

The Collapse of Intelligence Support for Air Power, 1944-52

Two Steps Backward

Michael Warner

Historians of American intelligence must be tempted at times to follow a modified form of what scholars have dubbed the “Whig theory of history.” The English Whigs, or their camp-following

historians, supposedly viewed the course of political evolution in Britain and America as a gradual (if sometimes bumpy) progress from premodern and autocratic rule to broader and deeper forms of democratic participation. In short, from worse to better, in a sort of cosmically pre-ordained pattern. Similarly, students of American intelligence have sometimes viewed developments from World War I through the Cold War as an evolution from simple to complex organizational forms, from uncoordinated and amateurish attempts to more collaborative efforts by dedicated, professional officers, and from ad hoc control arrangements to codified systems of oversight and accountability.[1] Again, from worse to better, in a providential way.

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This Whiggish interpretation of American intelligence history may be true

in the main, but new scholarship is revealing serious retrograde digressions in the overall march of progress toward integration and professionalization. Scholars such as James D. Marchio and Jeffrey M. Moore, for example, are showing the degree to which the American military in World War II made great strides in producing “joint” combat intelligence in support of theater commanders.[2] Marchio has also dropped the other shoe in this story of progress by noting that the US military soon unlearned these lessons of joint intelligence after the war ended.[3] Strategic intelligence was transformed after World War II, to be sure, but inter-service military intelligence at the theater or operational level was sadly neglected and actually lost certain capabilities that it had acquired in wartime. It is little short of astonishing to note, for example, that American theater commanders between 1945 and 1991, with insignificant exceptions, did not control organic joint-service intelligence staffs to help them conduct joint operations.

Scholars like Marchio and Moore have only scratched the surface of this topic. A quick look at theater-level intelligence for air power from the closing of World War II through the Korean conflict provides ample corroborating evidence for an argument that American military intelligence lost, rather than gained, organizational sophistication and analytic proficiency at the beginning of the Cold War. The military’s wartime progress in command and control—for instance, the creation of theater commanders and the subsequent Unified Command Plan—was not matched by progress in intelligence capabilities. The decline was particularly jarring in air intelligence. Indeed, a survey of recent findings and published sources suggests that, in the very years when strategic airpower was being advocated and recognized as a key component of national security, intelligence to guide strategic bombing campaigns, especially at the operational-level, faced institutional jeopardy and professional stagnation.

Wartime Experience

World War II saw three innovations for the US military. First, strategic bombing became a centerpiece of the American arsenal and a constitutive component of the nation’s thinking about how it might deal with foreign threats. Second, Washington learned at Pearl Harbor that one man had to

be in charge in each active theater of war and that unity of effort required a unity of command that transcended the individual services and fighting arms. Hence the appointment of theater commanders (most famously Eisenhower in Europe, Nimitz in the Central Pacific, and MacArthur in the South Pacific), and their assembling of inter-allied support staffs. Third, in Europe and to a lesser extent in the Pacific, these theater staffs included large intelligence elements to support strategic bombing efforts by charting the course of the air campaign and gauging its impact on enemy intentions and capabilities. The first two of these lessons proved enduring, but the third had serious troubles when the shooting stopped.

A key component of the intelligence for strategic bombing was the interpretation of evidence gleaned from overhead photography. Imagery analysis had won a place as its own discipline in World War II. By 1942, Allied bombers were growing so large and long-ranged that they promised to make a reality of pre-war forecasts of the power of strategic bombing. In so doing, aircraft technology briefly outstripped the crude reconnaissance capabilities of the Allies to guide targeting and damage assessment. Aerial photography long predated World War II, of course, and it was hardly clandestine, but what made it “intelligence” was the tightly guarded sophistication of the analysis that interpreted the pictures in light of other sources to maximize the strategic impact of air power. Theater commanders needed such intelligence to understand both the effects that their efforts were having on the enemy and the best ways to allocate scarce resources.

Britain, out of necessity, had pioneered this field, creating an inter-service photo intelligence center in late 1940. The British taught their newly acquired skills to the Americans, who had gone to war with crude intelligence capabilities.[4] The Army Air Forces (AAF) appreciated the value of integrating all available sources in an organization employing teams of expert photo-interpreters supported by analysts like those of the Enemy Objectives Unit of the Office of Strategic Services. Indeed, by the end of the war, imagery processed by theater photo interpretation centers—like the one at Medmenham, England—was providing large portions of the tactical and strategic intelligence that Allied commanders employed against the Axis, and was a key to the bombers’ success in crippling the German economy.[5]

AAF commanders in Europe understood their dependence on the British and disliked it, but there was not much they could do. They had unintentionally developed a system to provide what would later be called

“national-level” imagery support to theater-level operations, but the national system providing that support was owned by Great Britain. “We have built up the only really competent Intelligence service that exists or has existed in the Air Forces of the United States,” reflected one of the American commanders of the Combined Bomber Offensive in October 1944. Nevertheless, he continued, “if it would become necessary for us to break off from British sources of Intelligence at short notice we would be lost.”[6] Less than a year later, senior AAF commanders in Europe were concerned enough about the decline of US intelligence proficiency to complain to Secretary of State James Byrnes when he visited them.[7]

Only in Europe, however, was this degree of sophistication, based on backstopping by the British, achieved. Perhaps the closest analogue to it in the war against Japan was the Joint Intelligence Center Pacific Ocean Area, a Navy and Marine Corps-staff that collated imagery, signals intelligence, and human source reporting to support Adm. Nimitz’s island-hopping campaign across the Central Pacific.[8] In the last year of the war, the AAF’s intelligence staff also established a Joint Target Group to analyze objectives in Japan and evaluate the progress of the nascent bombing campaign; it did indeed perform all-source analysis, but it did so in Washington, under the wing of the AAF’s commander, Gen. “Hap” Arnold.[9]

Postwar Changes

Victory in World War II made strategic air power a cornerstone of American defense policy, but it also showed, for the observant few, that strategic air operations depended for their success on vast quantities of accurate and timely intelligence reports.[10] The operative word here is “few.”

The rout for the Army Air Forces began just after V-J Day. Victorious over the Axis, the AAF now collapsed from within. It fell from about 2 million men in September 1945 to one-quarter that number barely six months later.[11] Arnold’s deputy, Gen. Carl Spaatz, warned Congress in November that “our air force [is] disintegrating before our eyes. We see almost hysterical demobilization.”[12] Brig. Gen. Leon W. Johnson, head of the AAF’s Personnel Services Division, complained in detail:

We didn’t demobilize; we merely fell apart.... We lost many records of all the

*groups and units that operated during the war because there was no one to take care of them. So, it was not an orderly demobilization at all. It was just a riot, really.***[13]**

The AAF's specialized support capabilities perhaps suffered the worst. At least 12 reconnaissance groups and four wings were active on V-J Day, but only two groups and one wing remained in operation at the end of the fiscal year on 30 June 1946.**[14]** By then, it is likely that the AAF's ability to utilize them had been seriously degraded. Gen. Spaatz had lamented in late 1944 that the intelligence components of his command in Europe were staffed with hundreds of highly trained "emergency officers" who would inevitably be lost to civilian life when the war ended.**[15]** That seems to be exactly what happened. The War Department's "point system" gave demobilization priority to overseas veterans with the longest service (and thus the most expertise). Intelligence was no exception: The better the officer, the faster he left.**[16]**

Military intelligence capabilities were swept away in the haste of demobilization. Soon the combat intelligence centers built during the war were all but gone, dismantled like the joint intelligence centers established to help theater commanders in the Pacific and Mediterranean.**[17]**

Sophisticated inter-allied systems to provide air targeting intelligence through exploiting imagery and all available sources were being disbanded, their personnel demobilized, and their equipment presumably sold.**[18]** Few of the AAF's leaders understood how dependent these efforts had been on British expertise, signals intelligence, and inter-service coordination; thus little was done to preserve in Air Force hands the capability that had been so painfully won in wartime.**[19]** Indeed, the "Eberstadt Report" on military unification prepared for Navy Secretary James Forrestal in the summer of 1945 had praised joint photo-intelligence and target analysis, but it said nothing about whether that intelligence was provided at the tactical, operational, or strategic levels—or whether and how to provide it in the future.**[20]**

President Truman wanted intelligence reform in late 1945, but as yet he had little time or training to understand the subtleties of what was being done in its name. By the time he examined proposals for a new director of central intelligence (DCI) to guide and coordinate activities at the national level, much of the damage had been done. The president agreed with the Army and Navy that "every department required its own intelligence"—a concession that in effect ratified the wholesale scrapping of wartime intelligence capabilities.**[21]** Truman's order establishing the post of DCI in

January 1946 accordingly stipulated that the “existing intelligence agencies ... shall continue to collect, evaluate, correlate, and disseminate departmental intelligence” (outside the purview of the DCI).[22] This concession, while necessary to win military assent in the creation of the DCI and an organization to serve him, would be codified in the National Security Act of 1947—the same legislation that gave statutory standing to unified and specified commands, thus making permanent the wartime innovation in America’s conduct of the operational level of war. But while these theater commanders would reign relatively supreme in their areas of responsibility, nothing in the 1947 Act provided for them to have their own organic intelligence capabilities. This oversight would soon have unintended consequences.

With no secretary of defense powerful enough to coordinate a joint, all-source combat intelligence capability, and the DCI implicitly barred from this field, the military services concentrated on their own concerns and had little authority or inclination to re-create joint intelligence staffs. A blue-ribbon panel appointed by Congress to study the organization of the government flagged some of the danger signals in its January 1949 report. Its subcommittee to study intelligence, headed by Ferdinand Eberstadt, warned that the military intelligence arms had lost most of the “skilled and experienced personnel of wartime,” and that those who remained had seen “their organizations and their systems ruined by superior officers with no experience, little capacity, and no imagination.”[23]

This neglect devastated the nation’s ability to provide intelligence support to a strategic air campaign. AAF leaders after World War II were busy developing the potential of jet aircraft, winning independence from the Army, and then establishing the institutions of an independent US Air Force. In the spring of 1949, the Air Force deactivated several more of its tactical reconnaissance units, leaving only three squadrons in active status. Its strategic reconnaissance units seemed to have fared better only by comparison; economy measures had hampered their modernization since the war.[24] The problems of developing and fielding jet-age reconnaissance aircraft—and the improved cameras for them to carry—were daunting enough, but still worse was the decay in the human and organizational assets for imagery intelligence.[25] What time and energy they had for air intelligence seems to have been devoted to a scramble for data on targets in the Soviet Union.[26] Nevertheless, by 1950 bomber crews still had “target materials” on only about half of their prospective targets in the USSR.[27] On the eve of the Korean War, a draft “Handbook for Air Intelligence Officers” distributed by the Air Training Command

described World War II-vintage procedures for organizing and running photo interpretation units because there was nothing else to describe. The booklet sheepishly explained that “the organization of units engaged in Air Force photo interpretation is being modified” and promised to update the section at a later date.[28]

Consequences in Korea

The Truman administration’s decision to allow the “departments” to provide their own intelligence thus abetted, in practice, a situation in which a single service, through simple inattention, could deprive the nation of a valuable asset. In Korea, a surprised US Air Force had to reconstruct, almost from scratch, the sort of intelligence support for strategic air operations it had enjoyed in 1945. For the first two months of the conflict, a single reconnaissance technical squadron in Yokota, Japan, had to handle all photo interpretation work for the US Army and Air Force in Korea.[29] The Army had pledged in a series of deals dating from 1946 to handle much of the interpretation of photos of the front-lines, but the Eighth Army had no photo-interpreters at all until February 1951, by which time United Nations forces had twice been threatened with eviction from the Korean peninsula. When Lt. Gen. Matthew Ridgeway took over the Eighth Army in late December 1950, he found that his command literally did not know the sizes and locations of the Chinese formations facing it. To add insult to injury, an urgent reconnaissance campaign to locate those forces found little or nothing, largely because the harried photo-interpreters were relying in most cases on imagery alone to spot camouflaged Chinese positions, without the aid of other intelligence sources.[30]

Something seemed to have gone seriously wrong. Indeed, the chief of the Far East Air Force, Lt. Gen. Otto Weyland, complained that “it appears that these lessons [of World War II] either were forgotten or never were documented.”[31] Not until mid-1952—two years into the conflict—did theater command have at its call an all-source imagery intelligence, targeting, and battle-damage assessment capability.[32] By the end of the war, imagery support was once again competent and robust, but recouping that capability had been expensive in time, money, and lives—and there was still little understanding that the job was perhaps too big

for any one service.

James Marchio's research adds an interesting side note. Early in the Korean war, the several commanders-in-chief of the unified and specified commands endorsed a director of naval intelligence proposal to fashion joint intelligence centers in each of their commands—an idea that was soon forwarded to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. For some still undetermined reason, the Joint Secretariat in 1951 returned the proposal with the cryptic explanation that it had been “withdrawn from consideration by the JCS.”[33] That is roughly where matters would stand until the implementation of the Goldwater-Nichols Act, almost four decades later.

Conclusion

This essay is *not* a comprehensive examination of the literature and documentation on its topic. It is rather a survey of clues that suggest what might be found when additional archival spadework gets done in the records of reconnaissance units and imagery intelligence organizations.

At the end of the world war, the Truman administration and Congress took stock of what had changed in America's posture toward the world and in its military and intelligence capabilities and sought to organize these capabilities in a lasting, peacetime configuration. The military establishment failed, however, to incorporate important lessons from its wartime experience. The problem of harnessing “national-level” means to “operational-level” needs was too difficult. It had been solved only temporarily for the Combined Bombing Offensive in Europe, and that success had lulled Army Air Forces into a false confidence in their intelligence capabilities, which were soon demobilized. Thus, the new Intelligence Community simply was not well prepared for the challenges of the Cold War and beyond. The Pentagon had to relearn in Korea that strategic air campaigns require especially close support from intelligence. And this lesson had to be relearned in later conflicts as well.

Thus, a “Whig interpretation” of the history of American intelligence must be used with caution, if at all. Indeed, historians might profit from reexamining certain developments during the Cold War—such as the growth of the analytic capabilities of the Central Intelligence Agency and the creations of the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Photographic Interpretation Center, and the National Reconnaissance Office—not as progress toward a higher intelligence synthesis, but as ad

hoc and partial remedies for certain chronic weaknesses and problems created in the rush to demobilize after World War II.

Footnotes

[1]This is suggested by Nathan Miller, for example, in the preface to his *Spying for America: The Hidden History of US Intelligence* (New York: Paragon House, 1989). See also the report of the “Brown-Aspin Commission,” formally cited as the Commission on the Roles and Missions of the United States Intelligence Community, *Preparing for the 21st Century: An Appraisal of US Intelligence* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1996), 7.

[2]Theater commanders themselves marked something of an innovation in American military practice. Imposed upon the services after Pearl Harbor, they controlled all forces operating in their respective areas of responsibility and thus (in theory) made the separate services fight as a team.

[3]James D. Marchio, “Days of Future Past: Joint Intelligence Operations During the Second World War,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, (Spring 1996): 122, and “Support to Military Operations: The Evolution and Relevance of Joint Intelligence Centers,” *Studies in Intelligence* 49, no. 1 (2005):41– 54. See also Jeffrey M. Moore, *Spies for Nimitz: Joint Military Intelligence in the Pacific War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2004).

[4]For example, the 12th Air Force went to North Africa in November 1942 with no trained photo-interpreters to analyze aerial photographs. Its commander, Brig. Gen. James Doolittle, analyzed the pictures from its first photoreconnaissance mission himself. See James Doolittle, with Carroll V. Glines, *I Could Never Be So Lucky Again* (New York: Bantam, 1991), 332.

[5]For more on imagery intelligence in World War II, see Alexander S. Cochran, Jr., Robert C. Ehrhart, and John F. Kreis, “The Tools of Air Intelligence: ULTRA, MAGIC, Photographic Assessment, and the Y-Service,” in John F. Kreis, ed., *Piercing the Fog: Intelligence and Army Air Force Operations in World War II* (Washington: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1996), 85, 92–93.

[6]The officer was Maj. Gen. Frederick Anderson, deputy commanding general for operations for the US Strategic Air Forces in Europe (USSTAF); see “Conference held in the Office of the Deputy Commander, Operations,

USSTAF,” 9 October 1944, in the Library of Congress, Carl Spaatz Papers, USSTAF Files, Intelligence, Box 297. See also the memorandum on this topic prepared for Gen. Carl C. Spaatz, commander of the US Strategic Air Forces in Europe, by his director of intelligence, Brig. Gen. George C. McDonald, on 7 November 1944. Concern over the dependency may also have influenced USSTAF’s relocation of much of its intelligence organization from Widewing, Bushey Park, England, to the new Main Headquarters in St. Germain, France, in late 1944—a move that may have contributed significantly to the decline in the AAF’s post-war intelligence capabilities. See Lt. Col. Lewis F. Powell, Jr., Chief, Operational Intelligence Division, to Brig. Gen. McDonald, “Notes on Operational Intelligence Division of Directorate of Intelligence, USSTAF,” 9 June 1945, 20. I am grateful to John Ferris of the University of Calgary for copies of these documents, which are held in the MacDonald Research Material, Special Collection, US Air Force Academy Library.

[7]According to H. F. Matthews, “Mr. Byrnes also heard a number of our Air Corps [sic] officers complain of a lack of adequate American intelligence and praise the high quality of British intelligence.” See “Minutes of Meeting” [of the Secretaries of State, War, and Navy], 16 October 1945, in Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945–1950, Emergence of the Intelligence Establishment* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1996), 64.

[8]Roy M. Stanley, II, *World War II Photo Intelligence* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1981), 70.

[9]John F. Kreis, “Planning the Defeat of Japan: The A-2 in Washington, 1943– 1945,” in Kreis, ed., *Piercing the Fog*, 368– 71.

[10]See, for instance, former Treasury Department economic analyst and Amherst College professor George S. Pettee’s *The Future of American Secret Intelligence* (Washington: Infantry Journal Press, 1946), 35.

[11]Walton S. Moody, *Building a Strategic Air Force* (Washington: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1996), 50.

[12]Moody, 52.

[13] Quoted in Herman S. Wolk, *Planning and Organizing the Postwar Air Force, 1943–1947* (Washington: Office of Air Force History, 1984), 117.

[14]These numbers are derived from a quick and unscientific survey of the