even contentious political issues.**

*Editor's note: This article is an adaptation of a presentation given to the Annual Conference of the International Studies Association in April 2018.*

In recent years, a growing number of former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officers have joined in the public discourse on national and international developments that usually appears in popular media as opinion or commentary. While political pundits, so-called expert analysts, academic scholars, journalists, and other former government officials had taken up most of such space in media outlets, former CIA officers have nevertheless gradually emerged as voices to be heard, often offering timely insights and opinions on the business of intelligence, current foreign policy challenges, and even contentious political issues.

Given this trend, it is fair to ask: what impact have these officers had on the public's understanding of the role of intelligence in government and to what extent have they helped shape the thinking of those who have more than a passing interest in national security interests? In our current politically polarized environment, it is also fitting to ask: what is the appropriate role for former CIA officers in the ongoing public discussions on national security and political issues?

The intent of this article is to review such work published by former officers during the 2016–17 period in order to form the basis for a conversation around the above questions, even if they are not fully answered here.

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### Scope

#### *Literature Addressed*

Covered in this review will be the writings of 90 former CIA officers. It will focus only on published work in the form of op-ed articles, short essays, and question-and-answer pieces appearing in print sources or online. These writings are timely, relevant, and, easily accessible to the public. They give former officers the opportunity to openly enter the ongoing discussion and the potential to influence the thinking of many readers.

Overall, this review encompassed nearly 500 articles from 40 different media outlets, 35 of which were online sites (see table on next page). Outlets include sites that typically cover national security issues—e.g., NYTimes.com, WashingtonPost.com, foreignpolicy.com, politico.com, and nationalinterest.com. Others—e.g., businessinsider.com, Ozy.com, and Vox.com—are less well known as national security-related platforms, although intelligence issues have been covered.

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Not addressed are books or peer-reviewed journal articles, which have already drawn sufficient attention.<sup>1</sup> Also beyond the scope of this study were television appearances, personal blogs, and Twitter postings.

### **The Contributors**

The group of 90 former officers who have published in the outlets I researched include professionals from all the major intelligence disciplines. They have ranged from the recently retired to those who have been out of government for some time. Among them are former directors and deputy directors of CIA, former directorate heads, senior and mid-level clandestine service officers and intelligence analysts, and attorneys. Some of the formers have served in other Intelligence Community agencies or other federal government organizations.

I should, however, note that while I tried to be as comprehensive as possible, I cannot claim to have uncovered every op-ed or essay penned by a former CIA officer, but I am confident I have reviewed a substantial and representative selection.

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### **An Overview**

The recent writings of former CIA officers build upon an extensive body of literature. Beginning with the publication of former Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Allen Dulles's book *The Craft of Intelligence* (Harper & Row, 1963), formers joined journalists, historians, critics, and other writers in beginning to build a vast library on the intelligence profession, covering all aspects of intelligence, from collection, analysis, covert action, science and technology, espionage, and counterintelligence to support to policymakers, organi-

zation and structure, and leadership and management. Some books have taken the form of personal memoirs. Some offer specific critiques of CIA's missions and activities. Most cover important periods and episodes of agency history and, to the extent that can be revealed in an unclassified book, some have scrutinized the tradecraft behind intelligence practices, evidenced by the proliferation of "setting the record straight" books by CIA formers that has appeared since 11 September 2001.

Professional journals have also provided outlets for formers to share their knowledge, critiques, and recommendations. *Studies in Intelligence*, *Intelligence and National Security*, and *The International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* are all examples of scholarly, peer-reviewed journals that reflect the growth of the study of intelligence into a respected field of scholarly research and writing. The Association of Former Intelligence Officers (AFIO), an educational association that supports and conducts public programs focusing on the role and importance of US intelligence for national security, publishes *The Intelligencer*, another journal whose major contributors often are former intelligence officers from across the Intelligence Community.

### **Motivations**

Formers officers have gone on the record for various reasons. Many have found that, despite the available body of literature on intelligence, the public and even some government officials do not fully understand the role of the Intelligence Community in the United States. Some have been concerned about specific aspects of the intelligence profession.

### **Sources Examined**

#### **Print**

Foreign Affairs  
The New York Times  
The Washington Post  
The Washington Times  
The Wall Street Journal

#### **Online**

Baltimore Sun  
Business Insider  
CNN  
Counterpunch  
Christian Science Monitor  
Dallas News  
First Look Media  
Foreign Affairs  
Foreign Policy  
Fortune  
Fox Business  
Free Beacon  
Global Brief  
Government Executive  
History  
Just Security  
Los Angeles Times  
Lawfare  
Miami Herald  
National Interest  
National Review  
Newsweek  
New York Times  
NPR  
Overt Action  
OZY  
Politico  
Politique Etrangere  
Reuters  
The American Conservative  
The Cipher Brief  
The Daily Beast  
The Hill  
Truthdig  
USA Today  
VOA News  
VOX  
Wall Street Journal  
Washington Post  
Washington Times

For some, setting the record straight is the goal, and for these, writing can be a very personal matter. For example, in the aftermath of a wave of criticism over CIA's ren-

dition, detention, and interrogation program, and the passionate objection on the part of many inside and outside government to the CIA's interrogation techniques, former Deputy Director for Operations Jose Rodriguez published his effort to set the record straight in *Hard Measures*, which began, "What follows is the story of how my fellow colleagues and I came to take those hard measures and why we are certain that our actions saved lives."<sup>2</sup>

Formers have also offered public accounts, not to defend CIA's actions but to question its mission and conduct. Victor Marchetti is an early example from this group. In the early 1970s, he saw reform as necessary, but he doubted that Congress, the president, or CIA would move to institute it. For some formers, a sense of duty and commitment to be as transparent as possible moves them to write. As former DCI George Tenet put it in his 2007 memoir,

*I have come to believe that I have an obligation to share some of the things I learned during my years at the helm of American Intelligence.*<sup>3</sup>

Behind this feeling of obligation is a sense of pride in the work and contributions of the intelligence professional and the need to protect CIA's reputation and work. The vast majority of intelligence professionals, however, have chosen not to go on the record. CIA's culture, based upon a code of secrecy, has kept many from writing or speaking of their work or that of their colleagues.

But intelligence professionals during 2016 and 2017 seemed to question whether strict adherence to this code was still appropriate, given

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their perceptions that the public is poorly informed about the profession and its place in US society. Also contributing to the questioning has been the felt need to respond to outrageous claims and lies related to CIA, its workforce, and the profession of intelligence.

In choosing to write or speak out, formers have had to weigh the conflicting forces that come with having served as a professional for a secret intelligence organization; their discernment process involves more than simply protecting classified information as called for in the secrecy agreements they all sign when they begin working at CIA (or other intelligence agencies). Hank Crumpton, a former senior clandestine services officer summarized this dilemma in his 2012 book: "I seek to strike a balance between a retired spy's honorable discretion and an active citizen's public responsibility."<sup>4</sup>

***A Question of Appropriateness***

The question then becomes whether it is appropriate to comment publicly on the intelligence profession, foreign policy, and political issues even when the comments do not contain classified information. Former Director of CIA Michael Hayden, an advocate of greater transparency in the Intelligence Community, also acknowledged that more openness does pose risks to intelligence operations.<sup>5</sup> With this in mind, Hayden agreed with a position taken by Mike Leiter, former head of the National Counter Terrorism Center. Referencing Leiter, Hayden wrote in 2016:

*... the American intelligence community owes the public it serves enough data so that people can make out the broad shapes and broad movements of what intelligence is doing, but they do not need specific operational details. The former should suffice to build trust, while the latter would be destructive of espionage's inherent purpose.*<sup>6</sup>

This is not an unreasonable standard to use in assessing former CIA officers' writings on the intelligence business.

***Publication Options Plentiful***

The increase in op-ed pieces and short essays by former officers has been made possible, in part, by the proliferation of available media outlets. Traditional hard-copy newspapers, such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, continue to reach a broad audience and serve as effective platforms for writings on intelligence, but the online media has given formers additional readily available means of connecting with the public.

One real game changer with regard to national security issues in the world of online media is *The Cipher Brief*. Founded in August 2015 by former CNN national security and intelligence correspondent Suzanne Kelly, *The Cipher Brief* supports discussions on national security issues in a number of ways, from short essays and reports to podcasts and discussion forums. Though the site's target audience is the government national security and policy official,

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it is of growing interest to those in the private sector.<sup>7</sup> *The Cipher Brief* has become the most popular outlet for former intelligence officers; no media outlet is even a close second to *The Cipher Brief* in terms of the number of articles published by formers.

***Credibility: Not All Equal***

The experiences, subject matter expertise, job responsibilities, and accountability for results of former officers separate them from those who write only from an academic perspective or as journalists or media commentators. Intelligence practitioners gain perspective and build up bases of knowledge that cannot readily be gained by outsiders who try to look inside a secretive field inaccessible to them. Intelligence professionals understand firsthand how intelligence can drive policy and affect policymakers' decisions. DCIAs and DDCIAs, especially, by reason of direct interaction with the president and other senior policymakers, are uniquely positioned to see how intelligence was used—or not used—and how it was regarded. As former Deputy Director and Acting Director Michael Morell observed:

*Greater experience gives one a breadth of perspective that you simply can't have with only a few years on the job. When I was first made a manager at CIA, I thought I knew the other analysts on my team's strengths and weaknesses. I could not have been more wrong. It was only when I was their day-to-day manager that I saw their actual skills and lack of skills. So be careful with folks with*

*narrow experience drawing broad conclusions.*<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, then, former officers cannot be put into one general category or be seen as equally credible. Within their community, differences affect the content and value of their writings, including the nature of the jobs they held, their levels of responsibility, their areas of expertise, their lengths of service, the circumstances under which they left, the time that has passed since they left CIA, their post-agency careers, and whether or not they have a continuing association or contract with the Intelligence Community since retirement or resignation.

Elements that especially relate to credibility are the circumstances in which former officers left, lengths of service, and the time that has elapsed since a former last served. Some formers have admitted that they are not always in positions to comment on certain aspects or current developments in the business. Over time, their inside knowledge has become dated. For instance, CIA leaders who left while the agency was still organized in its historical four-directorate construct will not have firsthand knowledge of the leadership challenges that have emerged since the CIA's 2015 reorganization into regional and functional mission centers.

On the other hand, certain lessons and best practices are just as applicable now as they were 30 years ago. For example, many case studies on intelligence successes and failures demonstrate the timeless truth that challenging prevailing assumptions

behind analytic judgments is a vital part of the analytic process.

Most readers of articles by formers can readily weigh the credibility of the authors. More often than not, backgrounds of authors are included with articles, but if they are not, a little research will almost always uncover some information about an author's service with CIA.

This context is in stark contrast to articles written anonymously. A frequent source for mainstream journalists is the "former intelligence official." The phrase "according to current and former intelligence officials" is all too common in journalistic reporting. Given journalists' commitment to protecting sources, readers have no way of using the factors noted above to assess the credibility of information provided by the "former intelligence official," let alone know if sources have leaked classified information in violation of secrecy agreements.



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***The Issues Covered***

Whatever their intrinsic differences in terms of expertise, past position, or post-agency career status, formers tend to focus on three main content areas: foreign policy, domestic policy, and the profession of intelligence. The following section will take these up in turn, offering various ways of looking at how discussion in these areas has shaped—and can continue to shape—the relationship of CIA and the Intelligence Community and its various constituencies, from the Oval Office to the US public.

**Pre-publication Review**

Before narratives and opinions on intelligence matters are published, all former CIA officers are obligated to submit their work to the CIA's Publication Review Board (PRB). The obligation is based on the requirement that all CIA employees sign a secrecy agreement that constitutes a lifetime obligation to protect classified information. Under this agreement, employees must accede to a prepublication review of their material to ensure that classified information is not disclosed, intentionally or unintentionally. This applies to all content—written material of every kind, printed or online, but also speeches, blog posts, podcasts, and any other form of communication intended for open publication. The US Supreme Court has upheld the enforceability of the secrecy agreement and its lifelong validity.<sup>9</sup> The PRB review is intended only to safeguard classified information—not to prevent the release of critical, embarrassing, or even false information.<sup>10</sup> Within these parameters, formers have been free to exercise their First Amendment rights.

Such obligations also apply to other intelligence agencies in the community and within the office of the DNI.

**Foreign Policy Writings**

The dividing line between intelligence and policy has been the subject of much discussion and debate throughout CIA's history. Concerns about politicizing intelligence and the need to maintain objectivity in intelligence assessments are the underlying themes behind this longstanding debate.

To protect the integrity of intelligence analysis, CIA management considers it inappropriate for current employees, whether on staff or in contract status, to publicly comment

on intelligence issues under certain conditions. This includes public discussion of active foreign policy issues.<sup>11</sup> (See textboxes concerning the prepublication review and the “appropriateness clause” of the regulation.) However, once they are no longer employed, former officers are free to engage in the foreign policy debate. On such issues, the writings of former CIA officers over the years 2016 and 2017—encompassing topics as general as foreign relations and as specific as al-Qa'ida and ISIS threats, international trade, and North Korean weapons development—are much like those offered by former US government policy officials and policy experts: they are interesting, offer valid points, demonstrate the expertise of the writers, and shed insight on the factors that weigh on policymaking and policy decisions.

Among the formers who wrote on foreign policy in 2016 and 2017, four stand out in terms of the volume of their writings, the degree to which their past roles conferred credibility to their perspectives, and the extent to which their work reverberated in the policy and intelligence communities: Michael Hayden, John McLaughlin, Michael Morell, and Paul Pillar. Each offered a variety of opinions on difficult, global, strategic challenges.

General Hayden, a career Air Force intelligence officer who, in addition to leading CIA, served as the director of the National Security Agency and the principal deputy director of national intelligence, presented observations and thoughts as an insider, someone who was front-and-center during the shaping of some of this country's most important policy responses. McLaughlin and Morell rose through the ranks

**Appropriateness Criteria**

For current employees, in addition to the prohibition against revealing classified information, the Agency is also legally authorized to deny permission to publish any official or nonofficial materials on matters set forth in paragraphs e(1) and e(4) above that could:

- (a) reasonably be expected to impair the author's performance of his or her job duties,
- (b) interfere with the authorized functions of the CIA, or
- (c) have an adverse effect on the foreign relations or security of the United States.

From CIA Prepublication Regulation, as printed in “CIA Prepublication Review in the Information Age,” *Studies in Intelligence* 55, no. 3 (September 2011), approved for public release 2013/04/05.

in CIA as analysts and managers of analysts. Their articles display the type of critical thinking, sophisticated analysis, and balanced judgments that one would expect from government officials with their experience and record of accomplishments. Given their stature and the quality of their writing, these three agency leaders have offered insights and advice worthy of consideration by those making policy decisions today.

Paul Pillar, also accomplished and formerly highly placed as a regional national intelligence officer in the National Intelligence Council, is distinguished from the others by being the first former senior CIA officer to criticize the Bush administration's use of intelligence in the runup to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. In a 2006 *Foreign Affairs* article, Pillar argued that this use of intelligence was

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symptomatic of a more serious problem rooted in the intelligence-policy relationship.<sup>12</sup> He would go on to write *Intelligence and U.S. Foreign Policy: Iraq, 9/11, and Misguided Reform* (Columbia University Press, 2011), in which he continued to criticize the Bush administration's use of intelligence and found fault with the post-9/11 reforms. He has since taken strong positions on a spectrum of regional issues and key national security challenges of terrorism, proliferation, political Islam, and political instability. During the period of this study he contributed at least weekly to a blog of the journal *National Interest* for which he serves as a contributing editor.

In addition to these four, 39 other former officers of varying backgrounds and years of experience—including former directors R. James Woolsey, John Deutch, and David Petraeus—wrote on US foreign policy during 2016 and 2017, clearly believing they had something to contribute to the foreign policy debate.

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***Domestic Political Writings***

Former CIA officers have not normally ventured into public discourse on domestic political issues. The common refrain—to “speak truth to power”—is one of CIA's hallmarks; if CIA is to be effective in supporting the president, the agency must be objective in the way it presents intelligence analysis and carries out intelligence operations. CIA serves at the behest of the president—whether the occupant of the office is a Democrat or Republican, liberal or conservative. Ideally, an intelligence

organization in a democracy should be seen by the president as apolitical. Correspondingly, CIA professionals expect to carry out their mission free from political pressures or politicization of intelligence analysis and estimates.

The predominant practice of CIA leaders upon leaving office has been to publicly stay out of political discussions. But that changed in 2016, when prominent formers openly expressed their views during the 2016 presidential campaign and after the 2016 presidential election. In an unprecedented step for a top CIA leader, former DDCIA and former Acting DCIA Michael Morell on 5 August wrote an op-ed published by the *New York Times* entitled “I Ran the CIA. Now I'm Endorsing Hillary Clinton.” In that article, Morell stated that he was neither a registered Republican nor Democrat and that he had served presidents of both parties while at CIA. He also pointed to his prior silence on presidential preferences. Two factors drove him to endorse Clinton, he explained. First, he believed she was qualified to be president. Second, he asserted: “Donald Trump is not only unqualified for the job, but he may well pose a threat to our national security.”<sup>13</sup>

Three days later, former DCIA Michael Hayden joined a group of 50 former national security officials in signing a letter stating that Donald Trump “lacks the character, values, and experience” to be president and “would put at risk our country's national security and well-being.”<sup>14</sup> Following the 2016 election, other former CIA officers joined Morell and

Hayden in publicly expressing their opinions of the Trump presidency.

These political op-eds were written in the aftermath of something the president-elect / president said or did that the writer would argue could have an adverse effect on US intelligence activities and operations or was a risk to national security. Such trigger points included the president-elect's reference to Nazi Germany in describing the CIA, the president's speech at the Memorial Wall of Honor at CIA Headquarters on his first full day in office, and the president's expression of doubts about the intelligence on Russia's interference in the 2016 presidential election. Formers pointed their criticism and outrage directly at the president.

When former officers decide to publicly weigh in on political matters, it is fair to ask what they hope to accomplish—whom are they trying to influence? In cases where the political issues touch upon the nature of intelligence, they add context and depth to discussions and may raise points that others did not consider. In other cases where intelligence is largely irrelevant to an issue at hand, they join an already crowded room of commentators, analysts, and pundits, and one can reasonably question whether another opinion adds value.

Three former officers in a jointly written article justified their reasons for speaking out on political matters. They emphasized that the oath of office they took as CIA officers to protect and defend the constitution is a commitment that, in their view, did not end when they left CIA. Accordingly they asserted: “We believe we have a responsibility to call out when

our leadership is not doing enough to keep America safe.” They insisted that they will speak out against threats to national security “even if they come from within.”<sup>15</sup>

From the time he retired from CIA in 2004, former DDCIA and Acting DCIA John McLaughlin has been one of the most reasoned and thoughtful voices on foreign policy and intelligence issues, but rarely did he weigh in on political matters. In July 2017, however, he shared his thoughts on the president’s speech to the Boy Scouts of America in a *Washington Post* op-ed called, “Why Trump’s Boy Scout Speech Was So Disturbing.” This was not about a foreign policy decision or an intelligence activity, therefore, McLaughlin’s experience and expertise were not directly relevant to the topic. Instead, he wrote only as a concerned citizen.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, his stature and former positions at CIA drew attention. On MSNBC, McLaughlin shared his reasoning for speaking out:

*For most of us, throughout our careers, we maintained a neutrality. But if you have a genuine conviction that the country is endangered, you can’t help but speak out about it. No one from the Intelligence Community who speaks out about Trump does it with joy or satisfaction. It’s against the grain of the culture we’ve grown up with.*<sup>17</sup>

Michael Morell, likewise, asserted his responsibility to speak out. He argued that it was important for the public to distinguish Michael Morell the private citizen from Michael Morell the CIA leader. Asked how

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### **The topics covered during the 2016–17 period could form the contents of an anthology on intelligence.**

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people should think about that separation, he explained:

*I think that’s exactly what they have to do. This is Michael Morell, private citizen and this is Michael Hayden, private citizen, who are talking about what we think is best for the country. It’s completely divorced from what the job of the CIA is, and it’s a pretty simple line: We don’t work there anymore; we don’t work for the government anymore. We’re not bound by that same responsibility that anybody who works for the agency has. . . . We’re talking about our own country for once in our lives. That’s the distinction, and people shouldn’t be confused by that.*<sup>18</sup>

During the period of this survey, the former senior officers so far discussed represented a relatively small subset of the larger population of formers who have gone on the record, but these are prominent intelligence leaders, and there are repercussions and possible unintended consequences when they speak out on political issues.

Morell has admitted that he did not fully appreciate the downside of taking a political position when he endorsed Hillary Clinton: in retrospect, he was able to see what his political position must have looked like from the candidate and then president-elect Donald Trump’s point of view. As he explained:

*. . . he (Trump) sees a former acting director and deputy director of CIA criticizing him*

*and endorsing his opponent. . . . And he must have said to himself, “What is it with these intelligence guys? Are they political? . . . Is this a political organization?”*<sup>19</sup>

There is no easy answer here, and former officers who chose to write or speak out must weigh their responsibility to protect the intelligence profession’s reputation for objectivity and discretion against their own constitutional right to free speech.

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### **Writings on Intelligence Issues**

If the ultimate goal of former intelligence officers who go on the record is to contribute to a more informed public, the most insightful and valuable articles are those that cover intelligence history, intelligence tradecraft, and the role of intelligence in supporting policy.

The topics covered during the 2016–17 period could form the contents of an anthology on intelligence. They touch on the intelligence-policy relationship, analysis, foreign intelligence collection, counterintelligence, covert action, reorganization, leadership, congressional oversight, briefing presidential candidates and the president-elect, the *President’s Daily Brief*, employee morale, workforce demographics, technical innovations, liaison relationships, foreign intelligence service operations, insider threats, leaks, and espionage.

The remainder of this paper will focus only on the three issues that received the most media attention and were arguably the most important issues to emerge in the context

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**Former officers drew on their experiences from previous campaigns and elections to attempt to shed light on 2016 candidate and president-elect briefings.**

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of domestic and international developments during 2016 and 2017: intelligence briefings to the presidential candidates and president-elect, the intelligence and policy relationship, and Russian intelligence service operations.

***Intelligence Briefings for the Candidates and President-elect***

Every four years during the presidential election and transition, the media turns its attention to the intelligence briefings given to the presidential candidates and the eventual president-elect. Such briefings have a history dating to the 1952 election and the Truman-Eisenhower transition. The definitive work on this topic was first published by CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence in 1996 in an unclassified book called, *Getting to Know the President: CIA Briefings of Presidential Candidates 1952–1992*. A second edition that included the two George W. Bush elections was published in 2012, and a third edition is nearing completion.

Written and updated for each edition by former CIA Deputy Director for Intelligence and Inspector General John Helgerson, *Getting to Know the President* draws upon interviews with former presidents, presidential candidates, campaign staff, Intelligence Community seniors, unclassified documents related to the briefings and the briefing processes, and the author's own experience in briefing presidents and presidential candidates.<sup>20</sup>

In 2016, David Priess added to the literature on this topic with his book, *The President's Book of Secrets: The*

*Untold Story of Intelligence Briefings to America's Presidents from Kennedy to Obama* (PublicAffairs, 2016). Priess, a former CIA officer with experience in writing, editing, and briefing PDBs, addresses the historical evolution of the PDB and past administrations' practices of using the PDB. He also expounds on the CIA briefings of the PDBs during presidential transitions.<sup>21</sup> Taken together, *Getting to Know the President* and *The President's Book of Secrets* provide an inside account of the briefings, demonstrating how each candidate and president has taken advantage of CIA's support in different ways, depending on their own background and needs.

The 2016 Clinton-Trump election featured scenarios not seen in previous elections and transitions. Former senior officers drew upon their own experiences in briefing presidents to offer insights and context to the dynamics of the election. While briefings to candidates and presidents-elect each have unique aspects, there are common themes throughout the history of this program. One raised at the outset of the 2016 campaign by some quarters was the idea of suspending intelligence briefings for both candidates—Clinton because of the classified email controversy and Trump because of opposition assertions that he could not be trusted to protect classified information. Denying a candidate the intelligence briefings would have been unprecedented.

Management of the briefings—and the decision to brief candidates,

or not—has since 2008 rested with the ODNI, although CIA has always provided the most assistance in the preparation and delivery of the briefing material.<sup>22</sup> In response to calls to withhold the briefings, DNI James Clapper put an end to the uproar and affirmed publicly that both candidates would be extended the opportunity to receive intelligence briefings after the candidates' formal nominations, saying, "Now is the appropriate time since both candidates have been officially anointed . . . it is not up to the administration and not up to me personally to decide on the suitability of presidential candidates. The American electorate is deciding on the suitability of the next commander in chief."<sup>23</sup>

Key points of interest to emerge in the 2016 candidate and president-elect briefings were content and frequency, the briefers, other participants, and the arrangements for the briefings. Former officers drew on their experiences from previous campaigns and elections to attempt to shed light on these points.

Of course, formers without regular access to fresh intelligence were not in a position to know the content of briefings during the 2016 sessions but they knew enough from experience to make suppositions about the subject matter.

- John McLaughlin suggested, "Usually they [the briefings] include most of the issues occupying the sitting president, often supplemented by specific interests of the candidates."<sup>24</sup>
- Michael Morell pointed out that candidates do not receive a daily briefing and they do not get the PDBs. After the election, the

president-elect may receive more frequent briefings to include the PDB. It will not necessarily be the same PDB the president gets, however, according to Morell.<sup>25</sup>

- Michael Hayden added: “The book will likely be stripped of some operational details since those would be of no use to the president-elect but other than that, the book will be just like the one being shown in the Oval [Office] that morning.”<sup>26</sup>

These former officers also provided some sense of who would be doing the briefings—the DNI or his designates and IC subject matter experts. Formers also were able to provide a general idea of the atmospherics of the sessions.<sup>27</sup> The public is seldom aware of other members of the candidates’ staffs who sit in on classified briefings; formers, likewise, may not know or be able to reveal those present. Nevertheless, Michael Morell pointed out that all attendees must be approved beforehand by IC leadership.<sup>28</sup>

Specific historical presidential campaigns provide useful context to the 2016–17 situation. By the end of the transition period in 2016, a level of animus had grown between the president and the IC. Looking back, David Priess wrote: “The president-elect knows how to hold a grudge; few of them seem stronger than the one he harbors toward the CIA.”<sup>29</sup> In this regard, Priess saw similarities between Donald Trump and Richard Nixon, explaining that Nixon’s prior history with the CIA and Nixon’s belief that the CIA was biased in favor of his opponents contributed to the incoming president’s mistrust of the CIA.

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Not all former CIA officers agreed that president-elect Trump had no reason to distrust the IC. One former—a 25-year veteran of intelligence with 19 years as an analyst—argued that CIA officers in the past tried to undermine the DCI and the president, citing as examples efforts against William Casey and Ronald Reagan for their Cold War policies and measures taken against George Tenet and George W. Bush because of the war against Iraq.<sup>30</sup>

In the public’s eye, the relationship between intelligence and policy (and the president) has at times been tainted with charges of politicization or the IC’s failures. As complex as the intelligence-policy relationship is—involving individuals and organizations across the intelligence and policy communities—the president is the cornerstone of the overall relationship, the “First Customer.” In that respect, the 2016–17 period presented a particularly challenging stage in the development of a working relationship with a White House inexperienced in national intelligence.

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***After the Election***

Indeed, this evolving relationship would become the center of former CIA officers’ writings immediately after the 2016 election through the weeks following the 2017 inauguration. During this period, there was very little reference to President Obama’s last year. The issues that sparked flurries of commentary were President-elect Trump’s reaction to the intelligence supporting the conclusion that Russia interfered in

the election, the nomination of Congressman Mike Pompeo to be CIA director, the president’s visit to CIA Headquarters on his first full day in office, and the new president’s continued criticism of the Iranian nuclear agreement.

In addition to providing context and perspective on the relationship and the fundamental challenges that both sides faced in establishing the appropriate level of engagement, many of the formers offered very specific recommendations. In most instances, the intended audience for these recommendations was the incoming president.

***A Matter of Building Trust***

Among the many challenges for policymakers new to government is understanding and fully appreciating the vast and complex Intelligence Community. Former CIA Deputy Director of Intelligence Jamie Miscik noted that the IC provides the president with invaluable resources to support him in his policy goals. She emphasized: “For the relationship between intelligence producers and consumers to work effectively, however, each needs to understand and trust the other.”<sup>31</sup>

The need for mutual trust was a consistent theme in writings of the period, as formers responded to critical comments aimed at the IC and its leaders by the president-elect prior to his inauguration. In expressing their concerns, several formers addressed the potential consequences of this distrust, the most consequential being that the president would ignore or not

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**Throughout the history of US intelligence, presidents have at times been skeptical of intelligence reports and judgments, but it is their prerogative . . .**

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fully use his valuable national security resources.<sup>32</sup>

Access to the president and the policy discussions informed by intelligence is a privilege enjoyed by senior intelligence officials. Accordingly, those who interact with the president during these sessions must demonstrate discretion and an unwavering commitment to secrecy if there is to be a trusting relationship. As a former senior official explains:

*From the Intelligence Community's perspective, the impulse to enforce this confidentiality doesn't spring from dogged faithfulness to past presidents, but to that 'persistent and conscious effort' to build and maintain a trusting relationship with current and future occupants of 'the Oval.'*<sup>33</sup>

Michael Morell, President George W. Bush's briefer, also addressed the importance of trust, emphasizing that a president must be able to ask tough questions and feel free to comment on the intelligence, confident that his remarks don't end up in the media.<sup>34</sup>

Throughout the history of US intelligence, presidents have at times been skeptical of intelligence reports and judgments, but that is their prerogative, as writers pointed out. Paul Pillar explained that the president's feedback is important to the community: "What the agency hears from these interactions constitutes valuable guidance in keeping their work relevant to the needs of the president and his administration."<sup>35</sup> But most of the formers argued that the president

should not publicly criticize CIA or the IC, even when he disagrees with the intelligence. As Morell warned: ". . . it undermines that trust . . . it undermines the Agency's ability to do its job."<sup>36</sup>

Former officers have also pointed out the difference between a president's honest skepticism and disagreement, and politicization. They acknowledge that policymakers in the past have crossed the line and pressured analysts to alter their judgments to fit policy objectives.<sup>37</sup> This concern was raised in light of President Trump's doubts about Iran's compliance with JCPOA.<sup>a</sup> Former DDCIA David Cohen wrote: "The reason it's a concern is that it corrupts the intelligence process. . . . If you bake into that process the answer the policymaker is looking for, it stands the process on its head and undermines the integrity of the intelligence."<sup>38</sup>

**Recommendations for President's Team**

A number of former leaders offered thoughts for the president's security team. Some were written with the new DCIA Mike Pompeo in mind. One former emphasized that it is important for the DCIA to stand up for CIA and its mission and people, especially given the prevailing partisan environment in Washington.<sup>39</sup> The challenge for the

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a. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), colloquially known as the "Iran nuclear deal," was signed in Vienna on 14 July 2015 between Iran, the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, and the European Union.

DCIA is to maintain the trust of both the president and the agency workforce. Doug Wise, a former senior CIA clandestine services officer and former deputy director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, offered the new DCIA practical advice in leading the people and mission of the CIA. He emphasized the importance of taking time to fully understand the institution and trust the agency's leaders and followers. With an allusion to the CIA culture, he advised that the workforce will expect him to treat the agency well and respectfully before he is fully accepted by them.<sup>40</sup>

**Russian Intelligence Operations**

As the new administration and the Intelligence Community began to develop a working relationship, the controversy surrounding Russia's interference in the 2016 presidential election and allegations of the Trump election campaign staff's collusion with Russia took on a life of its own. In this case, the focus of attention was not the US government's intelligence capabilities but rather Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), and the Kremlin itself.

Several former senior clandestine service officers who chose to address this topic collectively brought extensive knowledge of Russian intelligence services and Russian espionage tradecraft into the conversation. They drew upon their direct experience in dealing with the Soviet and Russian intelligence services to introduce historical precedents, describing how the Russians carried out influence operations and cultivated assets, and speculating on how the recent Russian efforts were planned and executed.

They pointed out that Moscow's attempts to spread disinformation, interfere in the US political process, and attack US interests with asymmetric tools were not new and dated back at least to the 1940s. Their historical accounts are rich with examples and explanations of methodology, but as a 30-year clandestine services veteran stated: "Whereas the KGB relied on press placements and agents of influence, the KGB's successor intelligence services, FSB and SVR, as well as Russian military intelligence GRU, have added offensive cyber operations to their spying tool kit."<sup>41, 42</sup>

Several formers joined in the public debate regarding the overall objectives of the putative influence operations.<sup>43</sup> Were the Russians trying to get Donald Trump elected, or to seed an asset among Trump's associates, or simply trying to disrupt the US democratic process? A few also speculated about who in the Kremlin ultimately was behind these actions. Most settled on Vladimir Putin, although one former characterized some of the Russians' efforts as low level operations.<sup>44</sup>

These formers provided further insight into Russian intelligence operations and shared their knowledge of the purpose and techniques of such engagements. Their descriptions of Russian techniques provided a framework from which readers could analyze and assess the incomplete and, at times, somewhat confusing media accounts of the Russian operations.

Amidst the prevailing nationwide outrage over the Russian interference, two formers rebutted attempts to draw similarities between Russia's actions and CIA's past efforts to in-

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### **Several formers joined in the public debate regarding the overall objectives of the putative influence operations.**

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fluence elections or support political groups' attempts to overthrow democratically-elected foreign governments. They argued that attempts to establish moral equivalency between Russia's efforts and historical CIA activities is misplaced.<sup>45</sup>

They acknowledged that US covert action programs have tried to influence the political outcomes abroad and, although there have been abuses, they stressed that oversight measures have been introduced to prevent such activities. The biggest differences between Russian and US intelligence operations are not found in specific operational tactics but in the processes by which such actions are initiated and implemented in a democratic form of government, as compared to the conduct of similar operations by authoritarian regimes.<sup>46</sup>

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### ***In Sum***

The two-year period (2016–17) covered in this study featured prevailing themes and consequential episodes that drew the attention of formers and prompted them to go on the record. The scope of my research did not include data from previous years that might have served as a baseline for comparison to earlier periods. Nevertheless, I was surprised by the number of articles written by former senior officers, the number of different writers, and the number of media outlets used.

The former intelligence officers contributing to this literature included officers of varying ranks, experience, and expertise, which covered almost all aspects of the intelligence profes-

sion and the CIA's mission. Collectively, the formers did not speak with one voice. Nor were they always apologists for CIA and its missions. However, general agreement on the fundamentals of the intelligence business did appear to exist, though on particulars, such as in organizational structure, differences were common.

Given the existing body of literature on intelligence, no one article during this period stands out as a singular contribution, but these recent treatments provided value in terms of topicality and timeliness and in bringing in relatively fresh experiences. Thus many of the formers were able to shape discussions in the context of today's evolving national and international environments and draw on experience and expertise to help explain and clarify complex matters in dynamic domestic and international environments.

The value of well-crafted memoirs, histories, case studies, and tradecraft analyses as published in books and professional journals is unquestioned. But op-ed pieces and short essays published in today's innumerable media outlets have given formers many more opportunities to offer timely commentary and analyses as issues arise. As national security policies take shape, these writings offer interpretations and recommendations within the decisionmaking cycle of government policymakers.

The more controversial writings of the formers were those that crossed over into the political arena. Those who wrote these pieces emphasized that they were not speaking as government officials but as private

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***In going on the record, formers have added to a body of literature that continues to serve the public well.***

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citizens, who do not live in isolation from national and international developments, and that they were merely exercising the freedoms allowed by having transitioned from government service into life as private citizens.

Readers, however, may not always be able easily to distinguish between the former senior government intelligence official and the private citizen. It is, after all, because of their previous service that their writings are published and receive attention. Thus

there are political consequences when formers publicly enter political debates. As noted earlier, the objectivity of senior CIA leaders and the agency itself can come under scrutiny.

While this study has focused on former intelligence officers who have chosen to go on the record, the vast majority of former CIA officers have not spoken out publicly. Nevertheless, the old-school code of silence among formers has been steadily

eroding, an erosion that seems unlikely to slow appreciably, if at all.

Finally, today's level of transparency about the intelligence business has never been greater. Many of the myths of intelligence have been dispelled thanks to the steady stream of releases of previously classified documents and studies by CIA and the writings of former CIA officers. Public discussions and debates on the intelligence business are more informed. In going on the record, formers have added to a body of literature that continues to serve the public well.



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