

The Origins of National Intelligence Estimating

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In the Beginning.

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Most of what I have to say on this subject is a matter of personal recollection. I was "present at the creation," though without power to control the event.

My story begins in October 1940, when I was ordered to active duty in the Military Intelligence Division of the War Department General Staff. At that time, now thirty years ago, there was no common conception of *any* kind of an intelligence estimate, much less of a *national* intelligence estimate.

In our language, the word "intelligence" originally meant communicated information: that is, information reported from elsewhere, as distinguished from information known by personal observation. You will find the word used in that sense by Shakespeare. That was still the prevailing sense of the word in 1940. Indeed, public comment shows that, even today, most laymen regard us only as gatherers of information. The Press, which is itself a primitive intelligence organization, shows almost no comprehension of the function of estimating the meaning of the information gathered, apart from the expression of personal opinion by individual columnists whose "authority" varies with their personal prestige.

In this primitive sense, the entire Department of State was, in 1940, an intelligence organization. It had its own network of reporters who sent it information from abroad — but the evaluation of that information occurred only intuitively in the minds of the desk men who read it. The Department had no conception of intelligence research, much less of any organized process of estimating.

The Navy was one degree more sophisticated. It had an Office of Naval Intelligence, the function of which was to compile NIS-type information of Naval interest. Just the *facts*, man! Navy doctrine strongly held that it was *not* a function of Intelligence to estimate the *meaning* of the facts. Only the Admiral could do that — which may go some way to explain Pearl Harbor.

Only the Army conceived it to be a function of Intelligence to estimate the capabilities and intentions of foreign powers. That was Army doctrine, but the Military Intelligence Division did little to practice that art. Like ONI, it spent the year before Pearl Harbor producing "strategic handbooks," a primitive, single-service, NIS.

During that year "Wild Bill" Donovan burst upon the scene as the President's Coordinator of Information. He was a man of many pregnant ideas. Just one of them was that the President should be better informed than the State, War, and Navy Departments, acting separately, could possibly inform him. Donovan assembled a group of eminent scholars, men knowledgeable of foreign affairs and practiced in the techniques of research and analysis in a way that regular Army, Navy, and Foreign Service officers could not be. Donovan's Research and Analysis Branch would assemble all of the information in the possession of the Government, not only in the State, War, and Navy Departments, but also in the Library of Congress and other places, and would prepare for the President a fully informed and thoughtful analysis of any situation of interest to him.

Let me observe at this point that the analyses actually produced by this R&A Branch were not estimates. They were academic studies, descriptive rather than estimative, more like an NIS than NIE.

Donovan had no idea of coordinating these studies with anyone. He was responsible only to the President. One can readily imagine how professional Army, Navy, and Foreign Service officers reacted to the idea that a lot of johnny-come-lately professors would be telling the

President what to think about political and strategic matters.

Gen. Raymond Lee, who had recently served as military attaché in London, proposed to head off Donovan's intrusion into the mysteries of military intelligence by the creation of a Joint (Army and Navy) Intelligence Committee, in imitation of the British JIC.

Significantly, the task of defining the functions of this US JIC was assigned, not to the Chiefs of Intelligence, but to the Chiefs of Army and Navy Plans. There arose at once a doctrinal controversy between the Army and the Navy. The Army wished the JIC to "collate, analyze, and interpret information with its implications, and to estimate hostile capabilities and probable intentions." The Navy wished it to present such factual evidence as might be available, but to make no "estimate or other form of prediction." Inasmuch as the Army desired to have a joint committee, for which the Navy's agreement was indispensable, the Navy's view prevailed. Thus the first US interdepartmental intelligence organization came into existence expressly forbidden to make estimates!

I dwell upon this episode because it has contemporary relevance. Now, thirty years later, we hear again that in certain high quarters the idea prevails that the function of Intelligence is to produce evidence, not estimates. Conclusions as to the meaning of the evidence will be drawn by the interested policymakers to suit their policy predilections.

There was, of course, a scuffle between the Army and the Navy for control of this new joint committee. Before the war, normal promotion was faster in the Navy than in the Army. The Army was shocked to learn that the senior Naval officer assigned to the joint committee, a youngish commander, actually outranked the older lieutenant colonel assigned by the Army. And that commander's mission was to see to it that the joint committee did nothing except by direction, particularly that it did no estimating. But the Army, in the midst of a massive mobilization, had developed a faster system than the Navy's for making spot promotions. The Army made the lieutenant colonel a colonel before the Navy could make the commander a captain. And the first thing that the new colonel did, on taking over from the commander, was to order the immediate preparation of the first US joint intelligence estimate, in flagrant violation of the JIC's charter!

The subject of that first US interdepartmental intelligence estimate was the strategic consequences if the Japanese were permitted to seize

control of the Netherlands East Indies. (Singapore and Bataan were then under attack, but had not yet fallen.) The answer was obvious: that would be a Bad Thing. The policy implication was also clear: it should be prevented. Since that policy implication suited the Navy, it did not protest the illegality of making that estimate.

At this point, Mr. Winston Churchill came to town with two purposes in mind. The first was to commit the United States to give the war with Germany priority over the war with Japan, not an easy proposition in the face of the US reaction to Pearl Harbor and Bataan-. The second was to establish the Combined Chiefs of Staff in order to insure for Britain a more or less equal voice in the conduct of both wars.

The Combined Chiefs of Staff organization included a Combined Intelligence Committee modelled after the British JIC in London. Since the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Economic Warfare were important members of the British JIC, the US JIC, the US side of the CIC, had to be enlarged to include representatives of the State Department, the Board of Economic Warfare, and the Office of Strategic Services. Since the sole function of the CIC was to produce combined "appreciations" as a basis for combined war planning, it automatically became the primary function of the US JIC to produce US joint intelligence estimates. Thus it was the Prime Minister of Great Britain who created the wartime US JIC and put it into the estimating business.

At that time, and for many years thereafter, the British JIC held the highest reputation in Intelligence. Let me therefore say a word about British joint intelligence estimates. They were joint only in the sense that all of the members of the JIC subscribed to them. It would never have occurred to a British Army officer to question the political judgment of the Foreign Office, nor would it have occurred to a Foreign Office representative to question the Army's order of battle. Consequently British JIC estimates were nothing more than a set of departmental estimates fastened together.

The situation was somewhat different in the US JIC. The State Department was incapable of making any contribution, but felt free to criticize the political contributions of OSS. The Foreign Economic Administration (formerly BEW) generally deferred to OSS in economic matters. The Air Force and the Navy generally stuck to their technical specialties, although the Navy was ever ready to defend the interests of Admiral Nimitz against any supposed Army favor toward General

MacArthur. But the Army and OSS both claimed a universal competence: they would argue with anybody about anything, and chiefly with each other. The Army had no hesitation about contradicting an OSS political or economic estimate. OSS delighted to expose deficiencies in the Army's order of battle.

In these circumstances, the Joint Intelligence Staff, the full-time working staff of the JIC, performed a real service in working out an agreed joint text from conflicting contributions, particularly those of the Army and OSS. These were not split-the-difference compromises. Despite their different departmental origins, the members of the JIS were a band of brothers who lived and worked together; they could reach agreement amongst themselves on the basis of reasoned consideration of the evidence. The estimates that they prepared were truly joint estimates.

The trick then was, of course, to obtain the concurrence of the members of the JIC, who were surrounded by advisers who had never participated in joint consideration of the subject. But the members of the JIS were the personal representatives of the members of the JIC for this purpose. They had equal access to them, and could generally persuade them to adopt the joint view.

The defect of the JIC system was that the Committee was composed of six sovereign powers. No one represented the national interest, as distinguished from departmental interests. No one held a power of decision in case of disagreement. Since there was no acceptable way of registering a divergent view, unanimous agreement was required. In the case of a real controversy, that could be obtained only if someone backed down, or, as happened more often, if someone could devise an ambiguous formulation acceptable to both sides in the controversy. Thus, joint estimates tended to become vague or meaningless precisely at points of critical importance.

The members of the JIS agreed that a headless joint committee was the worst way of producing national intelligence estimates. During the autumn of 1944 they developed their idea of a more effective interdepartmental intelligence system. Since every department would require its own intelligence organization to meet its specialized departmental needs, there would have to be an interdepartmental committee to bring together the heads of those departmental organizations to deal with common (that is, national) problems. But that committee should have an independent chairman, appointed by the

President and responsible only to him. And, in the case of estimates, that chairman, having heard all of the evidence and argument bearing on a disputed issue, should have the power to decide what the text of the estimate would say, subject only to the notation of the dissenting opinion of any chief of a departmental intelligence agency. That idea, developed by the men who then had the most personal experience in the coordination of interdepartmental intelligence estimates, is the key to the present system for producing national intelligence estimates.

In the autumn of 1944 others were thinking of a postwar intelligence system. The Department of State had a plan. It was premised upon the exclusive responsibility and authority of the Secretary of State for the conduct of foreign relations, subject only to the direction of the President. It assumed that the military intelligence services would be interested only in technical military matters. It contemplated the creation of an "American (i.e., National) Intelligence Service" within the Department of State. This Service would maintain "close liaison" with the military intelligence services and would obtain through liaison whatever military inputs it required for its own estimates. The military, however, would have no voice in those estimates. Produced under the exclusive authority of the Secretary of State, they would provide the intelligence foundation for national policy.

Somehow, a working copy of this State Department plan came into the possession of General Donovan, the Director of Strategic Services. He moved to forestall State by proposing to the President the creation of a "Central Intelligence Service" in the Executive Office of the President. His point was that departmental intelligence estimates were by their nature self-serving. The President should have in his service an intelligence organization wholly free of the influence of departmental policy advocacy and special pleading. It would make full use of departmental intelligence resources, but would produce its own independent intelligence estimates, as the basis for national policy and strategy.

Let me stress that neither the State Department Plan nor the Donovan Plan contemplated any interdepartmental coordination of these "national policy intelligence" estimates. The military intelligence services would contribute "factual" data to them, but would have no voice in their estimative judgments. They would be produced under the sole authority of the Secretary of State, in the first case, or of the Director of the Central Intelligence Service in the second.

The Donovan Plan was referred to the JIC for comment and the fat was in the fire. After a month of fierce contention, the JIS worked out a compromise plan, JIC 239/5, 1 January 1945. In that paper the JIC recommended the establishment of a Central Intelligence Agency which, among other things, would produce national intelligence estimates. With regard to such estimates, however, the Director of Central Intelligence was required to consult with a board composed of the heads of the departmental intelligence agencies and to report their individual concurrence or dissent. In short, this was the scheme developed by the members of the JIS during the autumn of 1944, to which reference was made above.

After a year of vicissitudes that I shall not take time to relate, President Truman adopted the plan set forth in JIC 239/5. In January 1946 he established the Central Intelligence Group which, in September 1947, became the Central Intelligence Agency.

It is true to say that without William Donovan's initiative, in 1941 and again in 1944, there would have been no Central Intelligence Agency. All honor to him for that. But it is a mistake to suppose, as is commonly done, that CIA was based on the Donovan Plan of 1944. General Donovan himself knew better than that. Instead, CIA is based on JIC 239/5, which General Donovan stubbornly opposed.

The Central Intelligence Group set out to produce national intelligence estimates in accordance with the concept embodied in JIC 239/5. It was frustrated in that intention by the departmental agencies. For reasons that I shall not take time to explain, they refused to contribute to CIG estimates, or even to meet with CIG to discuss them. The result was that CIG, later CIA, produced estimates based solely or primarily upon its own research and sent them to the heads of the departmental agencies for concurrence or dissent on a take it or leave it basis. The IAC (the predecessor of USIB) never met to consider an estimate.

That certainly was not what had been intended. In 1949 the Dulles Committee blamed CIA for it.

This matter was not straightened out until General Walter Bedell Smith became DCI, in October 1950. Through positive leadership, he then developed a cooperative relationship with the IAC. He established also the Office of National Estimates with the sole mission of producing national intelligence estimates in the manner that had been intended in

JIC 23915 — that is, on the basis of departmental contributions, independent evaluation of those contributions, working level consultation with the contributors, and final consideration by the IAC (USIB).

In this context, the specialized research offices of CIA should be regarded as contributors on the same basis as the departmental agencies. ONE, working solely for the DCI as the Chairman of USIB, has no more commitment to them than to, say, DIA. They are represented in USIB by the DDCI.

This system has now worked well for 20 years, which proves that it is soundly conceived. Let me close by pointing out its particular virtues from the point of view of the user of the NIE.

First, it assures him that all of the intelligence resources of the Government have been brought to bear on the problem, and that every intelligence authority in the Government has been consulted.

Nevertheless, the power of decision with regard to the content of an estimate resides in one man, the DCI. This is, or should be, a protection against the evasions and obfuscations that characterize joint estimates. It should work to clarify any real differences that may exist among well informed men.

Third, any dissenter is forced to dissent within the context of a generally agreed discussion — not in an *ex parte* paper circulated separately.

Finally, the user has consequent assurance that all of the intelligence considerations bearing on his problem are contained in this one paper, under one cover.

After 20 years, these virtues may seem commonplace but sometimes I sense that they are not fully understood and appreciated nowadays. To appreciate them fully, one has to know what it was like 30, or even 20, years ago. I have endeavored to give you some feeling for the difference between the present system and what went before.

It is written that those who disregard past experience are condemned to repeat it.

Footnote

* This article is the text of an address delivered by the late Dr. Montague, a retired member of the Board of National Estimates, at the first meeting of the Intelligence Forum, 11 May 1971.

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