

# A Personal Perspective

## ***Commentary on "Two Strategic Intelligence***

### ***Mistakes in Korea, 1950"***<sup>1</sup>

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The article by Mr. Rose appears to be the fruit of considerable research—far more than I have devoted to the subject since I last worked on it in 1952. However, I found it to be somewhat unbalanced and incomplete, and an injustice to analytic personnel of the early 1950s—even those who came to wrong conclusions at the time. Were I Bill Gertz or Rowan Scarborough, I would indeed have jumped at the opportunity it presented to excoriate the Agency.<sup>2</sup> And I am sure that there are others who were disturbed by the presence of this article in a CIA public journal. For my part, I would like to help set the record straight.

While I must rely completely on my memory, to me the article is marked by certain illusory shortcomings in analysis and the intelligence process that cannot but create misconceptions in the minds of present-day readers. I assume that the author had little understanding of the informational, organizational, and Intelligence Community situation and constraints during the early 1950s. His article missed an opportunity to identify those limitations on the conduct of intelligence as the all-but-devastating challenges that they were and to set them in perspective. Ultimately, as the 1950s progressed, many of the constraints were overcome; thus, they may have no relevance or meaning for today's analysts in the present intelligence environment. But I feel, rightly or wrongly, that CSI has done the Agency a disservice by publishing the article without putting the events and the intelligence information involved into an appropriate context.

In 1950, there was no real interagency (or even internal CIA) structure that

permitted or encouraged regular discussion of critical current intelligence information below the “director” level, other than the Watch Committee—invented by my boss, J. J. Hitchcock—which met, as I recall, once a month. Information, particularly any information protected by a codeword or other “sensitivity,” was not freely exchanged either between or within agencies. Thus, it could not easily contribute to broad analytic thinking in the Intelligence Community.

- In CIA analytic elements, for example, SIGINT was received only within our unit, the General Division of the Office of Reports and Estimates (ORE), which was set up in 1948 by Knight McMahan to provide one centralized locus for the substantive examination of SIGINT. We could discuss it with, or show it to, “cleared” analysts or other elements of ORE, but it did not cross the desks of those analysts on a regular basis. Most importantly, they could not use it or refer to it in their published work. Fortunately, our ten-analyst team (then known as the Indications Branch)—which had been hastily created by General Division to produce the weekly *Situation Summary (SitSum)* requested by President Truman in July 1950—did have regular access to most SIGINT, but not necessarily to all other data.
- We never had a clear concept of what proportion or what level of clandestine information we were given access to. I recall that rarely did we succeed in getting responses from the Directorate of Operations to our questions about sourcing or our requests for elaboration on clandestine reporting. (Of course, as any analyst can testify, this was far from unique to the Korean war period, although I cannot speak for the present.)
- We may have had access to some State Department traffic, but we could never be sure of receiving it, and we could not have used it directly in any event. And our access to information from military sources was always uncertain. In General Division, we could never be sure of what non-SIGINT information was reaching other analytic elements in ORE, such as those who issued estimates.

Physical handling of information was of necessity fairly primitive in those days. There were no copying machines. Most items that we received came in single copies, which we had to pass on and could not retain for our files. For the most part, files consisted of 5x8 inch cards on which we scribbled source and time data and as much extracted or summarized information as we thought we would need. We organized these according to an assessment structure developed by Hitchcock that proved essential in focusing our attention on “families” of indicators, particularly in those areas where we had little or no hard information. As primitive as this was, reviewing these cards was invaluable, at least during the month that I was

responsible for the final writing and editing of the *SitSum*.

At the time, we could not be sure of the comprehensiveness of General Division's access to the "finished" intelligence issued by other analytic elements in ORE or by other government intelligence organs. While my memory could be fragile—not surprising after more than 50 years—there are references in Mr. Rose's article to relevant items from CIA estimates and daily summaries that I simply do not recall seeing.

I go into this at such length because I feel that a current reader of the Rose study might assume that all the information he describes and lists so thoroughly was available fairly promptly and on a fairly universal basis within the Agency. Such was not the case.

Rose's article contains no reference to any contributions that we made through the *Situation Summary*, even though this product was mentioned in the book *CIA Briefings of Presidential Candidates*, by John Helgerson, which the Center for the Study of Intelligence published in 1996.<sup>3</sup> It may well be that copies of the *SitSum* are nowhere in the files; this would not be surprising, since so much time has passed and since only three copies of each issue were produced (the original for the President, a carbon copy for the DCI, and one for our files). I have not myself seen any of these since early 1952. I know that they were not polished and that we presented few, if any, significant "conclusions," but we worked very hard to summarize and present what we saw as indications, or possible indications, of expansions in the Korean conflict—actually, we saw our responsibility as extending to Communist Bloc offensive actions on a worldwide basis. Reference to our product by Mr. Rose could at least have shown that the Agency was making an effort to keep the President apprised of what seemed to be signs of adverse developments in the Korean war, even though the formal estimates and other daily and weekly publications—which we rarely saw—served to discount the likelihood of such developments. Truman apparently felt well served; in early 1951, he directed that additional senior officials receive our weekly report.

With the exception of references to the *SitSum*, Mr. Rose appears to have researched his topic intensively. Nonetheless, I note that he relied mainly on secondary sources. This strengthens my observation that he does not appear to have viewed the information on Korea from the inside, as it was available to us at the time and under the limitations imposed on us at the time.

From early in the summer of 1950, we felt the pressures of our responsibility for turning out the *SitSum* for the President so deeply (at least I did) that, even after more than half a century, they still have an impact. Many workweeks were at least 80 hours, an intensity that seems to strengthen the memory a bit, notwithstanding the passage of so many years. This may explain my reaction to the publication of Rose's study, especially at a time when the world seems to be in worse shape than ever and the Agency seems to be facing more challenges than ever in predicting developments.

### **Footnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> See article by P. K. Rose, *Studies in Intelligence*, Fall-Winter 2001, pp. 57-65.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Gertz and Rowan Scarborough referenced Rose's article in their column in *The Washington Times* on 18 January 2002. Their commentary begins: "The CIA released an embarrassing report this week in its in-house journal, showing, once again, how CIA analyses of China are not only flawed today but were wrong in several aspects during the Korean War."

<sup>3</sup> Helgerson described it as "a closely held, all-source weekly intelligence publication, the first of its kind, called the 'Situation Summary' ... a global review, built around the Korean situation ...."

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