Intelligence Theory: Key Questions and Debates

Peter Gill, Stephen Marrin, and Mark Phythian, eds., New York: Routledge Press, 2009. 252 pp, incl. bibliography and index.

Reviewed by J. M. Webb

Improving national intelligence is something all can agree is important. Better intelligence enhances security and prosperity and, one hopes, helps create a safer world. In the wake of 9/11 the number of articles, books, and blogs on intelligence has soared, but very little has been groundbreaking.

One wishes that *Intelligence Theory: Key Questions and Debates* (produced by the Routledge Press Studies in Intelligence [no relation to this journal] series) had offered more than it does. The 13 contributors to this collection of 12 essays are prominent scholars of intelligence—their collected works would fill a bookcase, a number have published articles in this journal, and their teaching credentials are solid. They have been struggling with this topic for some years now. Many were participants in a workshop on the subject of intelligence theory sponsored by the director of national intelligence in June 2005.[1] Most, if not all, as members of the Intelligence Studies Section of the International Studies Association, have turned this nut over and over in annual meetings of the association since then.

The work's goal, as it is described in this volume, is worthy: The writers hope to formalize the study of intelligence with the goal of influencing US intelligence policy and educating the public about intelligence issues (212–13). They call for a lasting academic discipline of intelligence, which is sorely needed, and hope to lay a solid foundation for general theories that will, in their words, "explain intelligence as it is practiced everywhere" and that will be seen as "relevant by scholars wherever they are based" (1–2; 209).

In this attempt, they join a long historical line of scholars and intelligence professionals who have studied the field of intelligence. In addition to the classics—Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, Thucydides's *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Clauswitz's *On War*—modern scholars like Klaus Knorr in the 1960s and Walter Laquer in the 1980s, made the case for intelligence studies and called for theories of intelligence.[2] Because intelligence literature itself is mostly historical—covering things like the development of intelligence services,

[1] Gregory Treverton, et al., *Toward a Theory of Intelligence: A Workshop Report*, (Arlington, VA: Rand Corporation, 2006).

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collection methods, use of intelligence, operations, how technology fits into intelligence, differences between intelligence and counter intelligence, intelligence analysis, and of course "intelligence failures"—intelligence theories have long been sought. Less common has been the kind of effort made in this volume to consciously assemble a collection of writings to serve as a foundation for an intelligence discipline. Yet, as the book's inconclusive subtitle, *Key Questions and Debates,* suggests, four or more years of cogitation has not led to a coherent theory, and as much as the attempt is to be applauded, it is clear that efforts need to be redoubled—or at least more sharply focused.

How does this work fall short, then? First, the essays demonstrate that, after years of thought, scholars are still struggling with definitions. The volume opens with discussion of definitions in chapters by historians David Kahn and Michael Warner. In "An Historical Theory of Intelligence," Kahn concludes simply that it is information of one form or another. Michael Warner, in a contribution that replays his 2002[3] review and synthesis of the problems of defining intelligence, introduces greater complexity and highlights the existence of an "impasse" over contradictory definitions that is far from over. Not terribly helpfully, however, he goes on to assert that "arguments over the definition of intelligence resemble perhaps nothing more so much as a trademark dispute" (17). Students of intelligence understand how problematic this is. Warner himself states, "Without a clear sense of the dependent variable in the equation, we find it difficult to understand which independent factors cause and affect intelligence phenomena" (17). Later, Peter Gill agrees, writing, "If we cannot agree on what we are discussing, then we shall struggle to generate understanding and explanation in an important field of political and social activity" (213). Unfortunately, Gill doesn't help either by opting to lay out another definition instead of working with those that had been tabled in other essays (217–19).

Second—perhaps because too many of the essays in this collection are attempts to boil down full-length books never really intended to deal with specific questions of theory—the debate promised in the subtitle never really takes place. Instead, the authors essentially talk past each other. For example, several contributors outline elements of what might serve as building blocks for the field, but the arguments advanced tend to contradict one another or stress sharply differing approaches without explaining why one approach is superior to another. At the same time, authors appear to undercut their own arguments. Principal editor Mark Phythian writes that intelligence studies (IS) needs to "establish itself as a distinct subject area," but he goes on to say that traditional international relations (IR) theory on "structural realism" provides a "theoretical basis for addressing key [intelligence] questions" (61). As a subset of IR, then, what is the benefit of IS? In their chapters, Richard Betts, Glenn Hastedt, and B. Douglas Skelley argue for an organizational theory approach to the subject. James Shep-

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[2] Klaus Knorr, *Foreign Intelligence and the Social Sciences, Research Monograph No. 17,* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), Walter Laqueur, *A World of Secrets: The Uses and Limits of Intelligence* (New York: Basic Books, 1985)

[3] Michael Warner. "Wanted: A Definition of 'Intelligence,'" *Studies in Intelligence* 46, No. 3 (2002). From Warner's earlier work, "intelligence is secret state or group activity to understand or influence foreign entities." Rob Johnston makes a slight but useful modification by adding that the activity is focused on domestic entities in addition to foreign ones—in *Analytic Culture in the US Intelligence Community* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2005.

tycki (167–80) then suggests sociology can serve as an alternative theoretical base for intelligence studies. Here, again, the authors don't really debate the costs and benefits of these different approaches, let alone lay out what should be the key elements of the debate. Nor do they present a breadth of evidence from around the world to support their cases.

Third, *Intelligence Theory* focuses too narrowly on failure. Phythian argues that the "core focus" of the study of intelligence "should be on the causes of intelligence failures" (62). Betts, Hastedt, Skelley, Jennifer Sims, and Loch Johnson all focus on explaining intelligence failures. None of these authors does any stocktaking to illuminate how prevalent intelligence failures are. So it's impossible to know if failures are the exception or the norm in intelligence activities, nor is there an attempt to assess the importance of failures in general. This work has been done to some extent by two former intelligence officers. Richard Kerr, a former deputy director for intelligence and deputy director of CIA, wrote in a chapter in *Analyzing Intelligence* that in his survey of CIA analyses from 1950 to 2000 he found that CIA had more analytic successes than failures.

In the same book, Jack Davis argued in addition that "little is made publicly of the failure of analysts to anticipate favorable developments for US interests," which suggests that not all intelligence failures have the same effect or matter equally. The Kerr and Davis essays suggest that in focusing on failure *Intelligence Theory* is highlighting outlier cases with limited utility in construction of an overall theory.[4] To be sure, intelligence failures are important. They need to be studied, and we need to learn from them. But intelligence as an object of academic study should be far more dynamic and rich than just examination of failure. If scholars of intelligence, like those contributing to this book, want to inspire and establish a discipline of intelligence that will go beyond case studies of US intelligence, in particular of failure, a more robust set of questions and debates is still needed.

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[4] Richard Kerr, "The Track Record: CIA Analysis from 1950 to 2000," and Jack Davis, "Why Bad Things Happen to Good Analysts," in *Analyzing Intelligence* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008).