

Intelligence in Public Media

The President's Book of Secrets: The Untold Story of Intelligence Briefings to America's Presidents from Kennedy to Obama

David Priess (Public Affairs, 2016) 386 pps., notes, index.

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In a few months a new US president will begin to chart a course through a complex set of national security issues. In short order the new administration will put in place a process to absorb intelligence analysis as it formulates a strategy to contend with terrorist threats, turmoil in the Middle East, international economic problems, security tensions in East Asia and Europe, and myriad other problems. Simultaneously, the Intelligence Community (IC) will need to learn swiftly how best to serve the new administration.

The imperatives of the administration and the IC will meet in the first intelligence briefings the president-elect receives, together with the start of *President's Daily Brief* (PDBs) deliveries. The routine and substantive exchanges they establish at the outset will evolve, but a significant portion will revolve around the PDB, the daily digest of analysis CIA started in 1961 to serve President Kennedy's needs. The current proximity to a new relationship makes David Priess's book, *The President's Book of Secrets: The Untold Story of Intelligence Briefings to America's Presidents from Kennedy to Obama* an exceptionally timely read.

Book of Secrets eschews the flashy operational side of intelligence in favor of examining the cheerless side of intelligence—analysis. It recounts past administrations' practices surrounding the PDB, senior officials' views on its value, and various efforts to shape its form and content. Beyond the timeliness of the work, Priess's historical review reveals rich details about the PDB's evolution that will resonate with those who work in intelligence and national security and appeal to those interested in an insider's view of a particular slice of the US intelligence system.

Those looking for something about how policymakers view intelligence will also find it of value; however, those interested in intelligence successes and failures, operations, or new political gossip, will be dissatisfied with this largely uncritical look at how intelligence analysis is delivered to the president and his top advisors.

Priess brings genuine expertise to *Book of Secrets*. Although this is his first book, he brings personal experience in writing, briefing, and editing PDBs and, like many in his generation of intelligence professionals, he has worked and managed analysis on Middle Eastern states and counterterrorism issues and knows well the pressures of providing analysis for policymakers. Priess carries forward the scholarly work about US presidents and intelligence.^a His book is particularly strong in looking at PDB practices from President Carter forward because it draws on inputs from all living former presidents and interviews with some 100 former senior US policymakers and many former intelligence officers.

Book of Secrets expands on work about how the CIA has handled presidential transitions and suggests that one of the first crucial questions the new president will need to answer is how many in the administration will be regular PDB readers.^b President Carter restricted readership to himself, National Security Advisor (NSA) Brzezinski, Vice President Mondale, Secretary of State Vance, and Secretary of Defense Brown because he thought President Ford had allowed too many people to read the book and, as a result, the best intelligence was not being included. (112–13) President Reagan and the first President Bush kept a similarly small group of readers. In stark contrast, President Clinton allowed access to some 24 individuals (211), and the second President Bush pared recipients back to just six, though the events of 9/11 prompted him to expand the circle to 20. (231, 249) Under President Obama, readership has edged up to at least 30. (282)

Membership in the PDB circle is important. It allows participation in an exclusive dialogue on national security issues that centers on the book's contents, developing what the business community would call a distinct "con-

a. Christopher Andrews, *For the President's Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush* (Harper Collins, 1995).

b. John L. Helgeson, *Getting to Know the President: Intelligence Briefings of Presidential Candidates, 1952–2004* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2001).

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sumer identity.”^a Presidents set the broad themes in the *PDB* by virtue of their foreign policy agendas and the security threats they face. Direct *PDB* recipients learn they can drive the security discussion by tasking topic-specific analysis for the *PDB*, which they can then use to engage the president. *Book of Secrets* shows how both NSA Scowcroft under the first President Bush and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld under the second President Bush used their tasking authority to great effect to get things before the president and other National Security Council principals. (243) Albeit, as Priess finds, this carries the risk of presidential ire if it becomes too obvious or cuts against the president’s agenda, as it did in Scowcroft’s case. (170) Priess’s research shows that some presidents have learned to use the *PDB* as more than fuel for a dialogue but as a policy tool. President George W. Bush used the *PDB* to work more closely with his ambassadors and build rapport with foreign leaders, such as Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi and Russian President Putin, by letting them have a peek. (260–61)

Book of Secrets makes plain that intelligence officers most prefer to brief presidents directly, as they did under both Bush administrations. Such briefings offer the best the opportunities to gain direct feedback on how best to aid the president. More than likely, however, they will brief the president’s NSA or chief of staff as they did under Presidents Nixon, Carter, Reagan, Clinton, and Obama.

Priess’s narrative highlights intelligence officials’ struggles with the fact that some presidents simply prefer to read than to be briefed on intelligence. As early as the Johnson administration, intelligence officials have gauged a president’s willingness to accept in-person briefs as an indicator of how engaged the president is on intelligence analysis. (43) Former DCIA Tenet, however, believes that too much has been made of in-person briefs (214) and *Book of Secrets* suggests that in-person briefs are not a good measure of the president’s attention to intelligence analysis. Several presidents have left notes in the margins of their books demonstrating strong interest in the analysis they receive and serving as feedback, though imperfectly. For example, it took time for intelligence officers during the Carter administration to figure out that the president’s use of a question mark in the margins did not mean he wanted an immediate answer so much as indicated he was musing about a particular point. (120)

In-person briefs to other *PDB* recipients, such as to the vice president, the NSA, secretaries of defense and state, and others, allow intelligence officials insight into the needs of other top national security consumers. This personal service, a practice started under the Reagan administration following a directive by then-Vice President Bush (137) feeds the *PDB* intelligence consumer identity and is a key node in the administration-Intelligence Community relationship. Vice Presidents Gore and Cheney used these briefings to request additional intelligence support, to follow up on issues of interest, or to clarify points about specific *PDB* items—all of which further enabled them to drive national security policymaking and offer intelligence analysts the opportunity to inform policy.

Book of Secrets reveals that intelligence officials have introduced other analytic products to accompany the *PDB* and meet the president’s needs. The *Economic Intelligence Brief* was created for President Obama a month after he took office because of his focus on economic issues and because, as then-CIA Director Panetta explains, “we have to know whether or not the economic impacts in China or Russia or any place else” are affecting US interests. (277) CIA similarly responded to President Clinton’s request that CIA include more economic and environmental topics in the *PDB* because he “became convinced early on that economics was going to be increasingly tied to security.” (192) Under the second President Bush, a terrorism threat matrix was developed after the 9/11 attacks, though it has been much criticized as including too much useless information.

The variety of actors seeking to shape the analysis in the *PDB* is amazing, though perhaps expected. *Book of Secrets* suggests a president’s desires for strategic or tactical analysis shifts during his administration and there is ebb and flow in the *PDB*’s quality, between simply distilling vast volumes of information and going beyond a “secret” news summary. Vice presidents, NSAs, and chiefs of staffs have all have played roles in pushing for style and composition changes. Priess’s research, however, also unearths that one of the most important changes coming from the consumer side traces back to Vice President Mondale’s NSA, Denis Clift, who worked with the CIA to include opportunity analysis and analyses of the domestic challenges foreign leaders meeting the president faced at home. (126–27)

On the intelligence production side, the roles of senior IC officials in the *PDB* has fluctuated tremendously. *Book of Secrets* retells how DCI Colby acted to get the *PDB* flowing to the vice president regularly (86) and

a. Guy Champniss, Hugh N. Wilson, and Emma K. Macdonald, “Why Your Customers’ Social Identities Matter,” *Harvard Business Review*, 93, no. 1–2 (2015): 88–96.

portrays DCIs Turner and Goss as very hands-on. Goss complained he had to spend a startling five hours a day working on the *PDB*, because he was disappointed by it and saw it as a means to rebuild the Intelligence Community after 9/11 and the Iraq WMD failure. (262) As DCI, Gates was considered to be less involved than he was as DDI, when he ordered analytical units to distinguish between analysis and intelligence reporting in their writing and to become more explicit in describing the bases of their analysis. (145) DCI Deutch, however, saw the book as largely irrelevant to his position. (213) CIA Deputy Director Kerr sought to create a “Red Book” to complement the *PDB*. The Red Book was designed to examine how the US looked from a foreign perspective, but Kerr was unable to gain traction for it. (180) CIA *PDB* briefers have also inserted themselves into the *PDB* review process, at times rewriting pieces based on what they believe the president needed to know. (167)

Organizationally, the DI revised the *PDB* decisionmaking process during the Clinton administration. For the first time, it began engaging the heads of all analytic offices in daily meetings to plan the next day's *PDB*. It also established the practice of analysts writing current intelligence in the *PDB* format—with the president in mind as the prime consumer—rather than, as had been the practice, of writing current intelligence for a broader, cabinet and subcabinet, readership. In addition, feedback to analysts was improved. (207–8) Much of what Priess brings forth in this part of his narrative echoes other work highlighting the influence analytic managers have on analysis.^a He observes, however, that too much concentration on the *PDB* brings diminishing returns and that successive layers of review only marginally improve the work. (285)

Priess reviews the importance of the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 on the

a. See John A. Gentry, “Managers of Analysts: The Other Half of Intelligence Analysis,” *Intelligence and National Security* 31, no. 2 (2016): 154–177.

management of the *PDB* and suggests it has had little effect thus far. The legislation placed responsibility for the *PDB* in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) and opened the book to contributions from the broader IC. In practice, however, the CIA has continued to manage day-to-day operations of the book and provide the lion's share of the content. (268) Although the first DNI, Negroponte, made few if any changes, subsequent DNIs have begun to make their influence felt. For example, DNI Blair under the Obama administration was “determined to take the *PDB* from its tactical detail to a more strategic level” (276) because he believed that was where the president needed to be, despite having no guidance from the president. Interestingly, Blair also favored holding some articles and to give a “heads up” (277) to policymakers who had to act on them.

Book of Secrets lingers over the events of 9/11 and the efforts of the 9/11 and WMD commissions to gain access to the *PDB*. Priess adds a few new details from interviews about these issues but they add little to what is already known publicly. As a consequence, he misses the opportunity to inform us how the *PDB* served the second Bush administration as it grappled with deepening crises in Afghanistan and Iraq or other key issues. Several chapters in *Book of Secrets* make references to the national security issues administrations faced and as such, the absence of some mention of these issues from Bush's second term is glaring. Nonetheless, Priess does make a solid point that future investigations about intelligence will probably have an easier time getting access to the *PDB*.

Book of Secrets makes for a good, primary resource for further analysis and those involved in the upcoming presidential transition would be wise to read it. Priess does not provide any lessons learned, but the voices and views of the people who have been involved with the *PDB* over the past several years give us a deeper sense of the complex and sometimes strained policymaker-Intelligence Community relationship and what we can expect as the relationship continues to evolve.



