

Privileged and Confidential: The Secret History of the President's Intelligence Advisory Board

Kenneth Michael Absher, Michael C. Desch, and Roman Popadiuk, (The University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 515 pp., endnotes, appendices, index.

Reviewed by Samuel Cooper-Wall

The authors of *Privileged and Confidential* have performed a great service to intelligence professionals in producing a thoroughly researched and well-crafted treatment of the President's Intelligence Advisory Board (PIAB).¹ This subject has been largely neglected by historians, and the necessarily secretive nature of the board has increased the odds that its rich history could fade into the ether. Having now served 10 presidents by examining nearly every major US intelligence matter since 1956, the board has a story worth telling. While most intelligence professionals are unlikely ever to interact with this small and obscure part of the Intelligence Community (IC), the PIAB has a reputation for providing insights into National Security decisionmaking and producing useful assessments on the future of intelligence. *Privileged and Confidential* brings out the importance of the PIAB while giving it a fair and thorough appraisal.

Apart from the lack of prior scholarship, the authors had to overcome the assumption that there is little about the PIAB that is worthy of study—a hypothesis even they admit is not completely unfounded. Indeed, there exists a somewhat compelling narrative on the lack of accomplishments of the PIAB; it was not uncommon for the board to find that its influence was limited or that it was the subject of controversy. Most notably, the unauthorized disclosure of the board's assessment of the Team A/Team B competitive analysis program rocked the Ford administration and reportedly caused Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) George H.W. Bush to storm into PIAB Chairman Leo Cherne's office and accuse the board of being the

source of the leak. Jimmy Carter went on to shut the board down entirely during his presidency.

However, the authors indicate there are two more common inhibitors to the success of the board. First, presidents such as Reagan and Clinton have undermined the board by appointing many political allies who had limited familiarity with intelligence. Second, lack of access to the president has posed a significant impediment, as was the case most recently after PIAB Chairman Brent Scowcroft had a falling-out with the George W. Bush administration over the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Such challenges, taken collectively, create a negative picture that is difficult to overcome, but the authors are quick to counter this view. They start with a central factor in any and all success the board has: its membership. The board's rosters of capable and powerful members alone indicate the influence it has held in Washington. Clark Clifford is an ideal example. Prior to becoming secretary of defense, he served on the board during much of the 1960s and used his frequent contact with President Lyndon Johnson to ensure the PIAB's recommendations were heard, even though the board itself had very little direct access to the president at the time.

The board has had a measurable impact via numerous recommendations that were later enacted, most notably the establishment of the National Photographic Interpretation Center, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the CIA's Directorate of Science and Technology. Many board products have earned

¹ The board was designated as the President's Board of Consultants on Foreign Intelligence Affairs (PBCFIA) from 1956 to 1961 and the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB) from 1961 to 2008. In the interest of simplicity, this review will refer to the body under its current name, the PIAB.

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praise, including an extensive 1976 report on the future of intelligence and technology, primarily authored by board members Edward Teller, Cherne, and William Casey. It was considered by CIA seniors to be incredibly helpful, and labeled as “one of the most thoughtful and perceptive papers to be produced on the intelligence community.” In the same vein, the board’s charter defines it as a resource for intelligence professionals, mainly because unlike the Intelligence Oversight Board and congressional committees, the PIAB was designed not to oversee or investigate the IC, but to help improve it. At the presidential level, Eisenhower and Kennedy each accepted the vast majority of recommendations from their respective boards, and thus the precedent was set for future presidents to entrust their significant intelligence initiatives to the PIAB for review.

Privileged and Confidential is an insightful and interesting read; however, at times one senses that the

authors are still fighting an uphill battle to defend the PIAB. As they put it, “[t]he PIAB is the part of the intelligence community that is the least in the thrall of preconceived ideas or captured by organizational biases and so can be of great use in thinking through these issues.” Yet, while one can certainly endorse the premise that an unbiased panel, often stocked with those capable of offering great perspective, can be an incredible resource for the president, it remains unclear as to whether the board is truly an essential enterprise. The answer to this lingering question almost certainly lies in the sheer volume of reports PIAB has produced throughout its existence that remain classified and thus inaccessible to the authors of *Privileged and Confidential*. An internal, classified assessment of the PIAB is needed. In the interim, this book will serve as the cornerstone and benchmark of this history. ²



² See also Hayden Peake’s review in this issue’s “Intelligence Officer’s Bookshelf.”