

Improving the Intelligence System

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The Iranian crisis raises anew the issue of US intelligence capabilities, or rather the lack of them. The failure of US diplomatic and intelligence reporting to alert the White House and State Department to the strength and dynamism of the Islamic revolutionary movement, the inability of the shah's vast panoply of modern armament and repressive police apparatus to contain it, and the likelihood of a violent reaction in Iran to admittance of the shah to the United States, are only the latest miscalculations in the collection and evaluation of political intelligence.

Whether US political intelligence and reporting is as feeble as both its critics and supporters, for different reasons, say is a matter of debate. What is clear is that the conditions of the next decade would make overhaul of the system imperative in any case. This will not take place so long as the formula for its renewal includes the same ingredients that precipitated the failures of the past.

Unfortunately, blind repetition of old policies seems to be the course advocated by the CIA's congressional supporters and the increasingly vocal lobby of retired intelligence professionals. In recent articles, and in congressional testimony on the proposed CIA "charter," they put exclusive blame on the post-Watergate, post-Vietnam climate of national guilt and self-exposure, coupled with savage media criticism and crippling legislation, for disastrously weakening US intelligence capabilities. Their remedy is to remove legislative restrictions and go

back to the good old days.

The current proposals would, if implemented, indeed rebuild the US intelligence system, but not in a way calculated to purge it of its weaknesses and improve its performance. None of the pending proposals would terminate the dangerous connection between intelligence collection and covert operations—a union of missions and a scrambling of techniques so dissimilar and incompatible that uniting them within the same CIA directorate has periodically compromised the functions of both. Each of them in one way or another perpetuates centralized control by the CIA over the analysis of intelligence information and the production of intelligence estimates by a specialized corps of academically-oriented career analysts. Nor would the proposed reforms have any impact on the present self-limiting, security-conscious pattern of intelligence gathering which in the political field excludes or downgrades information from the most crucial sectors of the developing world—labor, youth, intellectuals, the press and the working clergy.

The debate over the future of the CIA has already been muddled by diversionary currents. Outside the intelligence community public discussion has been monopolized by legislators and lawyers whose principal focus has been on forging a complex network of restrictions and chains of accountability, a negative approach at best. Within the intelligence community, a lobby of retired professionals has drowned out the voices of the foreign policy makers who actually use the intelligence product. Some of the arguments mask a power struggle over the proper role and power base of the director of central intelligence—whether or not he should continue also to head the

CIA. Throughout, the level of the debate has been degraded by the demagogic tactic of CIA supporters in and out of government in accusing critics of seeking to dismantle the whole US intelligence establishment, when in fact the occasional target is covert operations—which are not intelligence operations at all!

Basic to an effective national security establishment should be a covert operations capability that is separate and distinct from the intelligence system. Within the CIA this demarcation has always existed in the form of separate directorates of intelligence and operations (formerly plans). But the ostensible separation applies to intelligence evaluation and analysis only—secret intelligence *collection* is the responsibility of the operations directorate, a combination unknown in other western countries. (Great Britain's foreign intelligence and counter-espionage organizations [MI-6 and MI-5] have never been organizationally linked to clandestine warfare organizations like the special operations executive [SOE] and the special air services [SAS] unit.)

Indeed, much of the present confusion is a legacy of the CIA's wartime origins in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), which in the beginning was not so much an intelligence organization as a clandestine warfare organization recruited and trained for paramilitary operations behind enemy lines. What should have been two separate, small, tightly-controlled and totally separate agencies grew into a single monstrous bureaucracy created in a wartime image and staffed by OSS carryovers, many of whom, whatever their talents as underground fighters, were poorly attuned to peacetime intelligence work, or indeed to civilian life in

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general.

Intelligence operations are so markedly different from covert operations that the distinction deserves further elaboration. Intelligence collection is information-gathering focused on particular operational or policy needs. It involves a longterm, laborious, multifaceted process of acquiring facts and data from a wide variety of sources and subjecting this heterogeneous material to painstaking evaluation, cross-checking, and analysis. The analytical process is (or ought to be) a compound of scientific investigation and art, combining a multitude of special technical and analytical skills with area knowledge and a high degree of empathy with the personal and collective motivations of others. If departments and agencies like state, commerce, defense and treasury did a satisfactory job of reporting on foreign areas it has been estimated that only 10 percent or less of the information collected from open societies, and 20 percent or less from closed societies, need come from clandestine sources. As it is, according to 1976 congressional testimony from the CIA, about 30 percent of significant information comes from clandestine sources.

Covert action is utterly different. It should not be confused with paramilitary operations like the abortive hostage rescue mission, though sometimes forming part of them. Its object is to change the policy of foreign governments, perhaps even to influence whole societies. Unlike intelligence gathering, which is quiet, dispersed, and equipped with built-in mechanisms and checking devices to correct error or repair breaks in the system, covert action is usually a risky gamble in which victories may be more apparent than real, and exposure can spell political disaster. Even the more benign aspects of covert action, such as subsidizing friendly political parties to offset political expenditures by the other side—as in Italy in the late '40s—need to be handled with maximum discretion or they can be counterproductive.

As practiced in the past, the more sinister aspects of the CIA covert operations—destabilization, bribery of foreign leaders, support of foreign secret police organiza-

proved to be a two-edged sword. This history of CIA covert operations is an albatross around the neck of every legitimate business and government enterprise overseas. It is the covert action side of the CIA, not the intelligence side, whose highly publicized interventions in Cuba, Iran, Guatemala and Chile, to name only a few, have so dramatized the name of the CIA abroad that its own intelligence operations have been crippled and US foreign policy in the Third World

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exposed to compromise and vilification. Sooner or later the role of the United States in supporting a despotic ruler or overthrowing a legally constituted regime either precipitates a violent reaction or opens the United States to perennial charges of conspiracy and corruption, in many cases wildly exaggerated.

Moreover, entrusting underground operations to a bureaucracy with a vested interest in “success” regardless of cost, diminishes personal responsibility for the methods employed or the character of local allies. The United States not only becomes identified with foreign secret police forces, but tarnished with their atrocities. Any civilized nation that presumes to establish collaborative arrangements with the thoroughly vicious security establishments of certain nations of Latin America bears a heavy responsibility for the train of mutilated corpses left in their wake.

Nevertheless, covert action has been part of the arsenal of weapons of the sovereign state since the days of the Trojan horse. The Athenians were adept both in the

arts of destabilization and in creating “factions” favorable to their interests in other Greek city states. Louis XIV kept King Charles II on his payroll, and tried to foment internal rebellion in Britain on behalf of the exiled Stuart pretenders. During the first phase of the wars against Napoleon, William Pitt almost bankrupted the British treasury with overt and covert subsidies to the German principalities. A classic example of covert action in modern times was the despatch of Lenin in a sealed train from Switzerland to Russia by the German general staff in 1918. A more recent example was the clandestine mission sent by Britain and the United States to Yugoslavia in March 1940, which resulted in a fake *coup* that sent the regent, Prince Paul, into exile and swung Yugoslavia into a posture of resistance against the transit of Hitler's forces to attack Greece.

The differences between traditional covert action as practiced by the European monarchies and the covert operations of the United States after World War II are largely one of scale—but that is the vital difference! Once escalated to global dimensions and institutionalized in a large bureaucracy the very term covert action becomes a misnomer. If a secret intelligence operation is blown, the cell can be sealed off and a new start made with only minor damage to the whole apparatus. A blown covert operation may compromise the whole spectrum of foreign relations for an indefinite period.

By their nature, covert operations in peacetime are so tricky, so liable to exposure or backfire, that to bring them off with even a remote chance of long-term secrecy requires delicate handling of the highest order. In earlier times, the chosen instruments of such operations have been agents unconnected with government, recruited on the basis of special qualifications for that operation alone. The practice of entrusting politically sensitive secret missions to all-purpose bureaucrats, with no particular cultural or ethnic affinity with the area involved, supervised by even more unqualified superiors, is absurd on its face.

The Achilles' heel of all covert operations is their personnel. When kept in tight military harness in

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wartime their abilities can be turned to good account. Unfortunately, dedication to a lifetime of clandestine activity produces a conspiratorial mentality that, if not criminal in nature, is uncomfortably well-adapted to leading an underground life that is illegal in most foreign countries. What emerges from recent literature, not to mention the personal experience of many Foreign Service officers, is an unacceptably high proportion of covert action operatives who are alcoholic, violent, and inhabitants of a paranoid dream-world. Howard Hunt adjusting his red wig in the White House basement, the rogue operation conducted by Cuban mercenaries in the Watergate and bizarre assassination schemes were fully to be expected. Equally embarrassing have been the revelations of ex-CIA agents about every major covert operation from Iran in 1953 to Angola in 1975. Sensationalized to generate maximum sales appeal, they depict a pack of exuberant amateurs playing lethal games along the fringes of US foreign policy.

In *White House Years* (p. 658) Henry Kissinger notes that the national temperament and tradition is unsuited to covert operations. This view may be too pessimistic. Nevertheless, a media-saturated constitutional democracy like the United States should be wary of institutionalizing a foreign policy tool that is alien to its values, incompatible with domestic political conditions and, in the long run, more likely to harm the wielder than the adversary.

The problems of the intelligence system proper are quite different. The claim that recent lapses like the failure of the CIA to predict the collapse of the shah or the takeover of the US embassy in Tehran are attributable to self-destruction of the system in the post-Watergate climate ignores similar failures in the days when CIA effectiveness was supposedly at its peak. In any case the recent wave of CIA dismissals was largely confined to covert action personnel: the intelligence directorate still has the largest collection of political and economic analysts in the business—1700 political analysts alone. Moreover, the total US intelligence capability includes the

attache network of the Defense Intelligence Agency; the political and economic reporting functions of US embassies and consular posts overseas; the satellite surveillance system; and the code-breaking and telemetering functions of the National Security Agency—a formidable collection of assets with a budget of nearly \$5 billion and personnel approaching 30,000.

In February of 1978, well before the fall of the shah, the White House signified its dissatisfaction with the poor quality of CIA and State Department political and intelligence coverage of the Iranian revolution in a letter from the president's national security adviser, to the director of central intelligence. In mid-August of 1978, the CIA produced its notorious 23-page assessment of Iran that included such sentences as "Iran is not in a revolutionary or even pre-revolutionary situation" and "there is dissatisfaction with the shah's tight control of the political process, but this does not threaten the government." On November 11, 1978, President Carter sent Secretary of State Vance, CIA Director Stansfield Turner, and Brzezinski a three-sentence handwritten memorandum bluntly stating: "I am not satisfied with the quality of political intelligence."

The roots of US intelligence weakness are too deeply embedded to be eradicated by cosmetic organizational change. Well-adapted to assessing developments and framing scenarios for the advanced societies of the West, the average American political analyst is ill-prepared to appreciate the self-abnegation and dynamism of non-Western religions and ideologies, not to mention the charisma of primitive political personalities. He is equally ill-equipped to understand the private financial motivations that lurk behind public rhetoric the world over. At both ends of the spectrum a wide range of indicators is closed to him.

As civil servants with a social science background, the majority of intelligence analysts have a subconscious antipathy to the emotional and irrational factors that dominate mass movements. As a result they tend to downgrade political fervor and ideological conviction as factors to be reckoned with. Nothing is more pathetic than the

perennial delusion of American diplomats and intelligence experts that sooner or later in the course of a raging revolution such "rational" goals as political democracy, economic development and improved living standards will reassert themselves. Another delusion is that the leaders of mass movements can be brought to heel by attachment of national assets or economic sanctions.

The empty abstractions that analysts use exemplify their flight from the passions that bring mobs out into the streets. Anodyne terms like "power centers," "repression," "safety valves," and "orchestrated demonstrations" and the fatuous "responsible elements" comfortably insulate both writer and reader from the harsh realities of Third World conditions, including the corruption, brutality and social injustice that fuel revolutionary movements. There can be no real knowledge of other societies without some degree of empathy. Neither the policy-making bureaucrat nor the analyst can accept that once a regime tortures and kills students and non-violent political activists the relatives of the victims will never rest until they have obtained retribution, regardless of the material cost to themselves or their country.

The insulated, suburban values of the intelligence specialist extend to his sources. The predisposition of American officials overseas to restrict their social contacts to the local "establishment" is well known. They even confine their journalistic contacts to Americans, despite the foreign language illiteracy and cultural insularity of American media personnel that make them useless as evaluators and give them little entrée to inside sources. Intelligence professionals often compound this disability by cultivating only the power structure of the moment and confining their underground contacts to those approved by the security services of the host country. This erects a wall of mistrust between US intelligence services and the radical and Marxist groups that form the core of political dissidence—and the future leadership—in most of the Third World. The scanty contacts of US intelligence with the students and clergy of Iran are now a painful reality. The same holds

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true in South Korea where embassy contacts with disaffected students and city dwellers are minimal and the strongest official links are with the Korean army.

At the other end of the scale the civil service intelligence professional is such an innocent about private financial motivation that he makes no attempt to penetrate the world of exchange speculation, capital movements, currency transactions, insider stock trading, and contract kickbacks, which are often crucial indicators of political allegiance and impending change. The details of these transactions are not as systematically recorded in foreign countries as they are here but, since business deals cannot be consummated without some form of paperwork, there are always disaffected sources to reveal them.

Intelligence professionals profess to adhere to a cult of scientific objectivity which is supposed to render their cerebrations immune to irrational hunch or diversionary emotion. In fact, most of them are quite unconscious of the extent to which cultural biases distort their reasoning. As authorities like Karl Popper (*The Logic of Scientific Discovery*) and Thomas Kuhn (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*) repeatedly point out, fields of inquiry are always structured: the assumptions of the investigator in selecting his data and assigning it weight predetermine his conclusions. Whenever the intelligence analyst unconsciously allows his cultural biases or the policy preferences of his superiors to exclude or downgrade unpalatable realities, he builds what William James called "a closed and completed system of truth" in which "phenomena unclassifiable within the system are . . . paradoxical absurdities and must be held untrue."

Ideally, the US intelligence analyst should feel as remote from his country's policies as a gnome of Zurich. To be of optimum use to the policy-maker, assessments should be denationalized and value-free, avoiding like the plague the sin of ethnocentrism approaching the problem from the standpoint of US interests and exaggerating the role of one's own nation in its interaction with others. If as an experiment President Carter were to scrap for one week the political intelligence served up by

the State Department and the CIA in favor of the reports of the international banking community he would obtain a better picture of the prospects for his battered foreign policy than he does today.

The worst feature of the present system is the pressure for conformity and the absence of any institutional means of correcting error. Once "facts" are arranged in symmetrical patterns they become difficult to challenge. The location

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of a national foreign assessment center within the CIA, and the requirement for a consensus on important strategic and political issues, stifles dissent, eliminates competition, and makes the estimate system a captive of its own weaknesses. During the period 1975-78 the policy of détente put a premium on an optimistic evaluation of the US nuclear deterrent and corresponding depreciation of Soviet nuclear capabilities. There was no way for dissenting agency voices to register their alarm over the massive build-up of Soviet strategic missiles except by introducing hedges and qualifiers into the consolidated estimates. Similarly, dissenting viewpoints as to the durability of the shah were submerged in qualifiers or relegated to footnotes.

The lesson of World War II is already forgotten. The insistence of Hitler on centralized analysis and streamlined consensus was the greatest infirmity of an otherwise excellent German intelligence system—in contrast to the decentralized, less orderly, structure of the British and American intelligence services, which pro-

duced competing estimates of greater coverage. As General Daniel Graham pointed out in a recent symposium, whenever the conventional wisdom of the analysts becomes congealed as official doctrine, failure is inevitable.

What are the solutions for our intelligence dilemma? The United States cannot retreat from its vital interests, which owing to energy dependency and a network of shaky alliances still extend around the globe in both directions. The president needs a limited covert action capability, and the government the best political intelligence it can obtain. New departures will not, however, be easy so long as intelligence is treated as an arcane field for specialists.

As a first step, the present covert action organization should be pruned of its older personnel, removed from the CIA, and transferred to the executive offices of the president. It should be named the special operations branch of the National Security Council, and gradually reconstituted along different lines and under different leadership.

Under the new concept, the special operations branch would be basically a high-level planning staff, housed in the NSC structure because of its proximity to the president and high-level interdepartmental policy formation, and to keep covert action missions under tight control. Covert operations themselves would no longer be entrusted to a large, autonomous corps of CIA bureaucrats. Except for a small permanent core of specialists, routine political action programs, such as subsidizing foreign organizations or channeling arms to guerrilla movements, would be entrusted to specially trained personnel seconded from the various departments and agencies of the national security establishment—state, defense, CIA, the International Communications Agency, AID, and even treasury. Sensitive, high-level covert missions would henceforth be entrusted to hand-picked government personnel and civilians with legitimate credentials appropriate for the mission in question.

The objective would be to create a small, highly secret capability to

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execute a limited range of missions not overtly performable by any other part of the national security establishment. A covert action office of this kind would, by its secret and high-level character, be more responsible and self-limiting than the present massive, though compartmentalized, bureaucracy. Assignments would be entrusted to qualified persons with well-established covers, not to a corps of easily-identified, multi-purpose clandestine operations. Because of their reliance on non-government personnel, the projects of the special operations branch would have to be kept under the strictest secrecy. Project clearances and reports should be restricted to two congressional committees, with severe legal penalties prescribed for unauthorized disclosure. There should be no repetition of the incredible public exposure of the methods, equipment and use of local agents that emanated from Pentagon briefings immediately after the Iranian rescue debacle.

Improvement in the coverage and product of the US intelligence system would require quite a different approach. The ideal solution—admittedly not achievable—would be to take the bureaucratic components responsible for political and economic estimates out of the system completely and unite them in a new and completely autonomous organization, staffed by a diversified, international corps of political and economic specialists, charged with preparing reports and estimates for the national security establishment similar to what *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, or the *Petroleum Intelligence Weekly*, furnishes to private subscribers. A more achievable goal would be gradually to contract and diversify the intelligence side of CIA, by rotating personnel—bringing more in from the field, giving two four-year assignments to area specialists from other agencies and universities under the Intergovernmental Personnel Act, and recruiting from

a broader spectrum of business, journalism and the professions than is now the case. In the case of estimates involving remote areas and unfamiliar non-western cultures, the analytical process should be farmed out to business or academic specialists, or at least subjected to a rigorous critique by such specialists before taking final form. On crucial questions, other departments and agencies with expertise or special insights should be encouraged to submit competing estimates or given the opportunity to file informed and well-substantiated dissents.


The collection process should be broadened. All countries should be regarded as being in a permanent state of societal evolution. Their social, economic and political structures, as well as the forces opposed to them, should be viewed in a detached and impersonal way as transitory phenomena. Contact should be made with levels of the private business and financial sectors not heretofore systematically covered. An even greater effort should be made to develop sympathetic contacts in youth and student circles, and with dissident groups. There should be no hesitation about obtaining information from any source, domestic or foreign. To the extent that clandestine sources are relied on, the material should be processed as rapidly as possible since in an age of mass effects most sensitive information usually has the value life of a fruit fly. Classification of political and economic intelligence should be correspondingly downgraded for rapid handling.

In the analytical process, the objective would be to transform intelligence estimates into products that the policy-maker can actually use, instead of being scanned for trends and then discarded. Language and syntax should be pruned of jargon and abstractions. Estimates should be oriented to foreign actions and capabilities, not speculative intangibles, and substantiated by supporting evidence. Neatly packaged conclusions aimed at giving the policy-maker a comfortable sense of control over events should be avoided. Above

all, estimates should keep events in their proper cultural and historical perspective, free alike from policy bias and the hysteria of the moment.

One other organizational change should be considered. If the director of central intelligence were liberated from his dual role as head of the CIA, and moved to the White House as supreme chief of all intelligence activities, it would have the beneficial effect of giving the State Department's bureau of intelligence and research, and the Defense Intelligence Agency equal bureaucratic status with the CIA, thereby enhancing diversity of approach, and stimulating competition in the preparation of estimates. Of itself, this would not work any fundamental change in the mind-set of intelligence professionals, but might at least free the system from the straitjacket of consensus.

As regards the recent debate in Congress over the CIA "charter" the emphasis has been misplaced. Clearly, the Hughes-Ryan amendment should be repealed and congressional oversight of covert operations limited to two committees. But the objective should be to assure *presidential accountability*, not more agency accountability to Congress. The law should require prior disclosure of the full details of prospective covert operations to the president, and disclosure to Congress made under controlled conditions well after the fact. It should be made statutorily impossible for the chief executive or national security adviser to escape responsibility for the consequences of their blunders by pleading ignorance of the details of covert operations that backfire.

Beyond this there is little that organizational change or legislation can do. There is no way of mandating improved performance or better judgment by enacting laws or drafting regulations. Any more congressional oversight would only multiply the chances of ignorant or malicious interference in a sorely beset system whose ills are internal and not susceptible to legislative remedy. The responsibility is the president's and he should not be permitted to evade it. 

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