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F-16 Fighting Falcon after returning from supporting Joint Task Force Odyssey Dawn (Staff Sgt. Tierney P. Wilson / Public Domain)

The Future of Strategic Intelligence

Robert Hutchings

We begin with a puzzle: the need for strategic analysis is more important than ever in this period of great flux and uncertainty, but the disdain for analysis of any kind has never been greater than under the administration of President Donald J. Trump. The very premise that leaders need reasonably objective intelligence analysis to inform their policy decisions – a premise that has guided every U.S. administration since World War II – is under assault. If we are to rebuild our capacity for strategic thinking, we need to go back to the beginning. When President Harry Truman created the strategic intelligence function at the end of World War II, he understood that the United States had been thrust into a global role for which it was not prepared. The world was simply too complex, and American interests too extensive, to operate on the basis of impulse or ad hoc decision making. Moreover, when Truman issued National Intelligence Authority No. 5 on July 8, 1946, instructing the Director of Central Intelligence to "accomplish the evaluation and dissemination of strategic intelligence," he deliberately set up this function outside of the White House, the Department of State, and the military, so that strategic analysis would be kept at a critical distance from policy making.[1] Yet Truman, like every president since, was ambivalent about the role of strategic intelligence and the degree of autonomy it ought to have.

The story actually begins earlier, when President Franklin Roosevelt, in a military order of June 13, 1942, formally established the Office of Strategic Services with William J. "Wild Bill" Donovan at its head, and directed it to "collect and analyze… strategic information" and to "plan and operate special services."[2] The cloak-and-dagger wartime operations of the OSS are the stuff of legend, as are the notable figures recruited to serve, including the poets Archibald MacLeish and Stephen Vincent Benét, the banker Paul Mellon, the psychologist Carl Jung, the philosopher Herbert Marcuse, the anthropologist Margaret Mead, and the movie director John Ford. Less well known is its role in strategic intelligence analysis through its Research and Analysis (R&A) Branch, led initially by James Phinney Baxter III, president of Williams College, and after 1943 by Harvard historian William Langer, identified in war correspondence as "OSS 117."[3]

However, the OSS was never given the central coordinating role that Donovan envisioned. Roosevelt understandably deferred to military commanders who insisted on maintaining close control over their respective intelligence services. Truman took essentially the same position in designing the post-war Central Intelligence Agency headed by a Director of Central Intelligence, but with a "weak DCI" model that denied the CIA full authority over the intelligence agencies of the Army, Navy, Department of State, and FBI. The National Security Act of 1947 affirmed this institutional arrangement by establishing "under the National Security Council a Central Intelligence Agency with a Director of Central Intelligence, who shall be the head thereof."[4] Yet this arrangement continued to reflect the strongly held positions of the key departments, and indeed of the President himself, for a decentralized intelligence structure and a weak DCI.[5] The one thing Army, Navy, State, and FBI could agree on, then and now, was that they opposed a strong central authority controlling their intelligence collection and analysis.

To fulfill the mandate of providing strategic intelligence, the DCI created an Office of National Estimates and an associated Board of National Estimates, headed initially by Langer and then by Sherman Kent, who served for 15 years. The Board of National Estimates was transformed in the 1970s into the National Intelligence Council, establishing the basic structure of strategic intelligence analysis that continues to this day.

The first major reform to this arrangement came in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The Intelligence Reform and Terrorist Prevention Act (IRTPA) of 2004-5 created a seemingly powerful Director of National Intelligence. Under pressure from the armed services and key Republicans in the House

of Representatives, however, the DNI's authority was sharply curtailed in a compromise reminiscent of the debate over intelligence organization back in the 1940s – and for the same reasons that Truman and FDR backed away from a centralized intelligence model.[6]

Thus, from the very beginning, there has been a recognition of the need for strategic intelligence but also a built-in tension between policy and intelligence. Policy makers understandably want intelligence to help them implement their policies, but whether they know it or not, they also need intelligence as a somewhat detached check on their ambitions. Administrations that neglect this need for strategic intelligence do so at their own peril.

Similarly, there is a built-in tension between military planners and intelligence. Military commanders need to prepare for what an adversary *might* do, not just what it is *likely* to do, so they are prone to "threat inflation" in order to hedge against every conceivable contingency. This seems sensible enough, but the danger is that this approach can lead to an ever-escalating arms race, as each side is driven to match the military preparations of the other. It is the familiar "security dilemma," which actually produces *less* security for each side. Political strategists and intelligence analysts need to be cognizant of that danger as well, so they must give weight to intentions as well as capabilities.

The current U.S. administration challenges us with the acute danger of a reckless and undisciplined president inclined to give free rein to the military. There is an urgent need to reinsert strategic intelligence analysis into the policy process.

Good strategic analysis – *if heeded* – could have averted some past policy fiascos as well as prevent future ones. In late 2002 and early 2003, there were numerous warnings, including in two Intelligence Community Assessments of January 2003, that cautioned against the planned U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, but they went unheeded by the George W. Bush administration.[7] In 2011, the Obama administration participated in the NATO operation in Libya, which quickly and predictably expanded from a limited effort to protect civilian populations at risk into a much broader campaign to overthrow the regime of Muammar Qaddafi, and led to even more civilian casualties. Obama later called this his "worst mistake," acknowledging that he was at fault for "failing to plan for the day after" the intervention.[8] Today, one hopes that U.S. intelligence is warning the Trump Administration of the dire consequences of a military strike against North Korea. There are several scenarios that might ensue from such a misguided step, all of them bad.

Baghdad, Iraq, U.S. soldiers patrol the Hariyah district
(Spc. Charles Gill / Public Domain)

NATO officials assume responsibility for no-fly zone over Libya
(Cherie Cullen / Public Domain)

It is not hard to see why policy makers often do not want strategic analysis. They have ascended to senior positions because they have (or want to project) a high degree of self-confidence and self-assurance, and they don't like their pet projects subjected to critical scrutiny. But history has shown that they need it whether they want it or not.

Despite the America-first bluster coming from the Trump Administration these days, the United States finds itself at a point where it possesses neither the power to impose its will on the rest of the world nor the clarity of purpose that the Cold War seemed to provide. Our government needs to develop – or rebuild – the habit of strategic thinking and embed strategic analysis into policy decisions, so that it can discriminate more rigorously among ambitious and sometimes dangerous foreign policy ambitions. A policy maker who does his own strategic analysis is like a lawyer who represents himself in court: he has a fool for a client.[9]

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[1] C. Thomas Thorne, Jr. and David S. Patterson, eds., "Emergence of the Intelligence Establishment," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945-50* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996)

[2] Thomas F. Troy, *Donovan and the CIA: A History of the Establishment of the Central Intelligence Agency* (Frederick: University Publications of the America, 1981), 427; Amy B. Zegart, *Flawed by Design: The Evolution of the CIA, JCS, and NSC* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 166.

[3] Neal H. Petersen, ed., *From Hitler's Doorstep: The Wartime Intelligence Reports of Allen Dulles, 1942-1945* (College Station: Penn State University Press, 1996), 543.

[4] *The National Security Act of 1947*, 80th Cong., 1st sess., P.L. 235, 61 Stat 496.

[5] Subsequent amendments to the 1947 act strengthened the role of the DCI as the "principal advisor," a designation that was specified for the newly created position of Director of National Intelligence by the intelligence reforms of 2004 (under the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act). For a detailed analysis of these interagency battles, see Zegart, *Flawed by Design*, 163-184.

[6] The definitive account of the background to passage of the IRTPA is in: Michael Allen, *Blinking Red: Crisis and Compromise in American Intelligence After 9/11* (Lincoln: Potomac Books, 2013).

[7] Paul Pillar, *Intelligence and U.S. Foreign Policy: Iraq, 9/11, and Misguided Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 55-58.

[8] Dominic Tierney, "The Legacy of Obama's 'Worst Mistake'," *The Atlantic*, April 15, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/04/obamas-worst-mistake-libya/478461/> (accessed April 22, 2018). A simple "decision tree" analysis would have illustrated the likely sequence of events after the initial air strikes predictably failed to achieve their goals.

[9] Robert Hutchings, "Is There a Map to the Future?" *Foreign Policy*, August 31, 2011. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/08/31/is-there-a-map-to-the-future/>

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