

Intelligence in Public Media

Truth to Power: A History of the U.S. National Intelligence Council

Robert Hutchings and Gregory F. Treverton, eds. (Oxford University Press, 2019), 242 pp.

Reviewed by Roger Z. George

The edited volume, *Truth to Power*, is a small but significant step toward documenting the remarkable role of the Intelligence Community's most often examined and criticized analytic organization, the National Intelligence Council (NIC). As a former national intelligence officer interested in this institution, I eagerly applauded the co-editors' plans for the publication. Given my own association with the NIC, readers might write me off as an apologist for the organization, but that would miss the point of this review, namely to objectively assess this volume's contribution, just as the NIC seeks to reveal "truths" to those in power.

To be honest, the volume should not have been subtitled "A History of the National Intelligence Council." The eight contributors, all former NIC chairmen, span the years 1993 to 2017. A better subtitle might have been "The NIC After the Cold War." Its role in the 1970s and 1980s is briefly, though deftly, summarized in the introductory chapter by co-editor Robert Hutchings. He examines the legacy of the Board of National Estimates and the challenge of providing strategic analysis found in NIEs until the board was replaced by national intelligence officers (1974) and the subsequent creation of the council to be led by a chairman (1979). As Hutchings notes, the NIC struggled to distinguish itself and its estimates from CIA and its publications. This remains a challenge despite many efforts to bring in outside experts as NIOs and to present IC-wide assessments that do not solely reflect CIA's intelligence judgments. (13) Not surprisingly, the NIC's strategic intelligence role has never been easy. Even in the best of times, for example, when the IC had former CIA Director George H.W. Bush as president, "rarely was strategic analysis sought out or heeded." (14)

Having edited several volumes containing contributions from practitioners and academics, I recognize the difficulty of weaving together, as Hutchings and Treverton have done, the perspectives of eight very different NIC chairmen, each of whom served under a variety of presidents, bureaucratic pressures, and politics. Two chairmen were professional intelligence officers from the CIA (John

Gannon and John Helgerson), while five others had come from academia or the think-tank world and had previously served in policymaking or intelligence positions (Joseph Nye, Richard Cooper, Robert Hutchings, Thomas Fingar, and Gregory Treverton). Some were in charge of producing strategic intelligence that addressed the post-Cold War challenges of globalization and new transnational threats. The others' tenures were deeply affected by the aftermath of 9/11 and the Iraq War.

Joseph Nye, Richard Cooper, and John Gannon cover the years after the end of Cold War period—five officers chaired the NIC from 1991 to June 2001, when Gannon's tenure ended. The three highlight their efforts to refine estimative methods to include multiple futures, to leverage outside expertise, and to adjust strategic analysis to the beginnings of the IT-revolution. Many veterans of the NIC would applaud Nye's assertion that "no one can predict the future because there is no one future." (16) To paraphrase Nye, it is better to *think* about the future than to try to predict it. Building on this notion, Cooper's chapter places great emphasis on his initiative to bring about the now well-known *Global Trends* series, in order to exploit the open source world and build outreach to non-US government experts. As part of this project, Cooper highlights the NIC's service to the IC in legitimizing new intelligence topics (humanitarian crises, environment, migration, etc.) and creating new NIO positions for economics and global issues. Gannon's chapter, in addition, reflects his efforts to combat bureaucratic inertia and security concerns about introducing the NIC to the internet.^a

Gannon goes on to foreshadow the attention given in later chapters to NIOs as the true measure of the NIC's reputation. These dozen or so senior analysts, more than the NIE products, are what produced impact and relevance for the NIC. They must be recognized specialists but also well versed in intelligence practices and

a. The *Global Trends* series can readily be found on the internet on ODNI.gov. <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/digital-extras/previous-reports>

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personally connected to those sitting in the White House, State Department, and Pentagon. Indeed, NIOs often found it necessary to “orally estimate” to an NSC senior director or assistant secretary. They were also a major conduit for probing questions and follow-up taskings for the broader IC.

In the post 9/11 era, three chairmen grappled with the fallout of global terrorism and the prominence of the Iraq and Afghan wars. John Helgerson narrates how he and DCI George Tenet exited CIA Headquarters after the 9/11 attacks to begin planning for the post-attack requests for intelligence. Helgerson admits that the NIC’s role was less clear as “Everything was tactical; no one had the leisure to focus on larger, strategic considerations.” (89) In that environment, he strove to shorten NIEs and continued work on perennial topics like the Balkans, Russia, and China. Despite the fact that the infamous 2002 Iraq WMD estimate was prepared during his tenure, Helgerson asserts that no one in the NIC or IC generally “thought there was an intelligence-based case to go to war with Iraq.” (96)

It was left to Helgerson’s successor Robert Hutchings, however, to deal with the repercussions that estimate had on the NIC. Hutchings reflects that he had assumed his chairmanship knowing he did not agree with much of the Bush administration’s policies toward the Middle East. His mission was to insure that the NIC continued to speak truth to power in its estimates. He also recreated the NIO for Transnational Threats (aka Terrorism) in order to insure that the IC took a strategic view of the issue and put it into a context that would not further contribute to what he feared was an “overmilitarized response” to the global war on terror. (108) Recognizing that the NIC was very much under attack for its flawed NIE, Hutchings nonetheless chides some of the post-mortems for their “hindsight” bias and criticizes the subsequent 2004 intelligence reforms because they “further divide” intelligence responsibilities without increasing the DNI’s authorities and staffing. (120)

NIC Chairmen Thomas Fingar and Chris Kojm reflect on the NIC’s adjustment to becoming part of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the bureaucratic and procedural changes this reform introduced. Fingar, as the INR director who signed off on the 2002 Iraq WMD estimate, defined his mission to restore the IC’s credibility and morale. Under DNI Negroponte he had almost carte blanc to improve analysis, although he resisted the

temptation to restructure the IC that so many reformers often attempt. Instead, he describes how he used his position and the NIC as an opportunity to introduce more rigorous analytic tradecraft, to knit together the IC-wide analytic community through more and better tools for collaboration, and to redesign the NIE process to ensure collection agencies took more responsibility for validating the information used in estimates.

Chris Kojm took over the NIC when DNI James Clapper decided to introduce major structural changes aimed at integrating analysis and collection. Hence, Kojm describes how he struggled to accept the imposition of the National Intelligence Managers (NIMs), who would sit over the NIC and the NIOs. While Kojm says he philosophically understood the need for senior managers who would integrate analysis and collection better, he laments the bureaucratic turf battles around whether a NIM would replace the customary NIO as the back bencher at senior policy meetings. Symbolically, if not substantively, this bureaucratic loss undercut the NIC’s status and the NIO’s ability to speak for their communities of analysts. For those of us who have served in government, the DNI’s decision to have NIMs rate their counterpart NIOs’ performance further salted the NIC’s professional wounds and made it harder to recruit accomplished experts.^a

In the penultimate chapter, Greg Treverton, who had served as the NIC’s vice chairman in the 1990s, opens his narrative with the observation that it was a very different place as a result of the preceding terrorism crises, structural reforms, and current intelligence needs. What he found was a NIC saddled with preparation of detailed briefing books for deputies and principals committee meetings that were held non-stop and drew NIOs away from more strategic work. NIE production dropped precipitously from previous levels, to be replaced by shorter, time sensitive memos to specific senior officials. Treverton lauds the professionalism of the NIOs, who in lieu of the NIE, were now the essence of what made the NIC relevant. He laments, “The NIC was, and probably still is, too small to carry out its mission, dramatically expanded from strategic intelligence to include intense current intelligence support to the government’s main policymaking committees.” (195)

a. Kojm offered his take on leading the NIC to *Studies in Intelligence* in 2015: <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol-59-no-2/pdfs/Kojm-NIC-in-Changing-Times-June-2015.pdf>

Looking at the eight chairmen and chapters described above one can ask, “Is the sum greater than the whole of its parts?” In some ways, yes. Each chapter contributes to a picture described best by John Gannon as the “hard scrabble world of intelligence.” (69) The NIC, he asserts, is not simply a government version of an academic think-tank but more a player in the policy game, where the NIC’s judgments were under political pressures, if not outright politicization. Each of the chapters contain vignettes of controversial NIEs, ones that either were “inconvenient truths” to uninterested or hostile policymakers. All the chapters note the struggle to improve the products to suit an ever-changing and accelerating policy process.

To one degree or another each chairman also provides evidence and examples of a National Intelligence Council that is the most transparent (and, perhaps because of this, vulnerable) element of the Intelligence Community’s activities and performance. Without the NIC, the American public would know a lot less about intelligence. Some chairmen sought to speak more publicly about their duties and contributions in order to educate; a few more than others also reached out to non-government experts to encourage exchanges of views. The *Global Trends* series exemplifies the NIC’s goal to collaborate with the outside world and indirectly encourage those of us inside to be more open to unclassified sources of information and insight. The NIC, in short, was a window on the world. However, often the IC’s the security restrictions made it appear to be made of one-way glass.

Finally, these reflections also provide the reader with an opportunity to consider the relevance and significance of “strategic” analysis. Although hard to define, most observers would agree that strategic analysis must look ahead and identify significant challenges and opportunities for US policymakers. Indeed, many of the chapters single out instances when the NIC’s foresight was on display. For example, the NIC’s 1995 foreign ballistic missile threat projections regarding North Korea and Iran were roundly criticized by the Rumsfeld Commission but in hindsight now look to be about right. Few credited at the time the prescience of the 1990 estimate forecasting the breakup of Yugoslavia, which the Bush administration ignored,^a or the NIC’s early work on the geo-politics of global climate change, or the *GT 2015* (published in 2000) identifying China as a potential challenge. What comes through is a sense that when policymakers perceive long-range forecasts to be negative or not part of their immediate agenda, they likely will ignore them rather than act. So, does strategic analysis truly raise the level of debate, as Sherman Kent tried to convince us? As a former NIO, I continue to believe (and hope) that there are a few policymakers who will look beyond their inboxes and think about the future.

a. See the CSI-sponsored RAND study by Greg Treverton and Renanah Miles, *CIA Support to Policymakers: Unheeded Warning of War: Why Policymakers Ignored the 1990 Yugoslavia Estimate* at <https://cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/csi-intelligence-and-policy-monographs/pdfs/unheeded-warning-yugoslavia-NIE.pdf>.



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