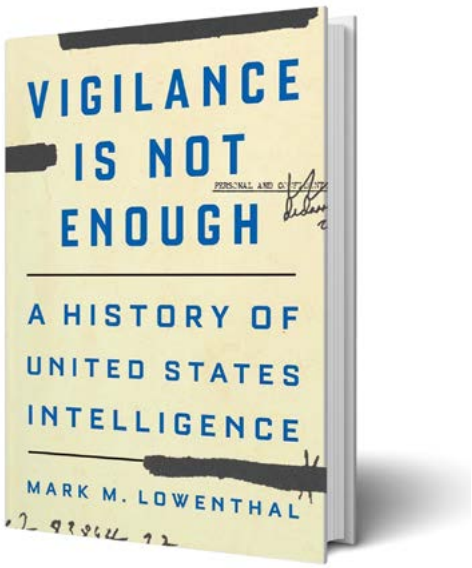
intelligence in public media

Vigilance is Not Enough: A History of United States Intelligence

Reviewed by Charles Heard



Author: *Mark Lowenthal*
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Reviewer: Charles Heard is the pen name of a CIA officer.

Writing at great length is a luxury afforded to the few; for the rest of us, it is usually better to get to the point. French philosopher Blaise Pascal long ago first used what has since become a shopworn apology: he was sorry he had written a long letter, but he did not have time to write a short one.

Mark Lowenthal appears not to have had time to write a short book. At more than 800 pages, wrapped in cover art mimicking a redacted government document and armored with laudatory blurbs from high-status US and UK intelligence alumni, *Vigilance is Not Enough: A History of United States Intelligence* promises dutiful and dry reading. It delivers on both.

The book's 19 chapters are a straightforward chronological march through episodes in American intelligence history, from George Washington's first known secret tasking in 1753 up to the drone strike that killed former al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2022. Lowenthal's writing is workmanlike and descriptive without being prosy, befitting a former intelligence professional. Many chapters end with short descriptive summaries, providing both an accessible entrée into the history and a platform for Lowenthal to offer his own view of events.

Vigilance's scope expands dramatically after World War II; about two-thirds of the narrative covers the period since 1947. Of course, such a division seems eminently defensible. There is simply more to write about. The narrative jumps from one incident to the next, however, with little evident rhyme or reason, and it is at this point of expansion that the book bogs down in the welter of events.

As an example, the 50-page chapter on George W. Bush's two administrations covers the disputed 2000 election; the arrest of Robert Hanssen; the 9/11 attacks; the arrest of Cuban spy Ana Montes; intelligence's role in the US invasion of Afghanistan; the USA PATRIOT Act; CIA's renditions, detentions, and interrogations program; the debate over warrantless wiretapping; the congressional inquiry into the 9/11 attacks; the drafting of the Iraq WMD National Intelligence Estimate in 2002; Lowenthal's own experience developing the National Intelligence Priorities Framework; the run-up to the Iraq war; the 9/11 Commission; the WMD Commission; the beginning of the insurrection in Iraq; and the creation of the Director of National Intelligence. Despite the real variance in these incidents' importance for US (and US intelligence) history, each episode receives roughly equal treatment. The resulting impression—not unlike the cover—is of an overstuffed government file folder, papers thrown together and threatening to fall out of every corner.

There are occasional interesting notes. Lowenthal was in senior intelligence circles for some of the events he recounts late in the book, and his personal recollections in those moments add welcome color. Chapters on the interwar periods in the 19th century provide interesting summaries of mostly overlooked periods of expansion, exploration, and armed conflict that show how a range of activities began to come together under what became the conceptual umbrella of intelligence.

That said, Lowenthal's insistence on writing something about everything renders many of his observations rather anodyne. This is all the more noticeable, and disappointing, because the occasional sharp comment suggests there is more he could say. Recounting the furor over Jose Rodriguez's decision to destroy tapes from CIA's rendition, detention, and interrogation program, Lowenthal writes sympathetically that then-Deputy Director for Operations Rodriguez took "responsibility for an action that many people wanted but no one wanted to order." (546) On INR's famous long footnote about Iraq's nuclear ambitions in the 2002 NIE, he adds testily that the bureau "dined out on it for years." (552)

Mostly, however, the conclusions are bland, even when the events themselves are gut-wrenching. About the US failing to respond earlier to reports of the Nazi Holocaust, he writes, "there were few available responses and competing demands and a preference to deal with this issue after the war." (215) The suicide bombing in Khowst, Afghanistan, which killed seven CIA officers in one horrific moment in 2009, "underscored the uncertainty of human sources and the need for vigilance and security." (587) The 9/11 investigative reports and hearings did little to satisfy the families of 9/11 victims. (549, 562) Faulty targeting that led to the deaths of Afghan civilians, including children, "underscored the uncertainty inherent in drone operations." (635) And so on.

Vigilance is Not Enough will be useful for intelligence studies professors and their students—the chapter summaries are nearly tailor-made for undergraduates lagging the syllabus and running late for class. As a one-stop reference for others seeking a quick refresher on one of America's ever-lengthening history of intelligence incidents, activities, and operations, it is more approachable than a textbook like Richelson's *The US Intelligence Community* (now in its sixth edition). But as a reading experience for intelligence professionals, I found the time-to-value ratio dissatisfying, and I suspect most other practitioners might as well. ■