

# Intelligence in Public Media

## **Dorwart's History of the Office of Naval Intelligence, 1865–1945**

Jeffrey M. Dorwart (Naval Institute Press, 2019), 327 pp.

**Reviewed by CAPT David Belt, USN (ret.)**

### **The Basic Thesis**

The literature on America's first permanent intelligence agency, the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), is largely critical of the institution for its performance from its Civil War beginnings through the World Wars. The latest addition to the literature by long-time historian of this agency, Rutgers University Professor Emeritus Jeffrey M. Dorwart, adds to this chorus, but it also offers a broad treasure trove of specifics that yield many key insights, which today's leadership can apply in the intelligence enterprise.

The ONI, to jog our collective memory, was created to provide the decaying post-Civil War US Navy with the blueprints and technical data, along with intelligence on capabilities and tactics, from more advanced foreign navies in a new era of steel and steam. To that end, the naval attaché agent system was expanded from its modest beginning ranks—officers that included future fleet admirals Nimitz, Halsey, and Rickover when they were junior officers—to some 350 attachés by 1943. Described as “observers” and liaison officers abroad, these officers ranged from open officials to undercover travelers in denied areas. (2) The ONI remained the US government's largest and most active intelligence agency until the creation of the Office of Strategic Services in World War II.

Professor Dorwart's recent addition is essentially a combination of his two existing books on the ONI—the first covering its creation in 1882 through World War I; the second covered the interwar period through World War II. Dr. Dorwart's main theme throughout this and his previous text is what he calls the “conflict of duty” or the “intelligence dilemma”—the phrases that formed the title and subtitle of his first book on this problem within the ONI. Dorwart's exhaustive research shows—in his words—“how the founders and first generations of U.S. naval officers trained to man warships at sea confronted what seemed an inherent dilemma in new missions that interfered with providing technical and operational information to their navy.” In this combined text, Dorwart demonstrates how this intelligence dilemma was manifested in various ways throughout ONI's long history. In his and his publisher's words:

*The threats in both oceans from powerful enemy navies equipped with the latest technology and weaponry gave an urgency to the collection of information on the strategies, warships, submarines, and aircraft development of potential and actual naval enemies. But at the same time ONI was asked to provide information of possible domestic threats from suspected enemy spies, terrorists, saboteurs or anti-war opponents. This led ONI officers to wiretap, break and enter, pursue surveillance of all types of people from foreign agents to Americans suspected of opposition to strengthening the U.S. Navy or becoming involved in world wars. This history explains that many ONI directors and officers were highly motivated to collect as much information as possible about*

*the naval-military capabilities and strategies of Germany, Italy, Japan, and even allies. ONI officers understood that code-breaking was part of their job as well. But this all led some to become deeply involved in domestic spying, wiretapping, breaking and entering on private property.*

Dorwart's argument is that such domestic political focus, and the vast amounts of information inherent to it, overloaded some ONI officers and obscured more strategic security and intelligence issues, thereby hindering their ability to estimate or warn of issues like Japan's war on China or Tokyo's plans for a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor.

## **The Bigger Lessons**

But, the amount of detail in this combined text offers Intelligence Community (IC) leadership today still more than the basic concept that Dorwart spoon-feeds us. Reading between the lines, the text yields other key insights that intelligence leadership today can apply to keep from falling into similar traps for their craft. From my own reading, I came away with two or three more key insights—principles even—that should inform our leadership.

### **Principle #1: We Must Keep the Strategic Focus**

The first principle to be gleaned from this history of the ONI is that the IC enterprise should never fall into the bureaucratic trap of losing sight of the larger strategic and value-added picture while fighting the continual “tyranny of the urgent” back in the always-too-political Washington DC. The IC is daily under pressure to *politicize* its intelligence, either by act of omission or commission, as too much of the literature attests. Senior intelligence officers across the agencies complain about having too little time and too few resources to apply against the strategic intelligence mission area. Why? Because they are always having to produce analysis on the subjects and questions of policymakers, who themselves are often under pressure to introduce legislation by lobbyists for major and often friendly foreign powers and blocks of powers. In acts of omission, the IC in these instances often is forced to ignore the weightier, more strategic, or major security issues that it sees and instead produce the bulk of its analysis on the minor subjects of policymaker requests.

Dorwart's history continually shows how the ONI fell into this trap of effectively losing sight of the strategic threat of foreign enemies and instead spending most of its resources on either *enemies domestic*—to apply the phrase from our oath of office—or on more ancillary, less-important, and often urgent functions.

This strategic distraction within the ONI had begun in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution, as Dorwart begins to describe here:

*The burdens and complexities of wartime intelligence duty soon drained [intelligence director Roger] Welles's early enthusiasm. War-induced patriotic hysteria, fear of aliens, and an atmosphere of repression and suspicion which settled over the United States during 1917 [the Bolshevik Revolution] filtered down into the Navy Department. Public-spirited informers found enemy aliens and evil spies everywhere. ONI had to investigate each allegation. (100)*

This trend continued between 1921 and 1923 under DNI Luke McNamee, who—despite new congressional restraints and his public statements denying it—“expanded” domestic surveillance (163) on all potential traitors, from Bolshevik to Japanese. In response to a tip that a Japanese spy had entered New York to gain intelligence on US aeronautics technology and capability, the DNI and Third District intelligence officer (DIO) crafted a plan “to break into private offices and ransack luggage in search of the mysterious Oriental agent” (164). Similarly, in 1929, DIO Glenn Howell broke into the Communist Party of America headquarters in New York and vandalized everything, and even stole check books, and then planted evidence to

frame someone else for the deed. (169)

The ONI's strategic misfocus reached another unlawful milestone when it did the dirty work of the paranoid and obsessed President Herbert Hoover. In Nixonian-Watergate fashion, an operation in 1930 led by DIO Howell broke into the Democratic Party's office in search of the file purportedly created on Hoover that might destroy his reputation and administration. Dorwart nicely captures the dilemma ONI faced in the wake of this:

*Whether or not the naval intelligence officers realized the full implications of their situation, they confronted a dilemma particularly American in nature. In order to defend a free and open society, sometimes US intelligence had to pursue secret operations inimical to that very freedom. Moreover, once crossing the line between lawful conduct and extralegal measures, it became difficult to stop short of criminal activity. On its part, naval intelligence faced its own version of the dilemma. During the First World War, ONI had spawned an apparently inherent and irreconcilable conflict between the bureau's work for the Navy department and its function as a government intelligence agency. Its primary mission was to provide strategic and technical data for Naval war planners, and secondarily to secure the Navy against internal and external threats—often by secret methods. These latter activities might have naval interest, but as in the case of Howell's adventure, might just as likely lead to unrelated and even in illegal acts. (135)*

Dorwart then observes that “The more ONI wandered into peripheral areas, the more it neglected strategic information,” and “To keep pace with the larger and more complex requirements for information and security, ONI expanded, and this expansion diverted the office from its appointed mission and led to entanglement in non-naval matters.” (135)

The obvious lesson that Dorwart can't manage to say is that an enterprise can never allow its primary mission area to become distorted by a resource-constrained environment. It can never allow secondary mission creep to result in degradation of the primary mission. Instead, it must continually improve the process so that the performance of both primary and secondary missions can become more effective.

To this end, later, in 1930, DNI Johnson issued orders to rein in the domestic focus and—in Dorwart's words—“urged attachés to stick to naval matters, avoiding the seduction of undercover operations that took time and energy away from basic duties.” (173) Dorwart adds that “Johnson recognized that too much information, poorly analyzed, obscured important signals from abroad,” and that he “only desired information about submarines, radio communications, and fleet tactics, material of direct and unquestionable naval interest.” (173)

But, by December 1934, the ONI's culture was back to majoring in minor things, so to speak, as it released a highly speculative and McCarthyesque report on communists in America to the Committee on Un-American Activities. Characterized by Dorwart as “anything but professional,” the report named over 200 American organizations and individuals the ONI claimed were dangerous radicals and, in Dorwart's words, “smeared many of FDR's isolationist and pacifistically inclined friends and supporters.” (202)

Seemingly unable to learn, by 1936 the DNI made domestic surveillance the primary part of ONI's mission. (203) Internal security, in Dorwart's words, “had become so prominent during [the highly anti-communist focused ONI director] Puleston's tenure that the War Plans Division of the CNO's office worried that ONI had let down its vigilance of developments overseas and had begun to neglect larger strategic questions attached to its war planning mission.” (203)

Because of this misplaced emphasis, not once between 1934 and 1937 did the more gifted [ONI director] Puleston prepare what we would call a national intelligence estimate on the strategic

megatrends in Japan and in Germany. Dorwart concludes that “a careful study of intelligence signals during [Puleston’s] tenure would have given him grounds to estimate possible future situations more forcefully” and—overstating the obvious— “it was the intelligence director’s business to attempt an informed prediction of future trends and to present any number of possible situations so that war planners could draw up countermeasures and prepare for different eventualities.” (205) As a result, one intelligence officer, speaking of this misfocused era of the ONI, observed that “there was very little information concerning the [possibility of] a war in Asia” and “the Japanese occupation of Shanghai in 1932.” (206) The ONI was so misfocused that Puleston reported to the CNO in 1936 in reference to Japan and China that “It is believed that the influences for peace outweigh those for war at least at any time in the predictable future.” (206) Within three months, the war the ONI director had said was so highly unlikely had exploded.

Such a strategic intelligence failure notwithstanding, by 1939 President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave the FBI, the Army’s Military Intelligence Division (MID), and the ONI “sweeping authority” on domestic or internal security matters and charged all three agencies to work together. (235) ONI Director Rear Admiral Walter Stratton Anderson—in the words of Brian Niiya—“met weekly with MID Director General Sherman Miles and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover through 1940 and pushed his agents to put together files on suspect domestic groups, including Nazi, fascist, and communist sympathizers and Japanese.”<sup>[1]</sup> So, while the Japanese Navy was making plans for a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the misfocused ONI allowed the Army’s MID to succeed in its bid to round-up loyal Japanese-American citizens and intern them in camps.

By this point, with running mates like J. Edgar Hoover, ONI Director Anderson admitted, “we were all in disobedience to the law,” but with so much bureaucratic momentum and with such an ensconced organizational culture, he felt powerless to do anything about it. (232) Dorwart notes that “[FBI director] Hoover’s constant tutelage influenced Anderson’s emphasis on domestic security detective work, and the pursuit of America’s internal enemies, and eventually at the expense of strategic and naval questions.” (233) Indeed, it was not only a complete surprise when Hitler invaded Poland in September 1939, but the German’s highly successful blitzkrieg strategy and the signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop non-aggression pact between Germany and Russia were also strategic surprises to the misfocused intelligence enterprise.

## **Principle #2: Intelligence Activism Is Our Job**

The second key insight that I gleaned from this history of the ONI is that IC leadership can and should have a meaningful impact on the domestic political predispositions regarding strategic security issues facing the nation.

Today, in response to criticism over a lack of strategic intelligence that would have prevented the multiple disastrous and costly U.S. foreign policy blunders since 9/11—Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Iran, and so on—past IC leadership has complained within IC circles that various administrations did not listen to intelligence and instead followed their own ideologically-aligned think tanks in Washington DC. But, to be fair, some of this analytical marginalization is self-inflicted. We earned it, in my view, by allowing our strategic intelligence mission area to atrophy. But, that is a different book and conversation.

And, this is not the first time the intelligence enterprise has found itself marginalized by the people it was created to serve. Dorwart shows how the ONI at the beginning of World War II was essentially detached from the Navy that it was supposed to serve. In his words, the ONI “was isolated from other divisions of the CNO’s office and remote from important parts of US Naval establishment,” and—in the words of a British intelligence official—that the ONI “lacked

prestige.” (258)

But, Dorwart’s history shows that some intelligence leaders have not taken their mission so lightly and would not even fathom the thought of allowing their strategic analysis to be marginalized or to passively accept the security predispositions or paradigms of elected officials when they believed that these officials, by ignoring the analysis, would be making the nation less secure. We might call this *intelligence activism*.

Dorwart specifically shows how the ONI leadership resisted the prevailing common sense after the 1921–22 Washington Conference, where some leaders, including those of the United States, agreed to scrap much of their respective navies. Naval intelligence activism manifested in feisty discourse. In an article by the then new DNI, Luke McNamee, “pacifists and little navy men” at the Washington Conference used “Alice in Wonderland reasoning” to justify why the Navy could be downsized to the point that it could not protect the nation’s vital interest from threats from Japan, Germany, and other nefarious powers. Other ONI officers, Dorwart explains, took up this kind of activism to correct what they believed to be this disastrous misunderstanding by “devoting spare time to lectures and articles designed to counteract anti-navy sentiment.” (151) Not only did they publish their counterargument in the May 1923 issue of the US Naval Institute’s *Proceedings*, but they advanced debates in the National Council and in the Foreign Policy Club in Philadelphia.

But, of course, there can be the poorest execution of a sound principle, as was the case in the ONI’s campaign to overturn the Washington Conference. For example, in his article in the *Proceedings*, DNI McNamee waxed hyperbolic under the earliest part of the Red Scare when he charged that those who sought to downsize the Navy must be under the influence of the communists. “I am repeating no idle rumor,” he said as he repeated the going rumor, “When I tell you that much of this propaganda has a sinister foreign source” and that its object is “the overthrow of our government and the ultimate dictatorship of the proletariat.” (152)

More even-keeled than McNamee, retired intelligence officer Capt. Dudley Wright Knox, who headed ONI’s naval library and historical archives waded into the fight with his 1922 tract, *The Eclipse of American Sea Power*, in which he argued to “nullify even partially the disproportionate sacrifices imposed upon [the United States] by the agreements she subscribed to at the [Washington] Conference.” (152) But, even this activism failed the nation; the work was described as “pedantic,” “boring, and “academic” in tone, and “ponderous” in style.

The point again is that there is no shame in being activist intelligence officers. To be persuasive in analysis we believe in is our core mission, and we need to be more creative and wise in this mission. That is what we in the Navy since our junior officer days have known as “good staff work,” and why we have senior enlisted advisors—the “command master chief”—to keep the “Old Man” or “Skipper” out of doing things she or he would later regret.

### **Principle #3: Beware of the Popular and Distorting Security Paradigms**

The third principle for IC leadership that Dorwart’s history illuminated for me is the power of paradigms to construct and shape the strategic security master narratives.

Of course, we saw the power of a security paradigm throughout the ONI’s history in its misplaced focus on the subversive radical or enemy within—a kind of perpetual Red and then Yellow Scares. Dorwart continually shows how the ONI’s master security frame at the time of greatest threat from enemies foreign was that of enemies domestic. The ONI’s focus—in Dorwart’s words—was “intelligence doctrine, placing the emphasis on ONI’s function in securing the Navy against sabotage, espionage, and subversive activity.” Dorwart then adds that

“essentially these policy statements envisaged ONI as a security agency. Indeed, domestic security, counter espionage, and protection against internal enemies seemed the most immediate and pressing need for Kirk in March 1941.” (261) Again, such a misplaced focus at this juncture was a strategic leadership failure, akin to spending all the enterprise’s energies on straightening out the deck chairs on the Titanic after it began to list. And, so we come full circle and wonder why the ONI, tasked with strategic-level intelligence, was relegated to a security agency, tasked by the Navy to guard navy yards against possible sabotage. (261)

But, this disastrous security paradigm notwithstanding, it was the misplaced security paradigm of “neutrality” that probably cost the United States and the Allies untold fortunes in national treasure. How the ONI allowed Congress to pass the Neutrality Acts of the 1930s seems incomprehensible in light of the strategic security environment with respect to rising totalitarianism in Germany, Japan, Italy, and the Soviet Union. The most cursory analysis of the strategic security environment in the prelude to and beginning of World War II would have burst this security myth. Instead of sound-minded intelligence estimates at this point, the paradigm of neutrality with respect to foreign enemies, and the concomitant obsession with domestic enemies, hindered the production of sound strategic intelligence and intelligence activism that would have functioned as a corrective. The ONI had been so politicized and marginalized by this point that it was evidently unable to challenge these linked false security paradigms.

Given the power of these two security paradigms—paranoia over domestic enemies and neutrality with respect to foreign enemies—it is no surprise that leaders in Washington were shocked when all of Europe quickly fell to Nazi Germany and Britain appeared unable to stand and Japan invaded China. It is no surprise that, in 1941, the ONI was caught flat-footed as Germany continued its blitz through Yugoslavia, Greece, and into Egypt to battle Britain for North Africa, and even invaded their non-aggression partners, the Soviet Union. And it is no surprise that everyone was shocked when Japan conducted a surprise attack on Oahu.

The most interesting thing about Dorwart’s history of the ONI was that up to this point he doesn’t even mention a single intelligence analysis or estimative product that can be credited with shaping the president’s painfully late move out of neutrality. The oddity of this omission by Dorwart can only be compared to a history of Shakespeare without mentioning any of the poet’s plays, or a history of the Rolling Stones without mentioning their music.

That said, in a move we might classify as too little and too late, the ONI just before Japan’s surprise attack on Pearl Harbor had sort of turned over a new leaf. By late 1941, just a month before the attack, the ONI had amassed—in Dorwart’s words— “one of the most thorough and definitive bodies of information and thought about Japan in any U.S. government agency.” (285) Paradoxically, this collection began as far back as the end of World War I, when two Naval attachés warned that Japan might strike first to gain the strategic advantage prior to a formal declaration of war. And as early as 1933, in “Fleet Problem XIV” judged it possible that Japan could conduct an air raid on Oahu. Evidently, this repository of information wasn’t enough to break through the existing fixations on domestic enemies and neutrality. The result was—predictably—strategic surprise on “the day that will live in infamy.”

In conclusion, these are but three interrelated lessons that one can glean from Dorwart’s history of the ONI. Admittedly, they are peculiarly mine. But, the book is of sufficient detail that all aspiring intelligence leaders can readily glean their own lessons to apply across the enterprise.

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## Footnote

[1] Brian Niiya, "Office of Naval Intelligence," *Densho Encyclopedia*, March 19, 2013. [https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Office\\_of\\_Naval\\_Intelligence/](https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Office_of_Naval_Intelligence/)[Accessed December 23, 2019].

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