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Reports

GEIGER

A Report on Intelligence Alert Memoranda

Prepared by the

Product Review Division, Intelligence Community Staff

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A REPORT ON INTELLIGENCE ALERT MEMORANDA

October 1975

This study, prepared by the Product Review Division of the Intelligence Community Staff, responds to a request by the Director of Central Intelligence for a review of *Intelligence Alert Memoranda* produced to date. He wished to know both how well the system has served him and the community and how well it has served the high-level consumer. This report has been circulated among USIB Principals, and they have formally concurred in the review's findings. The document, "Procedures for Alert Memoranda," dated 9 January 1975, is being revised to reflect the recommendations noted in the study.

KEY FINDINGS

In view of the numbers of persons who either were important recipients or had some role in producing Alert Memoranda, a unanimity of views on all aspects of this intelligence medium was neither expected nor achieved. There was, however, substantial agreement among both producers and senior-level consumers on the following key points:

—The basic concept of the Alert Memorandum (AM) is sound. Those that have been produced to date have by and large done what they were designed to do.

—Alert Memoranda are being seen—and their message noted—by principals and senior aides in the national security decision process; they are not being short-stopped by lower-level staff mechanisms.

—The system is not being seriously abused by overuse. Given the circumstances which led to their preparation, few of the fifteen Alert Memoranda so far produced are judged to have been hasty or ill-advised. In general, those consulted judged this on the whole to be a good record.

—Conversely, no serious charges have been leveled at the community for neglecting the AM form when it might have been used. (One possible such case—the Mayaguez incident—was mentioned by one respondent, and this point is discussed later in the paper.)

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—There was general recognition among most of those interviewed that the production process has evolved—and improved—with the passage of time and as experience in this form has been gained.

Nevertheless, differences of view—some fundamental in nature—surfaced on a number of points of form and substance. The more important of these are:

—There are varying perceptions of the appropriate criteria for selecting particular situations to be handled by Alert Memoranda. This reflects a lack of consensus on the relative weights that should be placed on how important the subject is to US interests, how quickly it needs to be addressed by policy councils, and how likely it is to occur.

—Some respondents suggested that it would be helpful to have a more standardized format—one that had better attention-getting qualities and ensuring that each AM uniformly addressed certain questions. Others emphasized the values of an unconstrained form and style.

—Although the AM was designed as a community mechanism—and the National Intelligence Officer (NIO) has sought the views of other agencies when time permitted—the Alert Memorandum is still viewed by many to be either a CIA product or as reflecting a personal concern of the DCI rather than of the community. Close involvement by other agencies in recommending or participating in producing Alert Memoranda has been minimal—far less than we judge to have been the goal of the DCI and the USIB in establishing the system.

The findings are covered in greater detail in following sections, and recommendations are set forth beginning on page 10. The recommendations themselves are relatively minor. Indeed, the flexibility of the process has been important to its evolution and we see little need to introduce major new restrictive or prescriptive provisions.

An exception involves a few practices that have grown out of experience in producing Alert Memoranda and that now have become normative to the process. They should—in our view—be codified in the USIB-approved "Procedures for Alert Memoranda," dated 9 January 1975. There are three of these:

—The practice of speedily notifying Washington area intelligence operations centers as soon as a decision has been made to produce an Alert Memorandum.

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—The practice—when time permits—of promptly notifying US embassies and other appropriate field elements in the geographic area discussed that an Alert Memorandum is in process, with an invitation for comments and suggestions.

—The practice of electrically disseminating the finished paper to those same embassies and field elements.

In addition, we believe community participation would be made easier if—following close behind notification of other agencies that an AM is being prepared—the responsible NIO would forward to those same agencies an LDX statement briefly covering the salient facts of the case, including critical source references, a statement of the intended thrust of the paper, and an indication of the planned time of issuance and the extent of coordination sought.

The remaining recommendations for the most part can be met if the DCI and USIB place heavier emphasis on existing procedures to try to meet problems seen by some of our respondents. USIB discussion, for example, might help to clarify some of these issues. This particularly applies to the question of how to achieve greater community involvement in initiating and producing Alert Memoranda.

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INTRODUCTION

In a memorandum to USIB Principals dated 28 August 1974, the Director of Central Intelligence asked for early USIB consideration of a procedure for alerting the national policymaker "to the potential danger of an unfolding situation as early as possible in the unfolding process." Mr. Colby went on to say that the purpose of such an alerting mechanism would be "to put WSAG formally on notice that the community sees the possibility of a major problem, to inform it of steps taken to improve intelligence collection, and, if appropriate, to recommend that WSAG meet on the problem."

On 12 September the USIB agreed in principle to the idea, and the Intelligence Community Staff was directed to produce and coordinate within the community a statement on procedures. The completed document, "Procedures for Alert Memoranda," was approved by USIB and issued on 9 January 1975.

In the period since the subject was first raised at USIB, fifteen Alert Memoranda have been prepared. The first three of these were issued before formal USIB approval of the *Procedures,* but even those three were clearly responsive to the original DCI memorandum, and in accord with the USIB expression of approval. They have, therefore, been included in this survey. In all, the list of *Alert Memoranda* to 1 August include:

Alert Memoranda
Produced During September 1974 to August 1975

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A case study approach was used in this review. For each Alert Memorandum produced we:

—interviewed those persons who were key to its initiation and production;

—reviewed with them the evidence and background circumstances relating to the memorandum;

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—consulted with others in the community on their views on the production and coordination process; and

—sought the views of consumers concerning the impact of the Alert Memoranda and their value to the policymaking process.

Summary statements of the results of this survey of the individual Alert Memoranda are included in the Annex.

We were able to be more thorough in our coverage of the circumstances surrounding the initiation, production, and issuance of the Alert Memoranda, relative to what we could accomplish in the survey of the *impact* of the alerts on national security *policymakers*. But even on the consumer side we feel we have obtained fairly accurate reflections of the views of WSAG Principals on the general question of the utility of the alerting system, largely through discussions with their senior aides.

We also considered major differences among Alert Memoranda in form, coverage, and objectives. And in discussions with both producers and consumers, we sought to identify—with benefit of hindsight—any that seemed to have been ill-advised and hasty or, alternatively, any subjects that might profitably have been addressed by Alert Memoranda but were not.

And finally, we reviewed the procedures used to produce, coordinate, and issue the Alert Memorandum to determine if changes in the USIB instructions—contained in USIB-D-28.5/8, "Procedures for Alert Memoranda," 9 January 1975—might usefully be made.

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DISCUSSION

The Alert Memorandum grew out of the need for a distinct intelligence product for senior officials for communicating information and analysis about world events which—if they unfolded in certain ways—would importantly affect US interests or require a US response, or both.* A great deal of current intelligence is of course routinely devoted to alerting, but if this material appears only in routine publications, policymakers may not have their attention sufficiently directed to the more ominous situations. To communicate effectively, a special-purpose vehicle was needed. Hence the Alert Memorandum.

No important disagreement appears to exist among either producers or consumers about the basic concept of the Alert Memorandum or about the way the system has functioned, although some differences exist on how it might be improved. By and large, our respondents feel that the vehicle has done what it was designed to do. The primary audience is small—the Principals of the Washington Special Action Group and their senior aides. The number of alerts issued—fifteen in all over a ten-month period—has not been so great as to degrade the currency in the eyes of the consumer. The memoranda have reached the senior officials and their top aides expeditiously. Their contents have been considered and in some instances diplomatic actions have been taken following the issuance of an Alert Memorandum. It is not possible to say, however, whether the action was taken as a direct result of the AM. This is so because, in the main, an Alert Memorandum only places higher intelligence emphasis on situations which policymakers already know something about from routine reporting, and on which they are already being advised from within their own departments.

The Threshold: A Fundamental Issue

The alerting function is both basic and critical to intelligence, and maximum lead time is necessary for policymakers to attempt to ward off the impending threat or prepare to deal with it. But the question of which issues to single out for treatment by an Alert Memorandum is not clear-cut. Each situation calling for consideration of an Alert Memorandum has had its own unique mix of *importance, probability*, and *urgency*. Varying views on how to balance this mix have generated most of the disagreements among producers and consumers on how the process ought to evolve.

Most of those consulted appear to agree that, in practice, the more drastic the impact of a threatening situation the sooner intelligence should alert, and for alerts on major contingencies it has normally been accepted that even a low probability of occurrence does not rule out the need for an alert. But some of our respondents have argued for a higher threshold of probability than has been used in some of the alerts that have been issued so far. For them, the Alert Memorandum is a somewhat perilous device. The alarm it signals is, by its nature, often based on fragmentary evidence quickly considered, and the chances of error are high. They would argue that the credibility of the AM vehicle will quickly be lost if it comes to be seen as having a low batting average.

For others, the primary value of the Alert Memorandum is that it permits a judicious and carefully stated warning about potential situations of *considerable importance*. In their view, the *likelihood* that the event in question will occur and how soon it may be upon us are less important factors than its potential *impact* on US interests. Some respondents—both producers and consumers—emphasized that alerts

*This discussion leaves aside the question of strategic warning, for which the Alert Memorandum was not designed.

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which focus on events weeks or even months ahead are the most useful, in that they avoid telling people what they already know and are worried about and they allow time for preventive actions.

The present broadly worded definition of Alert Memoranda—"warning of developments abroad of major concern to the US"—accommodates a wide range of views on the issue of balance among probability, impact, and urgency—and this is probably healthy. The DCI's memorandum to USIB Principals clearly stated that "we should be prepared to alert WSAG to the *possibility* of a *grave* crisis, and accept the brickbats that come with crying wolf." And clearly the community would be risking charges of failure if it did not alert the policymaker to a threatening event a day or two away on the grounds that he *might* already be worried about it.

Too Many or Too Few?

The views expressed on this basic question were as varied as those expressed on the closely related "threshold" issue.

Those who would prefer higher thresholds of immediacy, importance, and probability were the ones to observe that the system has, if anything, been flawed by overuse. And the converse is equally true. But by and large these judgments were not severe. The tenor of the responses in virtually all cases was tempered by a recognition that the issue is highly subjective and that, in any event, it was not a question of *very many* too many or *very many* too few.

On the one side, a very strict interpretation of the words in Mr. Colby's 28 August memorandum to USIB, which were specific that "we must alert only on those matters that should engage WSAG," might have eliminated some Alert Memoranda that were, in fact, issued. For example, the alert issued on the unravelling of the coalition in Laos could be judged from the contemporary armchair to have been pretty close to the margin on that score. In another case—concerning the [redacted] one senior official said that the Alert Memorandum dealt with matters already well known and under active policy deliberation, and was thus not needed.

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Our look at events which might have spawned an Alert Memorandum, but did not, also generated few good candidates. Events that were considered and rejected, but which were still raised by some consumers as possible candidates include the rapid collapse of South Vietnam, the [redacted] As a rule, those issues raised as potential Alert Memoranda have been rejected for one of three reasons:

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—the specific event did not meet the test of constituting "a major concern to the US," or

—the warning had been transmitted to policymakers by other means, or

—intelligence information was not clear enough to trace the direction of future events with confidence.

The case of the Mayaguez was also raised, but largely in a hypothetical context. In the view of some of our respondents, had the community correctly interpreted the information at its disposal, an Alert Memorandum should have been issued before the seizure of the vessel and its crew. But the issue is not clear-cut. One view—expressed largely by intelligence analysts—is that even had the community somehow anticipated the Cambodian action against the US vessel, the National Intelligence Daily (NID),

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National Intelligence Bulletin (NIB), and Defense Intelligence Notice (DIN) would more likely have been chosen as the primary reporting media. US preventive action—i.e., diversion of shipping—could have been accomplished by standing procedures without involving WSAG.

Community Involvement

The Alert Memorandum was conceived as an expression of community concern, but it is more commonly viewed by members of the community—other than CIA—to be a CIA product. This single agency cast stems from the heavy use of CIA personnel for drafting and other support to the NIOs. And without exception all Alert Memoranda produced to date have been set in motion in CIA Headquarters Building.

Individual NIOs—in consultation with the DCI—have initiated the largest number of Alert Memoranda. Within CIA, both DDO and DDI components have recommended use of this product form in a number of instances. The role of other production agencies has been limited to consultation or coordination—where time permits—and even here there has often been little time available to effect significant modifications to the text. This is in part due to the convenience that comes from collocation, in part to considerations of timing. Individual NIOs report that a large number of the issuances to date have required quick responses and night and weekend activity, complicating quick and easy access to other agencies' production analysts and managers. Thus, the largely passive role played by most of the community is understandable under the circumstances, but it is clearly not what the Director and the USIB appeared to have in mind when they established the alerting vehicle.

On the other hand, the "single agency flavor" of the system does not appear to have troubled other members of the community unduly. Other agencies—primarily DIA, INR, and NSA—operate their own formal and informal means of exercising the alerting function for their own audience, and in large measure appear to be content to let the Alert Memorandum stand as a reflection of the personal concern of the DCI, produced under the aegis of his own staff arm.

There are some signs that greater community participation is being developed. As the Alert Memorandum has evolved and matured, improvements have been incorporated which will tend more and more to draw others into a recognition of common responsibility for the end product. For example, it has now become standard procedure to notify intelligence watch centers in Washington that an Alert Memorandum is in process as soon as a decision has been made. Similarly, it is becoming more common to notify appropriate US embassies and attaches with requests for comments, where it is appropriate and time allows. And the practice of electrical transmission of the finished product to relevant US officials abroad has been used on occasion. Expressions of dissent or alternative interpretations—totally absent in the first dozen Alert Memoranda produced—have shown up in more recent issuances. These practices—if encouraged—will help to overcome the lack of identification of other agencies with the finished product.

This is not to mean that there are no remaining problems. DIA, for example, has shown new concern very recently about what they see as barriers to full DIA participation in an AM. Both the NIOs and the IC Staff have been approached about DIA's need to get more information on sources and other relevant facts by LDX as early as possible. We expect this problem to reemerge from time to time when there is great urgency to get an AM out, particularly when this occurs outside normal working hours.

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It probably can never be totally solved for all occasions, but the NIOs and DIA working together can probably make improvements, and we include a recommendation that might help.

Ultimately, of course, for the product to become a truly community document, initiatives on the part of other agencies themselves will be required. Both the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Bureau of Intelligence and Research of the State Department have internal alerting mechanisms which could generate candidates for Alert Memoranda as well as drafts, and no formal barriers to this being done exist.

Terminating the Warning

One person interviewed—a relatively senior State Department aide—believed strongly that when a warning message is no longer valid it should—as in the CRITIC system—be officially terminated. Most of those with whom we discussed this subject conclude that when a threat recedes or rises to crisis proportions its path is normally so apparent to all concerned that one does not need to emphasize the obvious. This is a difficult question to address in the abstract, as each Alert Memorandum has its own life span. It would, for instance, appear gratuitous to officially terminate warning of an event that either would occur on the following day or not occur at all. But other situations can be foreseen where an official termination of the alert would have value. This would be valuable to collectors, for example, in cases where special collection efforts have been put into effect to monitor developments. On balance, a continued flexible approach on this issue recommends itself, with the responsibility for determining whether to officially terminate an alert left to the appropriate NIO.

Toward More Standardization?

In this survey a number of questions have been raised concerning the need for greater standardization in form, style, and content of Alert Memoranda. Even those who agree that flexibility is the primary strength of the medium have pointed to some areas in which they would like to see more uniformity, but in ways that were not overly constraining. The principal of these are:

—*Attention-getting quality:* Some respondents—both producers and consumers—felt that a distinctive stationery or cover sheet should be used. They pointed out that this would provide a clearer signal to "read me." No strong contrary views were expressed on this point.

—*Statements of impact and probability:* Some views were expressed concerning the considerable variability among the Alert Memoranda issued so far in the clarity and forcefulness with which these two major judgments are communicated. The plea seemed to be for a more explicit handling of the implications for US interests and the likelihood that the issue being discussed would in fact develop, rather than to introduce a mandatory format into the system.

—*An explicit time frame:* Again, there were variations noted in how clearly the time frame of the alert was expressed, and some of those interviewed observed that some Alert Memoranda were more lax in this regard than others. And, as above, this is more a request for more careful handling than for a standardized statement.

—*Note on special collection efforts:* The document "Procedures for Alert Memoranda" calls for explicit statements to the consumer concerning what

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special efforts the community is undertaking to monitor the situation. While this has generally been honored, the statements have varied from a simple statement that special collection efforts are being made on one extreme to very detailed statements about which collectors are being taxed, and how. The general judgment is that, inasmuch as the Alert Memoranda do raise the alert status of analysts and collectors and do generate special collection efforts, a more detailed statement of what is being done should be made insofar as possible.

—*Standard Dissemination:* A standard dissemination list for Alert Memoranda has been developed by the Deputy to the DCI for the NIOs, with provision for directing copies also to special recipients depending on the subject matter. This list has now grown to about 80 addressees. We suggest that this is quite a few too many, in view of the mandatory inclusion of the substance of each Alert Memorandum in the NID and NIB.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We recognized at the outset that this attempt to evaluate a new product over the first year of its existence would be, in effect, like following a moving target. From its inception, the Alert Memorandum has been seen as a flexible device, with procedures permitting wide latitude in format, style, subject matter, and methods of preparation and coordination. And in practice considerable latitude has been exercised. This has allowed refinements and improvements to be made as experience has been gained, and some of these should now—in our view—be incorporated into the USIB document "Procedures for Alert Memoranda." They are:

—The practice of speedily notifying Washington area intelligence operations centers as soon as a decision has been made to produce an Alert Memorandum.

—The practice—when time permits—of promptly notifying US embassies and other appropriate field elements in the geographic area discussed that an Alert Memorandum is in process, with an invitation for comments and suggestions.

—The practice of electrically disseminating the finished paper to those same embassies and field elements.

The Alert Memorandum has *not* developed as originally intended in one important way: it is not yet perceived by many of those we consulted to be truly a "community" document. While there has been greater community participation in more recent issuances, in no case has an AM been initiated or drafted outside of CIA Headquarters Building, and participation in coordination has at times still been less than might have been possible. These are not practices that can be easily legislated into existence, but we believe improvements are possible and desirable. We recommend, therefore, that the DCI raise the issue at USIB at an early date to express his concern, and that he encourage State/INR and DIA in particular to consider using the Alert Memorandum form on appropriate occasions when otherwise they would use their own internal devices to alert their principals to threatening situations. We also recommend that the responsible NIO forward to Washington area USIB watch centers at the earliest possible time—say within a half hour of the decision to produce an AM—a brief statement (via LDX) covering the intended thrust of the Alert Memorandum, along with source references on the specific information which triggered the decision. The NIO should also attempt to indicate what level of coordination is being sought as well as the planned dissemination date and time. This will enable others to engage quickly

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with the substantive issues, and it will also aid in developing special collection actions that might be called for.

The suggestion to adopt a standard cover sheet was made by several with whom we spoke. No strong contrary views were voiced to us, and we recommend that the practice be adopted. A standard highly visible cover would not only ensure that each AM will be recognized as such and will receive special handling and immediate attention, but could also be designed to display more prominently the degree of community involvement in its preparation.

A question was raised concerning the proper dissemination of Alert Memoranda. The dissemination list has now grown to include about 80 addressees. Now that the substance of the message carried by an AM is also carried in the NID and NIB, we recommend that dissemination be substantially reduced. We believe, however, that the DCI and the NIOs are the proper judges of who should receive each AM.

Another issue concerns the matter of updating or cancelling the warning when circumstances have materially changed. This has not been done in the case of any of the Alert Memoranda so far produced. A hard and fast rule would be difficult to develop and apply here, and we recommend a continued discretionary approach. Still, when the need for a high alert posture of the community changes significantly—either increasing or decreasing—we believe the NIO responsible for the AM should give careful consideration to formally notifying the AM recipients. In any event he will need to modify or cancel any intelligence collection efforts that were specially tasked because of the alert.

Finally, a number of those consulted charged that there has been considerable unevenness among the Alert Memoranda so far produced in the explicitness with which they treated questions of timing of the event being discussed, its likelihood, and its impact on US interests. There is some truth in the charge, and this reflects in large measure the variability among the events themselves and in the degree to which they could be known, understood, or predicted from the evidence available. We did note one other area of unevenness which can clearly be corrected—that of specifying what special collection and analytic efforts the community has set in train—and we recommend that the drafter seek to be clearer on this point. Beyond that, there is little chance that much could be done to ensure greater standardization in the handling of the substance of the Alert Memoranda. Indeed, much damage could be done by trying to do so. In the end, however, it is a matter largely for the professional judgment of the drafters, coordinators, and reviewing officials on how best to make the message clear and how far to go in stating probability.

The recommendations of this study are being incorporated into new guidelines for the production of Alert Memoranda, and this document is being circulated for USIB approval.

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ANNEX

REVIEW OF THE PRODUCTION PROCESS FOR INDIVIDUAL ALERT MEMORANDA

September 1974—July 1975

Note: For convenience, the individual summaries are numbered. The Alert Memoranda themselves do *not* carry numbers, and we are not proposing that they do so.

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