

## ***Intelligence in Public Media***

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### ***Facts and Fears: Hard Truths from a Life in Intelligence***

James R. Clapper, with Trey Brown (Viking, 2018), 424 pp., bibliography, index.

#### ***Reviewed by David A. Foy***

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Anyone who has spent more than five decades in a specific profession has stories to tell and is generally worth listening to. That is certainly true of James Clapper, the longest-tenured Director of National Intelligence (DNI) to date. His personal and professional story fills the pages of *Facts and Fears*, his autobiography co-written with DNI speechwriter Trey Brown. As Clapper notes in the introduction, his purpose in writing *Facts and Fears* was “to capture and share the experience of more than fifty years in the intel profession.” (4)

In the early chapters of this book, Clapper relates the personal history that leads, almost inevitably, to a lifelong career in intelligence. As an Army “brat” whose father was a signals intelligence officer, young James came to the profession naturally, though he cites a favorite story from his youth to explain the inquisitiveness that would make him a successful intelligence officer. During a summer stay with his grandparents, he was flipping radio channels when he accidentally discovered the Philadelphia police radio band and was soon riveted to the chatter, the gist of which he transferred to a map, learning police jargon, the boundaries of patrol districts, and gaining what the military calls “situational awareness” along the way. In engaging fashion, he also explains how a comic book collection unexpectedly led to meeting his future wife and why he still displays a model of a 1947 Cadillac, his first car, on a shelf.

Clapper then turns to a review of his numerous military assignments, from a brief period in the US Marine Corps to the US Air Force, in which he would spend more than three decades. His path of military assignments led him from the Pentagon—“where fun goes to die” (57)—to Korea as a new brigadier general, to Pacific Command (PACOM), to Strategic Air Command (SAC), and back to the Pentagon. In his early days as an Air Force general officer, he dealt with such challenging issues as the Korean Air Lines Flight 007 shootdown, the Grenada assault, the tense situation along the DMZ in Korea, and the military campaigns of Desert Shield/Desert Storm, in which he was

dismayed to see intelligence arrive too late to be useful, reflecting the assessment of ground commander General Norman Schwarzkopf, who was sharply critical of the intelligence he received during the campaign.

For most readers, however, it is the period after Clapper retired from the Air Force in 1995, after 34 years of military service, that is likely to be of greatest interest, and it is this portion that will prompt them to buy and read this book. In the public’s eye, Clapper’s time as the director of several IC agencies—and particularly his tenure as DNI—is most noteworthy. He describes his less-than-satisfying period as a defense contractor, in which he learned the invaluable lesson that he was “not good at helping to win contracts and expand the firm’s footprint.” (86) After bumping around a bit, he received a call from one of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s aides, wondering if Clapper would consider returning to government service. Over the objections of his wife, Sue, he accepted leadership of the National Imagery and Mapping Agency (NIMA), where he and CIA senior Joanne Isham set about integrating the diverse disciplines of imagery and mapping against the dramatic backdrop of 9/11. It took two years for the duo and many others to transition NIMA to NGA, the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, which improved IC-military relations and became a key element working with first responders in dealing with Hurricane Katrina. Ironically, Clapper expresses his belief that Rumsfeld’s irritation at NGA’s close working relationship with the Coast Guard at the time shortened his tenure as NGA Director.

With Rumsfeld’s departure, new Secretary of Defense Robert Gates then asked Clapper to serve as the Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence (USD(I)) and end a running feud with ODNI. As he characterized it, Clapper made peace with DoD by serving as the DNI’s “director of defense intelligence.” Even then, however, Clapper was among those who openly called for a strong DNI to serve as the president’s chief intelligence adviser and lead the US Intelligence Community. In the book,

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Clapper notes that, like all major legislation, the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act (IRTPA) of 2005 that formally created the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) was “flawed.” He opines that the first DNI should have been a career intelligence officer rather than former ambassador John Negroponte but was content when the latter chose newly-promoted Gen. Michael Hayden as his PDDNI (Principal Deputy). He writes of similar misgivings about Vice Adm. Dennis Blair as DNI, though he carefully chooses his words when writing about his predecessor, simply wondering if he was “the right fit” for the job. (121)

In April 2010, with Blair still on the job, Secretary Gates called Clapper to his office and told him simply, “Jim, we need you to be the DNI.” After initially turning down the offer, he spoke with Sue, who stressed how different this job would be compared to being the director of NGA or the USD(I). So he wrote Secretary Gates a note saying he had reconsidered over the weekend and, if he and the president thought he was the right man for the job, he would accept. In reply, he heard nothing for weeks, only to be informed one day that he had an appointment with the president the next day—a job interview for the DNI position, as it turned out. The 15-minute interview went well, but Clapper was dismayed that he had not been able to explain what he proposed to do as DNI.

At Gates’s suggestion, he wrote President Obama a letter in which he provided seven observations, including the fact that he was a “truth-to-power” guy who avoided media attention whenever possible and who was “more interested in making the IC work than accumulating power.” (116) He also stressed “unwritten rule of intelligence number one—leave the policy making to policy makers” (143) and made the point to the president that this was, in his opinion, the last chance to make the DNI concept work before Congress created a “Department of Intelligence.” When his nomination was announced, President Obama commented to one of Clapper’s grandchildren, “I appreciate your grandfather’s willingness to take on the second most thankless job in Washington.” (132) Clapper thought he was joking but soon learned otherwise.

As Clapper discovered that President Obama read the *President’s Daily Brief* in advance and therefore a new briefing approach was necessary, he also learned that with each misstep, the press routinely called for his

resignation. The first hue and cry came in response to the tragic loss of Ambassador Chris Stevens and three security officers in the September 2012 assault on the US diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya, a ripple-effect reaction to the “Arab Spring” movement that had begun in Tunisia in 2011. The second such clamoring occurred after Clapper’s highly-publicized response to a question from Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR) about NSA surveillance practices. When Clapper replied that NSA was not monitoring average Americans, he was thinking of Section 702 of the FISA Act—vice Section 215 of the Patriot Act, as Wyden was. On the tense ride back to ODNI following his testimony, OGC attorney Bob Litt informed Clapper that he had been wrong in his answer to Senator Wyden, which Clapper acknowledged, though explaining that while he had made a mistake, he had not lied. Unconvinced, congressmen and citizens called for his resignation. However, President Obama, while acknowledging publicly that Clapper should have chosen his words more carefully, defended his DNI.

In a “perfect storm” of sorts, the DNI had to deal simultaneously with sequestration and its deleterious financial and psychological effects on the IC as well as the tidal wave of unauthorized disclosures former Booz Allen contractor Edward Snowden provided. Even though Clapper briefed President Obama within two days of the story breaking, he did not have a lot of hard information to provide. In the litany of embarrassing disclosures that followed and soured relations with many foreign partners, especially Germany and Brazil, Clapper decided to push the “transparency” initiative by releasing to the public declassified IC documents on the Tumblr “IC on the Record” site.

In the midst of this crisis, the IC learned that Syrian leader Bashir al-Assad was intentionally using chemical weapons against his own people, prompting the writing of a finely-crafted, hard-hitting National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on the Syrian use of CW. By early 2014, the avalanche of recent disastrous events left Clapper feeling so besieged that he offered to resign, but White House Chief of Staff Denis McDonough refused to consider that. In September, at a professional organization meeting, Clapper introduced the *2014 National Intelligence Strategy*, which included the “Principles of Intelligence Ethics” the ODNI had tried to implement two years earlier. In a display of “gallows humor,” he also described the situation facing the IC at that time:

*We are expected to keep the nation safe and provide exquisite, high-fidelity, timely, accurate, anticipatory, and relevant intelligence; and do that in such a manner that there is no risk; and there is no embarrassment to anyone if what we're doing is publicly revealed; and there is no threat to anyone's revenue bottom line; and there isn't even a scintilla of jeopardy to anyone's civil liberties and privacy, whether US persons or foreign persons.*

*We call this new approach to intelligence: "immaculate collection." (268-269)*

His dramatic 2014 closed with his unexpectedly being dispatched to North Korea to negotiate the release of two Americans held there, a mission that amazingly remained secret, described in a chapter appropriately entitled "Not a Diplomat."

The dawn of 2015 brought continued drama, both personally and professionally. While learning of the details of the North Korean cyber attack against Sony Pictures and characterizing the world threat situation as one of "unpredictable instability," Clapper's attentions were jolted away from his professional duties when Sue fell ill and spent three days in a coma in a Salem, Virginia, hospital. He again seriously thought of resigning to care for his wife but was concerned about the legacy of intelligence integration and especially the push to embrace transparency in the IC. As Sue's condition gradually improved, he decided to remain at the helm.

The penultimate chapter of *Facts and Fears* is one of the longer and more awaited sections of the book, as it deals with Russian President Vladimir Putin's re-election and the far-reaching Russian influence campaign during 2015–2016, which Clapper admits is one of the reasons he wrote the book. He balances his numerous criticisms of Russian actions with the reminder that, between 1946 and 2000, the United States also interfered in 81 elections, including one of our own—a reference to the Watergate break-in. He discusses the events and nuance surrounding the Clinton email controversy and his dismay at the ill-advised decision of retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn to appear at a December 2015 Moscow gala sponsored by leading propagandist media organization *Russia Today*, for which he received a \$45,000 speaking fee. In May 2016, six months prior to the presidential election, Clapper announced to the public that Russian entities were interfering in the US presidential campaigns, and by August

the IC assessed that Putin and his cronies were actively trying to get Donald Trump elected president or, in the more likely case of a Hilary Clinton victory, undermine her ability to effectively govern the nation. On 7 October, Clapper and DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson issued a joint statement concerning this Russian interference in the US democratic process, but other headlines swallowed up their announcement. As he notes, no one at the time believed a Trump victory was even possible, much less likely.

In the final chapter of *Facts and Fears*, Clapper explains more explicitly why he chose to write the book—a noteworthy topic, since he initially planned to never write about his experiences. Although he explains early on that he "doesn't do well when unoccupied and bored" (65), he did not take pen in hand simply to keep busy in retirement. He has a specific, heartfelt message for the IC, which, he says, "cannot save our nation if facts are negotiable" (396), and for America in general, prompted by the 2016 presidential election and the subsequent behavior of the Trump administration. He wrote *Facts and Fears* because of his deep-seated and abiding concern for the future of the nation, to remind Americans that "the Russians are our primary existential threat," and in hopes that it might help the public "regain awareness." (400)

As is routine in Washington in advance of presidential elections, Clapper submitted his resignation as DNI, letting President Obama know that, at age 75, he would be leaving office effective at noon on Inauguration Day, 20 January 2017. In the meantime, he began working with the transition team for president-elect Trump, which included former colleague Mike Flynn as national security advisor. Now as a private citizen, Clapper watched from the sidelines as Flynn was fired in February, followed shortly after by the abrupt firing of his friend and FBI Director William Comey, a development Clapper describes as "truly reprehensible." (393) Stopping just short of accusing the Trump administration of collusion with Russian influence peddlers, Clapper stresses the common interests of both parties and instead charges them with "parallelism," the perhaps unplanned but mutually-beneficial campaign to sow lingering, pervasive doubts in the minds of the American populace about the democratic process and its results.

Clapper emphasizes several themes throughout the book—his view of public service as an obligation and

a privilege, his determination to root out discrimination in any and all forms, his intention to avoid dabbling in policy, and his mandate that he and his immediate subordinates leave the IC better than it was when they found it. Another theme Clapper addresses throughout is the importance of mentorship. While anyone who has worked for him recognizes how he has mentored them, Clapper reverses the optic and identifies several individuals specifically who helped him be successful, including IC seniors Joan Dempsey, Letitia (“Tish”) Long, Betty Sapp, and Stephanie O’Sullivan. In typically glib fashion, he asks them to “remember me kindly when they eventually take over the world.” (70)

*Facts and Fears* is not only an engrossing read but also unique, in that no other DNI has written such a book about his experiences, and Clapper’s tenure and longevity in the IC lends the volume a special significance. The

well-written book is very personal in nature, especially when Clapper briefly discusses family (primarily his wife and grandchildren) and friends and co-workers (in more extensive fashion). The droll sense of humor those who have spoken at length with him know so well comes through the pages clearly. Clapper proudly and openly wears his badge of patriotism, and the harsh critique of Russian actions and the whiff of collusion with the Trump administration accounts not only for the fact the book exists at all but also for the strident nature of the final two chapters. To get inside the head of the man who served as DNI longer than his three predecessors combined is a rare opportunity, as is hearing from a man who has spent more than a half-century finely honing the craft of intelligence. *Facts and Fears* is a welcome addition to the IC literature, a volume that does not shy away from exposing the “hard truths” of the profession.

