

## **The Primary Value of Restoring a Healthy Relationship Between Intelligence Agencies and the Academic World is a Revolution in Intelligence Affairs**

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This long-winded title derives from two fundamental goals. On the positive side, I'd like to have better access to information resources of my national government, because my opinion on why wars start matters in various places and I'd like that to be better informed. I've studied the causes of war for 23 years, and written one, national award-winning book on the subject. But I am still like a child just beginning to understand. Watching about 30 conflict zones all the time leaves the single observer thin everywhere, and it would be great to have easier access to detailed information compiled by my government with its vastly greater resources.

On the negative side, there have been many intelligence failures the last few decades, some very serious with grave consequences for thousands or even millions of people, depending on how you count them. And it is very obvious from outside that distortions of perspective and data is the root reason why, brought on by the same system that keeps certain secrets so well. Examples include the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan with consequences obvious to all by now, the unpredicted fall of Iran, and later of the Soviet Union, and the ongoing failure really to comprehend why so many people around the world hate America despite many good things we have done. It is not all just envy, important though that factor certainly is.

So, there are the issues of accuracy of analysis, and of timely warning of dangerous events. Another, related question has occupied my time recently, prompted by discussion at these ISA meetings last year. How can we get more wisdom into the official products of national intelligence agencies?

To answer this question requires some awareness of how wisdom gets screened out of such assessments and recommendations. It is not a conscious process, that's for sure – all involved are doing the best they can to serve their country within systems that often prevent success. Remembering that I have no security clearances and have declined to sign the nondisclosure agreements necessary for such clearances (to preserve my own clarity of thought, and credibility in polite society), I have reached the following conclusions among others. All involve, paradoxically, restrictions on information available to the professional intelligence analysts and executives who think that because they have special access to “secrets” that they must then have access to more data than the open world.

As Gregory Treverton has noted more eloquently, the obsession with keeping secrets tends to crowd out the goal of figuring out what is really going on and what to do about that.

First, intelligence agencies restrict the scope of their concern. The concept of “national interests” predominates, often precluding broader visions of coalition, regional or global security interests much less the welfare of humankind as a whole. Institutional selfishness conducted very efficiently also generates considerable resentment elsewhere.

Second, their time horizon is usually very short, while wisdom tends to take the long view. This process is exacerbated by politicians (the ultimate customers for most intelligence agencies) who often have even shorter time horizons, and even narrower conceptual domains. Temporal myopia compounds conceptual myopia and moral myopia, leading to myopia cubed and related policy disasters.

Third, the text of recommendations is also often compressed to serve the time constraints of busy bureaucrats and politicians, and their limited ability to comprehend complex thought. Interagency meetings often allow only 10 minutes (or less) to present options and make a case, which compresses complex issues into sound bites and simple check-off lists. End results can be pathetic.

Fourth, the body of information available to intelligence professionals is also restricted in complex ways because, a) the spies get paranoid and won't talk with outsiders, and b) polite society reacts badly to the institutionally imposed paranoia, and will not share information with spies openly, honestly, or at all. This bad relationship is compounded by the history of abuses by spies and spy agencies which lingers for generations in the academic world (as though professors were spot free innocents!). It is one thing to read an expert's paper, usually written long ago. It is quite another to get free flowing, timely and complex assessments from them.

This phenomenon contradicts the perception common among analysts that they have access both to secrets and to 'everything in the open world.' In theory yes, in practice no, because every person is restricted to the same 24 hours per day, to one brain and two eyes, etc. Effective collaboration on complex issues requires efficient collection of highly distilled grasps of the essence of many sub-topics from other professionals, each with decades of experience in various areas. This process is constantly interrupted by the barriers to free flow of information and opinion which security clearance and vetting procedures require. Furthermore, the ability to ask questions openly among this community when non-cleared personnel are present is so confined that a mixed conference of spies and non-spies is almost amusing to observe. I observe them often. Those who should ask questions don't for fear they will get disciplined for revealing those precious secrets. When questions cannot be clarified promptly, they often never are.

Fifth, the focus on "actionable" information that politicians can use to make concrete decisions of immediate practical consequence often precludes the kind of reflection that might reveal "out of box" options or courses of action. Exclusion of "out of box" thinkers undoubtedly does, and this is endemic to that world. Conformity to party lines is pervasive, and spies become at least as frightened of outsiders as polite society is of spies.

Finally, sixth, the process of security clearances systematically excludes some of the wiser people on this earth since they won't put up with it. Aside from the serious inefficiencies noted above, excessive compartmentalization of information damages the ability of high performance minds to make associations. It is an unfortunate reality of the spy world that the practice of tradecraft actually induces some dysfunctional mental conditions. To be very specific, schizophrenia and paranoia are both induced by certain aspects of tradecraft, and are mirrored by institutional practices of many national intelligence agencies. They have their reasons. But a probably unintended side effect is exclusion of people who sometimes have the answers you seek.

Some professionals don't want to damage their own abilities by catering to the needs of the obsessive secret keepers. So they stay out, or leave after they encounter the craziness within. Those people who remain cannot tell what they have lost because they tell each other constantly that they are, indeed, the elite. Since others are not present to reveal various errors, the spooks often come to believe this hubris. We are all vain, especially professors -- I mean no insult to observe that it handicaps one's own self to drive away those who might reveal mistakes in facts or interpretation. The spy world does this constantly, and furthermore imposes an institutional paranoia seen as necessary to "keep the secrets" that inadvertently, without conscious intent, stunts the analyses of those who remain by restricting the information available to inform them.

We are back to Gregory Treverton's observation that keeping secrets tends to crowd out figuring out what's going on and what to do. Of course, there are things that should be secret, and we all keep some. Sources need to be protected. And for a specific example, I never tell anyone how to build a biological weapon although I've had an active file on them for over 25 years (long ago I was a medical geneticist with some practical experience I will spare you). But those facts or procedures that are really too dangerous to spread around are very few compared to the vast mass of information relevant to informed decisions about the world. Those who must look over their shoulders constantly lest they utter any taboo words stunt their own intellectual development and the quality of the analyses they produce. They suffer many inefficiencies, limit their access to the far larger universe of data that is not classified, and preclude effective collaboration with many intelligence professionals from polite society who refuse to damage their reputations or their minds by conforming to the many rules of spooky-luky land.

What would be gained by restoring a healthy relationship with the other information professionals of our world, most notably professors and journalists? Well they far outnumber professional spies, and develop networks of contacts and informants that extend beyond those available to the spooks. Most of what is known does not get printed, by the way, so the spy world's impressive ability to read others' mail has serious limits also. This is especially true of highly judgmental or secret political information of special interest to those seeking influence.

Perhaps as important, both professors and journalists must endure a constant, systematic process of correction of errors which is not common in the spy world, and which tends to enforce a degree of discipline and attention to accuracy that is helpful. Not that intelligence analysts are entirely free of discipline, of course not. But still, remarkable errors are possible in that more closed community, such as when most of the experts were saying the Russians were ten feet tall and growing at the very moment the Soviet Union was falling apart from within.

Finally, the open world depends more and more in the skills of collaboration, since technology is making so many sources formerly available only to spies available to anyone with a computer. Forever after, quality will be the determinant factor, not quantity of information available to thinkers. And for quality, nothing helps more than a good network of reality testers willing to put their skilled brains and information tools to work on your project in a timely way.

Written with the best of intentions by Michael Andregg of St. Paul, for the intelligence studies section of ISA, and a world on the soft edge of its third global war. February, 2002.