

## US Intelligence: Profession, Community, or Enterprise?

Bowman H. Miller

---

***My contention is that intelligence is not one profession but rather a complex amalgam of multiple professions. To call it a single profession in and of itself shorts intelligence; it deprives it of the wide expanse and increasing depth of all it is asked to do and of the complicated, layered wherewithal to achieve its manifold objectives.***

Is intelligence work a *profession*? The debate continues, in fits and starts, over whether and to what extent work in intelligence constitutes work within a profession. The exchange of views has been spirited at times, even occasionally acrimonious. It has a long history. In the discussion that follows, the aim is to sort out some of the pros and cons of the argument and to suggest a compromise solution that is, by many, already partially embraced.

Intelligence work is performed by huge numbers of professionals, be they part of something that warrants the designation “profession” or not. My contention is that intelligence is not one profession but rather a complex amalgam of multiple professions. To call it a single profession in and of itself shorts intelligence; it deprives it of the wide expanse and increasing depth of all it is asked to do and of the complicated, layered wherewithal to achieve its manifold objectives.

---

### ***What Is Intelligence?***

Defining intelligence has a lot to do with deciding its status as a profession or otherwise. Almost all definitions of it combine “what it is” with “what it does.” To the many who work in government intelligence, it is largely secret information secretly acquired and zealously protected. Writing in 2002, Michael Warner

defined it as “secret state activity to understand or influence foreign entities.”<sup>1</sup> Today that version is too narrow. For one, secrecy is no longer a defining characteristic of intelligence. The increasing focus on and volume of open-source intelligence is evidence of that.<sup>2</sup> Just as governments have long since lost any monopoly on information they may have once enjoyed, the same holds for intelligence. Any consideration of the naming issue, therefore, must examine all facets and loci of intelligence, both in its public- and private-sector manifestations.

In his article “A New Definition of Intelligence,” Alan Breakspear in 2013 offered a more accurate, relevant, and encompassing definitional proposition: “Intelligence is a corporate capability to forecast change in time to do something about it.”<sup>3</sup> One advantage of this wider gauge is to subordinate the notions of intelligence being limited to “state” and “secret” undertakings. It also encompasses the ever-growing field of commercially conducted work. Major corporations employ staff to study and analyze political-economic conditions and outlooks in order to assess risk. (Breakspear’s use of corporate simply refers to an institutional activity, be it official or in the private sector.)

In wording his definition in this way, Breakspear skirts the pitfalls of “secrecy” and “state-conducted.”

---

The views, opinions, and findings of the author expressed in this article should not be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations or representing the official positions of any component of the United States government.

***Much of what has been written and debated about intelligence's candidacy as a profession tends to limit consideration to the field of analysis. As vital as analysis might be, it is but one of several elements.***

---

He focuses on providing insights with which the receiving entity has the time and information to enable action. However, he does not give us a straighter path to answering the central question: Is intelligence a profession? That dilemma remains to be treated.

While some may see this naming issue as making a mountain out of a molehill, others believe that deciding that intelligence does not qualify to be called a profession would be both demeaning and shortsighted. That said, those doing intelligence do not need to meet a specific set of qualifications, as is typical of other professions. They do not need to meet standards set by an external authority. Nor do they need to be licensed, certified, or otherwise authorized to do their work and to be recognized as professionals.

Much of what has been written and debated about intelligence's candidacy as a profession tends to limit consideration to the field of analysis. As vital as analysis might be, it is but one of several elements. Depending on one's unique national or bureaucratic cultures or traditions, intelligence also comprises collection, counterintelligence, and covert action. The intelligence literature, which Sherman Kent called for at the creation of US intelligence, parses these distinctions. Some of them also mark differences between British and American practice.<sup>4</sup> However, when Stephen Marrin (now a full professor at James Madison University) in 2007 prescribed the required moves and ingredients that could transition

analysis from a craft to a profession, the suggested solution appeared both partial and in some respects utopian.<sup>5</sup>

---

### ***What Is a Profession?***

Definitions of a profession vary widely but generally coalesce around the idea of a paid occupation with specialized education, training, knowledge, and ethics. That might make intelligence a profession. One council of professions offers a more detailed and specified definition,

*By some modern definitions a profession is a disciplined group of individuals (professionals) who adhere to ethical standards and who hold themselves out as, and are accepted by the public as, possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely recognised body of learning derived from research, education and training at a high level, and who are prepared to apply this knowledge and exercise these skills in the interest of others.<sup>6</sup>*

Lists of professionals, rather than professions, likewise range far and wide. One website offers accountant, teacher, technician, laborer, physician, commercial banker, engineer, lawyer, psychologist, and more as examples.<sup>7</sup> Such an inventory of careers and job titles doesn't get us very far when contemplating whether work in intelligence is also work in a profession.

The military, among the most respected institutions in US society, is a profession. It is also a calling,

one even labeled the manifestation of "true belief" in terms of Eric Hoffer's excursus on the nature of mass movements.<sup>8</sup> One of Hoffer's features is a shared ethos of members, also typical of intelligence professionals, many of whom are in uniform or are civilian officials or contractors working intelligence and national security tasks.

---

### ***The Founders' Wisdom***

Examining the views of the iconic Sherman Kent is a good place to start. In his essay highlighting "The Need for an Intelligence Literature," Kent recalled the 1941 inception of a US intelligence effort undertaken in wartime collaboration with the United Kingdom: "Intelligence was to us at that period really nothing in itself; it was, at best, the sum of what we, from our outside experience, could contribute to a job to be done. It did not have the attributes of a profession or a discipline or a calling." He added, "Today things are quite different."<sup>9</sup> The question that I ask is whether Kent's early claim is true and, if so, in what ways are things "quite different" than they were some 70 or more years ago.

Kent expanded upon his claim that intelligence, in his day and experience, had undergone profound changes,

*Intelligence is more than an occupation, more than a livelihood, more than just another phase of government work. Intelligence has become, in our own recent memory, an exacting, highly skilled profession, and an honorable one. Before you can enter this profession, you must prove yourself possessed of native talent and you*

**Intelligence Analysis: Craft or Profession?**

In his essay “Intelligence Analysis: Turning a Craft into a Profession,” (University of Virginia, 2007) Stephen Marrin (who today directs the intelligence studies program at James Madison University) went to some lengths to prescribe what intelligence needs to do, and how it must reform, to progress from craft to profession. Much of his prescription runs up against the reality of ingrained traditions, practices, and stipulations that impede such an ascent. Moreover, despite its importance, analysis is only one of several aspects of intelligence. Even were it deemed a “profession,” that omits collection, counterintelligence, and covert action, at the very least. Thus, his attempted solution to this naming challenge remains partial and, from a practitioner perspective, a bit utopian. His attempt to force professionalizing of intelligence into the definitional requirements and boundaries of other, credentialed professions—in his case comparing it to medicine—appears to be trying to force a round peg into a square hole.

*must bring to it some fairly rigorous pre-training. Our profession like older ones has its own rigid entrance requirements and, like others, offers areas of general competence and areas of very intense specialization.<sup>10</sup>*

Written nine years later about Allen Dulles’s *The Craft of Intelligence*, Frank Wisner’s eloquent review displays both keen insights into the intelligence world and some of its shortcomings. Wisner’s assessment, however, features a lexical cacophony when it comes to characterizing intelligence. Wisner refers to intelligence variously as a craft, trade, profession, enterprise, and community. He inserts pointedly one key observation he attributes to Dulles: “Intelligence is probably the least understood and the most misrepresented of the professions.”<sup>11</sup>

Speaking about the same issue to portions of the then Defense Intelligence School (DIS) in 1981, its head, Navy Capt. Richard W. Bates, focused on the issue of intelligence as a profession. He laid out his objectives for the DIS in this context.

*The goal was to contribute to the recognition of military*

*intelligence as a profession by establishing or identifying the recognized elements of a profession, including: Academic degree programs, a supporting body of literature, a professional journal, a professional association, a code of ethics, a vehicle for national recognition of experts and authorities, and a viable and dynamic academic research capability.<sup>12</sup>*

It would appear, at first glance, that the vast majority of Bates’s aims in terms of intelligence qualifying as a profession are now in hand. But there is more to the story.

**Intelligence—Beyond Government Secrecy**

Almost all intelligence definitions mix “what it is” with a heavy dose of “what it does.” For decades intelligence was understood to be secret information secretly obtained and utilized. Writing 40 years ago, George Allen could assert that because “intelligence is a state monopoly, the function is performed only in the service of the state.”<sup>13</sup> Twenty years later the scene had not changed appreciably when Michael Warner defined

intelligence as “secret state activity to understand or influence foreign entities.”<sup>14</sup> Again, Warner’s version today is too narrow. For one, secrecy is not now a defining characteristic of intelligence. Open-source information, much of which can qualify and be usefully exploited as intelligence, has been a bedrock of US intelligence going back to Kent’s day. It is also corporate intelligence’s bread and butter. Nonetheless, the Director of National Intelligence (DNI)’s current definition reads as follows:

*Intelligence is information gathered within or outside the U.S. that involves threats to our nation, its people, property, or interests; development, proliferation, or use of weapons of mass destruction; and any other matter bearing on the U.S. national or homeland security.<sup>15</sup>*

Intelligence, however, is no longer limited to governments trying to read one another’s mail. Rather, intelligence is a widespread activity in business and industry, and it is also a business in and of itself. Commercial entities and nonstate actors are very much part of the activity now. Private companies acquire and sell intelligence—and analysis—to corporations to assess risk, protect and/or obtain technology, acquire proprietary data, and more.

**Comparable Professions**

What does the business of doing intelligence have in common with fields like medicine, dentistry, law, engineering, social work, the military, and the like? Do those in intelligence, like these others, need to demonstrate a certain, testable level of competency in an area of knowledge or

---

***In all of its complexity, intelligence fails any attempt to force it into the constraints of comprising a single, stand-alone profession. Such a label is both insufficient and inappropriate.***

---

practice? Do they need specialized certification, licensing, or credentialing to perform their work and do they need to receive validation of expertise from some higher, external governing authority? Maintaining credentials does not require periodic testing or recertification updating. One can have a degree in law but, in order to be admitted to practice law, one must pass professionally administered bar exams. One cannot legally practice medicine without undergoing internships, residencies, and medical board exams overseen by state authorities. Medicine, law, and such tend to be learned, often high-paying and status-laden professions.

In all of its complexity, intelligence fails any attempt to force it into the constraints of comprising a single, stand-alone profession. Such a label is both insufficient and inappropriate. The scope of intelligence's missions and tasks is monumental. The fact is that intelligence is not one profession but rather an assemblage of a range of other professions. It includes analysts, collectors, scientists, physicians, engineers, attorneys, computer specialists, accountants, technicians, educators, and more. "Members of the profession include not only those employing skills unique to intelligence work, but also those using skills primarily of other disciplines within the bureaucratic framework of intelligence organizations."<sup>16</sup>

What about skilled specialists like plumbers, electricians, construction contractors, and automobile mechanics, all of whom can be found in the IC. Are these crafts, in the standard

sense of an activity making things by hand? The term hardly seems appropriate to describe intelligence writ large, although there are craftspeople performing intelligence missions, like building models or concealment devices. Skilled trades command increasing respect and pay, generally advertise that they are "licensed, bonded, and insured," and require more sophisticated training and expertise, especially in advanced technology. But are they also professions? I leave that question open.

One thing these trades often share with professions is the tendency to earn and showcase evidence of their qualifications, board examinations, awards, medals, commemorations of promotion, and records of service longevity. These seek to convince clients of expertise and value for costs incurred. In an automobile service center, one can encounter visible evidence of the presence of factory-trained and -certified technicians, much like a diploma displayed in a law or medical office.

---

### ***Intelligence and Tradecraft***

Part of what complicates extricating the world of intelligence from competing naming practices is its convoluted, evolving lexicon. The element of intelligence engaged in collection, principally using recruited and handled foreign human sources, refers to its behavior, techniques, and practices as "tradecraft." That term fails to adequately and appropriately describe the multi-faceted work of analysis. Rather, analysis demands

and uses methodologies, not tradecraft, despite the effort to migrate the lexicon of collection into analysis (see earlier textbox).

---

### ***Knowledge and Service***

Those who toil in the exacting, challenging, often thankless work of intelligence are, for the most part, professionals, whether in an acknowledged profession or not. They come to their work with specialties, expertise, and academic and other credentials related or applicable to what they pursue and perform. However, we use the name "professional" in several different, often imprecise ways. Athletes who play sports for money are professionals, as distinguished from amateurs. Thus, professional baseball qualifies as such based on the level of play, the size of the stadiums or ballparks, ticket prices, league standings, and championships. This is merely one illustration of the fact that one can, indeed, have professionals without insisting they are also part of a profession.

More and more students in universities now study intelligence, but are they preparing themselves for work in a profession? Is work in intelligence a vocation but not yet, and perhaps never to be, a profession in and of itself? Is it, or is its analysis component by itself, a profession versus a craft? "What does it matter?" you may ask, but the answer is not superfluous. "Profession" carries with it inclusion in a select grouping of endeavors, some notion of elevated status, and recognition of special skills, knowledge, and understanding.

There is an expanding body of intelligence research and literature, a growing number of peer-reviewed

and specialized intelligence journals, international and national learned societies, and subsets of larger scholarly bodies focused on intelligence. For example, the International Studies Association features an intelligence element. One key aspect of that growing body of literature is the CIA-managed *Studies in Intelligence*, in print since 1955. Its former subtitle—“The Journal of the American Intelligence Professional”—echoes Kent’s call for an intelligence literature.<sup>17</sup> Other leading journals in this same vein include *Intelligence and National Security* and the *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*.

Intelligence, like more traditional professions, serves a purpose to benefit the common good, even if the evidence of that often remains cloaked in secrecy. The hidden nature of intelligence’s work makes it harder to argue for the use of profession. Unfortunately, the outsider’s picture of intelligence is often fraught with heroic fictionalization on the one hand and disparagement of its assumed malpractice on the other. Admission and acceptance into the government’s intelligence world requires a qualifying judgment as to one’s suitability and sworn fidelity to an oath of secrecy and non-disclosure. However, no overarching external authority beyond the intelligence community acts as the decisionmaking body to admit and clear candidates.

---

### ***US Intelligence Academy***

The IC draws, in part, on graduates of universities with programs in intelligence studies, but it also has its own academy in the National

---

***Intelligence, like more traditional professions, serves a purpose to benefit the common good, even if the evidence of that often remains cloaked in secrecy.***

---

Intelligence University. NIU is governed by a board of visitors operating under the purview of the DNI. Given NIU’s unique authority and ability to conduct intelligence studies in a classified environment, it alone educates intelligence and national security professionals with a unique breadth of classified, sensitive access. Most of NIU’s students come with practical experience in some facet of intelligence or its application, which the NIU programs of study endeavor to expand and strengthen. NIU offers fully accredited bachelor’s and master’s degrees, fulfilling one of the characteristics Captain Bates included in his 1981 wishlist.

NIU has long pondered whether and how one might create and validate a doctoral degree program in intelligence. What would it entail? What would the essential components be in order to authenticate a Ph.D.-level of intelligence competence and knowledge? Would the “study of intelligence” beyond a master’s degree be similar to getting an Ed.D.? How would a doctoral student in intelligence perform the study of processes, history, case studies, analytic challenges, and organizational behavior that does not reside equally within a university’s history, political science, international relations, hard sciences, or business departments and career fields? This harkens back to Kent’s early description of the mixed makeup and backgrounds of those brought together in the wartime OSS.

Intelligence educators at the US college or university level—be those institutions private, public, or NIU itself—come in three varieties.

Professors of practice draw on years of practical intelligence experience. Academics generally lack that direct involvement and experience. Hybrid educators bring a blend of both. The subset of academics in intelligence higher education also has an international organization in the International Association for Intelligence Education. Another professional society in the intelligence realm more broadly is the Intelligence and National Security Alliance, bringing together specialists in industry with those in government ranks. These organizations, and others like them, foster crosspollination, coordinated research, improvements in pedagogy, and expanded intelligence inquiry. Their membership tends to be international and they furnish another piece of evidence arguing for intelligence as a profession.

---

### ***Intelligence as a Community***

If intelligence is not actually a single profession, as I suggest, is part of that argument the fact that the US intelligence agencies also claim to form a community? What is the reality behind the expression “intelligence community”? Some would argue that, given the various shortcomings in a true community of intelligence, the IC moniker should not even warrant capital letters. In short, the IC is the amalgam of some 18 different agencies and services. Various they perform a wide range of intelligence functions serving a host of purposes and clients, from the president to a platoon leader.

To some extent the separate agencies or services fall under the purview

---

**“Community” also implies a basic inclination to share perspectives, bear common burdens, and exchange views across divides.**

---

of the DNI, or under the Secretary of Defense. Still others are departmental units within the Departments of Treasury, Energy, State, Homeland Security, and Justice. Community oversight, once centered under the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI), now resides in large part (but without day-to-day direction or budgetary authorities) under the presidentially appointed and Senate-confirmed DNI.

The term “intelligence community” was first used during DCI Bedell Smith’s tenure (1950–53). The IC was officially established by Executive Order 12333, signed by President Reagan on December 4, 1981. The crux of the question concerning the viability and reality of the “community” of US intelligence efforts lies in assessing the accuracy of the stipulations, laid out in the 2008 update to E.O. 12333, that the DNI “will lead a unified, coordinated, and effective intelligence effort.”

Views vary widely on how readily and completely that mandate is being or can be met. The dilemma of breaking through often impenetrable stovepipes between agencies and activities remains alive; it accounts in no small part for some devastating intelligence failures and interagency, internecine bureaucratic warfare.<sup>18</sup> While interagency coordination and collaborative analysis have improved over time and under pressure to do so, individual agencies and their leaderships remain fiefdoms jealous of their access to particular kinds of intelligence and specific clients. Herding cats is, perhaps, not the most apt or original metaphor for this challenge

facing any DNI to be sure, but it is also not far from the truth. The mere size, dispersal, and multiplicity of efforts of the IC make a DNI’s work, regardless of staff size and leverage, a daunting task. No one person or oversight mechanism can possibly have continual managerial oversight of all of what US intelligence does globally day in and day out.

“Community” also implies a basic inclination to share perspectives, bear common burdens, and exchange views across divides. There are, of course, some functional structures in US national intelligence that are explicitly designed and designated to do just that. National intelligence officers (NIOs) and national intelligence managers (NIMs) are tasked with such national-level coordination and production of intelligence. NIOs focus on providing intelligence independently and via the National Intelligence Council to the President and senior executive branch leaders.<sup>19</sup> NIMs were instituted to manage both IC-wide targeting and collection, as well as related analysis focused on specific regions, rival states, threatening phenomena like nuclear proliferation and terrorism, and more. In both cases, cognizance of what the IC is doing, could do, and might do is fundamental to success in achieving cooperation and joint endeavor.

---

***Intelligence as an Enterprise***

The most recent lexical entry in the evolving definition of intelligence is the concept of intelligence as an “enterprise.” If “community” derives from the world of societal notions, “enterprise” finds its antecedents and

cousins in business and industry. The name in standard usage can range from a car rental company to a fictional starship, but it generally depicts a set of institutions and activities dedicated to a common purpose or product. In IC terms, the use of “enterprise” tends to refer to the totality of the US intelligence agencies’ human resources, capabilities, outcomes, and assessments.

Listings online that use the precise terminology of “intelligence enterprise” appear only with reference to the Department of Homeland Security and the US Coast Guard. Those are their preferred terms for their in-house intelligence activities that, taken together, comprise the set of intelligence activities of those organizations as a whole. In a larger context, the Defense Intelligence Enterprise (DIE) has entered the institutional lexicon, marrying the Defense Intelligence Agency and the service intelligence elements. In the *Defense Intelligence Enterprise Capstone Guide 2010*, then Under-Secretary of Defense for Intelligence James Clapper described the DIE as a consortium of organizations under USD(I) that

*assures success in meeting the challenges of identifying and assessing a wide range of threats to DoD and the nation. The Enterprise helps protect our nation by providing timely, accurate intelligence that supports activities ranging from military operations to weapons acquisitions and to policy deliberations.*

The current director of DIA used the term several times in his annual unclassified threat testimony with

the DNI before the Senate Armed Services Committee in May 2023.

Taking a different tack and wider perspective, Harvard University intelligence fellow Dr. Sunny Singh argued as follows:

*To understand the US intelligence community and the [then] seventeen components comprising it, one must study the collective as an enterprise that gathers intelligence, conducts all-source, non-policy prescriptive and objective analysis which it disseminates and briefs to policymakers. The underlying force behind the intelligence enterprise consists of three parts; its workforce, the private firms that support that workforce through intelligence-driven*

*contracts and the context upon which these two interplay.<sup>20</sup>*

### **Conclusion**

I set out in this discussion to appraise the appropriateness and accuracy of referring to intelligence work as a “profession”. It clearly has some of the major features of other acknowledged professions, from a specialized literature and dedicated knowledge societies to a basic code of ethics and a broad assemblage of knowledge, skills and abilities. At the same time, there is today a world of intelligence also outside of government. Secrecy is not its all-defining characteristic, and the scope and missions of US intelligence are vast and ever-expanding. Calling that huge

“enterprise” one profession does not do it justice.

The holy grail of being defined and seen as a “profession” remains a worthy goal, even if not yet fully attained. Thus, we come back to the initial proposition, i.e., that intelligence cannot be reduced to one “profession” but rather is an amalgam of many professions. And Breakspear’s definition of intelligence remains one of the more appropriate: “Intelligence is a corporate capability to forecast change in time to do something about it.” With or without the “profession” designation, US intelligence can claim a rich history and continuing record of highly valued, attested professionalism in support of national security.



*The author:* Dr. Bowman Miller is a professor at the National Intelligence University, former director of analysis for Europe at the Department of State’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research, and past contributor to *Studies*.

### **Endnotes**

1. Michael Warner, “Wanted: A Definition of ‘Intelligence’,” *Studies in Intelligence* 46, no. 3 (September 2002), 15–22.
2. See my article, “Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT)—An Oxymoron?” *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 31, no. 4 (Winter 2018), 702–19.
3. Alan Breakspear, “A New Definition of Intelligence,” *Intelligence and National Security* 28, no. 5 (2013), 678.
4. Michael Smith, *The Real Special Relationship: The True Story of How the British and US Secret Services Work Together* (Simon and Shuster, 2022).
5. Stephen Marrin, “Intelligence Analysis: Turning Craft into a Profession,” informal paper, University of Virginia (2007).
6. “What is a Profession,” Australian Council of Professions 2003 (<https://psc.gov.au/what-is-a-profession>, accessed July 25, 2022).
7. <https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/knowledge/other/professional/> (accessed August 5, 2022).
8. Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (Harper and Brothers, 1951).
9. Sherman Kent, “The Need for an Intelligence Literature,” *Occasional Paper* 1, (Fall 1955).
10. *Ibid.*, 2.
11. Frank Wisner, review of *On the Craft of Intelligence*, by Allen Dulles, *Studies in Intelligence* (Winter 1964), 28.
12. Richard Bates, excerpted from “Remarks to the Reserve Symposium on Strategic Intelligence at the Defense Intelligence School,” July 17, 1981.
13. George Allen, “The Professionalization of Intelligence,” *Studies in Intelligence* 26, no. 1 (Spring 1982), 28.
14. Warner, 13.
15. <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/what-we-do/what-is-intelligence>, accessed November 28, 2022.
16. Allen, 29.
17. The *Studies* cover was redesigned for the first issue of 2023 and no longer includes the subtitle.
18. See Amy Zegart, *Spies, Lies, and Algorithms: The History and Future of American Intelligence* (Princeton University Press, 2022).
19. See Robert Hutchings and Gregory Treverton, eds., *Truth to Power: A History of the National Intelligence Council* (Oxford University Press, 2019).
20. Sunny J. Singh, *The U.S. Intelligence Enterprise and the Role of Privatizing Intelligence*, Occasional Paper, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University Kennedy School (September 2019).