

Facts and Fears: Hard Truths from a Life in Intelligence

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

Reviewed by Jason U. Manosevitz

Former Director of National Intelligence General James Clapper introduces his memoir, *Facts and Fears: Hard Truths From A Life In Intelligence*, by describing his shock over the election in November 2016 of President Donald Trump (1) and recalling the official IC warnings issued during the campaign about Russian influence operations and cyber threats. (2–3) He laments that these warnings, contained in “a landmark product—among the most important ever produced by US intelligence,” were never adequately explained to the American public. (4) It is a failing he returns to in his concluding chapter, “Facts and Fears.”

General Clapper’s book is a must-read (see CIA historian David Foy’s excellent summary appearing on the pages just before this one), because the memoir provides the insights of a most senior and experienced practitioner of intelligence on collection, analysis, and the role intelligence plays in policymaking. Clapper’s life story as an intelligence professional with military and civilian experience serves as his bona fides. Like other senior intelligence professionals who have written memoirs, he explains the role he played in national security events that occurred during his watch and shows a deep sense of pride in intelligence work. The leadership tips Clapper sprinkles throughout his book are also particularly valuable and should not be overlooked. Readers will pick up on the DNI’s struggle with the intelligence officer’s job of informing policy decisions—“telling truth to power”—while remaining apolitical. It is a theme that emerges repeatedly and brings the book to a close.

The memoir does not go into intelligence operations in detail, but it does contain a six-page discussion of the deliberations surrounding the decision to take out Usama bin Ladin. In that discussion Clapper goes over the various assessments of the likelihood of Bin Ladin’s actually being present in the compound in Pakistan and reviews the range of opinions the president’s senior national security team held concerning the likelihood of Bin Ladin’s presence and how to proceed. (151–52) In observing how President Barack Obama left the Situ-

ation Room to consider his decision privately, Clapper provides the source of the title of this memoir, recalling George Patton’s advice to battle commanders before a battle: “The time to take counsel of your fears is before you make an important battle decision. That’s the time to listen to every fear you can imagine. When you have collected all the facts and fears and made your decision, turn off the fears and go ahead.”

One of the most interesting aspects of *Facts and Fears* is how Clapper’s view of how intelligence analysis evolved during his career as an intelligence officer. He writes that analysis is about hard work and persistence and underscores that it is difficult to draw inferences from spotty information, all of which is true. Looking back at his early years as a young military intelligence officer in Vietnam, Clapper bitingly recalls that intelligence was “largely historical, telling people what had happened, not what was happening and certainly not about forecasting what was going to happen.” (22) This is fascinating and a bit jarring for most intelligence analysts today, who tend to see analysis as anything but history. This experience may also help explain why he signed an update to Intelligence Community Directive 203 on analytic standards and integrity. The revision laid out specific probabilistic language to express likelihood and requires analysts to be clear about their underlying assumptions.

The general’s take on what intelligence can and cannot do adds to the age-old debate about intelligence success and failure and what we can reasonably expect from analysis. Sometimes as DNI, Clapper felt compelled to remind President Obama and Congress that the IC is not clairvoyant. Most intelligence analysts and managers will agree with Clapper’s belief that the goal of analysis is to “reduce uncertainty for decisionmakers as much as possible.” (49, 311)

Chief among the analytic limits that Clapper calls out is the difficulty with assessing an actor’s intent. His first taste with this problem came the mid-1980s when he discovered he could not come up with a system for un-

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ambiguously warning of a North Korean attack on South Korea. (48) Clapper sees the inability to assess intent as the reason why, despite issuing warnings about Middle East instability and assessing what could happen in Egypt, the IC was unable to predict that then-Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak would step down in February 2011 or that the self-immolation of a fruit seller in Tunisia would touch off the Arab Spring. (159–61). The former DNI points to the difficulty with assessing an actor's will—a close cousin of intent—which is, for example, why the IC was unable to assess that the Iraqi Army would flee Mosul when ISIS attacked, even though the Iraqis had several years of US military training and possessed superior weapons. (81)

Clapper's argument about intangibles, like intent and will, may not satisfy all. When recounting Russia's annexation of Crimea, Clapper states that assessing Russian President Vladimir Putin's intentions is difficult and that even though the IC had warned for days that Russian soldiers without insignia were positioning themselves around Crimea and that Russian troops were massing near the border, the IC "never expected Russia to actually seize control, much less formally annex the peninsula." (261) Part of the strategic warning function is to extrapolate intentions from actions and capabilities, and many analytic techniques have been developed and used since 9/11 to help analysts think creatively about such problems.

Clapper is not simply aiming to explain away his role in miscalls or missteps. He forthrightly points out his own role as the head of the National Imagery and Mapping Agency in getting assessments about Iraq's WMD program wrong in the months before the US entry into Iraq in 2003. (99) Similarly, he points out the mistakes the IC made when it unwittingly drafted talking points for the Obama administration about the Benghazi attack, particularly since he was aware that initial reports in crises are often wrong. (179) He does not linger over these failures, however. Clapper highlights a few successes, but he does not hype them. For example, he matter-of-factly points out that following the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 in July 2014, the IC had the Russians "dead to rights" in just a few hours, fusing data from national technical means. (266–67)

Clapper's memoir provides a sober view of the role of intelligence in policymaking. He argues that intelligence can provide policymakers with a decision advantage but

that ultimately it is up to policymakers to decide what action to take. Clapper's first dose of this plain truth came when he was a briefer for Gen. William Westmoreland in 1966 and realized the general was simply not listening to his briefs. Clapper describes this as "probably the darkest moment" of his career. (24) In a somewhat similar vignette, he retells how, after he had become DNI, the Obama administration kept raising the evidentiary bar for proof that Syrian President Bashar Al-Asad had used chemical weapons, showing some frustration that the president chose not to act on its own "red line" for action, even when the intelligence unambiguously showed that Asad had used such weapons. (239) Although not explicit, Clapper seems to arrive at the conclusion that facts are the basis of intelligence and that vision is the basis of policy. And while facts feed into policymaking, in the pursuit of a vision, policymakers sometimes set facts aside.

The general does not explicitly provide a list of leadership tips in *Facts and Fears*, but he provides several lessons learned throughout his memoir. This helps set his book apart from many other memoirs from intelligence professionals. The tips he provides are about workforce engagement, knowing when to end a program, the value of diversity, and navigating the public record of intelligence. For example, Clapper mentions that when leading DIA through a reorganization, he failed to engage the workforce enough, making the task more difficult than it needed to be. (73) In making changes to the office of the DNI, he put that experience to good use, which made for a smoother transition. (146)

The lesson Clapper offers on navigating public attention to intelligence is that intelligence professionals should correct the public record when they can, but not at the expense of compromising intelligence programs. This lesson comes from Clapper's long running fracas from a gaffe he made during congressional testimony. Clapper mistakenly answered a question he thought was about actions the IC was conducting under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, when in fact the question was about the Patriot Act. Though repeatedly chastised, he refrained from correcting the record until the program in question was exposed by Edward Snowden's unauthorized leaks. (208–10)

On sustaining or cutting programs, Clapper is fond of saying "when riding a dead horse, it is best to dismount." By this he means leaders should avoid running the IC on

bureaucratic momentum and herculean efforts to save pet programs if the programs have outlived their usefulness. Rather, IC leaders need to be clear-eyed about priorities and the most effective means of achieving those goals, particularly in the face of budget cuts. In this vein, the memoir's discussion of the IC budget cycle and the long-term damage that government shutdowns and continuing resolutions have on program development will not be of interest to all, but the section is a must read for anyone who aspires to IC leadership.

During his career, Clapper struggled at times with “company policy” to leave policy decisions to policymakers. For example, he describes giving his private input to President Obama on Afghanistan after an NSC meeting, consciously aware he was stepping beyond his objective role and explaining to an irate Obama that it was inappropriate for him raise his points during the NSC meeting. (147) He similarly recounts that he got more involved than he should have in discussions with senior policymakers on the US response to China's theft of Office of Personnel Management data. Specifically he strayed into the policy discussion by arguing that the US response

would set a precedent that might come back to “haunt” the United States in the future. (297)

As promised, *Facts and Fears* returns in its lengthy final two chapters to the subject of Russian involvement in the 2016 election and cyber warfare—and the multiple congressional hearings and meetings surrounding the subjects and the president-elect's reaction to them. Throughout, readers will see growing personal commitment to continuing to “speak truth to power”—in this case, to the American people.” (400) For this reviewer, General Clapper's desire to raise public awareness of intelligence issues carries with it considerable risk of straining IC ties to current policymakers (or others) who may take his perspectives as official—and political—IC points of view, notwithstanding the disclaimer that appears behind the title page: “All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official positions or views of the US government, specifically the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the US Intelligence Community.” Such a statement accompanies the published work of every author subject to an IC prepublication review, just as it does on the first page of this review.



