

# Against Footnotes

APPROVED FOR RELEASE

CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM

22 SEPT 93

**CONFIDENTIAL**

A "master craftsman" from State's intelligence bureau takes up a challenge and presents the case.

## **Allan Evans**

The eloquent lead article in the last issue <sup>1</sup> challenges anyone to come forth with a valid defense of the status quo that prevails in our community with respect to footnotes. Age predisposes me to defend status quos; my frequent statements in talking to intelligence officer groups put me on the spot to repeat my arguments against the use of footnotes. It may be that these views are conditioned by circumstances in the Department of State and that these circumstances differ materially from those in the Department of Defense if so, it will be all the more useful to unearth variations in the taste and requirements of major groups of consumers at whom our community is aiming. Let us see what can be said.

## **Customer is King**

The first and most important arguments are that our customers won't read fat papers and "almost certainly" in overwhelming majority don't want to be bothered with documentation. I think no truth in our business is more thoroughly substantiated by experience (either footnoted or not) than that the impact of a paper varies in close inverse

relation to its size. We have, of course, the NIS, which is indifferent to bigness, but it is an intelligence document of a very special kind, designed for universal reference. The Department of State issues stout papers, but for policy more often than intelligence purposes. There are technical areas of the government which revel in extensive analysis. So far, however, as the general run of day-to-day operation in this Department goes, our Bureau is prepared to stand by the idea that, other things being equal, the shortest paper has the most impact.

In closely related vein, our consumers are not going to spend their time summoning up the documents they see referred to in footnotes.

They think of our intelligence papers as the product either of particular analysts whom they know by name and whom they have learned to trust, or of a particular organization which they trust to employ analysts who are reliable. They expect Intelligence to speak as authority, to present its conclusions with confidence, and they don't want it to transfer to them the responsibility of reviewing the evidence all over again.

Indeed, many consumers couldn't review the evidence. Many readers—those overseas, for example—simply don't have the files of material that we use here at headquarters. Why tantalize them with alluring footnote references to luscious sources that are inaccessible to them?

I appreciate the excellent suggestion that footnotes be organized in the modern manner at the back of the paper and be therefore removable. When for special reasons footnotes are actually used, the device would be valuable. In the usual case, however, it would leave unjustified superscript figures throughout the text, to annoy people and intrude a real if small barrier to smooth absorption of the message. There might well be physical problems about tearing o\$ and re-stapling. These are minutiae, but in the bulk they might grow important. I doubt that the real answer to the problem with consumers lies along this line.

## **Quality and Control**

These then are two positive arguments against introducing an apparatus of footnotes into intelligence papers. Let us now look at some of the

arguments put forward in favor of this procedure. As an historian, I can only applaud the appeal to the past in evocation of the great scholarly revolution brought about by German methods well over a century ago. But aren't a number of people becoming a little skeptical about some parts of this revolution? Are there not even sporadic attempts to escape from the yoke of that ultimate German invention, the Ph.D.? Only the other day I heard a notable authority on American scholarship draw a distinction between the research associated with our Germanic discipline and what might rightly be called thinking. Perhaps we should patronize the scholarly revolution of our own age rather than that of the past, and stress the production of ideas.

There is worry that without footnotes mediocre analysts will float texts which are unreliable. What about the danger that mediocre analysts, under cover of footnotes, will float texts in which they are able to avoid the challenge of decisive thinking? I don't say that only one of these two dangers exists. I think that they both exist, and I suspect that they rather cancel out as arguments one way or the other.

The article suggests that without the footnote the operation of review and upper-level control is a hollow pretense. The answer here would be in brief that without good supervision and control no amount of footnotes will guarantee quality, but that if the supervision and higher control are good the footnotes will not be necessary. I think the article is a little unfair to the reviewer. According to the terms set forth, every reviewer would have to be an expert in the subject of the paper he was reviewing, or would have to make himself an expert by reading all the material in the footnotes. Teachers, I think, will realize that this concept is too categorical. With good but not infinite knowledge of the subject, and with sound intuitions about how style, logic, and marshaling of ideas relate to accuracy and integrity of thinking, teachers and scholars do very well at reviewing the works of students and colleagues. These are the qualities required in the leaders of intelligence operations; without these qualities no apparatus will make intelligence products worth the money.

It is true that the judgments of an NIE float in the empyrean and impress with their apparently unrooted boldness. It is also true, however, that the writers of those sentences approach them with prayer and fasting, and work them out in fiery give and take, often over long periods of time, in working groups which can test to their heart's content the background of information and fact that underlies each agency's opinion. If

sometimes our NIEs approach being a little too empyrean, so do the problems that our superiors and world affairs force us to examine.

## Intracommunity Practice

There are many lesser points. Certainly for intercommunication within the intelligence community indications of source might be useful; it would be a question of time and effort. As for the awful thought that many analysts may take advantage of the status quo to scamp their scholarly attention to detail in intelligence work, I should argue both that most of them are thoroughly dedicated and that the few who do try to get away with it are quickly found out. As a matter of fact, the working drafts of analysts often do have annotations, and are carefully filed for reference.

There is one small suggestion in the article on which comment requires a reference to the inner workings of a friendly agency; let me nevertheless rush in and remark that some part of the difficulty about documentation may be peculiar to the Defense Department because of its habit of sending estimators rather than the basic analysts to working groups. Is it possible that this mode of operating through layers accounts for some of the feeling that we lack full exchange of working data? I venture to suggest that the advantages and disadvantages of this procedure well merit discussion.

In the end, there is one final and to my mind clinching argument. As I have told many audiences, the essence of an NIE is what it says about things to come—indeed, the culminating feat of the whole intelligence process is to project the customer's view near or far into the coming weeks or years. And, who will footnote the future? Here internally, within the intelligence game itself, resides the chief positive argument against footnotes—that a reliance on them will blunt our willingness, if not our ability, to push along trails that cannot be blazed with documents or references, and to explore what may lie ahead.

---

1 A. John Alexander, "An Intelligence Role for the Footnote," *Studies* VIII 3, p. 1 ff.

Top of Page

**CONFIDENTIAL**

Posted: May 08, 2007 07:58 AM