

# What Basic Intelligence Seeks To Do

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*Intelligence doctrine re-examined*

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This paper seeks to open a discussion of basic intelligence doctrine: that is, of the objectives this type of intelligence should aim at and of the standards by which effective performance in it should be judged. This kind of discussion—which, I believe, was one of the things *Studies in Intelligence* was originally founded for—is not likely to end in full agreement but, as experience with other types of intelligence has shown, does offer the prospect of reducing the area of disagreement and making the product more sophisticated and more useful to the consumer.

The files of *Studies in Intelligence* to date show a near absence of papers taking this approach to the subject, though there have been a number of good factual surveys of particular basic intelligence programs. The omission is probably due to the topic's being widely considered lacking in interest rather than lacking in importance. "Basic intelligence" is denominated one of the three main categories of intelligence in Sherman Kent's *Strategic Intelligence* (i.e., the "basic descriptive element" along with "current reporting" and "estimates of the speculative evaluative element"), and the community's principal basic intelligence program, the National Intelligence Survey, has in the past year or so undergone extensive examination and review the most recent of a

number of such comprehensive reviews. Considerable attention has also been given to the statutory basis of the NIS and to its administrative aspects.

The present paper is not concerned with matters of statutory authority or administration but with intelligence doctrine. Since it seeks to open a dialogue on this subject, it begins necessarily on an elementary level and states somewhat dogmatically a number of definitions and main propositions as a basis for discussion. The value of the effort will depend very considerably on its success in stimulating expressions of informed opinion from other concerned persons—those concerned as consumers perhaps more than those concerned as producers.

Part of the difficulty the "basic descriptive element" has always labored under may be a simple matter of nomenclature. To some ears, the term "basic intelligence" sounds so elementary as to be quite without interest; to others, it tends to have the slightly moralistic connotations of "essential" and to offend by its seeming pretentiousness. But the concept itself is simple enough and should be non-controversial. It is perhaps better to start with the concept of "the reference document," a concept which rightly puts the emphasis less on the information itself than on a user's need for the information. Reasons for including any given set of data in a reference document are essentially pragmatic: (1) it is information likely to be needed by many persons for many purposes ("central" information might be a more accurate term than "basic"); and (2) it is information capable of being so organized that it can be turned to readily. Essentially the reference document is a money-saver because, human memory being what it is, the alternative to one reference work serving many people, is often a series of *ad hoc* documents each serving a half-dozen or so.

A modern industrial civilization could not operate without a wide variety of reference documents—with forms and contents varying widely according to the special concerns of their intended users. *The Morning Telegraph*, the racing man's Bible, is very different from *The Wall Street Transcript*, a weekly compilation of financial evaluations from various informed sources—and only a person specialized in both horse racing and corporate finance could come close to determining which is really "better." The continuing financial solvency of each publication is, however, a rough indication that each is satisfying a valid consumer need.

The subject of special concern to the US intelligence community—international affairs—is no less complicated than horse racing or corporate finance, and is considerably more difficult to deal with in an official reference document. One difficulty is that the subject of international affairs is less sharply separable from the rest of the universe and, partly because of this, the prospective readership much harder to envisage and define. The man who turns to *The Morning Telegraph* or *The Wall Street Transcript* may be presumed by the producer to be already knowledgeable about horse racing or corporate finance and reasonably clear on what he is looking for.

Not so with the man who turns to a government reference document or information on South Ruritania or East Parastatia. This presumed reader may be either an expert on East Parastatian affairs who wishes to check the exact age of its ruling general and the relative standing of its three most important export commodities or, at the other extreme, a US general's briefing officer who is not quite sure just where East Parastatia is but who within the next hour must give his boss a fill-in about an attempt still in progress to assassinate the Parastatian dictator and seize the government. Or, less dramatically, the reader may be a civilian or military official about to proceed to a new assignment in East Parastatia—or possibly at the capital of its bitter rival, West Parastatia. Some of these various readers may be presumed to have ready access to such non-government reference books as the World Almanac, the Statesman's Yearbook or the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Each reader, moreover, will naturally want to find the Parastatian information important to him with a minimum of dilution or delay caused by the presence of the other reader's Parastatian data.

A second difficulty for the reference work on international affairs is more serious. A good non-governmental work like the Statesman's Yearbook will meet most needs for purely factual non-classified data about any given country. But legitimate government needs also include military and political data which is normally classified and, more difficult still, go beyond mere hard factual data to involve judgments and evaluations of complex situations from the standpoint of US security interests. More important than just the size of East Parastatia's armed forces or the nature of their equipment are their loyalties to the ruling dictator, their relations with the traditional political parties or the labor unions and their prevailing orientation toward Moscow or Washington. Questions such as these go beyond the capabilities of a privately produced reference work and indeed tax those of the government as a whole. In

really critical or fluid situations they are in part the subjects of national estimates, and even in relatively routine situations there is an evident advantage for the US official in being able to turn to a reference document which is coordinated national intelligence.

## Criteria of excellence

What, then, is excellence in a reference document? I would like to propose three main criteria: systematic in its fundamental organization, clear and precise in its detailed presentation, realistic in what it seeks to include. Thus blandly put, these criteria probably attract little dissent; controversy arises when their implications are more extensively explored. All three criteria rest on the premise that the essential problem of the reference document is not recondite research but effective communication.

A reference document needs to be systematically organized primarily in the sense that it is part of a system; that its producers have recognized that their task is not just to manufacture a product but to provide a continuing service. The reader consulting a reference work naturally needs assurance of its validity but, second only to this, he needs to find the desired information quickly and, if possible, be given a little guidance on where to find further data on the same subject. And—a point often overlooked—he is also helped by some prior assurance that the reference work will be there to consult. Meeting these varied needs for a wide variety of readers necessarily requires a considerable degree of standardization in the way a reference work is organized internally; it also requires the external organization that will ensure the work's remaining in print and being adequately disseminated. It is these characteristics of organization, not just the nature of the contents, which establish the reference work as a distinct genus.

The importance of system for a reference document is easy to underestimate or even ridicule, since no standard plan of organization is very likely to fit a particular case precisely. At any given moment, moreover, there is also certain to be a more exciting way to tell the story than the way the reference document does it. Most of us can remember from our college days at least one lecture in which the speaker held his

audience spellbound by starting with a very minor Detail and skipping around in a seemingly chaotic fashion, yet covering by the end of the hour all relevant aspects of the subject with a vividness and memorability absent from more conventional presentations. But however successful as an occasional teaching technique, such a way of organizing information is no model for a reference document. Here the readers must be presumed to be seeking plain information and not entertainment, and a substantial proportion of them to be seeking not the total picture but specific facts or judgments about some part of it.

Another and more topical kind of illustration may also be pertinent. During the course of any given year, the Washington visits of foreign chiefs of state and the corresponding trips of US dignitaries abroad are likely to produce a number of excellent intelligence memoranda on the countries concerned—memoes which, along with the very current matter addressed to the immediate occasion, also contain much sound basic intelligence often more attractively stated than that in a standard reference work. Yet a memo of this sort, no matter how perceptively its basic intelligence is presented, is no real substitute for a standard reference document on the country, since (a) it will probably go out of print soon after its original dissemination and (b) having been originally designed for one particular occasion, it is unlikely to be ideally organized for a number of quite different purposes at later points in time. The general nature and influence of one of the country's opposition parties may, for example, be given very glancing attention in a "backgrounder" on its president's visit to Washington, but this may be just the subject on which a subsequent reader would want a quick evaluation.

"Systematically organized" of course includes having the data appear in a pattern that most people consulting the document will find compatible with their own particular interests in turning to it. For works on international affairs the most useful initial category is generally agreed to be countries—rather than economic commodities or weapons or diseases—but there seems to be no firm rule on the order of categories within a given country. Uniformity in treating widely different countries is neither necessary nor desirable, but the reader does have a right to expect a certain standardization among reference documents in the same series and a plain indication in the table of contents of the pattern being followed in that book, an indication couched in terms immediately familiar to him. The complaint has more than once been made regarding the NIS General Survey, for example, that "manpower" as a sub-section of "sociology" is a somewhat forbidding category to confront a man who

wants to find out in a hurry how powerful the country's trade unions are and whether they have any extensive record of Communist infiltration.

The second criterion of excellence—clarity and precision in the more detailed presentation of data—is of course always accepted in principle, but frequently with insufficient appreciation of what must be done to meet it adequately. It is too often forgotten that the primary task of intelligence is to get a fact or judgment from the inside of a specialist's brain to the inside of a layman's, not simply to state it in words which a fellow specialist can certify as not irrelevant and not untrue.

The user's needs are positive; whether he is novice or old hand on the country, it will do him little good to encounter either bland generalities or esoteric allusions. The novice will not be much helped by a delicate reference to declining Communist influence in East Parastatia based on the tacit assumption that "everybody knows" there was a pro-Communist regime there in the late 1950s. The old hand can only be exasperated by being told that the country experienced trade and payments difficulties in the mid-1960s, when he is trying to check on how serious these difficulties were and whether the critical year was 1964 or 1966. To convey the needed information effectively to two such different readers requires a kind of flexibility and imagination which not all analysts have. The producer of reference works, moreover, should write in the expectation of his product's remaining usable not merely for a week or two but perhaps for several years, and he must do his job without the psychological boost which people often receive from dealing in headline material ("It's happening right now"). Furthermore, the complexity of his subjects gives him no valid license to be ponderous and murky in his treatment of them; it creates rather a special need for his language to be crisp and clear.

The third (and most easily misunderstood) criterion of excellence in a reference document is how realistic it is in what it seeks to include. The critical questions to be asked are really two—though many people stop with the first, which simply inquires what are the central facts and judgments about a country which a US official might want to know before taking action. The corollary question—necessary but often overlooked—is to inquire which of these facts and judgments can be effectively communicated through this particular reference work, given its agreed size, processing time, revision schedule and the like.

Since the canon of relevant intelligence for the senior US official

obviously includes much current reporting and estimative material, there is a natural tendency to stretch reference works to take in much of these categories also. I see no absolute objection in principle to doing this, but at least two powerful limitations in practice. One is mechanical and almost inescapable: unless organized like a newspaper throughout, a reference work cannot hope to stay abreast of the news ticker. Everyone accepts this fact intellectually, but the dream dies hard of having a single document which will provide all the answers for, say, the rushed and harried briefing officer suddenly confronted with the attempted coup in East Parastatia. A reference work on the country which is only three weeks old will naturally be more convenient for him than one three years old, but it will in itself provide no guarantee of accuracy, since the events he is chiefly concerned with are probably those of the past three days or three hours. In a world of unlimited intelligence resources one might seek to ease his difficulties by decreeing that every reference book in the series be updated every three months, but a more realistic approach is to insist that each work be so arranged as to make its relevant information quickly accessible to the uninitiated reader and, if possible, provide him with leads to more detailed and current publications on the subject.

The other limitation derives from a reference work's need for a certain detachment and perspective such as is extremely hard to attain regarding particular events still in progress or judgments still in controversy. By and large, it is probably more useful for the reference document to avoid very recent detail and to confine itself to those judgments which have become generally accepted in the intelligence community—what is sometimes pejoratively described as "the conventional wisdom." It seems to me important, however, for the reference work to make sure that these evaluations are within the conventions of the present, not the past; to insist that its successive editions do not simply go on repeating the evaluations of, say, the Stalin era in tone if not in explicit statement.

Just which central facts and received judgments can be efficiently included in a given reference document must probably remain a matter of informed human judgment, at least till machinery for obtaining meaningful consumer responses becomes more highly developed than at present. Nor is it really an economical use of limited resources to try and determine revision schedules just by formula, i.e., strictly by elapsed time since the last edition. For reference works consisting almost entirely of statistical resumes and lists of officeholders, this can be a

quite valid method; most statistics are issued on an annual basis, and life expectancy tables apply to government officials as to anyone else. But for more complicated reference works concerned with basic evaluations of larger political, economic and social entities, the strict elapsed-time formula is likely to prove crude and inefficient. It is actual events, not the mere removal of leaves from the calendar, which causes such reference works to go out of date. One country of course changes more rapidly than another, and the same country may change more rapidly in one decade than in another. To cite a somewhat extreme example, an NIS General Survey on Cuba produced in late 1958 (i.e., just before Castro) would have been more out of date in its basic evaluations by mid-1960 than one produced at the same time on the Netherlands would have been by mid-1970.

Naturally, every user prefers a recently published reference work to an old one, just as he prefers his car to be this year's model and his office to be one with a fine view from the window—and the prestige of having such preferences gratified may in certain circumstances have a validity of its own. But, to continue the analogy, it is not realistic planning to equate such gratification with economy of transportation or the most efficient way of conducting the office's business.

## **The question of importance**

At this point it may be asked: granted that these are indeed the proper standards of excellence in a reference work, why is having excellent reference works a matter of any importance? I believe there are at least three reasons why.

The first reason might be considered budgetary, in that it concerns the most efficient use of limited resources. To state the principle figuratively: it is of course well recognized that the very best rifles for big game hunting are still handmade (and these, besides their greater precision of operation, are also an addition to the user's social prestige), but for most workaday uses of weaponry, the world long ago learned that the unromantic assembly-line product would do. In terms of intelligence production in a period of growing budgetary austerity, the question may well arise as to how many of the needs for background memoes might

not be met by a standard reference work and a few updating paragraphs rather than by a whole new handmade product. (I am speaking, of course, only about *ad hoc intelligence* memoos—not, for example, about the necessarily custom-made paper on what policy lines to pursue toward General X's dictatorship in East Parastatia, but of an intelligence memo describing the general status of East Parastatia after 18 months of the General's rule.) By no means all needs for background information can be met by supplemented reference documents but, with the rising competitive demand for research which really breaks new ground, the question of how many is likely to be asked with growing insistence.

The second reason I would cite for reference works' importance is the evident fact that many places—notably military commands—are so situated as to be denied ready access to most basic evaluative material except through reference documents. This point needs no elaboration here.

The third reason is in some respects parallel to the second. As some intelligence needs are too remote in space to be met by the more precise intelligence media of current reporting, formal estimates and *ad hoc* evaluations, so other needs are too remote in time—or perhaps too uncertain to predict safely. One must assume that other situations may arise like those arising a decade or so ago in Cuba and the Belgian Congo, where a country of relatively low intelligence interest suddenly became a hot spot when powerful figures there courted Soviet assistance. Even if the estimative process adequately foresees 90 percent of these situations, there remains the tenth case which still requires insurance.

One mechanism for such insurance is producing contingency intelligence—which in any given instance looks no different from any other reference document. The term applies simply to the reason for the intelligence being produced: to make sure that the US Government has available beforehand a modicum of central information about every part of the world and, beyond this bare factual minimum, organized evaluative material on any country which, by reason of formal sovereignty, possesses the option exercised by Congolese and Cuban leaders when they called in Soviet advisers.

Basic intelligence performs this insurance role, it may be noted, simply by seeing to it that its reference material for day-to-day use is prepared on a suitably inclusive basis. (It does not, for example, try to foresee the

special kind of intelligence that might be called for by the unexpected descent of a satellite in a remote part of the globe.) But the operative word for the contingency consideration is "inclusive." One cannot say, in scheduling the production of country surveys: "For most countries, yes; but surely the President of newly-independent Contracolonía will never be so misguided as to risk Soviet intervention. Let us, instead, use our basic intelligence resources on a country more people have heard of and are interested in right now." To act on this principle is to cancel the insurance policy.

## Improving the product

A further question remains: can one find specific means—not just sterner editing—of making the US Government reference document on international affairs a more efficient mechanism?

I think one can—though I am also aware of some of the difficulties inherent in the nature of basic intelligence. For example, the structure and format of an encyclopaedia cannot be changed as readily as a daily newspaper's can, for issuances of an encyclopaedia are not replaced the next day but are expected to remain in use for a matter of years. I also recognize that improvements in government programs involve administrative problems and affect related programs also; excluding administrative problems from this paper does not mean that I am unaware of them. Some possible lines of improvement, such as more extensive use of consumer surveys and of the resources of automatic data processing, I leave to be discussed by those more knowledgeable in these specialized fields. But there are two particular lines on which I would like to initiate discussion here.

The first amounts to urging a more critical look at the present intelligence-producing needs of the government, in the light of the massive research effort mounted by US universities and affiliated research institutes on the non-European world over the past two decades. The intelligence community has already reacted to this effort in part. Few would now consider it necessary for the main aspects of even a small and remote country—and the longstanding forces that work against basic US interests there—to be thrust uninvited on the policy-

maker's attention in a current intelligence memo rather than kept ready for him on call in a standard reference document. The scope of what is considered necessary for embodiment in formal classified "basic intelligence" has likewise been much reduced. The NIS program, which in the late 1940s set out to cover some 50 different aspects, each in a detailed section, of every country in the world, has formally dropped over half of these detailed sections and now concentrates on a General Survey, covering in a single integrated volume the principal aspects of each country as these are considered to relate to US security interests. But I would still wonder how fully the intelligence community has recognized its activities as essentially supplementary to the larger American effort—public and private—and conceded that more of its own attention should center on facilitating, by various means, the government official's access to these other sources of information.

The principle of "supplementary and facilitative" provides no magic formula in itself but does suggest a way of using limited government resources to maximum advantage. For some parts of the intelligence effort the problem seems to be largely one of suitable awareness and, in the broad sense, translation. In the field of reference documents, one might assume the government task to be that of producing a set of nationally coordinated country surveys providing contingency coverage on each of the sovereign states of the world and seeking to outline the US relationship to that state; beyond this, the burden of proof would lie on those maintaining that the US Government needed to undertake the additional research task itself. This need would be easy to establish on subjects like the armed forces and the intelligence systems of hostile powers, where the importance is obvious and the significant data classified and hard to get. As easy to determine on the other side would be the case of the economic and social affairs of Western Europe, where the US is well served by a wealth of open sources. In between are a great number of other cases where the decision might seem far from open-and-shut. These might include sociological research on minor African countries, where the data are not classified but sometimes hard to get and the subject often of little interest to non-government publishing enterprise; transportation research in which military or other government requirements may be markedly different from those of the economic world; even possibly some political research on subjects so controversial that the value of the end product for government use would be enhanced by its being officially sanctioned.

The second line of improvement for the reference document lies in

constantly remembering that its critical problem is effective communication—reaching the reader's mind, not merely the page in front of his eyes. The mechanical costs of graphics are of course far higher than for ordinary print, and it is easy to dream up photomontages or three-color work which merely decorate the text. But it is necessary to remember also that graphics are a bargain for the US taxpayer when they significantly shorten the time a senior official takes to absorb needed information—though the cost accounting system for measuring this has not yet been invented. There is also some reason to believe that many consumers would prefer a more fanned-out, outline type of presenting basic data (with frequent use of standardized tables) to the solid paragraphs of intelligence prose that are prevalent now. But converting all existing presentation to such a new format is something else again. Aside from a genuine (but often exaggerated) danger of distortion if one tries to make the story too simple or too exciting in the process of increasing its communicability, there is also a writing problem for reference works produced by non-professional writers. Not every analyst has the writing skill and intellectual flexibility for this task of translation.

More immediately, there are a few simple things that can be done to meet some of the user's legitimate desires for speed and convenience. Detailed indexing takes a great deal of a producer's time, but it can also save a great deal of a reader's time. There is also help for the hurried reader in a generous use of headings and subheadings, so worded as to aim at the reader's interests and not just the writer's—and adequately picked up in the table of contents.

Many may disagree with these suggestions on communication, as indeed with a number of other propositions advanced here. But, as indicated at the outset, the purpose of this paper is not to pass judgments but to initiate discussion and set up a frame of reference in which such discussion can meaningfully take place. Those who are particularly in a position to forward the discussion are, of course, not the producers but the users of reference documents—those who in the past may have simply put a tick in a box on a questionnaire without stopping to explain what, specifically, they used the document for or what they hoped to find there and didn't. I trust that some of them may be moved to respond now.

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