

Intelligence Ethics: Oxymoron or Hope for the Future?

There is much to-do about intelligence failures prior to the war, prior to 9/11, or in other disasters related to ethical failures among intelligence professionals. A cottage industry has arisen searching for whom to blame how.

This is why people gathered at the second “International Intelligence Ethics” conference in Springfield Virginia in January 2007. It attracted a couple of hundred analysts, internationals, professors, military intel vets, active duty and even a few operators, who stayed murky on the fringes like they do.

Almost every one of the participants has heard a hundred “oxymoron” jokes, because that’s just the natural reaction to putting those two words together. If you speak or write about intelligence ethics, you will become well versed in oxymoron jokes.

But, the moral zealots protest, “Ethics is good for you!”

Right. Like lots of fiber, heavy exercise and prostate exams.

But I pester colleagues; the case for ethics even in this strange domain is stronger than it may appear at first. The cases that ethics in intelligence serve the national interest, and that attention to intelligence ethics can be healthy even for operators in the field, are very strong when carefully reviewed.

First, alliances are critical to power on our vast planet, whether that power is democratically guided or imperial in style. Alliances fray when the center becomes untrustworthy or corrupt. Second, cohesion within the state is essential to maximum power at war. And nothing corrodes internal cohesion faster than a rotten core or visibly incompetent and immoral leadership.

Finally, operators work in conditions of unreal stress, where anchors to reality, to mental health and to spiritual tranquility are tenuous and fragile at best.

Operators face wrenching moral dilemmas on an almost daily basis, sometimes dozens a day, but down there in the sewers where they often work there are few they can consult. Moral wounds fester when it is difficult to consult counselors of any kind due to ever present security concerns.

But then some do such evil things too. Spooky-luky land has evil in every variety ever conceived. Don't you think polite society should encourage spies to develop a professional ethos? Wouldn't the world be safer if they did?

Those who would bring ethics to intelligence affairs face bigger problems than oxymoron jokes. Many of their colleagues think this is the dumbest idea ever. Some snort that State Departments are for ethics; spies are ... well, specialists in the non-ethical arts for one thing! What daft idea is this, they wonder? Who let these loons into our club anyway?

It can be a career crammer at the least, becoming a drudge about ethics at work, much less if you decide to go public and become a real cactus in somebody's ... plans.

Actually, truth be told, spies kill each other sometimes. And too much ethics in certain dark corners of this earth can get one killed quicker.

So warming up to this idea is going to take some time under the best conceivable circumstances in spooky-luky land. That is a real environment on this earth, by the way, despite my quirky term for it. It is a real environment that has much to do with issues like whether wars start or do not start. So it is quite important whatever you want to call it. Where spies meet could use more ethics; take it from one who knows.

So I applaud when real “intelligence professionals” (that is by far the preferred term to ‘spies’) ponder difficult issues like how to talk about “ethics” in the context of one the world’s oldest and dirtiest businesses.

Historical dictionaries of British, American, Israeli and other intelligence services reveal hundreds of cases where assassination, blackmail, intrusive surveillance, torture, extortion and all those other wretched things occur that are justified by national security or by someone’s security anyway. America has suffered much erosion of alliance strengths lately because of precisely those issues, with some modern variations like “extraordinary renditions.”

But we will need trained interrogators tomorrow, whatever you or I believe or say, just as we have needed them for thousands of years. And they will need training manuals that focus on technique but also take subjects like ethics into account. If not, we’ll be just like barbarians. That is the fundamental challenge for true intelligence professionals – how to win without becoming just as evil as your adversaries. And these are not just contemporary problems; they are universal problems societies have faced as long as they’ve existed.

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