

Intelligence in Public Media

The CIA and the Politics of US Intelligence Reform

Brent Durbin (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 338 pp., notes, index.

Reviewed by Michael Yerushalmi

In *The CIA and the Politics of US Intelligence Reform*, Brent Durbin, a professor at Smith College, illuminates the political dynamics behind US intelligence reform, focusing on the Central Intelligence Agency and the interactions within and between Congress, the executive branch, and the permanent intelligence bureaucracy. Other scholars have examined these dynamics, but Durbin injects the subject with more methodological rigor and the lessons of contemporary case studies.

The author examines reform through the lenses of policy consensus and information control: when agreement among stakeholders regarding threats is high, Congress generally defers to the executive, but in periods of low consensus, key parties will use information control—including leaks—to foster or stifle reform. Thus, meaningful reform depends not only on consensus between members of two of the three branches of US government, but also on actors' ability to navigate disparities in access to information. Durbin employs historical process tracing, moving from the early years of US intelligence and the CIA's establishment, through the tumultuous late 1960s and early 1970s, and onto the changes in US intelligence after the Cold War and the aftermath of the al-Qa'ida terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.

With its multiple, interlocking hypotheses and streams of argument, this is a complex book, tailored more to an academic readership. Still, Durbin ably weaves details since the CIA's establishment to tell the story of how and why intelligence reform efforts proceeded in times of policy consensus in comparison to times of contention. He has carefully mined the diplomatic record and key participants' memoirs in support of his case studies, although he could have made more use of the extensive literature published in intelligence journals such as this one.

As with earlier books on intelligence reform, the importance of key stakeholders is a thread running throughout. Some of the most insightful passages detail the struggles of strong personalities to change hidebound bureaucracies, or conversely, to stymie efforts toward

reform. From the very establishment of the CIA, key figures emerged to put their stamp on intelligence practices. Through "sheer force of personality," Walter Bedell Smith took on the role of CIA "drill master." (98) Despite objections from within, Smith was able to introduce rigorous training within the nascent organization. More broadly, though, high consensus about foreign threats during the early years allowed the executive to have great leeway in determining policy.

Durbin suggests that during the 1960s, President Nixon had two primary goals: realign the Intelligence Community (IC) in support of his policy goals, and rein in intelligence costs and activities. During the 1960s and into the 1970s, coinciding with a period of incipient détente with the Soviet Union, consensus was not as clear-cut, resulting in more clashes on intelligence between the executive and Congress.

Other key change agents abound, both within and outside the IC. Coming on the heels of Watergate, revelations by journalist Seymour Hersh "galvanized" support for legislation to curtail covert action. (135) The Gates task force of the early 1990s demonstrates the limits of internal IC efforts at reform. Though sound, his initiatives were not able to develop resilience without legislative actions to protect them from others intent on blocking reform. The families of the victims of 9/11 were stoic, powerful stakeholders, overcoming the opposition to reform in the lead up to passage of the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004.^a Among these opponents were powerful congressional representatives such as Duncan Hunter, who worked hard to limit changes the families and others sought, in large part because of the perceived negative effects on the warfighter and broader Department of Defense (DoD) equities. And notwithstanding Edward Snowden's incalculable damage to US national security, he, too, was a change

a. See Michael Allen, *Blinking Red: Crisis and Compromise in American Intelligence after 9/11* (Potomac Books, 2016).

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

agent.^a Durbin's suggestion that scandal may be the "most important driver of congressional intelligence reform" (264) is thus a logical conclusion, and has broader lessons for reform. Real reform takes place—for good or ill—often only when intelligence is pushed into the limelight, and, inevitably, politicized.

Durbin acknowledges the limitations of his book in its focus on the CIA, and includes among his final recommendations a call for further research on reform within collection agencies such as the National Security Agency. Space is given to examinations of defense intelligence (e.g., 117–18), but given the intelligence resources allocated to DoD and the Department's expanding role in this arena, a study of the politics of DoD intelligence building on prior research would also be a welcome addition to the literature on intelligence reform.^b

Another potentially fruitful avenue for research would be employing Durbin's methodology to examine the change within the CIA itself after the September 11 terrorist attacks. Numerous studies have addressed the CIA's post-September 11 shift toward more paramilitary activities.^c What role, if any, consensus and information control factored in to (and continue to play in) fostering or impeding this evolution would certainly make for a compelling read.

a. See Quinta Jurecic, "HPSCI Releases Full Snowden Report," <https://www.lawfareblog.com/hpsci-releases-full-snowden-report>, 22 December 2016.

b. See Janet McDonnell, "The Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence: The First 10 Years," *Studies in Intelligence* 58, no. 1 (March 2014).

c. See, for example, Henry A. Crumpton, "Intelligence and War: Afghanistan, 2001–2002," in Jennifer E. Sims and Burton Gerber, eds., *Transforming US Intelligence* (Georgetown University Press, 2005).

The CIA and the Politics of US Intelligence Reform addresses the importance of a flexible, adaptive IC responsive to threats of ever-expanding size and scope, a need regularly reflected in the daily headlines. In September 2018, three members of the House of Representatives called on the IC to investigate the national security implications of "deepfakes": photos, video or audio clips that appear genuine but have been manipulated.^d And yet, the renewed US focus on "great power competition" as a threat to national security demonstrates the continuing importance of a deep understanding of traditional, state-based challenges.^e Durbin asserts that such an adaptable intelligence system requires a change in the political environment to help foster needed reform, and calls for policies devoid of political considerations. As the historical record shows, however, overcoming such challenges in the interest of responsible, lasting reform remains a tall order.^f

d. Jonathan Vanian, "US Lawmakers Sound Alarm Over the Threat of 'Deep Fakes'," *Fortune*, 13 September 2018, <http://fortune.com/2018/09/13/deep-fakes-lawmakers-national-security>. Also see

Kaveh Waddell, "Lawmakers plunge into 'deepfake' war," 31 January 2019, <https://www.axios.com/deepfake-laws-fb5de200-1bfe-4aaf-9c93-19c0ba16d744.html> and Robert Chesney and Danielle Citron, "Deepfakes and the New Disinformation War," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2019, 147–55.

e. James N. Mattis, US Department of Defense, "Remarks by Secretary Mattis on the National Defense Strategy," 19 January 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1420042/remarks-by-secretary-mattis-on-the-national-defense-strategy>. Also see Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *National Intelligence Strategy of the United States of America 2019*, January 2019.

f. For Hayden Peake's perspective on this book, see "Intelligence Officer's Bookshelf," *Studies in Intelligence* 62 no. 2 (June 2018): 67.



Michael Yerushalmi is a Department of Defense analyst with interest in Middle East and intelligence history.