

# Is Intelligence Over-coordinated?

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Being in favor of coordination in the US intelligence community has come to be like being against sin; everyone lines up on the right side of the question. In fact, coordination has become what Stephen Potter calls an "OK" word - one which defies precise definition but sounds good and brings prestige to the user. Now I do not want to deny that coordination is a good thing, but I would like to suggest that there can be too much of a good thing. I am afraid the intelligence community is suffering from over-coordination.

Part of the trouble is that few who are zealous for coordination stop to define what it is. In one sense - unfortunately not always understood - coordination is the main business of the Director of Central Intelligence. The public law creating CIA establishes as its purpose "coordinating the intelligence activities" of the departments and agencies of the US Government, including the intelligence components of State, Army, Navy, and Air.

I am sure that in the absence of any technical definition by Congress the public statute employed the word "coordinate" in its normal Webster's-dictionary meaning of "to regulate and combine in harmonious action." This kind of coordination is essential; I doubt that we have enough of it.

In the intelligence community, unfortunately, the "activity" that has been coordinated tirelessly has not been the operational conduct of business or the analytical procedures followed by the intelligence agencies, which the language of the law would imply to a layman, but purely their verbal product in the form of written reports and estimates. Regardless of how inharmoniously the intelligence agencies may engage in "action," they have all settled down to coordination in the sense of prolonged and detailed joint examination of the words issuing forth from the national intelligence machinery. The apparent objective is to insure that every agency approves of all the language formulations employed in intelligence estimates.

Because coordination is felt to be automatically a good thing, the long and difficult path to unanimity on wording is pursued without regard for the time wasted or ideas lost. The search for the happy cliché, acceptable to all, shopworn but durable, frequently ambiguous but always defensible, goes endlessly on. It is this particular "coordination" process that is in a fair way of becoming a millstone around the neck of the Washington intelligence community.

It is ironic that the word "coordination" came into the government lexicon as the harbinger of a liberalizing and energizing influence at work in a ponderous bureaucratic machine. "Coordination" was the term hit upon by the Army to describe a system of staff consultation devised shortly before World War II in order to escape from the hidebound staff "concurrence" system then saddling the War Department General Staff with an almost unworkable consultative procedure. Under this post-World War I system, any Assistant Chief of Staff of the War Department General Staff was obliged to get the "concurrence" of the other Assistant Chiefs of Staff on any action affecting their mutual interests, whether the interests of the other Assistant Chiefs of Staff were of major or minor importance.

The difficulty of getting a fully concurred memorandum through the War Department General Staff in the emergency years of the late 1930's was so great that the more energetic staff officers began to despair of ever being ready or able to fight World War II. It was in this atmosphere that the coordination system developed and the formal concurrence concept was discarded.

The new procedure presumed that the officer proposing action was - on

behalf of his Staff Division - entirely responsible for presenting information and making recommendations. He was obliged to show his study and proposals to appropriate officers in other Staff Divisions with overlapping interests to insure that they had no reasonable grounds, deriving from other actions they were taking, for dissenting from the proposed action. The ultimate objective was "harmonious action" and prompt decision. Quibbling over phrases and details became unpopular under the pressure of the need for speed.

The result was that officers consulted in this informal fashion could initial a paper as having been "coordinated" with them without feeling that they were taking full responsibility for the phrasing of the study or the recommended course of action. Coordination merely proved that officers legitimately concerned had seen the paper and had interposed no objection that dissuaded the action officer from proceeding.

This War Department General Staff coordination system was so successful in World War II that it became a matter of doctrine. In the armed services it became a truism that a paper not carefully "coordinated" was not a good staff paper. There is much to be said for this point of view, and this kind of coordination is surely the responsibility legally placed on CIA in intelligence matters - that is, the obligation to consult and discover the views of other interested parties in order to insure "harmonious action." I wish it carried with it the original connotation of performing this essential consultative task with reasonable speed and without sacrifice of individual responsibility for describing the situation requiring action.

The intelligence community does not recommend action, of course, but it does describe situations which ought to be meaningful in terms of actions policymaking officials are considering. A good intelligence estimate is not an abstract exercise in cerebration but is a pointed analysis of a situation relating to national security. It ought to be as effectively presented and phrased as a good staff action paper - perhaps even better, because the subject matter is likely to be more abstract and the nuances and color in the author's choice of words is likely to be vital to a subtle understanding of the situation being described.

By some lower-level-of-consciousness reasoning, coordination in the intelligence business has in practice come to mean word-by-word

concurrence of all the intelligence agencies.

This practice has not only slowed down the production of intelligence estimates at the national security level but also has insured that when fully coordinated estimates do emerge into the daylight they usually reflect the carefully considered, carefully phrased views of nobody in particular. They are the drab and soulless products of a bureaucratic system which seems to have a life and a limping gait of its own.

These harsh remarks are not intended to suggest that our national intelligence estimating machinery is of no value. To the contrary, I would like to make clear at the outset that I think the initial organization of this machinery in 1951 - with which I am very proud to have helped - is one of the major advances in the history of the US intelligence business. It is obviously desirable for the government officials making national security decisions to have available in written form the best composite judgments of the interagency intelligence community on the main strategic situations affecting US security.

Even with the deficiencies I have suggested, the coordinated national estimates provide a sort of floor of common knowledge and common agreement under the policymaking process. At a minimum they serve the purpose of preventing wild ideas from carrying the day in the absence of effective confrontation with the agreed general view. In the old days it was perfectly possible for one agency to produce a little thinkpiece setting forth some preposterous theory about Soviet intentions and, through the agency staff channels, present it on the highest policy level without it occurring to anyone to question whether or not this represented the best intelligence views of equally well informed people in the intelligence community. I trust this does not happen now, or at least that there are a great many people who would stand up at some point during the policy consideration to say that such a proposal should be checked out against the national intelligence estimates. This is clearly a net gain of enormous worth.

What I am suggesting, however, is that we have won that net gain at the price of making our estimates much less timely, interesting, and useful than they could be. If we had not allowed ourselves to become so devoted to the concept of coordination of the written word at all costs and at all lengths, I feel we could do a better job of presenting the best views available in the intelligence community rather than the lowest

common denominator of agreed doctrine.

The first great defect of our coordination technique is merely the staleness that passage of time brings to a long-disputed thesis. In principle, of course, the national intelligence machinery can bring out an estimate in short order. I believe that there are in history the recorded cases of estimates written and agreed in two or three days. These were very short estimates produced under circumstances of extraordinary urgency. It is enough to say that what is usually called a "crash" estimate is usually produced in about two weeks' time. A good solid national intelligence estimate runs anywhere from six weeks to six months. Perhaps we can afford the luxury of writing estimates at this pace, but I very much doubt that the estimates so produced are as useful as they would be if they were produced much more rapidly. In the present system, unhappily, the estimates are bound to contain very few surprises and very little of immediate interest to our policymakers.

Much worse than this out-of-date quality, however, is the second great defect of the coordinated estimate - the flatness of ideas agreed by four or five contributing draftees. It is simply not true that the more people and the more views represented in the drafting of a paper, the better the paper is. Sometimes a brilliant paper slips relatively unmarred through drafting sessions in which a large number of people, are involved. But too often papers which, although imperfectly phrased and controversially put, make a contribution to knowledge at the beginning of the coordination process emerge either so long afterward that all of the sparkle of the basic idea is lost or so much watered-down and flattened-out as to be virtually meaningless.

The reason for the delay, the watering-down, and the flattening-out is not hard to find. Any group of working-level government officers brought together to "coordinate" a paper are under an enormous obligation to their bureaucratic superiors to emasculate any sentence which suggests, or might suggest, the contrary of a view held in their particular part of the bureaucratic forest. This caution tends to bring on a process of horse-trading in which every interested party secures his privilege of excluding an objectionable phrase in return for permitting the exclusion of some sentence which is anathema to another representative, although it may not be at all objectionable to the rest of the group. Add up four or five or six of these representatives as parties to the proceedings - and crank in the normal personal vagaries in reacting to

someone else's prose - and you speedily reduce a paper to its lowest common denominator of meaningfulness.

After all, we are all familiar with the phenomenon whereby most people feel that it is possible to express their own ideas only in their own words. This factor alone poses an almost impossible situation for anyone trying to draft a simple, cleancut view of a complex intelligence problem.

I, too, happen to like my own prose better than the words used so clumsily by other people. Unfortunately, I have discovered that my colleagues also seem to prefer their own, even over mine. My way of solving this problem, and the problem of many drafters representing multiple interests, is to determine, on the basis of subject matter, whether a paper is mainly my paper or my colleague's paper. If it is my paper I strongly believe that the best way to get the main ideas across is for me to draft it in my own words, presenting it in the way that seems to me to be most effective.

At that point in drafting I like to consult all of my colleagues, whoever they may be and whatever agency they may work for, who know something about the subject. Inevitably I get a considerable amount of comment, both on the main ideas and on the words in which they are expressed. This I think is healthy, and in many cases I am persuaded either that I am wrong in what I was trying to say - in which case I want to change it by all means - or that I have not presented it very effectively - in which case I am anxious to rephrase it in the light of my failure to put it across. It may be that I think my colleagues are simply dense, but nevertheless I ought to adjust my verbal presentation of the problem to carry them along with me in understanding the subject and my view. All this consultation with the best minds of the community is desirable, even essential. It is what I consider to be coordination properly understood.

In other words, coordination is ideally a process of consultation with knowledgeable and interested members of the intelligence community for the purpose of getting new information, taking account of differing views, and insuring the most effective presentation of an intelligence analysis. I think it is true to say that in many cases a person drafting a paper on a broad and complex subject is obligated to accept the information supplied him and, in general, to adopt the interpretive views held by the most expert and responsible people, wherever they work.

This sharing of knowledge is the whole reason for working as an intelligence community.

On the other hand, if there is any function for a central and coordinating group in the intelligence community, it is precisely in the sphere of subjecting to careful inquiry the views of all members in the community on situations cutting across specialized departmental interests, making a valid synthesis, and presenting the general truth of the matter in an effective manner, even though it may not fully please any single member of the group. If, when this purpose has been accomplished, a responsible member of the community still feels that the paper makes a major substantive error, as distinct from being badly expressed, then I think it would be most proper for the dissenting person to express himself as effectively as he can in language of his own choosing setting forth where he feels the basic paper has erred.

This last point - the right of major dissent - is an important one. I know from experience that in many complex intelligence problems the most effective way to discover the essential outlines of a tricky situation is to have an analyst present his case and then to listen to the views of any dissenting analyst. I submit that the net result of a strong view of this sort with a substantive dissent is much more helpful and meaningful to the person who actually needs to know something about the situation than is a compromise set of general cliches which do not indicate the difficulty and conflict of view inherent in the situation as seen through the evidence the intelligence community possesses.

The sum and substance of what I have been saying is that the US national security system would be better served if the intelligence community took a less vigorous view of the meaning of coordination and substituted more informal techniques of consultation. In this way the intelligence community could share knowledge and wisdom without delaying or weakening the product.

Such an arrangement would work like a consulting group of physicians, one a general practitioner and the others specialists. If the disease is complex and cuts across specialists' lines, the general practitioner (CIA in intelligence) should take responsibility for the diagnosis and treatment, consulting and using the skills of the specialists (State, Army, Navy, Air, et al.). In no case should the doctors confuse the diagnosis to disguise the fact that they could not agree among themselves nor, of

course, should they let the patient die while they argue.

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