

The Need for an Intelligence Literature

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by Sherman Kent

IN most respects the intelligence calling has come of age. What has happened to it in the last fourteen years is extraordinary. Maybe our present high is not so extraordinary as our low of 1941. In that day the totality of government's intelligence resources was trifling. We knew almost nothing about the tens of thousands of things we were going to have to learn about in a hurry. As emergencies developed we found ourselves all too reliant upon British intelligence. Many of us recall important studies issued by US intelligence organizations which were little more than verbatim transcripts of the British ISIS reports.

In 1941, the number of people who had had prior intelligence experience and who at the same time were available for new government assignments in intelligence was very small. There were few in Washington who could give any guidance as to how to go about the business in hand. What intelligence techniques there were, ready and available, were in their infancy. 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. Today things are quite different.

Let me briefly note the principal assets of today's intelligence community. To begin with, we are at strength. Perhaps we are not as strong as the present volume of work requires, but by and large we have the staff to do the mansized job before us.

Again, we are not novices at our business; we have a lot of experience behind us. We are officered and manned by a large number of people with more than a decade of continuous experience in intelligence, and who regard it as a career to be followed to retirement. By now we have orderly file rooms of our findings going back to the war, and we have methods of improving the usefulness of such files. We have orderly and standardized ways of doing things. We do most things the right way almost automatically. We have developed a host of new and powerful overt and covert techniques which have increased the number of things we can and do find out about. Most important of all, we have within us a feeling of common enterprise, and a good sense of mission.

With these assets, material and experiential, 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 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. People work at it until they are numb, because they love it, because it is their life, and because the rewards are the rewards of professional accomplishment.

Intelligence today is not merely a profession, but like most professions it has taken on the aspects of a discipline: it has developed a recognized methodology; it has developed a vocabulary; it has developed a body of theory and doctrine; it has elaborate and refined techniques. It now has a large professional following. What it lacks is a literature. From my point of view this is a matter of greatest importance.

As long as this discipline lacks a literature, its method, its vocabulary, its body of doctrine, and even its fundamental theory run the risk of never reaching full maturity. I will not say that you cannot have a discipline without a literature, but I will assert that you are unlikely to have a

robust and growing discipline without one.

Let me be clear about this literature that we lack. First, let me say what I do not mean that we are lacking. I do not mean the substantive findings of intelligence. Manifestly, I do not mean those thousands of words we disseminate each day about past, present, and probable future goings on all over the world. I do not refer to the end product of all of our labors.

We produce a great deal of this sort of literature and possibly we produce too much of it. It is not that literature that I am talking about. What I am talking about is a literature dedicated to the analysis of our many-sided calling, and produced by its most knowledgeable devotees. The sort of literature I am talking about is of the nature of house organ literature, but much more. You might call it the institutional mind and memory of our discipline. When such a literature is produced, it does many things to advance the task.

The most important service that such a literature performs is the permanent recording of our new ideas and experiences. When we record we not only make possible easier and wider communication of thought, we also take a rudimentary step towards making our findings cumulative. We create a stock of relatively imperishable thinking which one man can absorb without coming into personal contact with its originator and against which he can weigh and measure his own original ideas. His large or small addition to the stock enriches it. The point is reached where an individual mind, capable of using the stock, can in a day encompass the accumulated wisdom of man-decades of reflection and action.

Consider such disciplines as chemistry or medicine or economics and ask yourself where they would be today if their master practitioners had committed no more to paper than ours. Where would we be if each new conscript to medicine had to start from scratch with no more to guide him than the advice of fellow doctors and his own experience? Where would we be in medicine if there was nothing to read and nothing to study, no text books, no monographs, no specialized journals, no photographs, no charts, no illustrations, no association meetings with papers read and discussed and circulated in written form? Where would we be if no one aspired to the honor of publishing an original thought or concept or discovery in the trade journals of his profession? It is not impossible that blood letting would still be considered a valuable

panacea and exposure to night swamp air the specific for syphilis.

The point is that in the last few centuries we have accumulated an enormous amount of knowledge. And the fact that this accumulation has taken place since the discovery of printing from movable type' is by no means merely coincidental. The translation of new thought into words, and the commission of words to the permanence of print, more than anything else has made possible a progressive and orderly advance in all disciplines and all areas of learning.

In our calling, I am saying, we do not do enough of it. To be sure we do do some writing. We have produced a good many Training Manuals of one sort or another. We have done a good bit of chronicling of interesting case studies with an educational end in view. We have made transcripts of oral presentations at training centers. If you ransacked the "libraries" of intelligence schools you would find quite an amount of written material. Even so there is a very considerable difference between this volume of written material and the systematic professional literature I am talking about.

It is hard to define such a literature, and I will not try to do it in a sentence or two. As a starter I will note what I think to be three important aspects of it. To begin with, the literature I have in mind will deal with first principles. A portion of it will certainly have to deal with the fundamental problem of what we are trying to do. What is our mission? And as soon as that question is submitted to careful analysis, there is no telling what will emerge. One thing I think is certain: that is, that we have many more than a single mission and that many of us have been confused not only about the number and character of the many missions, but also how each of the many relates to the others.

Another first principle that will have to be elaborated is how we are going about our mission - what is our method? Here again we will find out, when the question is systematically answered, that there is not a single method, but that there are dozens of methods; and from further examination or discussion we will confront a good many new concepts which will speed our task and enrich our product.

Let no one feel either that we are necessarily sure of the nature of our first principles or that dispassionate examination of them would be a waste of time. In recent months the intelligence community has had to

wrestle with such fundamental concepts as "national intelligence objectives" and the criteria for the selection of such objectives; the nature of "warning"; the role of "indications" and so on. The results of these discussions have been generally praiseworthy, but the amount of time consumed and the consequent delay of important decisions quite otherwise. An analogous situation might be a consultation of surgeons deadlocked on a discussion of the nature of blood, preliminary to handling the emergency case presently on the operating table.

This takes me to a second thing which I would expect from a systematic literature of intelligence: a definition of terms. Hastily let me add that I am not proposing that we write a dictionary. Words which stand for complicated concepts cannot be defined by a dictionary. Words like "liberalism" and "democracy" require the equivalent of scores of dictionaries, or scores of shelves of dictionaries. You cannot define those as you define "paper" and "ink." So with our own words that stand for complicated concepts - such as "evaluation," "indicator," "capability," "estimates," and so on. As of today we use these words easily and often - yet one wonders if they are always understood in exactly the way intended. For example, we would be almost tongue-tied without the word "capability"; we use it perhaps more often than any other of our semi-technical words. Yet a little reflection on the matter shows that we use it indiscriminately to mean one of three quite different things: a feasible course of action, a raw strength, and a talent or ability. Can we be sure that we are always conveying an intended sense?*

** Editor's Note: In our next monograph, one of Mr. Kent's colleagues, Abbot Smith, takes up precisely this problem in his article Capabilities in National Estimates.*

If we do not rigorously define our terms we are likely to find ourselves talking at cross purposes; and such discussion, we all realize, risks being more of a fruitless dispute than an elevated debate. This takes me to a third point.

The literature I have in mind will, among other things, be an elevated debate. For example, I see a Major X write an essay on the theory of indicators and print it and have it circulated. I see a Mr. B brood over this essay and write a review of it. I see a Commander C reading both the preceding documents and review them both. I then see a revitalized

discussion among the people of the indicator business. I hope that they now, more than ever before, discuss indicators within the terms of a common conceptual frame and in a common vocabulary. From the debate in the literature and from the oral discussion I see another man coming forward to produce an original synthesis of all that has gone before. His summary findings will be a kind of intellectual platform upon which the new debate can start. His platform will be a thing of orderly and functional construction and it will stand above the bushes and trees that once obscured the view. It will be solid enough to have much more built upon it and durable enough so that no one need get back in the bushes and earth to examine its foundations.

Now if all this sounds ponderous and a drain on time, I can only suggest that, so far, we of the Western tradition have found no faster or more economical way of advancing our understanding. This is the way by which the Western world has achieved the knowledge of nature and humanity that we now possess.

These are only three things that I would expect from this literature. There are many others. It could and should record such things as new techniques and methods, the history of significant intelligence problems and accomplishments, the nature of intelligence services of other countries, and so on. But the three items that I have singled out remain the most important.

There are perils of going forward in our profession without laying down such a literature. First, there are the obvious perils of denying our calling the advantages I have discussed above. There is, however, another peril and one we should heed for strictly utilitarian reasons. As things now stand, we of the intelligence profession possess practically no permanent institutional memory. Our principal fund of knowledge rests pretty largely in our heads; other funds of knowledge are scattered in bits through cubic miles of files. What happens to our profession if we are demobilized as we were after the two world wars? What happens to it if our heads and files find themselves in the middle of a nuclear explosion? The answer, I fear, is that a new beginning will have to be made virtually from scratch. Most of what we know will go when we go; only a very small part will be left behind. A literature of intelligence is a reasonable insurance policy against repetition of two demobilizations of intelligence that have occurred within our memory.

In highlighting the desirability of producing a literature of intelligence and stressing the perils of not producing one, I do not wish to seem to close my eyes to problems and difficulties.

The first of these is probably the matter of security. One can expect the question: "Do you want to put all the secrets of the profession in writing and bind them up in one great book so that your enemy's success with a single target will at once put him abreast of you?" The answer comes in two parts. In the first place, many of the most important contributions to this literature need not be classified at all. They could be run in the daily press and our enemies would get no more good from them than from the usual run of articles published in our professional journals. Surely the enemy would benefit in some degree; he would benefit as he presently does from his reading of *The Infantry Journal* or *Foreign Affairs*. On the other hand, another type of contribution would deal with delicate trade secrets and would have to be classified. But is this reason not to write or circulate it? Every day we have to decide on the correct security procedure with respect to sensitive materials. Why should the literature at instance be necessarily more delicate or sensitive than the last cable from Paris, and why should its proper handling be more difficult or dangerous? In this case, as in the more familiar one of the sensitive report, we must again equate the value of exposing many minds to a problem with the increasing danger of disclosure. The plain fact is that, "security" and the advance of knowledge are in fundamental conflict. The only reason we get anywhere is because we do not demand either perfect security or unlimited debate about secrets of state. We do get somewhere because the necessity for compromise at both ends is well and fully understood.

There is another difficulty and a very practical one. How is such a literature to be written if most or all of the potential authors are practicing members of the profession, already burdened with seemingly higher priority tasks? I know of no magic formula by which a man can do two things at once. The question that we face is the familiar one of priorities. Surely one of the guiding principles to a solution is the desirability of investing for the future. Taking Mr. X off the current task and giving him the time to sort out his thoughts and commit them to paper will more than repay the sacrifice if what Mr. X puts down turns out to be an original and permanent contribution. If it buttons up a controversial matter and precludes thousands of hours of subsequent discussion, the cause has been well served. It has been well served

even though one of Mr. X's would-be consumers had to get along without his advice on another matter. What we are faced with in this case is nothing more complicated than the value and pain of capital formation.

A third problem. How may the Mr. X's be paid for worktime spent in the creation of this literature? If what has gone before is the fact and the Mr. X's of the calling are really creating intelligence capital, then it seems to me that they are entitled to their wage exactly as if engaged upon their regular assignments. Indeed, in logic, if what Mr. X produces contributes to the solution of the next hundred problems, he should be paid more than if he spent his time merely solving the single assigned problem before him.

Beyond these rather fundamental matters, there are hundreds of other problems. If a large proportion of the Mr. X's are sure to come from intelligence staffs, where do they work? Are they to have secretarial help? Will they keep regular hours? Must they be in residence? How will their findings be reproduced? How circulated? What editorial controls will be exercised over their output? These are really easy questions. The hard ones are to find the Mr. X's in the first place, and to induce them to undertake the most difficult job of all: original creative writing.

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