

In Defense of Irrelevance

Intelligence and U.S. Foreign Policy: Iraq, 9/11, and Misguided Reform by Paul Pillar: New York: Columbia University, 2011. 432 pp.

Reviewed by Roger Z. George

It is now more than eight years since the start of the 2003 Iraq War and more than a decade since 9/11. Not surprisingly, national security analysts have more than a few personal memoirs to chose from in gleaning what can be learned about decisionmaking and the uses of intelligence from these watershed events. This holiday season, book buyers will have yet another, this one from Dr. Paul Pillar, who served as deputy chief of the CIA's Counterterrorism Center (CTC) prior to 9/11 and as National Intelligence Officer (NIO) for the Middle East as the George W. Bush administration marched to war in Iraq. Pillar, now teaching at Georgetown University, is a serious analyst of foreign policy as well as a former senior intelligence analyst with long experience interacting with policymakers. Thus, his views add significantly to the public picture of the policy-intelligence relationship of the Bush administration.

I must acknowledge that early in my career I worked with Dr. Pillar on the National Intelligence Council (NIC) and later had many conversations with him about intelligence and policy. I find Pillar's treatment of his subject sophisticated and informative as well as personal. It is also provocative. Indeed, readers will be struck by the strident tone that Pillar—known as a cool-headed, soft-spoken official for his entire career—uses in describing myths about intelligence, the misuse of it under the Bush administration, and the misguided attempts to reform the Intelligence Community (IC) after 9/11. Pillar weaves these themes throughout the book's 13 chapters, leaving the reader with a sense that intelligence is more a victim than a perpetrator of

failure, and that it is more often irrelevant than wrong. Hence, the American proclivity to reform the IC is not only unnecessary but usually ill-conceived and counterproductive.

Pillar begins with a compelling case for how misunderstood intelligence and its missions are. He debunks key myths—such as “intelligence drives policy” or “the intelligence bureaucracy resists change.” Instead, he finds that most often, intelligence is either irrelevant to policy or more influenced by it than the reverse. Likewise, he defends the IC's record of internal adaptation, for which there is little external appreciation or credit given. What most bothers Pillar, however, is the policymakers' and public's misconception that the IC is all about “prediction.” Pillar has written elsewhere on this topic, but his treatment in this book is compelling. He notes that outsiders are forever assigning blame for “failures” that amount to not predicting a particular outcome. Yet, predictions are seldom what intelligence is really in the business to do; rather, it should be bounding uncertainty by highlighting the range of possibilities that numerous and dynamic international factors can produce. These are inherently unpredictable and lead to “surprises” that even the best intelligence cannot avert. In fact, Pillar notes, most of what the IC usefully does for the policymaker is focused on tactical intelligence support to implementing strategy, not futuristic crystal-ball gazing regarding unknown unknowns.

What Pillar calls the “fixation on intelligence failure and reform” is illustrated best by his treatment of the 9/11 Commission. He

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echoes many of the criticisms raised by outsiders like Judge Richard Posner—namely, that the analysis of the attack and its causes does not track with the set of recommendations. Unlike Posner, however, Pillar focuses heavily on the politics and personalities of the commission. He credits public and 9/11 families' pressure for "accountability" as the driver of unnecessary reforms. As evidence of this, he points to the creation of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), which duplicated and, he says, complicated many of the existing responsibilities of CTC, where he had served.

As further evidence of the political nature of the 9/11 reforms, Pillar angrily asserts that the CIA's Office of the Inspector General (OIG) played politics with its work. He claims the OIG had issued a routine management review of CTC's activities and given it a clean bill of health just before the 9/11 attacks. Then, he asserts that OIG did a "180 degree" shift by producing a new, post-9/11 report that found plenty of analytic flaws in CTC. For the reader, the routine OIG "audits" of CIA offices are typically focused on a component's management practices and procedures rather than on detailed analytic or operational performance. In 2007, the CIA made public a redacted version of the executive summary of its post-9/11 report—completed in June 2005—which had been requested by two congressional committees to evaluate specific assertions regarding CTC's analytic work not addressed in the earlier audit. Whether this OIG report was "cooked," as Pillar suggests, or merely an objective response to a legitimate oversight request is obviously in the eye of the beholder. But there is no doubt that hindsight analysis often uncovers shortcomings not evident to dedicated analysts and managers at the time.¹

Pillar goes further in skewering the competence of the 9/11 Commission Report by claiming commission members were ill-informed and often spoon-fed the preconceived ideas of the Executive Director, Phil Zelikow. This former colleague of many Bush appointees is said to have taken the job, already having concluded

that the leadership of the IC should be split off from the CIA director's responsibilities, partly as "punishment." This prejudice, Pillar writes, along with others produced a commission that was more an "advocate than investigator," prompting "precooked" recommendations that did not fit the evidence but did fit with the preconceived mindsets of the commissioners, the staff, and its director. In Pillar's view, Zelikow was a particularly poor choice given his closeness to National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice. (They had worked and written books together.) Zelikow is depicted as protective of the Bush administration and determined to place blame on the IC's failures of "imagination." That charge, Pillar notes, is nonsense, as it was intelligence that "played a significant role in helping to guide policy" regarding terrorism and al-Qaeda in the first place. In his view, the IC's early identification of a nascent threat, its focused collection efforts, and its serious reporting of the threat—all of which occurred years before 9/11—"was a model of how strategic warning ought to work." But this did not fit the script, he claims, so commission staff reports cited selectively or ignored many analytic products on al-Qaeda's formation, focusing solely on the absence of any national intelligence estimate (NIE) after 1995 as proof the IC was not doing its warning job. One might add that no policy-maker saw it necessary to request one.

The book's coverage of the run-up to the Iraq War will strike readers as familiar, given the many available books and monographs that detail the broken interagency system, the strong mindsets of senior Bush administration officials, and their hostility toward the CIA. Pillar's narrative adds a dimension in its portrayal of a frustrated senior intelligence official who is shocked at the calculated way in which policymakers dismissed, misused, or distorted available intelligence to serve the single-minded purpose of launching a war against Saddam Hussein. Pillar uses such terms as "war makers" and "warhawks" to describe senior national security officials, suggesting he saw all of the dysfunction in the Bush adminis-

¹ https://www.cia.gov/library/reports/Executive%20Summary_OIG%20Report.pdf.

tration as a design more than a flaw. Moreover, he seems to conclude—by touching on other well-known policy-intelligence blunders in Korea, Vietnam, and elsewhere—that the mental “images” held by policymakers are the chief culprits of what are often described as intelligence failures. These strong mindsets cause intelligence, good or bad, to be largely irrelevant to major decisions. In an odd way, he defends both: on the one hand, the Bush administration challenged and then ignored the solid CIA analysis that found no links between Iraq and al-Qaeda; on the other hand, the White House did not depend on the flawed Iraq/WMD judgments for its decisionmaking but rather exploited them to justify its march to war.

Pillar proves convincingly that the timing of the October 2002 NIE on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) made it irrelevant to the summer 2002 White House decisions to plan the war. He also acknowledges his co-responsibility in managing the NIE, but notes he had no role in its technical judgments; in hindsight, he admits he might have said more about alternative explanations for Saddam’s inscrutable behavior, but claims there was no compelling evidence to support such suppositions, and one is left with the unsatisfactory feeling that no firm judgments could have been made about such scenarios. In the end, Pillar concludes that no intelligence truly mattered in the major Bush decisions on the invasion or the postconflict reconstruction.

So, is a reader to presume then that the IC did its job—even if its work was irrelevant—as best it could, in both the 9/11 and Iraq cases? Readers, particularly those outside the IC, may find it unsatisfying that Pillar offers almost no reflections on any alternative courses of action senior CIA and NIC managers might have taken in either case. He either ignores or was not privy to the senior-level thinking regarding the policymakers’ misuse of Iraq intelligence. This omission is surprising given his belief that it was blatant, widespread, and frequent. His narrative also is at odds with the WMD Commission Report as well as the SSCI inquiry, which found no politicization. He appears somewhat defensive when he explains

that a *Washington Post* op-ed writer had questioned why intelligence officials had not leaked their views on the distortion of intelligence. Pillar claims, correctly, that it would have been unprofessional as well as wrong. He ultimately defends the Agency by arguing that congressional oversight committees were themselves smitten by the Bush administration’s war campaign, and the press largely had bought the arguments as well, providing few opportunities for dissenters to speak out legitimately. Yet, if the politicization was as blatant and prevalent as he asserts, it seems as though there would have been more internal uproar. More explanations for senior management’s passivity would help the reader understand why this case was so different from other historical cases he cites, where senior managers did push back, even if they did not win the day.

Adding to the sense of helplessness, his final chapters conclude that what reform has been proposed is misguided and likely to do more harm than good. He does not highlight any specific areas where the IC might need to improve either its process or its analysis, presumably because he has earlier asserted that such internal adaptation is constant, comprehensive and usually effective. But he does propose some policy reforms of his own. These are largely focused on more congressional oversight against politicization and more routine production of unclassified key analytical judgments. These steps, he believes, would make intelligence more balanced and less susceptible to misuse. Yet, he admits that these improvements are unlikely to be instituted. The reviewer has to agree. If members of Congress were more interested in oversight of the intelligence process, then they would have read the NIEs that the NIC had produced. They did not. Moreover, the regular production of unclassified NIE key judgments for public consumption is likely to hamper analysts from producing candid assessments, precisely the reverse of what Pillar seems to suggest is what analysts are supposed to produce. Earlier he acknowledges that the release of the Iraq WMD key judgments, as well as an ill-conceived “white paper” with similar if less nuanced findings only obscured the many caveats and qualifiers that decisionmakers needed

to read. Presumably, a similar unsatisfying outcome would result from the release of key judgments on other topics, that is, judgments (assertions) containing no real intelligence or assessment of the evidence that remains hidden from view.

Finally, Pillar's strong recommendation that the IC treat Congress and the Executive Branch as more coequal consumers is probably a nonstarter. He argues it would help to deter future administrations from ignoring or misusing intelligence and would educate Congress. However, no president is prepared to have everything he asks of the IC shared with Congress. Moreover, placing intelligence even more in the middle of the two branches would cause

presidents to rely less on the IC and would scarcely guarantee that Congress would use intelligence wisely, especially given the kind of polarization that exists in Washington today.

Given the bleak picture Pillar paints regarding the irrelevance and misuse of intelligence, he might have focused more on the IC's positives in the realm of practical intelligence support. Such examples might then be an antidote to the next "surprise," which is sure to conjure up the same myths Pillar so strongly laments about American intelligence. Still, this book is a healthy warning to future administrations that they are the ones who will make intelligence useful and relevant, not the IC itself.

