

“Bureaucrats Versus Artists...”

By W. Patrick Lang

“Were we right or were we wrong?” This was Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) George Tenet’s central question in his 2004 talk to the faculty and students of his alma mater, Georgetown University. What he was talking about, of course, was the critical political issue of whether or not the Intelligence Community (IC) of which he was the titular head “got it right” in telling the American people and their government that Iraq was a clear danger to the United States, as opposed to being a threat to regional states, and if that danger was substantial enough to serve as a justifiable basis for war, invasion and occupation. In Tenet’s address there was much of self-protection and an implicit warning that neither he nor the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) would accept to be “scapegoated” in a search for the roots of misadventure in Iraq. His words establish a claim to blamelessness for the CIA and the larger Intelligence Community in the decisions leading up to the Iraq campaign and a related claim to have done as well as could fairly have been expected. In other words, he wished to be thought innocent in this matter. Is that reasonable? Is it fair to expect American citizens and officials to believe that the Intelligence Community did its work well in helping the government of the United States to make sound decisions about Iraq? This is an important question, because if they did not, then why were their judgments so flawed in spite of the incredible amounts of taxpayer money lavished on the agencies of the IC? Why should so much money have been lavished on these agencies if they could do no better?

In spite of the importance of this question, impatience with the performance of the intelligence people ought to be somewhat dependent on the outcome of a national debate as to what should be expected of the process labeled “intelligence.” Reporters sometimes ask rhetorically if decisions should really be made on the basis of intelligence. At first hearing questions like this seem to be both naïve and nonsensical since it is obvious that information is the stuff that decisions must be founded on. Nevertheless, decipherment of these statements leads to an understanding that those who say things like this think that “intelligence” is a form of thinking both esoteric and obscure, a dark art, separate and

distinct from the normal way of knowing things and subject to acceptance or rejection by special rules of perception. In other words, they think that it is something like astrology, to be judged by its own “rules.” In fact, “Intelligence” is simply another word for “information” and in ages gone by the term was used in that way by authorities like Clausewitz or Jomini. There is nothing mystical or mysterious about the process by which information or “intelligence” is collected, collated, analyzed and disseminated. “Intelligence” is scholarship conducted in the service of the state. The great bulk of the information used as data in this scholarship comes out of the huge archival files of the major agencies supplemented by daily “feedings” of; diplomatic chit-chat, aerial and satellite reconnaissance, intercepts of communications and hopefully the products of espionage (clandestine HUMINT). Like any labor of scholarship involving the study of human beings by human beings, the work is nearly always conducted with incomplete and ambiguous information as a basis for the analysis. This natural phenomenon is aggravated by the desire of the studied group to hide something, usually, that which is under study. When George Tenet said before his Georgetown audience that “We never get things altogether right in the Intelligence business, nor altogether wrong,” he was correct but his statement was irrelevant to a discussion of the utility of the intelligence process since the quality of the analytic product depends on many variables, among them; good information and the quality of the minds brought to bear on the imperfect information. It is both trite and a truism that “intelligence is an art and not a science.” What this means is that human beings may succeed or they may fail in making judgments based on less than complete data and that the skill, intelligence and experience of those involved is the most important factor in determining the outcome. To say that “Intelligence” is a flawed process is simply meaningless in a discussion of the effectiveness of the state in making decisions. If the “Intelligence Community” as it now exists were abolished, some other group would have to assume the burden of performing the same functions for the benefit of the state. What would they be called? Perhaps it might be, “The Agency for Special Planning?”

The issue of the effectiveness and efficiency of the existing Intelligence Community is a separate but linked question from that of knowing whether or not the elected or appointed

officials of the Bush Administration may have intruded themselves inappropriately into the deliberations of the Intelligence Community in a way that led to distortions in the estimates of Iraq's significance that were presented to the president and the Congress. It is widely believed now that this occurred but that is not the subject of this essay.

The question under examination here is simple. Premise: "The Intelligence Community produced poor quality intelligence on Iraq." Therefore, one asks - Are there imbedded structural defects in the present United States Intelligence Community that contributed either directly or indirectly to the production of estimates that were unsound and which failed the nation? And, moreover, are there characteristics in the present intelligence community of the United States which now prevent and will prevent it from "reforming" itself? It is clear that the inability of the Intelligence Community to forecast or estimate Iraq's true condition was a major failure. Why did this happen, and how can the defects in the "community" be repaired? What "limits" are there in the psychology and structure of the government that may prevent "repair" of the system?

The author's conclusion after a working lifetime of studying the flaws in the system from within the community and from the evidence of continuing contacts with old colleagues and new friends in the intelligence agencies is that there are a multitude of problems in the intelligence forces of the United States and that most of them have grown up over a very long time, are now "built into" the system and are unlikely to be resolved without outside intervention by the Congress of the United States. It is impossible to consider them all but a few of the most important are so intractable as to be worth discussing here:

-Leadership. There is a natural tendency in the general public to believe that the upper levels of the Intelligence Community are filled with learned, avuncular and sensitive people somehow reminiscent of "George Smiley," the wonderful British spy and spymaster whose presence fills the earlier novels of John Le Carre. The character, "Smiley" is wise, sadly pessimistic, a profound student of mankind and devoted to his "people." He has a deeply empathic nature, is widely read, speaks several languages and is so dedicated to his craft and its ethic that he fears nothing and will take any risk either

to protect his own “people” or to “launch” operations that, if they fail may destroy him. What a marvelous conception this man is!

There are people like that in the leadership of US Intelligence. There are a few, but there once were many more and they are fewer all the time. In fact, the “system” works in such a way that people like “Smiley” are feared and distrusted by the bureaucratic politicians who really run the intelligence agencies. What are really to be found in the upper echelons of the “community” are either people who early in their government service became specialized in the generalized management of organizations (often after early substantive analytic work) or others who were “staff ” of some kind, (budgetary planners, lawyers, liaison staff, etc.) The Directors of the various agencies are naturally attracted to such people because they are focused on the administrative functions of the agencies and the protection of their ultimate superior, the Director. This makes them a kind of “insurance policy “ for the directors of the agencies. The old veterans of the intelligence trade often make a distinction between “real intelligence officers” and “managers.” “Real intelligence officers” are those who are known to be qualified and capable of the difficult work of analysis and field collection of information and who are known to have the moral character required to stand up to the pressure that is present in every political administration to make the “reality” presented by the “Intelligence Community” conform to the “ reality” envisioned by the policy of the administration in power. The “managers” are essentially courtiers grouped about the throne of whichever baron of the Intelligence Community they may serve. The “managers” functions center on liaison with the other barons, lobbying the Congress for money and “protection” of the boss (the Director of their agency). Such people as the “managers” are easily recognized by the directors of the agencies as very valuable to their career survival in the stylized “dance” conducted around Washington by the various parts of the United States Government but they are not well suited to leading “real intelligence officers” to feats of brilliant analysis or imaginative collection operations because they are always in a “defensive crouch” fearing that the “real intelligence officers” will cause trouble for them or “the boss” through disagreement with the “picture” desired by the administration of the day or in Human Intelligence (HUMINT) operations (espionage) gone bad which

result in publicity that could be damaging to the “managers” careers. Incredibly, these are the people who tend to be promoted to “line” command “at the top” in the collection, and analytic functions of the agencies over the heads of the “real intelligence officers.”

This pattern of rule by the “managerial” class is now so well established in the intelligence agencies that it is simply expected that senior jobs which control large parts of the agencies in the analytic and HUMINT collection fields will be held by “managers” as opposed to “real intelligence officers.” This tendency is so firmly rooted now that the author has often heard very senior “real intelligence officers” described as “just an analyst,” or “just an operator” in the context of a selection board picking someone for a high level leadership job in the very field in which the “real intelligence officer” is an authority respected throughout the government.

This tendency is perpetuated and reinforced by a process of “mirror-imaging” in personnel selections in which the ever-growing number of “managers” who are in senior leadership position simply select others like them in the next generation for the top jobs. This results in a leadership cadre in the Intelligence Community which is more and more hostile to the risks demanded as the price of real success in collection and analysis and more and more favorable to the self indulgence of a focus on the “turf battles and budget wars” endemic to Washington and at the same time less and less driven by the desire to do good intelligence work. The personnel management disaster described above is ultimately the responsibility of the directors of the agencies that make up the Intelligence Community. If they wanted to have a different focus in their agencies, there would be a different focus. There have been many fine and devoted heads of the various American intelligence agencies, but all too often the directors themselves are members of the “managerial class” within the Intelligence Community or simply politically selected party functionaries. All too often directors see themselves as “travelers” on a journey to yet further heights within the government and therefore not “decisively committed” to the work of their people. For many directors, the “managerial class” within their agencies is a natural ally in controlling the “wilder impulses” of the “real intelligence officers” in the organization.

-Risk Aversion. One of the most trite and tedious of the many things said in the national media and in the U.S. Congress about the failures of the Intelligence Community in Iraq and with regard to so many issues is that “HUMINT (espionage in this context) must be improved!” Repetition of this thought has become obligatory in any “serious” discussion of security issues but in fact, no one has done much to improve US espionage capabilities. This would be amusing in its inanity if the underlying phenomenon were not so serious. In fact, the media and the Congress are largely responsible for creating the operating environment in which the wreck of once formidable American espionage capabilities became inevitable. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the public and its representatives convinced themselves that the intelligence services were somehow the enemies of the American people. The FBI COINTELPRO program aimed at Director Hoover’s personal list of enemies and the Nixon Administration’s meditations (the Houston Plan) on the possibility of effectively combining all U.S. counterintelligence groups into one force contributed to that idea. The Houston Plan was never approved or implemented but the concept itself was enough to “trigger” demand for congressional investigations into the “misdeeds” of U.S. counterintelligence groups. Rather inevitably the “witch hunt” spread to include U.S. clandestine intelligence. The “Church Committee” in the US Senate resulted. Up until that time it was generally believed in the population of the United States that the intelligence services were filled with honorable people trying to protect the country, but the spirit of that age disagreed and a barrage of “literature” and films spread the idea that career intelligence officers were amoral opportunists animated by a kind of nihilistic sadism. “The Three Days of the Condor,” “The Bourne Identity,” and similar rubbish which portrayed a universe unfamiliar to anyone who had ever worked in intelligence filled people’s heads with the idea that the clandestine services were to be tolerated but only just barely tolerated and that they must be closely watched and restricted. American espionage capabilities began to decline from that time and the process has not yet been reversed. A mass of regulations were enacted in those and following years which tied the hands of the clandestine services so effectively that they have never recovered. Several categories of people were placed “off limits” as possibilities for recruitment as foreign agents (for example, reporters,

professors, employees of American companies) without regard for the fact that these very people have inherent access to people and information often needed to carry out effective intelligence work. The rationale seemed to be that some kinds of people needed to be “protected” from the “dirty” business of espionage. The same kind of “thinking” has caused the clandestine services to rely far too much on “liaison” relationships with foreign intelligence services as a substitute for conducting American run espionage against difficult targets. The reason? Disclosure of foreign operations does not entail the career risk for the “managers” that the failure of an American operation would bring.

The creation of this kind of operating environment served as a powerful “enabling” mechanism for the not so gradual assumption of power in the intelligence agencies by the “managerial class.” In an atmosphere dominated by fear of violation of legislated restrictions on behavior and the use of clandestine funds, it was only natural that the directors of the agencies would look to those who had little interest in driving forward the limits of accomplishment and every interest in “limiting the damage” and “preventing surprises” for themselves and “the boss.” This has resulted in a degree of control over operations by lawyers and financial officers that is suffocating to the ability of skilled operatives to mount the kind of potentially rewarding but risky operations that would be needed, for example, to penetrate “Al-Qa’ida.” Clandestine operations are inherently dangerous. It follows that if they are evaluated by people who “know the cost of everything but the value of nothing,” they will inevitably be disapproved before execution if the risks are considerable. Those in Congress who wrote the rules used as excuses to disapprove these operations will then “bleat” pitifully about the need for “better HUMINT” the next time a disaster occurs.

Analysis by Committee. Much the same phenomena exist on the analytic “side” of the intelligence business. Brilliant people from the best schools “sign up” for a career in intelligence work from a sense of patriotism, intellectual curiosity, and a desire to “make a difference” in the world. What typically happens to them after that is that they are “eaten alive” by bureaucracies utterly controlled by the “managerial” mentality. Young analysts are called on to write papers that demand a fresh look, hard work and an undying

devotion to the truth. The draft papers they write are not their property and these papers should not be subject to the vanities of “pride of authorship” so common in other works of scholarship, but neither should they be treated with a lack of respect for the views of the analysts and the creativity that the authors bring to the task. Too often, the “editing by committee” system that prevails results in papers that are not only irrelevant to the security needs of the nation but are actually misleading because of their lack of intellectual honesty.

In the “managerial” world, nothing matters so much as “staying in step” with the consensus in the various agencies of the intelligence world as well as making sure that analysis does not deny the political leadership of the country an intellectual “platform” from which they can proclaim their vision of the future. The “mere” belief of the analysts counts for little in the judgment of the “managers” when weighed against the career destroying effect of disapproval or disfavor from on high.

As a result analysis is “ironed out” in a “layer cake” system of committees at ever-higher layers of bureaucracy. These committees are made up of supervisors at the appropriate layer and they “take care” to insure that the interests of the various parties within an agency are protected in the text that goes forward to the next higher layer and that untoward results are avoided. When this process is ended, what is typically produced is a stereotypical example of the “lowest common denominator,” not something on which the country should “hang its hat” in making decisions affecting the national fate, and certainly. Such papers are inevitably reflective of the kind of “group think” that grows up in any highly integrated and hierarchical bureaucracy that controls the career long expectations of its inhabitants. In other words, an individual analyst has no chance whatever of having his or her views expressed at the national level unless a large and self-serving group of careerists approve them and find them not to be threatening to their collective view of what serves the group’s perceived best interest in terms of its relations with the rest of the intelligence community and the sitting government. The rule of the “managerial class” in the intelligence community ensures the permanence of this “system.” The ruling group will reproduce itself through “mirror imaging” *ad infinitum*

and will be maintained in position through the perceived self-interest of the kind of people who typically become directors of the major intelligence agencies. This is not to say that there have not been brave, courageous and creative directors of the major intelligence agencies. The author has had the honor of serving under several. It was a pleasure and they know who they are, but the sad truth, known to all who have served for extended periods in intelligence is that most directors are part of the problem. The truth is that intelligence is an art best practiced by gifted eccentrics, people widely and deeply educated, favored by nature and training with intuition beyond the average and who care more for the truth than anything else. Such people consistently will follow their “nose” and their instincts on a trail of information like bloodhounds until they arrive at a truth that matters to the people of the United States. In the espionage field of endeavor, the function of managers is to be “enablers,” to make workable the environment in which gifted case officers can break through the manifold barriers that will enable the penetration of groups that threaten the lives of our people. What must be avoided is the selection of managers who instinctively feel that their function is to “hold back” the operators and analysts in order to preserve “peace” within the bureaucracy.

Domination of the Intelligence Function by the Executive Branch: All the intelligence agencies are parts of the Executive Branch. The CIA is a separate organization within the Executive Branch and directly subordinated to the president. The Defense Intelligence Agency is part of the Defense Department as is the National Security Agency. The State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) is obviously part of that department. All these groups are deeply imbedded within these “ministries” of government in a constitutional system which ensures that the authority of the political party that controls the white House will control the intelligence agencies as well. This means that the temptation that will always be presented to politicians to attempt to shape” both information collection and the analysis of that information to their taste is likely to be overwhelming.

In most American administrations, the most senior authorities (generally elected) are wise enough to know that without sound and objective judgments from the intelligence

agencies, the information upon which they base decisions is worthless. The reason one creates separate information gathering and analysis systems under the rubric of “intelligence” is that there is an inherent “conflict of interest” in any system that allows policy decision makers to be the same people who judge what the reality is upon which such decisions are based. Decision makers can always choose to decide policy questions based on their own view of the world, but it is intuitively obvious that this is not the best way to insure good decisions. For this reasons the most senior authorities generally restrain their subordinates on the policy side of government and prevent excessive interference with the process of judging information. The danger is that the wisdom of that attitude is not universally appreciated and in some government past, present or future, policy officials may choose to drive the intelligence people supporting their deliberations towards judgments unsupported by convincing and dependable evidence. If one doubts the seriousness of the possible consequences of such a “cattle drive” one need only consider such historical examples of misadventure as the US strategic obsession with the likelihood of a Japanese first strike on the Philippines in 1941. This led the US Government to focus attention of its analytic force in that direction so firmly that Japanese preparations for an attack in Hawaii were completely missed. Another example would be the obsession with the “inevitability” of victory that influenced intelligence to “miss” completely enemy preparations for the Tet Offensive of 1968 in spite of the mass of information available that indicated something really “big” on the way. In both cases the results of policy or strategic thinking having been allowed to “intrude” on analysis were simply catastrophic. Strong leadership by “real intelligence officers” can help to prevent such disasters. The “dissent” taken by the State Department in the October 2002 NIE on Iraq may well have been an example of the survival of such leadership.

How can this be prevented? This problem exists across the world in every country where serious foreign policy and military issues must be considered and decisions on policy and strategy made on the basis of a systematic consideration of available data. In every country there is the problem of trying to insure that the judgments of the information or intelligence people are untainted by external pressures. There have been various methods and structures adopted to deal with this danger to the national security. In some places

external “think tanks” are used to “test” the result of internal analysis. In others countries, reliance is placed on the competitive analysis of two or more intelligence agencies, often one military and the other civilian. In Israel, within the Directorate of Military Intelligence there exists something called the “Devil’s Advocate” a name borrowed from the process of canonization within the Catholic Church in which a cleric is appointed to oppose the sainthood of one who has been presented for consideration for that honor. In the Israeli “Devil’s Advocate” section, the officers so employed have the job of opposing the analysis accepted by the government and of preventing the acceptance of institutional “group think” as the basis for decisions. For the senior Israeli officers who serve in the “Devil’s Advocate” section it is understood that opposition to the judgments of the rest of the intelligence community will have a career price and that the officers who do this work should look forward to a fruitful life in retirement from the army soon after their service in this job. Nevertheless, they perform a vital; perhaps “priceless” is not too strong a word, service for their country. None of these devices seem altogether suitable for the United States as a “safeguard” against overwhelming pressure to bring their analysis into conformity with policy. The sheer scale of the institutions involved in American life dictate modification of the methods used in smaller governments. Some approach that combines the better features of these institutional “fixes” would probably be appropriate.

Can the “Intelligence Community” change itself to eliminate the problems discussed above?

No.

It cannot.

The United States “Intelligence Community” is a “mature bureaucracy,” a group of institutions that have reached a stable equilibrium in their internal politics and in their relationships with the other parts of the government. The leaders of these intelligence agencies are bureaucrats and politicians identical in character and mentality to those of all the other departments and agencies of the U.S. government. Typically, they are focused

on group and individual survival and advancement, not on the quality of the informational product so desperately needed by their country. For the majority of these senior leaders, the most important work related event in their lives is the annual justification of the agency budget to the Congress rather than the opportunity to lead “their people” to new heights of achievement in the “art” of intelligence. There are few “virtuoso performers” among the senior leaders (military or civilian) of the “artists” who must be relied on to protect the United States in the unending intelligence wars that never end around the world.

If the Congress really wants better intelligence so as to avoid future disasters, it will have to “grasp the nettle” itself and dictate re-organization and a new beginning which seeks to protect the artists from the bureaucrats. If this does not happen, then superficial changes may occur but nothing of significance will be produced from within “the community,” and we will all just wait for “the next time.”