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The Intelligence Intellectuals
Social Scientists and the Making of the CIA

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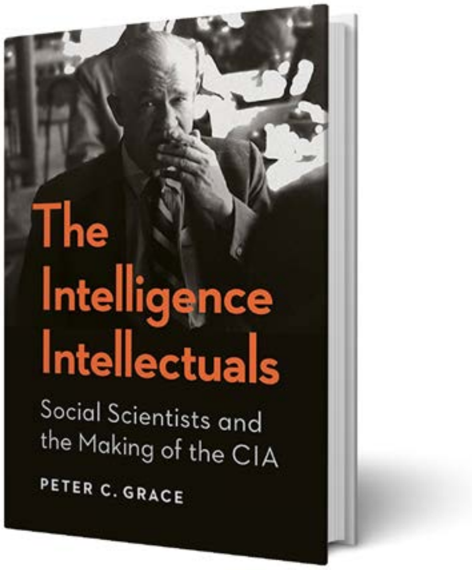
The Intelligence Intellectuals
Social Scientists and the Making of the CIA
PETER C. GRACE

In his new book, *The Intelligence Intellectuals*, University of Otago lecturer Peter Grace recounts how the CIA in its early days adopted social science techniques for national intelligence estimates. This crucial period shaped the analytic culture and methodology of the CIA to the present day. Grace's book presents a well-researched and insightful study in organizational leadership and makes a strong contribution to the intellectual history of the CIA's analysis.

From the National Security Act of 1947, the Central Intelligence Agency assumed the task of coordinating and evaluating national security intelligence, but the new organization struggled to define itself. (43) Grace recaps the CIA's founding and its shaky status with the US Congress and policymakers, and the push-back it received from the State Department and the Department of Defense. The CIA's failure to warn of the 1948 outbreak of violence in Colombia—the "South American Pearl Harbor"—as well as the more consequential 1949 Soviet atomic bomb detonation damaged the agency's credibility. (53) Reform became urgent after the perceived intelligence failure to warn of the North Korean invasion of South Korea in 1950.

A survey led by future Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Allen Dulles and deputy DCI William Jackson lambasted the performance of the CIA's struggling Office of Research and Estimates. Estimates were not coordinated and "not impressive." The process itself was muddled, and the leadership too passive. (79) The early organization needed to gain legitimacy and offer an analytic product other agencies could not offer. Truman's National Security Council embraced the survey's findings.

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Retired General Walter Bedell Smith, appointed as CIA director in October 1950, began a significant restructuring.

Enter the intellectuals. Grace focuses on Director Smith's key hires for analysis, especially Office of Strategic Services (OSS) veteran William Langer, a Harvard-based diplomatic historian, his OSS colleague Sherman Kent, who would lead the estimative intelligence effort; and Max Millikan, an MIT economist, would lead the Office of Research and Reports (ORR) and helped design methodologies to estimate the size and performance of the Soviet economy.

The intellectuals took advantage of the enormous prestige social science enjoyed after World War II. Indeed, the CIA was founded during the heyday of what political scientist Michael Desch calls "the behavioralist revolution" in the universities, which featured the rapid rise of quantitative methods, methodology, and empirical data to the exclusion of norms and values. Interdisciplinary approaches were stressed, along with a detached attitude to the phenomena being studies.[a] But with this approach came a tension between science and policy that would never quite be overcome.

Between 1950 and 1952, Langer brought in the approach of OSS's Research and Analysis (R&A) branch to the early CIA. With an important difference, as Grace correctly says: R&A had focused on the present; CIA would look into the future. (126) The emphasis would be on analysis, not report writing. The priority would be long-range, future-focused assessments, which Director Smith christened "national intelligence estimates" (NIEs). Based on recent intelligence failures, Grace notes, prediction became an expectation. (26)

Langer's decisive move was hiring in 1950 his former R&A deputy Sherman Kent, a Yale historian of 19th century French history, as the chief of the Office of National Estimates (ONE) and chair of the Board of National Estimates (BNE), a position Kent held until 1967. Despite all the impressive former luminaries at R&A, Kent was the right choice. After the war, Kent had gained prominence with his 1949 groundbreaking book "Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy," which, Grace emphasizes, served as the manual for "a new type of agency." (146)

The production of estimates centered on a two-tiered process with the CIA's ONE and the BNE. The CIA's ONE assembled a draft NIE and BNE reviewed the draft, often changing the conclusion (188). Products were coordinated across the IC, and dissenting voices were managed. The "Princeton Consultants," named for William Jackson's New Jersey home, peer-reviewed the estimates, and thus a strategic intelligence process emerged. According to intelligence historian Robin Winks, ONE under Kent would play an essential role in "explaining what intelligence means."[b] DCI William Colby replaced ONE with a group of National Intelligence Officers (NIOs) in 1973, but the fundamental process remained largely unchanged.

Grace ably explains Kent's imprint upon CIA's analysis. Kent brought with him the professional techniques of this historian's craft and its emphasis of empiricism, objectivity, and "value-free" judgments. (20) The effort to detach oneself from the story trans-lated into the policy of keeping analytical distance from the policymaker to guard against politicization. Multiple hypotheses became an integral part of estimate making.

Kent's view was that most "intelligence" could be acquired overtly and he stressed a multidisciplinary approach to the bigger picture and avoid information siloes. Kent's writing and approach stressed social science variables and causation. (143) But it would also require "leaps into the unknown." (135) Grace concludes that the new rigorous approach to analysis won over CIA's detractors. (184)

Critics of Kent's approach, like the political scientist Willmoore Kendall thought Kent focused excessively on the need for prediction, and he saw the inevitable danger when, "intelligence looks shamefaced over its failure to tell Secretary Marshall the day and the hour at which a revolution will break out in Colombia."[a] Grace also relates that former OSS veteran, the historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. echoed Kendall's criticism that intelligence and policy were intertwined. (154) Schlesinger also criticized social sciences' separation of facts and values, because the act of choosing facts itself requires a value judgment. (106)

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[a] Michael C. Desch, *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security* (Princeton University Press, 2019), 75-78.

[b] Robin W. Winks, *Cloak & Gown: Scholars in the Secret War, 1939-1961* (William Morrow & Co, 1987), 450.

Grace acknowledges some institutional drawbacks to the social science approach. At the CIA, "deployment of scientific theories," Grace writes, "would remain elusive." (29) Practically, how can one employ these methods and answer short deadlines? (35) Moreover, in the press of business, systematic methodologies and nuanced conclusions often had to yield to the expedient--"Just give me an answer!" (194) Besides, with a focus on material conditions and observable data, how does one determine adversaries' intentions? (189) Kent himself seemed aware of some pitfalls in the methods. (191)

Just as crucially, social science depended upon the availability of data, which would be particularly challenging to collect on the CIA's main target, the Soviet Union. Facing this a paucity of reliable data, Max Millikan, as head of ORR, developed a distinct interpretive framework. Few academic experts existed so ORR had to create Soviet experts. Also, a "bottom-up" approach, well described by Grace, was used arrive at total defense expenditures. (210) Working in this method, economist Warren Nutter challenged the idea of the Soviet economy as a powerhouse, although some economists still admired it. (216)

The book delves into the early NIEs, this new strategic intelligence product, with pioneering estimates of the Soviets (87). Facts and values were not always distinct; for instance, Grace identifies the "jingoistic" tone of NSC-68 in some estimates, but this was perhaps inevitable after that famous directive essentially institutionalized the Cold War, with the CIA as one of the leaders in the fight. (186) But in general, Grace leaves unexplored how the mindsets of East Coast intellectuals may have affected CIA's analytic output.

Grace, in his conclusion, offers an assessment of the intellectuals' legacy. The liabilities in Kent's approach surfaced in the 1962 Cuba NIE, which failed to predict the island as a platform for Soviet nuclear-armed missiles because it did not fit longstanding patterns of Soviet behavior, as ONE saw them. (9) But the author might have offered more context on how successful the Kent system was over time. As observed by former NIC Chair Robert Hutchings, eventually the BNE—with "a compulsive preoccupation with prediction"—lost the confidence of the policymakers and, over time, Kent's system became too detached and had to match it more closely with policymakers' interests.[b] Despite these quibbles with the conclusion, anyone interested in the origins of the CIA and intelligence analysis will find value in Grace's important study. ■

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[a] Kendall quoted in Jeffrey P. Rogg, *The Spy and the State: The History of American Intelligence* (Oxford University Press, 2025), 265.

[b] "Introduction" in *Truth to Power: A History of the U.S. National Intelligence Council,* Robert Hutchings and Gregory F. Treverton, editors (Oxford University Press, 2019), 9-13.