

# What is a Generalist?

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*How CIA has come to select its general officers largely from the ranks of its experienced specialists.*

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The word generalist as it is used by intelligence people has no fixed and useful meaning. It suggests a number of ideas which, for the most part, have been imported from other walks of life: from the military services we derive the concept of the general staff officer; from medicine, the general practitioner; from business, the manager; and from the world of scholarship, the synthesizer. And it must be admitted that an element of bias creeps into any discussion of generalists in intelligence. Most of us tend to line up for or against them. The result of this is that people beginning a career in intelligence have a hard time deciding upon long-range goals. They fear that the old hands will reject them if they try to become generalists and that they will run the risk of being tucked away and forgotten if they specialize. These fears, it will be seen, are largely the result of misunderstanding.

It is my purpose to describe the generalist in the light of what is known at the present time about career development in the field of intelligence. The need for qualifying this description and limiting it to the present is apparent if one turns to earlier discussions of this subject. The definitions of generalist and specialist that were current as recently as six or seven years ago must be set aside in the light of our experience, and it may be expected that our views will change in the future. In a paper entitled "A Program for the Establishment of a Career Corps in the Central Intelligence Agency" dated 7 August 1951, the following paragraphs were written on the subject of generalists:

"Generalists are those very rare individuals who have the capacity to bring together many aspects and branches of the intelligence problem and organization, and wish to do so. Their need is not for specialized training, but for increasing areas of responsibility and experience on the one hand, and for rotational experience within the Agency, as well as in other intelligence agencies and other governmental agencies which have mutual intelligence needs.

"Whereas the purpose of Specialist Career Training is to produce better specialists, there is considerable doubt that any particular effort should be made to improve the special skills of the generalists, excepting to broaden their language ability, increase their first-hand knowledge of important foreign areas, and to give them enough experience in the various offices of the Agency and other intelligence agencies so that they can understand their products, and know their limitations and capacities.

"Therefore, while a high percentage of this group will have benefited as specialists from ... training ... before they have been identified as generalists, an entirely new emphasis must subsequently be placed on their career development. The purpose of their training is to produce Directors of Central Intelligence, Deputy Directors of Central Intelligence, Assistant Directors, and Deputy Assistant Directors, Assistants to the Director, members of the National Estimates Board and other key people."

Clearly, the Agency considered making a relatively early selection of those persons who were to be developed as generalists and then planning their careers in such a way that from among their number the top management of the Agency could be drawn. The career pattern for the generalist was to be something like this: duty with Army, Navy, Air or State; rotation in CIA; assignment to ONE or OCI; rotation in CIA; National War College; assignment to the NSC; rotation in CIA; and, finally, graduate studies in the field of intelligence.

At the same time the generalist was pursuing this course of development, a carefully selected group of specialists would be developed by each of the major intelligence areas in the Agency, and it was expected from among the ablest of the specialists the top positions in these areas would eventually be filled.

These proposals for Agency personnel management were never formally

adopted, partly because there was something too artificial and self-conscious about the early designation of individuals as generalists, but even more because of the pressure of work in the Agency. Since 1951 we have undoubtedly been influenced by the experience of others in the field of personnel management. The report of the Secretary of State's Public Committee on Personnel dated June 1954 described the trend in management thinking as follows "Banks and industrial firms and commercial concerns used to develop `generalists' for top management posts by moving promising talent through different departments. The idea was to familiarize a promising man with the different operations of a business. That practice, however, has been all but abandoned by large-scale private enterprise—first by business, not much later by the banks, and finally by universities. Prevailing management practice today emphasizes the development of an individual around his specialty, with the generalism coming later as he approaches full maturity."

The report also pointed out the great importance of bringing men of stature and experience into the Foreign Service at higher levels. Although our experience and our needs are somewhat different from those of the Foreign Service, we too have found in practice that there are two types of generalists those who have entered intelligence work at a relatively high level and those who have first achieved status as specialists and later have become generalists.

We need devote but little attention to the former category, important as it is. Intelligence needs the infusion of new blood not just at the lower level but at the medium and higher levels. The fact that intelligence is coming of age is no reason to close the door to the great resources of talent and competence represented in industry, in the academic world and among professional people in and out of government. Further, by bringing in outstanding men from time to time, we will prevent intelligence from falling behind in those fields in which American progress is so intimately associated with the interests of national security: in science, in technology, in management and in the social sciences.

At the same time, any strong and cohesive service will necessarily try to develop a major share of its leadership from the ranks, and in intelligence this means from among its qualified specialists. To do this, it will need to convert a certain number of specialists into generalists.

Let us, therefore, begin with the specialist. The specialist, as contrasted

with the apprentice or technician, is a man who has developed specialized competence and recognized standing in one or several of the broad fields of intelligence: espionage, counter-espionage, overt procurement or analysis. He is a creative worker and is, above all, reliable in the sense that he is a known quantity. Within his field he works efficiently because he has a grasp of the factors that bear on his assignment. He deals easily with other intelligence elements, using what they can offer in the furtherance of his work. His knowledge of the intelligence process is broad and his ability to judge results in fields other than his own is at a high professional level.

The specialist may be a case officer, an analyst, a reports officer; or he may manage case officers or analysts. He may also be in charge of all of the administrative machinery associated with a substantial intelligence undertaking. Promotion to an important supervisory position is not tantamount to conversion to a generalist. Wide areas of the intelligence community are entirely dominated by the purest of specialists and it is in these areas that the most valuable work is done.

This is what makes conversion from specialist to generalist difficult. There tends to be built up among any really good group of specialists an attitude of self-satisfaction and a spirit of defense against all comers. Among intelligence people there exists the strong belief that there is no place for generalists. Are not all of us regarded as specialists by people outside of the intelligence community? Then why not fill our top positions with high-caliber specialists and let it go at that?

Harold J. Laski provided what is perhaps the best answer to this question 28 years ago in an article in *Harper's Magazine*.<sup>1</sup> He said that expertise sacrifices the insight of common sense to intensity of experience. It breeds an inability to accept new views from the very depth of its preoccupation with its own conclusions. It sees its results out of perspective by making them the center of relevance to which all other results must be related. It has, also, a certain caste-spirit about it, so that experts tend to neglect all those who do not belong to their own ranks.

If Laski had been writing about U.S. intelligence *anno 1958*, he could not have come closer to the mark. These are, indeed, the characteristics of the intelligence specialist; characteristics that many of us have long since recognized in ourselves and in our colleagues. They are the price we pay for effectiveness at the cutting edge.

But there is another side to intelligence. There are constantly at work broadening influences which over the years have left their mark on a good many men. First among them is variety. Over a period of time an intelligence officer is introduced to many of the factors bearing on national security or related to the overseas interests of the government. He has a front-row seat at the biggest show in our time. The extent and breadth of his intellectual development is limited only by his ability and willingness to learn.

Overseas, the experienced intelligence officer may be called upon to deal with men in very high positions in government, business or the professions. These relationships are not infrequently of an intense and revealing nature. They have proved to be of great value in the cultivation and growth of our people.

The structure of American clandestine activities, involving controlled competition and requiring as it frequently does the coordinate efforts of several agencies, is a permanent counterpoise to excessive parochialism and self-satisfied narrowness. It also makes a demand on the managerial skills of those who engage in joint efforts, for there are intrinsic inefficiencies to be overcome in any attempt at governmental teamwork.

Certainly the type of assignment and the type of training planned for the generalist seven years ago can provide valuable experience. These opportunities do not come in as concentrated doses as originally foreseen, but they come. Very often in making selections for the advanced schools the question of a man's ability to grow is carefully weighed, and in this sense the original purposes of the career development planning done in 1951 are kept alive.

Then, finally, in the conduct of our business it is necessary to move men from one field of specialization to another. Two elements dictate this: the shifting pressures of work and the recognized need to provide men with wide experience. This process does not, of course, operate at the rate that many would wish nor, necessarily, at the rate that it should. Intelligence has a long way to go in the development of its doctrine of manpower utilization. Nonetheless, in its few years of existence, intelligence has offered a wide variety of experience to a substantial number of men.

These, then, are the broadening influences that may affect the outlook

of an intelligence officer and move him in the direction of generalism. They are at work long before the question arises whether or not a given man should become a generalist. Indeed, they are in one degree or another common to the experience of all senior specialists. The final step from specialist to generalist would appear to involve a large measure of self-selection. A good number of our ablest intelligence officers remain specialists despite broad experience and outstanding success in different assignments. Those who take the step do so gradually. A man may be a practicing generalist, that is "one who devotes himself to general rather than specialist aptitudes or deeds," and yet for some time align himself with the specialists. But the change proceeds nonetheless, with the result that intelligence is constantly and imperceptibly gaining leadership from the ranks. Among these new leaders are to be found the true intelligence generalists.

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1 Harper's Magazine, December 1930, pp. 101-110, "The Limitations of the Expert"

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