

Ronald Reagan, Intelligence, William Casey, and CIA: A Reappraisal

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Ronald Reagan became the 40th president of the United States more than thirty years ago, and ever since he stepped down to return to California eight years later, historians, political scientists, and pundits of all stripes have debated the meaning of his presidency. All modern presidents undergo reappraisal after their terms in office. Dwight Eisenhower, for example, was long considered a sort of caretaker president who played a lot of golf but who was not very smart or capable; access to formerly closed administration records has changed the minds of historians, who generally consider him a president fully in charge of national policy, clear-minded, and even visionary.

Reagan has undergone a similar reappraisal. The old view, exemplified by Clark Clifford's famous characterization that Reagan was "an amiable dunce," posited Reagan as a great communicator, to be sure, but one without substance, a former actor who knew the lines others wrote for him, but intellectually an empty suit. Many commentators, especially self-described political liberals, agreed with Norman Mailer's view of Reagan as "the most ignorant president we ever had." Gore Vidal joked that the Reagan Library burned down and "both books were lost"—including the one Reagan had not finished coloring.¹ Even if these are extreme views, the perspective among many liberals, Democrats, even some Republicans, and most definitely public intellectuals (including historians) was that Reagan was never very intelligent, never very curious, and never read much; as president, he liked to watch movies and tell funny but pointless stories, delegated all hard choices, worked very little, and took lots of naps. If the Cold War largely ended on Reagan's watch, and if he oversaw an economic recovery, he was just lucky. Reagan, in the old narrative, simply could not be the architect of anything positive that happened while he was president.

That perspective has changed forever and is marked by the continually improving regard historians have for Reagan. Whereas Reagan ranked 25th among US presidents in a 1996 poll conducted by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., among fellow historians, in 2000 a bipartisan polling of scholars ranked Reagan eighth.² Since 2001, the reappraisal really took off with the publication of Reagan's voluminous personal and professional writings that demonstrate he was a voracious reader, a prolific and thoughtful writer, a fully engaged mind with a clear, reasoned, and

¹ Mailer interview in *Vanity Fair*, January 2007. Vidal quoted in *New York Magazine*, 2 December 1985, p. 33.

² James Taranto, "What Makes a President Great? Scholars finally begin giving Reagan his due," *Wall Street Journal*, 10 June 2004. Reagan's two terms as governor of California have also been the subject of historians' reassessment; see Matthew Dallek, *The Right Moment: Ronald Reagan's First Victory and the Decisive Turning Point in American Politics* (New York: Oxford, 2004) and Jackson Putnam, "Governor Reagan: A Reappraisal," *California History* 83, no. 4 (2006): 24-45. As for the public, Reagan since his death in 2004 has consistently placed in the top five presidents, largely because he is Republicans' and independents' top choice, but is only fourth among Democrats; see Lydia Saad, "Best President? Lincoln on Par with Reagan, Kennedy," Gallup report of 11 February 2009, accessed at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/114292/best-president-lincoln-par-reagan-kennedy.aspx> on 14 February 2011.

consistent philosophy.³ More recently, scholarly analysis—some of it by former Reagan critics—of the Reagan administration record, including declassified documents, makes a convincing case that the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union were no accidents and that Reagan deserves credit for his national security policies that led to these developments.⁴ Finally, there are the illuminating Reagan diaries, which have persuaded many skeptics—including Iran-Contra prosecutor Arthur Liman—that Reagan was a thoughtful and capable president.⁵

Lingering Mythology about Reagan as Intelligence Consumer

The earlier assessments of Reagan and the subsequent reappraisals should matter to CIA officers because they have implications for the history of the Agency and its work. If Reagan was a lightweight who read little, was disengaged from policy, and was ignorant about matters of statecraft and national security, there are implications about how CIA produced and presented its intelligence for the Chief Executive, how much that intelligence (and therefore CIA) mattered to the Reagan administration, and how the Agency might adjust its approach to another similarly intelligence-impaired president. The lack of a scholarly reassessment of Reagan as a user of intelligence has led to the persistence of a series of assertions consistent with the earlier general view of Reagan but similarly in need of reappraisal. These assertions are in fact overlapping, self-supporting myths about Reagan and intelligence perpetuated by prominent writers about US intelligence. There are three such myths:

Reagan was profoundly ignorant of intelligence and never cared to learn much about it. He came to the presidency, according to the author of a recent and flawed history of the Agency, knowing “little more about the CIA than what he had learned at the movies.” Others have seconded this view, including former Director of Central Intelligence (DCI)

³ Kiron Skinner, Martin Anderson, and Annelise Anderson have compiled two collections of Reagan’s self-drafted radio commentaries he delivered from 1975 to 1979 as well as other personal writings, *Reagan, In His Own Hand* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), and *Reagan’s Path to Victory* (2004). Their volume of Reagan’s letters is *Reagan: A Life in Letters* (2003). Among the histories influenced by the new material are John Patrick Diggins, *Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom, and the Making of History* (New York: Norton, 2007).

⁴ Histories of Reagan’s presidency published before the newer scholarship often emphasize Reagan’s problems and play down his achievements. For example, Lou Cannon’s *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991) devotes 180 pages to the Iran-Contra scandal and the personnel changes that preceded it but only about 50 pages to Reagan’s dealings with Gorbachev and the winding down of the Cold War. By contrast, former Reagan critics—like Cannon, both journalists—more recently have given him credit for his Soviet policies; see James Mann, *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan: A History of the End of the Cold War* (New York: Viking, 2009), and David Hoffman, *The Dead Hand: The Untold Story of the Cold War Arms Race and Its Dangerous Legacy* (New York: Doubleday, 2009). For an analysis of declassified National Security Council documents that illuminate Reagan’s role, see Martin and Annelise Anderson, *Reagan’s Secret War: The Untold Story of His Fight to Save the World from Nuclear Disaster* (New York: Crown, 2009).

⁵ Douglas Brinkley, ed., *The Reagan Diaries*, unabridged in two volumes (New York: HarperCollins, 2009). There is also a previously published one-volume abridged version.

Stansfield Turner, who asserts that Reagan's lack of interest in intelligence facilitated the unwarranted influence of DCI William Casey on the president and on policy.⁶

Reagan was not much of a reader of intelligence because he tended to read little of anything, especially material (like intelligence) with which he was not already familiar or interested in. Casey himself initially took this stance—saying to an aide, “If you can’t give it to him in one paragraph, forget it”—before he learned otherwise. Former DCI Turner says that Reagan paid little attention to CIA products like the *President’s Daily Brief* (PDB), citing Vice President George Bush’s statement that Reagan read intelligence only “at his leisure.”⁷ Others go so far as to assert that Reagan generally read no intelligence estimates or assessments of any kind; a highly regarded history of CIA’s work in Afghanistan from the Reagan years to the 9/11 attacks asserts that the Agency learned early that “Reagan was not much of a reader” and that detailed written intelligence “rarely reached his desk.”⁸ Variants on the theme that Reagan read little or no intelligence include the notion that Reagan’s PDB was unusually short (implicitly by the standards of other presidents) to encourage his reading it or that Reagan’s PDB was orally briefed to him so he would not have to read it.⁹

Because Reagan was not a reader, **he preferred to watch intelligence videos and films** made for him in lieu of traditional printed intelligence products. This myth is supported by Reagan’s purported preference as a former career actor in films and television and by the old perspective of Reagan’s simple-mindedness. One widely quoted intelligence scholar (a former CIA analyst) asserts that CIA managers made sure to give the president his intelligence in the form he preferred—images rather than text.¹⁰ Another sniffed that Reagan “wanted a show” instead of traditional printed reports, so he received “intelligence briefings in video format in which predigested facts were arranged like decorations on a cake. . . a mode of presentation [that] blurred any distinction between fact and judgment, intelligence and advertising, reality and artist’s conception.”¹¹ A recent (2009) study of intelligence analysis by a respected Washington

⁶ Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), p. 375. Stansfield Turner, *Burn Before Reading: Presidents, CIA Directors, and Secret Intelligence* (New York: Hyperion, 2005), pp. 191, 195-196.

⁷ Joseph Persico, *Casey: From the OSS to the CIA* (New York: Viking, 1990), p. 186. Stansfield Turner seems unaware of the recent scholarship with his assertion that Reagan “was not known as a voracious reader;” see Turner, p. 198.

⁸ Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: A History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, From the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2011* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 149.

⁹ Walter Laqueur, *A World of Secrets* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), p. 99. Ronald Kessler, *Inside the CIA* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), pp. 121, 129. Cannon, *President Reagan*, p. 155.

¹⁰ Michael A. Turner, *Why Secret Intelligence Fails* (Dulles, Virginia: Potomac, 2005), p. 119. (This Turner, contrary to Stansfield Turner, says Reagan was indeed “a voracious reader”—just not of intelligence products.) Steve Coll’s otherwise excellent *Ghost Wars* repeats this myth; Coll, *ibid*.

¹¹ For a dismissive and condescending interpretation of Reagan’s use of intelligence from a conservative, see Angelo Codevilla, *Informing Statecraft* (New York: Free Press, 1992), pp. 17, 212.

think tank asserts that the PDB as prepared for Reagan conformed to his preferences, which were for “simple briefings” and “audio-visual presentations.”¹²

These three Reagan intelligence myths are consistent with the old interpretation of Reagan the insubstantial president but directly conflict with the more recent evidence that indicates Reagan was a capable and engaged Chief Executive. In any case, these myths persist, probably from a lack of published evidence specifically covering Reagan’s use of intelligence combined with a partisanship that blinds some intelligence writers to the facts that have come to light. This paper will present new intelligence-specific findings on Reagan that will refute these myths.

Reagan’s Understanding of Intelligence Before His Presidency

Much—probably too much—has been made of Reagan’s acting career and its alleged influence on his substantive knowledge of intelligence and national security matters. Even the widely esteemed Professor Christopher Andrew of Cambridge University opens his otherwise superb discussion of US intelligence in the Reagan years with the observation that a third of the films Reagan made in the late 1930s and early 1940s dealt with national security threats; Andrew considers especially telling the four “Brass Bancroft” films in which Reagan starred as Secret Service Agent J-24. More significant, however, was Reagan’s wartime service making films for Army Air Corps intelligence, particularly those films used for briefing pilots and bombardiers before their Pacific war missions. The intelligence unit to which Reagan was assigned used prewar photographs and intelligence reports to construct large scale models of targets, over which a moving camera would film; Reagan would then record a narration telling the pilots and bombardiers what they were seeing and when to release their payloads.¹³ Reagan thereby had direct experience in the production of an overhead imagery product that had operational value.

The story of Reagan’s struggle with Hollywood’s leftists in the late 1940s is well known.¹⁴ After World War II, Reagan rose to the leadership of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), which was facing an attempted takeover by a stealth Communist faction and which had to deal with Communist-inspired labor unrest. Reagan successfully fought the attempts of the Communists to gain influence in SAG, and he persuaded union members to cross picket lines at Communist-organized studio strikes. He was threatened personally for his efforts—an anonymous caller warned he would have acid splashed into his face—and he acquired and started carrying a handgun. He became a secret informant for the FBI on suspected Communists and their activities, but publicly Reagan named no names and asserted that the film industry

¹² Kenneth Lieberthal, *The U.S. Intelligence Community and Foreign Policy: Getting Analysis Right* (Washington: Brookings, September 2009), pp. 9-10. This ostensibly nonpartisan study contrasted Reagan’s alleged “audio-visual” PDB with that of the current president, who prefers to read “printed material . . . without interruption.”

¹³ Christopher Andrew, *For the President’s Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), pp. 457-58.

¹⁴ These formative personal and political experiences for Reagan are covered in Lou Cannon, *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), pp. 82-102; Marc Elliot, *Reagan: The Hollywood Years* (New York, Crown, 2008), pp. 182-195; and Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), pp. 105-15.

could handle the problem itself without government intervention. These experiences are invariably described—apparently accurately, given Reagan’s subsequent move into politics—as hugely influential on a formerly politically naïve young actor, in particular by shaping his anti-Communist ideology. But these experiences were relevant also to Reagan’s understanding of intelligence. Through them Reagan learned something about secret groups undertaking clandestine activities, the challenges of working against ideologically driven adversaries, and the value of intelligence sources with access (in this case, himself).¹⁵

Reagan lent his celebrity support during 1951 and 1952 for the “Crusade for Freedom,” a fundraising campaign to benefit Radio Free Europe (RFE). It remains unclear whether Reagan at the time knew he was participating in one of CIA’s most significant Cold War influence programs. His involvement was sparked in September 1950, when Reagan, in his capacity as SAG president, wrote to the chairman of the Crusade for Freedom, retired general Lucius Clay, pledging the support of the more than 8,000 members of SAG: “We offer you our complete support in this great counter-offensive against Communist lies and treachery.” In his televised appeals, Reagan modestly introduced himself—he was a well known film star at the time—and concluded by saying “The Crusade for Freedom is your chance, and mine, to fight Communism. Join today.” Reagan at the time might well have suspected US government involvement in the Crusade for Freedom, since its operating entity, the National Committee for a Free Europe, boasted Allen Dulles in its leadership (Dulles had not yet joined CIA but was well known as a former OSS spymaster). As a well connected Hollywood star, he could hardly have failed to notice when syndicated columnist Drew Pearson publicized the CIA backing of RFE in March 1953, or when another media personality, Fulton Lewis, attacked RFE’s CIA connection during 1957-58 in his radio shows and syndicated columns for King Features.¹⁶ Whether or not Reagan in the 1950s knew about CIA’s sponsorship of RFE, it probably would not have mattered to him, but in any case he would have found out when it was officially disclosed in 1971, after which it was publicly funded. Reagan never disavowed his participation in a covert “hearts and minds” operation that was consistent with his visceral anti-Communist beliefs, nor did he ever suggest he had been duped.

Reagan’s later emphasis on the importance of counterespionage as a vital pillar of intelligence stems in part from his time as governor of California from 1967 to 1975. Reagan had a cooperative, even warm relationship with the FBI, which opened a field office in Sacramento not long after Reagan was first inaugurated. Reagan’s staff informed the Bureau that the Governor “would be grateful for any information [regarding] future demonstrations” at the Berkeley campus of the University of California—a major political challenge for Reagan at the time—and other types of “subversion.” Reagan sent a warm personal letter to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover praising the Bureau for its “continuing fight against crime and subversion” and

¹⁵ These lessons were occasionally reinforced during Reagan’s acting career. In March 1962, for example, during the last season of *General Electric Theater*, the television program Reagan had hosted from 1954, Reagan starred in a teleplay called “My Dark Days” in which he played the role of the husband of a housewife who is an undercover FBI informant on a Communist front organization; she reports, testifies to Congress, and is harassed by Communists for it. The teleplay was aired in two parts, 18 March and 25 March 1962.

¹⁶ Richard Cummings, *Radio Free Europe’s “Crusade for Freedom”: Rallying Americans Behind Cold War Broadcasting, 1950-1960* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), pp. 41, 53-54, 95, 171-72. The idea that Reagan may have been witting was first broached in John Loftus, *The Belarus Secret* (New York: Penguin, 1983), p. 111.

pledging his help. At the bottom of the letter, Reagan wrote in his own hand, “P.S. I’ve just always felt better knowing your men are around.” Declassified FBI documents show that Reagan received at least 19 discrete and credible threats against him during his eight years as governor, many of which were passed to him.¹⁷

Reagan’s tenure as governor also provided direct experience regarding classified material and security clearances, since his duties included oversight of Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory—a national resource for nuclear research—which required Reagan to hold a “Q” clearance granted by the Atomic Energy Commission.¹⁸

The Rockefeller Commission, January – June 1975

Reagan’s most formative and direct pre-presidential experience of CIA and intelligence undoubtedly was his participation in 1975 as a member of the President’s Commission on CIA Activities within the United States, better known informally as the Rockefeller Commission after its chairman, Vice President of the United States Nelson Rockefeller. President Gerald Ford created the commission on 4 January 1975 to investigate allegations, published in the *New York Times* the previous month, that the Agency had illegally spied on domestic groups, especially the anti-war movement, during the presidencies of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. Reagan at the time was within days of stepping down after two terms as governor, and he was named along with a bipartisan mix of career public servants that included former cabinet secretaries, a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and leaders in labor and education. The White House, in announcing the appointments, noted that the eight members (including Rockefeller) were chosen because they were respected citizens with no previous connections with CIA—though certainly most had some knowledge of intelligence.¹⁹

The FBI in January 1975 interviewed dozens of Reagan’s friends, associates, colleagues, and others pursuant to its background investigation of Reagan before he could participate on the Rockefeller Commission. Documents from Reagan’s FBI file indicates that almost all those interviewed highly recommended Reagan for the position, praising his intelligence, loyalty, honor, and dedication, but there were a few exceptions, mostly among Reagan’s former political rivals. Jesse Unruh, the former speaker of the California Assembly (whom Reagan had defeated in his reelection campaign in 1970) considered Reagan unqualified for any government position because of his lack of “compassion” for people; former California governor Edmund “Pat” Brown said that Reagan was “out of touch with the common man” and that his “overemphasis” on security and law enforcement “would raise a question of possible bias in favor of the CIA”; US Senator Alan Cranston challenged Reagan’s capabilities for the position on the grounds that

¹⁷ Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, declassified FBI files on Ronald Wilson Reagan; relations with the Bureau in box 1, folders 3, 6, and 9.

¹⁸ Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, declassified FBI files on Ronald Wilson Reagan; threat reporting in boxes 1 and 2 *passim*.

¹⁹ Seymour Hersh, “Ford Names Rockefeller to Head Inquiry into C.I.A.,” *New York Times*, 6 January 1975, p. 1.

he was” insufficiently concerned about civil liberties.” None of Reagan’s critics, however, expressed the opinion that he was ignorant about intelligence.²⁰

At the Commission’s first meeting in the Vice President’s office on 13 January 1975, Reagan informed Rockefeller that his busy schedule—booked full over several months with speaking engagements and taping sessions for his radio commentaries—meant that he would have to miss some meetings. Rockefeller accepted Reagan’s absences on the condition that he read the transcripts of the meetings he would miss. Reagan missed the next four meetings due to these previous commitments and because of the difficulty commuting from California to Washington, where the Commission met. Following unfavorable media reports and critical editorials in February, Reagan offered to step down from the Commission, an offer Rockefeller refused, again on the basis of Reagan’s ability to read the transcripts.²¹ Reagan ended up attending eleven of the Commission’s 26 sessions over the next six months, which irritated Rockefeller, who as a liberal Republican was a political rival of Reagan’s.²² According to Rockefeller’s counsel at the time, Peter Wallison, Rockefeller “regarded Reagan as a lightweight who was not taking his responsibilities seriously.” Scholarly critics ever since, when they mention Reagan’s participation in the Commission at all, point to his poor attendance record as evidence that Reagan was not very interested in CIA and intelligence.²³

Testimony from participants and witnesses, however, paints a different picture. Reagan was not only substantively engaged, he emerged as a leader within the Commission. He did miss many meetings, especially in the beginning, but his absences were not due to lack of interest or ability. Former Commission staff counsel Marvin Gray remembers that “frankly, he didn’t miss very much in those first stages. It wasn’t bad judgment on his part to miss those first meetings, when we were just getting organized and before we really got started.” Wallison recounts that Reagan, when he attended, listened attentively to the proceedings. The Commission’s senior counsel, David Belin—who has been publicly critical of Reagan—has written that Reagan kept himself informed through his absences; Belin noted that “I was able to keep him advised on all key questions.” According to Belin, Reagan showed leadership in disagreeing with Rockefeller’s views on two issues: whether the Commission should investigate CIA assassination plots against foreign leaders, and whether the work of the Commission should be

²⁰ Reagan Library, declassified FBI files on Reagan, box 1.

²¹ “Reagan Misses 3 Sessions of C.I.A. Spying Inquiry,” *New York Times*, 6 February 1975. “Rockefeller: Don’t Quit; Reagan: OK,” *Washington Star News*, 8 February 1975. Typical of editorial opinion was “So Little Time: Reagan and the CIA,” *Los Angeles Times*, 10 February 1975, and “The missing Mr. Reagan,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 11 February 1975. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that commission transcripts were flown to Los Angeles for Reagan to review and that Reagan did not consider his absences a handicap: “In fact, he said, one sometimes learns more by reading the transcript than by listening to testimony.” See “Reagan Calls for End of Agency Probes,” *Los Angeles Times*, 11 June 1975.

²² Reagan’s daily and monthly schedules are in the Reagan Library, Ronald Reagan Papers: 1980 Campaign, box 58, California Office Files (Hannaford), Scheduling Files.

²³ Peter Wallison, *Ronald Reagan: The Power of His Conviction and the Success of His Presidency* (Boulder: Westview, 2004), p. 86. Bob Woodward, *VEIL: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981-1987* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 32. Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *The CIA and American Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 199-200. Jeffreys-Jones implies Reagan missed three-fourths of all the meetings and concludes that Reagan thought “the subject of the investigation merited little serious attention.”

sealed from public access for five years. Rockefeller opposed the first and advocated the second. Reagan took the position that the Commission should look into assassination plots and opposed Rockefeller's proposal for the five-year moratorium. Reagan's position on both issues influenced others on the Commission and became the majority view. On the matter of assassinations, the Commission ran out of time to conduct a full investigation, electing to transfer its materials on the subject to the President (who sent them to the ongoing Senate investigation known as the Church Committee), while Reagan's view on openness helped lead to the June 1975 unclassified publication of the Commission's report.²⁴

Testimony about the drafting of the report itself provides more insight into the question of Reagan's understanding of complex issues such as intelligence. "Unlike other commissions where the commissioners merely sign off on what the staff has written," Gray noted, "for the Rockefeller Commission the members were very involved in drafting the report." Reagan, Gray said, played an important role in drafting the report: "I was surprised by how Ronald Reagan came up with a point of view and language that allowed the Commission, often divided on issues, to compromise."²⁵

Gray was not alone in his newfound appreciation for Reagan's abilities. Wallison, at the time a "Rockefeller Republican" who initially shared his boss's disdain for Reagan, quickly changed his mind: "As the commission began to draft its report . . . a contributing Reagan emerged. . . Rockefeller was not an analytical or critical thinker [and] was not able to offer much leadership in the actual drafting of the report."²⁶

For a while the commission seemed unable to develop a generally acceptable formulation of its views. As the discussions went on inconclusively, Reagan started to write on a yellow legal pad that he brought with him. At first I thought he was simply taking notes. Then, on several occasions, when the discussion flagged, he would say something like "How does this sound, fellas?" and would read aloud what he had written. His draft language was usually a succinct summary of the principal issues in the discussion and a sensible way to address them. Often, the commission found that they could agree with his proposal, which went directly into the report. . . Among a group of gifted and famous men, in the setting of the Commission on CIA Activities in the United States, Reagan was a standout.

Wallison remembers his amazement that Reagan "was really able to digest a lot of very complicated stuff [and] to write it all down in a logical order, in a smoothly flowing set of

²⁴ Marvin Gray, telephone interview, 15 January 2009. David Belin, "Reagan's Judgment," *New York Times*, 31 October 1980, p. A27. Belin later diminished his assessment of Reagan's role in persuading the Commission to investigate assassination plots, saying that "most commissioners, including Ronald Reagan, agreed" to do so against the wishes of Rockefeller. Belin, *Full Disclosure* (New York: Scribner's, 1988), p. 162. The report was published as *Report to the President by the Commission on CIA Activities within the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, June 1975).

²⁵ Gray interview.

²⁶ Wallison, pp. 87-88. See also Wallison's interview transcript, Reagan Oral History Project, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, 28-29 October 2003, available at <http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/oralhistories/reagan>

paragraphs that he then read off to the Commission members. It summarized for them and for all of the rest of us what we had heard.” This was so impressive, Wallison writes, because Reagan went beyond the understanding of complex issues to being capable of accurately describing them—“adopting actual words to describe these concepts can be quite difficult. . . if one’s understanding is limited, it is difficult to choose the right words. Having a sufficient mastery of the subject matter to prescribe a solution is harder still. Reagan more than met these standards.” Wallison’s account is confirmed by Commission member Douglas Dillon, a former Treasury secretary for Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, who recounted that Reagan’s intervention ended an “impasse” among the commissioners and who was surprised by the ease with which Reagan pulled it off.²⁷

CIA’s critics and congressional Democrats have long derided the Rockefeller Commission’s findings as a “whitewash,” but it was far from that. The report Reagan helped bring to life was critical of CIA. It described at length the domestic activities revealed by the *New York Times* and additionally uncovered a few other abuses for the first time, such as the testing of LSD on unwitting Americans, one of whom had committed suicide.²⁸ As a result of his membership on the Rockefeller Commission and his leading role in drafting its final report, Reagan was well grounded on both the fundamentals and specifics of CIA’s missions, activities, and responsibilities as well as its organization, oversight, and legal and regulatory constraints.

In the immediate wake of his Commission experience, Reagan—who philosophically was suspicious of encroachments of the federal government on individual liberty—enthusiastically defended the mission of intelligence in keeping the nation secure. As Congress continued its own investigations of US intelligence activities, Reagan publicly called for an end to ongoing congressional inquiries (the Senate’s Church Committee and the House’s Pike Committee investigations), saying that the Rockefeller Commission report satisfied the public’s need to know, that Congress was approaching the subject with “an open mouth and a closed mind,” and that further investigation would harm CIA’s ability “to protect the security of this country.”²⁹

Reagan’s Developing Views on Intelligence, 1975-1979

Reagan put the knowledge he acquired from his membership on the Rockefeller Commission to good use during his “wilderness period” from January 1975, when he stepped down as California’s governor, to October 1979, as he was preparing to announce his candidacy for the Republican nomination for president. During this period, Reagan wrote and delivered hundreds of commentaries for his syndicated radio spot that ran five days a week; he also drafted

²⁷ Wallison, *ibid.* Dillon’s observation is recounted in Fred Greenstein, “Reckoning with Reagan,” *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 115, no. 1 (Spring 2000), p. 122.

²⁸ A good overview of the Rockefeller Commission and its final report is Kathryn Olmsted, *Challenging the Secret Government: The Post-Watergate Investigations of the CIA and FBI* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 49-50, 82-85.

²⁹ “Reagan Opposes Congressional Inquiries of CIA,” *New York Daily News*, 12 June 1975.

opinion pieces, private letters, and public remarks.³⁰ In these writings, Reagan commented on a broad range of foreign, national security, and domestic topics, including intelligence and CIA. Early on, in a radio broadcast he titled “CIA Commission,” Reagan in August 1975 highlighted his service on the Rockefeller Commission and emphasized that, though instances of CIA domestic espionage were found, it did not constitute “massive” spying as reported in the media, the misdeeds were “scattered over a 28-year period,” and CIA had long ago corrected them. Reagan reiterated his concern that congressional investigations were assuming the character of “witch hunting” and threatened “inestimable harm” to CIA’s ability to gather intelligence. “There is no doubt,” Reagan warned, that intelligence sources worldwide “have been frightened into silence” and that CIA officer themselves were now less likely to take risks.³¹

The need for secrecy in intelligence and the potential harm of publicity is a frequent theme in Reagan’s writings and public statements during this period, frequently coupled with statements of enthusiasm for the work of US intelligence officers and of the overall need for a strong intelligence posture to protect US national security in a perilous world. Many of Reagan’s radio commentaries were mostly or entirely devoted to the subject of intelligence: “CIA Commission” (August 1975); “Secret Service” (October 1975); “Glomar Explorer” (November 1976); “Intelligence” (June 1977); “Spies” (April 1978); “Intelligence and the Media” (October 1978); “Counterintelligence” (January 1979); “CIA” (March 1979). Many more touched on intelligence subjects, sometimes to make a broader political point, sometimes for their own sake. Americans have more to fear, Reagan often said, from domestic regulatory agencies like the Internal Revenue Service and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration than from intelligence agencies like CIA or the FBI. The threat from Soviet expansionism, terror, and domestic subversion required robust US capabilities in intelligence collection—Reagan highlighted the need for human and technical collection alike—as well as in counterintelligence. Addressing well publicized intelligence issues of the 1970s, Reagan advocated allowing journalists to volunteer as intelligence sources but declared “the US should not be involved in assassination plots.” He strongly favored covert action programs that might lead to freedom for people living under Communist regimes, and he supported FBI surveillance and infiltration of domestic extremist groups. Not leaving any major intelligence function untreated, Reagan cited intelligence analysis to inform his radio audience of the threat from the North Korean military or from Soviet strategic weapons. He even praised liaison relationships for the intelligence they could provide while US agencies were “hamstrung” by investigations.³²

Beginning in 1977, Reagan began to increase his public advocacy for the work of US intelligence agencies as he stepped up his criticism of President Jimmy Carter, who had called CIA one of the three “national disgraces” (along with Vietnam and Watergate) during his

³⁰ See the introductions in Skinner, et al, *Reagan, In His Own Hand*, and *Reagan’s Path to Victory*. Reagan’s radio commentaries were interrupted during his unsuccessful run for the Republican nomination between November 1975 and August 1976, but otherwise the radio spot ran five days a week from January 1975 until late October 1979.

³¹ Reagan, radio commentary “CIA Commission,” August 1975, in Skinner, et al., *Reagan, In His Own Hand*, pp. 121-24. The editors include a photocopy of Reagan’s handwritten draft.

³² Various radio commentaries 1975-1979 in Skinner, et al., *ibid.* and *Reagan’s Path to Victory*. See also Reagan Library, Reagan Pre-Presidential papers, Series 1: Speeches and Writings, subseries A: Radio broadcasts, boxes 9, 32, and 39.

presidential campaign. Reagan had supported George H.W. Bush when President Ford had nominated him as DCI in early 1976, and a year later Reagan declared that Bush should remain DCI because of his success in rebuilding CIA's morale. Reagan was reportedly horrified at Carter's nomination of former Kennedy speechwriter Ted Sorensen as DCI. "We need someone who would be devoted to an effective CIA" and who recognizes the danger posed by the Soviet military buildup so that the US would not be "flying blind in a dangerous world." "Let's stop the sniping and the propaganda and the historical revisionism," Reagan said, "and let the CIA and other intelligence agencies do their job."³³

The evidence of Reagan's pre-presidential experiences demonstrate that the man elected in November 1980 to be the 40th President of the United States had a broad knowledge of and deep appreciation for intelligence and CIA and that he had reflected on the wide range of intelligence issues, including its proper missions and activities.

The Transition Period: Reagan as First Customer-Elect

In addition to the record of Reagan's pre-presidential knowledge of intelligence issues, CIA's experience with Ronald Reagan during the three-month period between the election of 1980 and his inauguration undermines the myth that Reagan was neither interested in intelligence nor read much of it. Proponents of this view (see footnotes 6-9) ignore or are unaccountably unaware of the unclassified 1997 *Studies in Intelligence* article on the subject, prepared by the PDB briefers for the President-elect, Richard Kerr and Peter Dixon Davis.³⁴ Kerr and Davis recount that senior CIA officials had low expectations of Reagan as a reader of intelligence, given his lack of foreign policy experience and the presumption that his mind was made up on many issues, but even so they boldly asked George H.W. Bush, the Vice President-elect and former DCI, to urge Reagan to accept daily briefings while he remained in California before the inauguration. Bush used his influence and CIA experience to make the case, Reagan agreed, and the briefings were arranged.

Kerr and Davis's article deals mostly with the process and logistical challenges in getting the PDB to the President-elect in California, but it also reveals a Reagan who was, contrary to the persistent stereotype, a careful, studious, and diligent reader of intelligence, who went over intelligence items "deliberately and with considerable concentration," who asked questions and "showed no impatience or disdain with analysis that presented a different view" from his own; "the door seemed to be open to new ideas, even if they were not welcome or necessarily accepted." Because of Reagan's "willingness and patience in reading items," Kerr and Davis were frank in pointing out where the factual basis of an article was weak or the analysis was superficial. For his part, Reagan expressed particular interest in, and asked more questions about, certain subjects of high priority to him, particularly on Middle East issues and the Iran

³³ Lou Cannon, "Reagan Criticizes Carter for Proposing Defense Budget Cuts," *Washington Post*, 6 February 1977, p. A19. "Reagan Advises Carter to Keep Bush as CIA Chief," *Los Angeles Times*, 7 February 1977, p. I-4.

³⁴ Richard Kerr and Peter Dixon Davis, "Mornings in Pacific Palisades: Ronald Reagan and the President's Daily Brief," *Studies in Intelligence* vol. 41, no. 2 (1997): 31-36.

hostage situation: “he absorbed whatever raw and finished intelligence we were able to offer on the subject.”³⁵

CIA records confirm this public account and enhance the picture of a President-elect deeply engaged with the global issues of the day that the Agency covered.³⁶ Reagan showed particular interest in reports of Soviet consumer frustration and economic troubles, especially in agriculture; he was “very interested and attentive” to strategic arms control issues; he showed “keen interest” in reporting on foreign leaders’ attitudes and plans regarding the incoming administration; he was “very interested in and somewhat concerned over” Soviet strategic weapons capabilities and deployments, as well as the Polish situation. A typical observation was “Reagan read through the book slowly and carefully, clearly very interested, concerned, and receptive to material” that included additional background papers on selected countries and issues, often sparked by Reagan’s questions. On feeding Reagan supplementary reports, Davis once commented “What a willing customer!” Briefings did not occur every day due to the competing demands placed on the President-elect’s time and attention, but when there was a gap between briefings, Reagan carefully read the PDBs he had missed. In all, Reagan received 27 CIA briefings between 22 November 1980 and 14 January 1981, more than half the working days of that period, which included major holidays.

President Reagan as an Intelligence Consumer

Reagan’s inner circle decided to end CIA’s direct daily briefing of the President after the inauguration in favor of a briefing by his national security advisor and selected staff—a briefing that would include the PDB but without a CIA officer present.³⁷ This deprived the Agency of further direct observation of Reagan’s reading intelligence as President, so we have to turn to other evidence to ascertain the degree to which Reagan read intelligence.

There is much indirect evidence that Reagan habitually read intelligence analysis from CIA. The fact that CIA reports of current interest to the administration were often routed to “PDB Principals”—including the President—indicates this material went to him, and DCI Casey often would attach personal cover notes to Reagan on reports he thought the President should

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 33-34. Another CIA officer who briefed Reagan during the transition period on the Middle East recalls that his questions “reflected considerable knowledge. . . He was very current and extremely alert.” See John Helgerson, *Getting to Know the President: CIA Briefings of Presidential Candidates, 1952-1992* (CIA: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1993), p.p. 132-33.

³⁶ Memoranda for the Record and other internal DI memos on the briefing of President-elect Reagan, generally from Kerr and Davis, for the period 13 November 1980 through 14 January 1981, copies in CIA History Staff files.

³⁷ This situation probably was a result of DCI William Casey’s relative lack of interest in the PDB, as attested to by Gates and reflected in DCI memoranda for 1981-82. Robert Kimmitt (Executive Secretary to the NSC during Reagan’s first term) and John Negroponte (Deputy National Security Advisor in the second term) both report that Reagan received his national security briefing at 0930 each day, though sometimes he would save the PDB for reading later. Center for the Study of Intelligence (CSI) interviews with Kimmitt, 19 April 2000, and Negroponte, 9 October 2009.

read, which suggests Casey had reason to believe Reagan read them.³⁸ It is reasonable to assume that Reagan read CIA reports relevant to current policy issues. National security advisors would request from CIA—often directly through the DCI—analysis on relevant issues specifically for the President’s reading, and often ahead of a major policy decision. For example, a CIA assessment emphasizing Nicaragua’s importance to Moscow’s aim to increase its influence in Latin America at the expense of the United States was disseminated just days before Reagan signed a new covert action finding on 1 December 1986 authorizing CIA to “conduct paramilitary operations against Nicaragua.”³⁹ White House policy meetings of the NSC or the smaller National Security Policy Group (NSPG), over which Reagan also presided, were often preceded by distribution of relevant intelligence reports that served as the basis of discussion, for example, on the Soviet Union’s reliance on Western trade, the Siberian oil pipeline, or the status of Soviet ballistic missile defenses.⁴⁰

Senior members of Reagan’s administration also have recounted that the President read and took seriously daily intelligence reports as well as longer intelligence assessments such as National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs). Former Secretary of State George Shultz, former presidential counselor Edwin Meese, former national security advisor Richard Allen, and former NSC senior staffer Richard Pipes have stated that Reagan regularly read and wanted to read intelligence assessments. Another former national security advisor, Robert McFarlane, recalls that Reagan enthusiastically read and marked up intelligence documents, and even recommended them to senior administration officials. Allen regularly prepared, as he put it, a “weekend reading assignment” on national security and foreign policy issues for the President to read at Camp David or on trips, and the package included intelligence assessments Allen selected for him. Reagan faithfully and regularly worked through the thick stack of his “homework,” as his diary entries call his after-hours and weekend reading—Allen said Reagan read it all—to the point that Nancy Reagan told the President’s aide Michael Deaver that the reading should be cut back at least 75 percent. Allen refused, saying he, not Deaver, was responsible for keeping the

³⁸ For example, Casey’s 27 June 1985 cover note to Reagan introducing the attached report on Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev as “good airplane reading”—Reagan left the next day for events in Chicago. The CIA report was *Gorbachev, the New Broom*, redacted and released 18 July 2008. Another example is Casey’s response to reporters’ questioning the President on whether the USSR was behind the European peace movement: Casey wrote to Reagan, saying the issue would probably arise again and forwarding CIA analysis that Reagan might find “useful in supporting your response.” Casey memorandum to Reagan, 16 November 1982.

³⁹ DI Intelligence Assessment *Soviet Policy Toward Nicaragua*, November 1986, released in 1999; the Finding was released in November 2001.

⁴⁰ For example, the DI assessment *Soviet Interest in Arms Control Negotiations in 1984*, 23 March 1984, was distributed before the NSPG meeting of 27 March on that topic. DCI Casey often would use the conclusions of a just-published CIA assessment or NIE in briefing the NSC or NSPG; for example, Casey used the conclusions of an NIE on the Nicaraguan insurgency as his talking points for the 8 July 1983 NSC meeting on the subject. In addition, Casey often would bring CIA analysts to these meetings to brief Reagan personally on, for example, Soviet efforts at ballistic missile defense, or the state of the Soviet economy and society. See Martin Anderson and Annelise Anderson, *Reagan’s Secret War: The Untold Story of His Fight to Save the World from Nuclear Disaster* (New York: Crown, 2009), pp. 139, 181-82, 217, 223, and 410 fn. 10. Despite the overwrought subtitle, the Andersons have produced a most useful book on Reagan as commander-in-chief, largely because of the NSC and NSPG minutes they were able to have declassified.

President informed on national security and foreign affairs, and Reagan kept doing his “homework.”⁴¹

Reagan also took the initiative when it came to his intelligence reading. In addition to the tasking DCI Casey would give to the DI for analysis of interest to the President, Reagan himself would occasionally commission an intelligence assessment, as when he requested an interagency perspective on foreign involvement in Grenada after the US military’s operation there in October 1983.⁴² More often, however, Reagan would request specific reports from a menu of options placed before him. Beginning early in his administration, the PDB—generally the Saturday book—would contain an extra page titled “Selected Reports,” by which CIA provided titles and brief summaries of intelligence analysis that CIA had published the previous week and that were available in full if desired. Of the five to seven reports listed, Reagan often would select one to three full reports by circling the item or placing a check mark next to it, or both, and writing something like “order for me, please.” On one “Selects” page in September 1982, Reagan marked a particular report with the words, “Send me another copy.” It is not known why he needed another copy, but the 11-page report he wanted (again) was not light reading but was rather a rather complicated treatment of a subtle technical point regarding an arms control matter.⁴³

Thus far the evidence for Reagan as a reader of intelligence has been indirect because it is not in the nature of printed text on paper to reveal what particular eyes read it—the act of reading itself leaves no traces. Reagan, however, often would initial papers that he had read, perhaps as a personal way of keeping track of his progress working through a pile of “homework,” or perhaps as a signal to aides that he had done the reading they had requested. In any case, we have several examples of Reagan’s initialing intelligence products, sometimes also writing the date he had read the material (sometimes also a secretary would also stamp the document “The President has seen”). Reagan initialed, for example, Richard Allen’s cover memo on a special NIE that explained how Soviet military strength was largely dependent on Western trade; Allen had called this estimate to the President’s attention as “extremely important.” Likewise, Reagan initialed Robert McFarlane’s cover memo on CIA’s first major assessment of Gorbachev in June 1985. The initials “RR” are prominent on the cover of an NIE on China provided to him in October 1983 and on a Soviet strategic nuclear NIE in April 1985. We also have two of the monthly global threat updates from the NIC, from December 1984 and January 1985, that Reagan initialed and dated.⁴⁴ These are a handful of examples scattered over a few years, to be

⁴¹ The author interviewed Shultz, Meese, Allen, and Pipes at the Reagan Library on 6 November 2009. Robert C. McFarlane with Zofia Smardz, *Special Trust* (New York: Cadell and Davies, 1994), pp. 307-08. Author’s telephone conversation with Richard Allen, 25 September 2009.

⁴² Gates, pp. 186-87. Robert Gates (as Chairman of the National Intelligence Council) cover memorandum to Robert McFarlane responding to the President’s request for an interagency assessment on Grenada, 19 December 1983, copy in History Staff files.

⁴³ Even though the report was redacted and released by CIA in 1999, I may not identify the subject of the President’s interest.

⁴⁴ SNIE 3/11-4-81, *Dependence of Soviet Military Power on Economic Relations with the West*, 17 November 1981, redacted and released in 2001. CIA memorandum, *Gorbachev: The New Broom*, June 1985, released July 2008. McFarlane sent the Gorbachev paper to Reagan, saying “you will find it interesting reading.” The author of the

sure, but they were found—and could only be found—by happenstance. There is no discrete collection of, and no way to specifically search for, intelligence products—classified or declassified—with Reagan’s distinctive “RR” inscribed thereon. These limitations suggest that the examples found thus far of Reagan’s reading and initialing intelligence are not isolated instances but indicative of a frequent practice of his.

Reagan and the PDB

No such limitations hindered research into Reagan’s reading of the PDB. Then as now, the President’s copy of the PDB was returned, with extremely rare exceptions, to CIA, where it was filed and archived. If Reagan read the PDB, and if he marked it as a reader, we should have the evidence. As it turns out, that evidence exists, but interpreting it requires context.

That Reagan read the PDB regularly is established by those who served him closely. Richard Allen says that Reagan read the PDB “nearly every day,” and Edwin Meese said the President read the PDB “assiduously.” George Shultz disliked CIA analysis but read the PDB every day because he knew the President was reading it.⁴⁵ Robert Kimmitt, an NSC staffer during the Reagan administration (and later Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs), helped prepare the daily package of the PDB and other national security readings for Reagan. In an interview with CIA’s Center for the Study of Intelligence, Kimmitt was asked about Reagan and the PDB.

My view is that he probably read the PDB page-for-page, word-for-word every day. Because I can just think of so many occasions when issues would come up, that he would be on top of, that you could only have done it if you’d been keeping up with developments. . . whatever the sort of common knowledge is about President Reagan—his intelligence, his attentiveness, and all the rest—he was the most incredible listener, and fact and information absorber, I ever viewed at that level.⁴⁶

I was able to review the President’s copy of the PDB for each day it was published from January 1981 through April 1984, about forty percent of his presidency, or about one thousand PDBs. The first conclusion one can draw is that this is a lot of intelligence reading. This body of intelligence that his closest advisors say he read regularly consists of upwards of 10,000 pages just for this period, or some 25,000 cumulative pages of daily intelligence reading for Reagan’s entire presidency.⁴⁷

assessment, an experienced analyst on the USSR, was later told that the President had read it and thought it useful for understanding the new Soviet leader.

⁴⁵ Allen and Meese interviews. George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1993), p. 864. When Reagan was recuperating from the assassination attempt of 30 March 1981, Allen had the PDB delivered to him at the hospital when he had recovered enough to read and believes that Reagan read it there. Allen e-mail to author, 25 September 2009.

⁴⁶ Kimmitt interview, 19 April 2000.

⁴⁷ It remains a puzzle why Reagan did not mention the PDB much in his diaries, so infrequently that the indexer of his diaries did not create an entry for it. Reagan notes his reading of the PDB just nine times, all in the last two years of his presidency, and almost always in the context of other reading—the “homework” or “desk work” Reagan

The second conclusion is that the individual PDBs prepared for Reagan were not thin, as some suggest. Christopher Andrew, in his otherwise indispensable *For the President's Eyes Only* (1995), suggests Reagan was not much of a reader. Citing an “unattributable interview” with a “senior CIA analyst,” Andrew says the typical PDB for Reagan comprised four 150-word main stories plus “a few shorter pieces and the occasional anecdote,” giving the impression that Reagan could not bother to read more than 700 or 800 words in his daily intelligence report.⁴⁸

If one reviews an actual “typical PDB” prepared for Reagan, however, the picture is quite different. A typical PDB for President Reagan actually comprised about 1600 to 1800 words or more, not 700 or 800. My personal observation as a former PDB editor during 1997-2000 is that the PDBs prepared for Ronald Reagan in the 1980s were very much alike in format and length to those I helped prepare for President Bill Clinton in the late 1990s.

But did Reagan provide tangible evidence of his reading the PDB? Robert Kimmitt, though he believes Reagan read the PDB, says there is no proof because Reagan did not write anything on it.⁴⁹ Kimmitt’s impression is incorrect, for the review of the PDBs produced for Reagan shows that he did in fact write or mark upon it, but not as frequently as might be expected (or hoped)—less than ten percent of the time. Asked about the relative lack of presidential markings on Reagan’s copy of the PDB, Richard Allen revealed that he advised Reagan *not* to write on it:

Early on, I suggested the President not write on the PDB too frequently, as I did not know precisely who would be assessing his particular copy. . . It would not have been too clever to push down into any bureaucracy, mine [i.e. the NSC staff] or yours [CIA], any comments that could be quoted by status seekers, leakers, or for any other purpose.

Even so, Allen recounted that he was “sure” that Reagan did write occasionally on the PDB, as he had requested Reagan to indicate which PDB articles were of particular interest and which should be followed by tasking for additional analysis.⁵⁰

Reagan did write occasionally on his copy of the PDB in often illuminating ways—they are sporadic but telling. The range includes everything from check marks to complete sentences. Most frequently, Reagan used a whole gamut of “non-verbal reader’s marks” that confirm what CIA’s pre-inaugural PDB briefers found—that he was a careful, interested reader. The underlining, brackets (and double brackets), circling of items, and exclamation points (sometimes two or three) are marks of a reader, not a briefer (who would underline or highlight key sentences, as Allen and his successor William Clark did intermittently), and comparison with Reagan’s distinctive writing indicates they are in his hand.

more frequently cites. Brinkley, ed., *Reagan Diaries*, Reagan’s entries for 31 October 1987; 24 August 1988; 12 September 1988; 10, 14, and 19 November 1988; 12 and 29 December 1988; 14 January 1989.

⁴⁸ Andrew, p. 460.

⁴⁹ Kimmitt interview.

⁵⁰ Allen interview and phone conversation.

Reagan would write words on his PDB to express different things. Sometimes he indicated his desire for more analysis with “And?” at the end of a paragraph. On one piece that concluded with a summary of CIA’s collection efforts on the problem, he wrote “but what else?” Reagan mused on whether a particular country would violate an arms control treaty by writing “breakout?” on an article covering the issue.

On occasion Reagan would tell CIA how he liked his intelligence presented. Items in the PDB normally ended with a horizontal line across the page. Once, when the line was omitted, Reagan drew it in and wrote, “I like line after item ends.” More often, however, Reagan was reacting to the substance of the intelligence provided. On a piece describing the movement of Soviet military forces to a client state, Reagan summed up the figures himself and wrote “5000 SOVIETS” in the margin. On a graphic of a Soviet mobile missile launcher, he scrawled “SCUD.” Reagan also considered policy issues when reading the PDB. At a time when his administration was following developments in a certain country undergoing political and social upheaval while his NSC was discussing policy alternatives, Reagan circled a relevant item on that country and wrote “This may become an incident sufficient to” and then spelled out a particular policy option.

In one case, Reagan demonstrated how closely he read his intelligence by catching a mistake on the part of the PDB editor. He was reading a two-page Article on Soviet arms control. In the fourth paragraph on the first page, the analysis said “The Soviets believe” so and so. In the middle of the second page, another country’s leaders were said to believe the same thing, “unlike the Soviets.” Reagan wrote, “Is this a misprint? See previous page.” He then underlined both passages. From my personal experience editing the PDB, this must have been horrifying for the PDB editorial staff. It is one thing to discover after the fact that a contradiction has made it into the President’s book, but for the President himself to point out the mistake must have been professionally scandalous. Perhaps the discomfort of CIA editors, however, would be exceeded by the confusion of those intelligence scholars and other writers who assert that Reagan did not pay much attention to intelligence.

What Happened to All of Reagan’s Videos

The recurrent myth about Reagan’s reliance on videos for his consumption of intelligence can finally be laid to rest. I requested a search for all videos produced from 1981 through 1988, and I spoke with the officer, now retired, who supervised the unit producing those videos during 1981-86. There are no PDB videos because none were made. A daily or even a weekly PDB video would have been impossible, given the minimum production time of three to four weeks for each video. At that time, daily short deadline productions were out of the question.

Although PDB videos were never made, a number of CIA video presentations were made specifically for Reagan. There is no doubt that Reagan found these intelligence videos useful. On one occasion, Reagan recorded in his diary watching “a classified film” on a particular leader: “These films are good preparation. . . They give you a sense of having met him before.” Three of the intelligence videos are scene-setters or advanced travelogues for presidential trips, including side travel by Mrs. Reagan, but the majority by far were substantive and issue-specific. Reagan indicated how much he appreciated these videos when he recorded his viewing of one on 14 October 1982: “Back at the W.H. saw a 20 min. C.I.A. movie on the Soviet Space Prog[ram].

They are much further ahead than most people realize and their main effort has been military.”⁵¹ But no one should exaggerate the significance of the video intelligence Reagan consumed, especially compared with the great quantities of printed intelligence he read. If Reagan watched every single video prepared for him during his presidency, he would have watched an average of one video every two months.

A final problem for the proponents of the view that Reagan or his advisors expected or demanded videos for the President is the fact that the impetus came from CIA, not from the White House. CIA suggested to the White House in the summer of 1981 that the videos, already in production as an in-house effort, might be helpful for Reagan. With DCI William Casey’s approval and support, the first video for Reagan was delivered in September 1981.⁵² Feedback from the White House was invariably good, and there were increasing requests for more videos from around the Reagan administration, but the production schedule and limited resources dictated that CIA produce videos almost exclusively on subjects of interest to the President.

Conclusions

The view that Reagan was not a reader but at best a casual watcher of intelligence has been perpetuated by political conservatives and liberals, Democrats and Republicans alike. That view is not consistent with the general reappraisal of Reagan’s intellectual abilities as evidenced by new scholarship over the past decade, but it has persisted. Logic and evidence, rather than political bias or personal opinion, paint a different picture. Logic would support the notion that Reagan, whom recent scholarship has established as an enthusiastic reader, was also a reader of intelligence, and new evidence presented herein has confirmed as myths the perceptions that Reagan was ignorant of intelligence, read little of it, and consumed it primarily in video form.

The record regarding Reagan’s pre-presidential experiences as an actor, union leader, state governor, and especially as a member of the first high-level investigation of CIA (the Rockefeller Commission) indicates that these experiences gave the future president a background in and an understanding of many areas of intelligence, including espionage, secrecy, oversight and necessary safeguards, and the law. As a prolific radio commentator in the 1970s, Reagan reflected and propounded on intelligence issues of the day, particularly on the balance between democratic values and intelligence operations, the value of espionage and counterintelligence in the Cold War, and the damage to intelligence operations and CIA morale stemming from leaks, media exaggerations, and an overly intrusive Congress more interested in civil liberties than national security. The preponderance of direct and indirect evidence, beginning with detailed observations of Reagan’s reading of the PDB as president-elect, conclusively demonstrates that he was an engaged and appreciative “First Customer” of intelligence who carefully read and used what he learned from intelligence products.

⁵¹ Reagan mentions viewing CIA videos three times; see Brinkley, ed., *Reagan Diaries*, entries for 4 September 1981, 14 October 1982, and 9 June 1985. For briefings or visit preparation that may have included a CIA video produced at the time on that particular subject, see the entries for 2 February 1982 and 8 August 1983.

⁵² The former chief of the video production unit says Casey previewed most films and without exception approved them. This interest is reflected in Casey’s daily schedule; for example, on 12 March 1982 Casey was scheduled to “view film” in his conference room.

What are the lessons from this history for CIA officers? First, the conventional wisdom about presidents and intelligence may not be correct. Regarding any particular president's engagement with intelligence, it is better to rely more on observation than on hearsay. Second, during the transition period it may help to research the president-elect's background to determine what he or she actually understands about intelligence and how that person likes to receive information. This might help us to avoid surprises either pleasant—as in Reagan's case when he exceeded CIA's low expectations of him and the Agency learned that he was open to receiving a lot of intelligence material—or not so pleasant, if a future president-elect's background suggests an unfamiliarity or even hostility toward CIA's products (Richard Nixon comes to mind). Third, the true record gives us potential answers if we are asked by a future administration to deal with finished intelligence “like you did with Reagan.” If CIA is ever asked, for example, to produce a daily intelligence video briefing like those provided for Reagan, the Agency—independent of its capability and will to do so at that time—can respond with “Actually, sir, that's a myth, and here are the data.” Finally, it always is preferable to have the true picture about CIA's interactions with any president, for the Agency's influence, its missions, and the morale of its employees depend on that vital relationship.

APPENDIX

William Casey and Ronald Reagan: How Close?

Because Casey is central to Ronald Reagan's war against the Soviet Union, understanding him and the part he played at CIA is critically important.

Robert Gates, *From the Shadows* (1996), p. 199.

Every organization—be it family, tribe, nation, or intelligence service—has its lore, its mythology, its memory of How Things Were and Came to Be. These received historical narratives can be problematic for the historian, who tries to understand and interpret for others the past as it was and on its own terms—not, for example, bringing a “present-mindedness” into historical inquiry that judges the past by the knowledge, standards or sensibilities of the present. Inevitably, however, the received narrative is often a mixture of the demonstrably true, the uncertain, the dubious, and the patently false—and the boundaries of all these categories constantly shift, thanks to the penchant of historians toward revisionism, re-revisionism, *ad infinitum*. Far from being fixed, the past is never over, it seems.

At CIA, there is an enduring internal narrative about the 1980s, specifically the years 1981 through 1986, when the Agency was led by Reagan's first DCI, William Casey. The “Reagan-Casey” years are understood as a time of resurgence for CIA, a second “Golden Age” for the Agency (the first was the Eisenhower-Dulles period, when CIA made a name for itself fighting the early Cold War). In the renewed and rejuvenated CIA of this narrative, CIA's relevance is reasserted after a difficult period for the Agency known as the Time of Troubles: the press revelations, scandals, and congressional investigations of the 1970s, combined with Jimmy Carter's perceived disdain for CIA as evidenced by the Carter administration's budget and personnel cuts under one of CIA's most disliked directors, Stansfield Turner. From an insider's perspective, the 1970s were a disaster. A CIA officer at the time with twenty years' service had joined in the Agency's heyday (during the first so-called Golden Age) but now saw an organization under siege.

Agency officers widely believe that William Casey gets the credit for resurrecting CIA with expanded resources and a renewed mission, thanks to his personal relationship, even intimate friendship, with the President. Casey, after all, had been Reagan's campaign manager, saving a bankrupt and dysfunctional primary campaign for “the Gipper” and overseeing the contest through to Reagan's electoral victory. Casey played up his closeness to Ronald Reagan, as expressed in this excerpt from an interview with Richard Lehman, a senior officer in the Directorate of Intelligence:

Just after Christmas [1980] DCI-designate Bill Casey called Bruce [Clarke, the Deputy Director for Intelligence] and me in for a get-to-know-you session. We prepared the standard briefing, but he interrupted us, saying in effect that he already understood all

*that. And he did. Apropos the relationship of the DCI to the President, he said, “You understand, I call him Ron.”*⁵³

The phrase “I call him Ron”⁵⁴ summarizes the Agency’s preferred thesis about this period—that CIA mattered in the 1980s largely because its director, William Casey, had a close friendship and an unprecedented influence with the President, manifested in his status as the first DCI with Cabinet rank, which Casey emphasized in his appearances before Agency employees.⁵⁵ It certainly was the impression of many senior CIA officials that, as one of them put it, “[Casey’s] relationship with Ronald Reagan couldn’t have been closer. . . It was clear to me that there was a very personal, a very close tie between those two men.”⁵⁶ This perspective is reinforced by outside assessments; one historian of the period called Casey “perhaps the most influential man in the Reagan cabinet after the president.”⁵⁷ The author of a CIA history highly regarded within the Agency said that Casey was “much more than just a director . . . he personally gave the CIA access to the president. In short, *he was the most important thing about the agency.*”⁵⁸

But was he? How valid is the perspective that Casey himself was the reason for CIA’s renewed prominence during the Reagan years? Did Casey overstate his access to and intimacy with Ronald Reagan, or at least did he consciously fail to correct the impression at CIA that such a relationship existed? Casey’s biographer Joseph Persico has documented that Casey early in his life freely embellished the level or degree of his access or influence. In 1940, for example, Casey, a young economic analyst and writer at the time, provided free market proposals to the presidential campaign of Thomas E. Dewey, a candidate for the Republican nomination, after which Casey claimed on his résumé that he had been a “tax and fiscal advisor” to Dewey. After Wendell Willkie defeated Dewey for the Republican nomination, Casey provided the same ideas to the Willkie campaign in the form of proposed language for speeches—becoming in his

⁵³ Richard Kovar, “Mr. Current Intelligence: An Interview With Richard Lehman,” *Studies in Intelligence*, Summer 2000, p. 63.

⁵⁴ I have seen no documentary evidence that Casey ever actually called the President “Ron.” Casey usually closed his memos to him (always addressed to “the President”) with “Respectfully yours, Bill.” To Vice President Bush, however, Casey would address cover memos with “Dear George” and sign off “Yours, Bill.” DCI Casey memorandum to Vice President Bush of 5 February 1982.

⁵⁵ Casey remarks to CIA employees, 21 October 1982, DVD in CIA History Staff files. Douglas Garthoff, *Directors of Central Intelligence as Leaders of the U.S. Intelligence Community, 1946-2005* (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2005), p. 154. Casey was the first but not the last DCI to hold Cabinet rank. John Deutch was enticed to be President Clinton’s DCI with the offer of Cabinet rank after the nomination of Michael Carnes fell through, and Deutch’s successor George Tenet had that status for the rest of Clinton’s second term (but not under the administration of George W. Bush). See *ibid.*, pp. 235-236. After Casey’s death, Reagan clearly thought that Cabinet rank for the DCI was a mistake and did not extend it to Casey’s successor, William Webster; see the Reagan diary entry for 23 March 1987 in Brinkley, p. 703.

⁵⁶ CSI interview with one of Casey’s assistants, 29 May 2008. This sentiment is repeated in many internal interviews that cover Casey’s directorship.

⁵⁷ Coll, p. 92.

⁵⁸ John Ranelagh, *The Agency: The Rise and Decline of the CIA* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), p. 712; emphasis added.

curriculum vitae a “Willkie speechwriter in the 1940 presidential campaign.” While Persico’s point is to portend the various controversies in Casey’s later career —especially as DCI—that stemmed from Casey’s arguably casual regard for the truth, it does seem more specifically that Casey was predisposed to overstate his relationship with Ronald Reagan.

That Casey did not have the relationship he touted is the assessment of Robert Gates, who was executive assistant to Casey in 1981-82, head of the Directorate of Intelligence (DI) in 1982-86, and then Casey’s Deputy DCI. In a 1994 interview, Gates said

I probably spent more time with Casey than anybody else in the Agency, and I just never had the sense that he had what I would call a close personal relationship [with Reagan]. I think that his relationship with the president was in a considerable way a distant one.⁵⁹

Gates explained this perspective more fully in his 1996 memoir:

I always believed that Bill Casey’s closeness to Ronald Reagan was exaggerated. I think the relationship was closest in the first months of the administration, while there was still a genuine sense of gratitude on Reagan’s part for Casey’s management of the presidential campaign. . . . Over time, however, their contacts grew less frequent. . . . He could always get in to see the President when he wanted to, and could reach him on the phone, but he did so less and less as time passed.⁶⁰

Preliminary research into DCI records confirms Gates’s impression.⁶¹ DCI daily schedules for calendar year 1981—the first eleven months of the first Reagan term—show that, while Casey as a Cabinet member saw President Reagan quite often at the White House as part of larger groups, he had surprisingly few personal meetings with Reagan. Starting with the first meeting of Reagan’s NSC on 6 February 1981, through the end of December Casey attended at least 33 such meetings, 18 meetings of the National Security Policy Group (a subset of the NSC that dealt with policy toward the Soviet bloc and also intelligence activities), and 17 Cabinet meetings (often combined with a working lunch), for a total of 68 large-group White House meetings—an average of one every four days—not to mention an additional twelve White House social functions at which Casey and Reagan were both present. Casey may have sought to give the impression internally at CIA that many of his frequent trips to the White House were private

⁵⁹ Andrew, p. 613, fn. 17. As head of CIA’s analytic directorate, Gates did not consult much with Casey regarding the day-to-day analysis delivered to the President in the form of the PDB and other CIA assessments. As chairman of the National Intelligence Council (NIC) during 1983-86, however, Gates frequently interacted with Casey over NIC products, especially National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) because of “Casey’s intense interest and active participation” in the NIEs, which were issued under the name of the DCI. See Robert Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider’s Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 202.

⁶⁰ Gates, *ibid.*, p. 218. An extreme view is that of Reagan aide Michael Deaver, who asserted that Reagan and Casey met privately at most six times through 1985; Cannon, *President Reagan*, p. 352.

⁶¹ Redacted versions of Casey’s schedules have been released under the Freedom of Information Act. My analysis of Casey’s meetings with Reagan during 1981 are augmented by Reagan’s diaries; see Brinkley, pp. 15-97 *passim*.

visits with the President; Casey's schedule for 5 October, for example, lists "Lunch with the President," while Reagan's diary indicates it was lunch for 29 people.⁶²

Casey's schedule for 1981, however, indicates he met alone with Reagan during this period only four times, or less than once every twelve weeks. In addition, he had six telephone conversations with the President. This is not the schedule of a man with a tremendously personal relationship with Ronald Reagan. Gates's impression that Casey's interactions with the President were most numerous in the first year (a view consistent with the fact that one of Casey's few close allies in the White House was Richard Allen, Reagan's national security advisor, who lasted just a year) is supported by a review of Casey's daily schedule for 1982. Casey in the second year of the Reagan administration saw the President in 54 large-group meetings (i.e. NSC, Cabinet, NSPG, down from 68 in 1981) and 5 small-group meetings; only three times did he meet with Reagan alone. Casey's telephone calls with the President in 1982 also dropped from the previous year, to four. The DCI's schedule for 1983 indicates he met privately with Reagan five times that year and had ten phone calls—up slightly from the preceding two years.⁶³ There is other evidence that in subsequent years Casey's individual meetings with Reagan and his telephone calls with him remained in low single digit figures.⁶⁴

Curiously, especially because during the 1980 campaign Casey had believed that Reagan was capable of absorbing only a paragraph of text at one sitting, after the inauguration Casey began sending detailed and lengthy letters to the President on topics such as progress in rebuilding US intelligence capabilities, Soviet espionage, and arms talks and US-Soviet relations. These seem to have become longer and more frequent as time went on, perhaps to compensate for fewer personal meetings.⁶⁵

⁶² The DCI's comings and goings are generally well known at least to the senior tier of CIA management, not to mention the support and security staff, so Casey's schedule of White House meetings probably reinforced the internal perception that he was close to the President. For example, on 18 May 1983 Casey attended a Cabinet meeting in the morning; an NSC session in the afternoon; and a private meeting with the President's national security advisor, William Clark, in the early evening—all of which on this day required three separate trips to the White House from Langley.

⁶³ An uptick in DCI-POTUS interactions for 1983 is hardly surprising, given that year's Boland Amendment restrictions on CIA covert action in Central America, the downing of flight KAL 007, Soviet reactions to Reagan's "Evil Empire" speech, the Strategic Defense Initiative, and the deployment of Intermediate Nuclear Forces in Europe, Soviet leader Yuri Andropov's ultimately fatal illness and succession considerations, the Mideast crisis and the killing of the US Marines in Beirut, the invasion of Grenada, the stepping up of the Afghan covert action, and other matters dealing with intelligence. Historian Stephen Hayward calls 1983 "the most significant and eventful year of the Reagan presidency"; Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Conservative Counterrevolution, 1980-1989* (New York: Random House, 2009), chapter seven, "The Year of Living Dangerously," pp. 273-337.

⁶⁴ According to a study compiled by White House lawyers in connection with the Iran-Contra affair, Casey during 1986 met privately with the President only three times, while there were eight phone calls between them. "Summary of Contacts Between the President and DCI Casey in 1986," 20 August 1987, Reagan Presidential Library, White House Legal Task Force: Records, box 92814.

⁶⁵ For example, in January 1984 Casey sent a 23-page, single-spaced letter to Reagan reviewing the Intelligence Community's activities and achievements. Casey's cover letter to National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane on the latter's copy indicates that Reagan told Casey he had read it. Casey often sent his substantive letters to Reagan (on at least one occasion he called a particularly long letter a "paper") before the President left on a foreign or domestic trip or took a weekend at Camp David, knowing that Reagan always brought along extra reading.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom at CIA, it does not appear that the Agency's fortunes and influence during the Reagan administration rested entirely or even mostly on a close personal relationship between the DCI and the President. It is far more likely that CIA was influential because it served a President who understood intelligence and its importance, who appreciated how it would help him in policy decisions, and who appreciated the product CIA provided. These factors would have obtained for almost anyone Reagan chose to lead CIA. As it happened, he chose William Casey as a way to reward him for his crucial role in the campaign and because of his conservative views, particularly on foreign policy, that Reagan shared. History is not a science in that we can ever "run the experiment again," but it is fascinating to speculate that CIA might not have been worse off, and perhaps could have been better off, with someone other than Casey as DCI.