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CRITIQUES OF SOME RECENT BOOKS ON INTELLIGENCE

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AND NATIONAL SECURITY.
By *H. H. Ransom*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
1958. Pp. 272. \$4.50)

This is the best study that has been written on the development, organization, and problems of the US intelligence business. The author declares that his goal is "to describe contemporary central intelligence insofar as this can be done from nonsecret sources." This goal he has admirably attained; it is remarkable indeed how much can be learned from "nonsecret" sources if they are industriously and skillfully used. The tone of the book is throughout temperate and scholarly. The reader will find an excellent brief discussion of what intelligence is, and of how it is supposed to operate. He will find good summary accounts of the history, functions, and present organization of all the IAC member agencies, and of CIA itself. Curious outsiders will learn a good deal that is new to them, and students in CIA training courses will find this an excellent textbook.

To a great — perhaps excessive — degree the story centers about National Intelligence Estimates. Partly, no doubt, this is because the existence of these estimates and the general manner of their production is no secret. But partly it is because the author entertains the highest notion of their significance. "No development in American governmental institutions in recent years is more important than the evolution of the mechanism for producing the National Intelligence Estimate," he says. This mechanism is accurately and quite fully described. And there is much explanation of why successful policies can only be made on the basis of good information and sound estimates.

But the author runs into trouble when he attempts to say how good National Intelligence Estimates really are. Even if he had been given all the texts of all the estimates he would not have found it easy to arrive at a judgment of their validity.

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Recent Books

As it is, the best he can do is to quote people like Admiral Radford, who says that we always overestimate the strength and capabilities of the Soviets, and other people like Joseph Alsop, who says that we always underestimate them. The reader will not be much wiser after such quotations; indeed he may well wonder why Alsop should be cited at all as an authority on the subject.

Then the author worries about the dangers of "intelligence by committee" — the perils of a watered-down consensus. He fears that there may not be enough weight given to variant opinions. "On the most important of questions," says he, "is likely to be found the greatest variety of dissenting views." This is a commonly held notion, which the present reviewer believes to be false. The fact is that there is not often much difference of opinion in the intelligence community on "the most important of questions" — it is on the less important that argument is most apt to be sharp. Indeed, most of the time devoted to coordinating the text of *Estimates* is spent in adjusting relatively minor matters of emphasis, phraseology, and the like. When there are firmly held differences of view on a truly important question, nobody desires to minimize the matter or to suppress a dissent by watering down the collective judgment.

A great deal hangs on the confidence and firmness with which an intelligence estimate is rendered, whether as a consensus or as a dissent. If a firm judgment is given, it may be sufficient by itself to determine US policy. But intelligence estimators would be irresponsible if they gave a firm judgment when the evidence did not warrant it. They would in effect be making a policy decision in the guise of intelligence, and they ought not to do this. It seems to me that the author of this book, along with others who decry the "watering down" of intelligence estimates, misses this point. He gives intelligence estimators no credit for honest doubts, or for decent intellectual humility in the face of insufficient evidence. He is clear, however, in his caution that intelligence estimators must base their differing opinions strictly on the evidence, and not upon extraneous political or budgetary considerations.

The author's discussion of the relationship between intelligence and policy is always interesting, and sometimes downright alarming. Policy-making, says he, is a dynamic process,

and a key element in it is the information available. The man or group controlling information thus to a degree controls policy. If knowledge is power, he remarks, CIA through an increasing efficiency has come to play a major role in national security policy.

He goes yet further. CIA, he says, will probably increase its influence, simply because increasing centralization of power and of function is more or less inevitable in the modern age. At some time or other the policy-making elements in the Executive and Legislative branches of the government may reach an impasse. When that day comes it may be that CIA will constitute a "third force" within the Executive Branch, and successfully espouse its own foreign-military policy. This horrendous prospect disturbs the author a little, and is one reason why he favors the appointment of a Congressional Committee to oversee the operations of CIA in the way suggested by Senator Mansfield.

Despite these fears, the author sketches out a considerable extension in the traditional activities of intelligence. Too little attention has been given, he says, to the discovery of factors by which the United States may influence the future. There has been too little Basic Research, and too much accumulation of facts. "The whole intelligence enterprise tends to focus upon the filling of a vast warehouse of encyclopedic data." And again, "too little regard is shown generally to theory, reasoning, or the inductive method." Be it so, but an increasing mastery of these methods, and an increasing weight of product from them, might in the long run make CIA virtually an arbiter of policy. Myself, I doubt that we shall ever be wise enough to reach that position on the "most important questions."

The foregoing observations are directed to some points raised in the last chapter of the book under consideration. Primarily the book is descriptive, not argumentative; it deals with the intelligence mechanism as it exists, and eschews theory. There is an excellent apparatus of footnotes, and a lengthy critical bibliography. Altogether this is a major work in our field, and one to be warmly welcomed.

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