

Intelligent Design?

The Unending Saga of Intelligence Reform

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Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA. Tim Weiner. Doubleday, 2007, 720 \$27.95

Summary: Two new books on intelligence reform -- Tim Weiner's *Legacy of Ashes* and Amy Zegart's *Spying Blind* -- distort the historical record. A third, by Richard Betts, rightly observes that no matter how good the spies, failures are inevitable.

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Also in this review:

. Amy B. Zegart. Princeton University Press, 2007, 336 pp. \$24.95.

. Richard K. Betts. Columbia University Press, 2007, 264 pp. \$26.95.

In the 67 years since the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, countless commissions, committees, and other official inquiries have lamented the shortcomings of the U.S. intelligence agencies. Even more unofficial ink has been spilled on intelligence failures and the supposed need for reform. But then why, if there is a problem that needs fixing, has it not yet been fixed, despite the enormous amount of attention devoted to it?

Some observers argue that the U.S. government simply has not found the right formula for change. Yet the many volumes already devoted to the subject of intelligence failure and reform make it unlikely that any bright new ideas (or even dim ones) will emerge. Another popular explanation is that reformers have had good ideas but the political stars have not been aligned in their favor. After all, it took the combination of an election campaign, the trauma of 9/11, and an aggressive commission that skillfully exploited public insecurity to bring about legislation establishing a director of national intelligence in 2004 (an idea that had been discussed for decades). However, this explanation overlooks the strong bias toward reform among managers inside the intelligence community. Like ambitious managers anywhere, they make their careers not by sitting on the status quo but by championing new initiatives and strategic redirections. The dominant pattern in the U.S. intelligence agencies has been not stasis but almost constant revision, even to the point of disruption. Another common claim is that the challenges faced by the intelligence agencies have changed so dramatically that solutions from the Cold War era are now obsolete. But the intelligence agencies were addressing the "new" issues of terrorism and the proliferation of unconventional weapons while the Cold War was still raging. It is true that threats such as terrorism have evolved, but they have not changed nearly as much as the public believes. The shock of the 9/11 attacks was so profound that many Americans mistakenly assumed that they must have come from a new danger that no one, including their own government, had recognized or understood.

Although there is an element of truth to each of these arguments, they all miss the point. There are three far more promising explanations for why intelligence reforms so often fail to live up to the demands and expectations of U.S. citizens and politicians. First, the American public consistently believes the intelligence community's record to be worse than it actually is, prompting calls for reform even when none is required. The stir created by the December 2007 National Intelligence Estimate on Iran's nuclear capabilities is a case in point. Lacking important details, the media (unfortunately encouraged by the estimate's wording and structure)

oversimplified what the intelligence community was actually saying, leading the public to believe that it had dramatically reversed previous judgments. In fact, the key aspects of the community's assessment of the Iranian nuclear program were unchanged: Tehran, despite its denials, remains interested in the option of building a bomb; it will have the capability to build one by the middle of the next decade; and its choice to exercise that option will depend on decisions that Iranian leaders have not yet made. Nevertheless, the outside-the-Beltway belief that this is yet another example of the intelligence community's incompetence has become widespread.

In the intelligence business, failures (and apparent contradictions) make headlines, while successes generally remain secret. Failures also prompt inquiries, whereas successes go unnoticed. It is the nature of these inquiries to devise solutions to problems regardless of whether they are soluble and to shift blame in order to avoid political land mines. Moreover, retrospective evaluations make events that were cloudy and ambiguous in real time seem blindingly clear in hindsight.

Second, calling for intelligence reform serves psychological and political purposes that have nothing to do with the intelligence agencies' successes or failures. Such calls remain a fixture of public debates because they satisfy Americans' deeply felt need to attribute bad things to a specific, fixable problem and because they reinforce Americans' comforting but naive belief that similar bad things will not happen in the future if a proper solution is found. But reforms that pander to psychological needs and political agendas encourage changes that are more disruptive than productive. Moreover, they foster falsely reassuring notions of accomplishment -- as if the redrawing of the intelligence community's organizational chart three years ago left Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri shaking in their djellabas.

Finally, intelligence failures are inevitable. This fact, however discomfiting, flows directly from the nature of the job, which involves trying to uncover information that is extremely difficult to obtain. Intelligence officers share with debt collectors, vulture investors, and trauma surgeons the challenge of giving unpromising cases their best shot. The information they process is ambiguous and fragmentary and can be assembled in countless ways. Intelligence is called on to connect dots even though, unlike in children's puzzles, many of the dots are missing or have no number. The principal challenge for the U.S. intelligence agencies is outsmarting adversaries who work assiduously to keep secret what the U.S. government hopes to find out. One side's intelligence success is the other side's counterintelligence failure. And the difficulties mount when an intelligence service is expected -- as the United States' services have been in recent years -- to predict almost every significant occurrence across the globe.

INVISIBLE SUCCESS

The widespread public perception that the U.S. intelligence agencies chronically perform poorly has created a receptive audience for a slew of books and articles that both exploit and help to perpetuate misunderstandings. The most recent and most prominent specimen of this genre is Tim Weiner's *Legacy of Ashes*, which won the 2007 National Book Award for nonfiction -- but probably would have been a better candidate in the category of fiction. His much-heralded history of the CIA is a selective and haphazard treatment of the agency's record. The book's heft and alleged grounding in historical legwork (Weiner says in his preface that he read "more than fifty thousand documents") have earned *Legacy of Ashes* laudatory reviews. However, readers who know a little bit about the CIA and anything about historical research will not react so favorably to Weiner's work.

Weiner portrays an agency careening out of control, with adventure-hungry (and often alcohol-sodden) officers doing the driving. The book's scope is also extremely narrow: Weiner focuses disproportionately on the CIA's early days. The agency, according to Weiner, has been so enraptured with covert action that it has devoted too little energy and attention to collecting foreign intelligence. *Legacy of Ashes* offers little about two of the CIA's core intelligence functions, the collection of technical information and intelligence analysis, and not much more about the third, espionage. There is no mention, for example, of the CIA's revolutionary A-12 Oxcart spy plane program -- a crucially important technical-collection program during the 1960s. The A-12 was the precursor to the air force's SR-71, the premier U.S. reconnaissance aircraft for over 20 years. Nor does intelligence analysis

get much attention. Among many significant omissions, Weiner fails to refer to the assessments from the CIA's Saigon station that anticipated the 1968 Tet offensive, even though President Lyndon Johnson and his national security adviser, Walt Rostow, later cited these reports in claiming that the Tet offensive had not surprised them. (Weiner's only paragraph on Tet portrays the CIA as totally in the dark about the enemy's intentions.) Nor does Weiner mention the CIA analysis that anticipated the Six-Day War of 1967; instead, he attributes Washington's lack of surprise to a single tip from Israel. And there is not a word about the intelligence community's prescient analysis before the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which anticipated the civil strife, terrorism, and instability that ensued.

Weiner's loose treatment of the historical record begins with the book's title. The phrase "legacy of ashes" comes from a remark made by President Dwight Eisenhower at a National Security Council meeting near the end of his presidency, but Weiner conflates two events and completely misrepresents Eisenhower's words. According to Weiner's account, the CIA director, Allen Dulles, was arguing against a proposal to separate his office's responsibilities from oversight of the broader intelligence community (as legislation in 2004 eventually did). Weiner quotes Eisenhower angrily complaining -- ostensibly in response -- that the structure of U.S. intelligence was faulty and that the failure to reform it would "leave a legacy of ashes." In fact, Eisenhower was not responding to Dulles, with whom he agreed about leaving the CIA director's job intact; the president had made his remark at a different NSC meeting a week earlier, and he was not talking about the CIA at all. Rather, his remark concerned how military intelligence had been stitched together during World War II.

The historical inaccuracies continue in the first sentence of Chapter 1, where Weiner claims, "All Harry Truman wanted was a newspaper." Citing a letter Truman wrote to an aide many years after he left office in which he claimed that he had never wanted the CIA to be a "Cloak & Dagger Outfit," Weiner concludes that Truman simply wanted the agency to be a source for global news. But the documented history of the Truman administration's use of the CIA to conduct extensive covert operations during the early Cold War years strongly contradicts that notion. Weiner's use of source material throughout *Legacy of Ashes* follows in the same vein. Damning quotations are cherry-picked, episodes are chosen to highlight failures and exclude successes, conversations are distorted, presidential desires are misrepresented, and sweeping judgments and naked assertions are made with no apparent reference to any of those 50,000 documents.

Legacy of Ashes does accurately illustrate how the agency has been at the mercy of shifting political winds for decades. This is perhaps the only element of the book relevant to current debates over intelligence reform. *Legacy of Ashes* is not a history of the CIA, much less the history that the subtitle promises. It is largely a collection of tales of derring-do, deceit, and defeat. This highly tendentious book should be viewed the same way as a good novel: a lively read not to be trusted as history.

BLIND FAITH

Amy Zegart's *Spying Blind* also exploits the public's attention to intelligence failures. Zegart confesses in her preface that she was researching the difficulties faced by U.S. government agencies attempting to adapt to new challenges when 9/11 suddenly supplied the perfect dramatic event to illustrate her argument. She has therefore tailored her depiction of the official reaction to 9/11 to fit her broad preexisting thesis: that traits inherent to any large organization, especially a government agency, prevent it from adapting well to new challenges and new missions.

Zegart strains to fit the record of the CIA's and the FBI's handling of terrorism into this thesis, and her straining leads to factual errors. She attributes, for example, the CIA's failure to place terrorist suspects on a watch list before 9/11 to the agency's not being "in the habit" of doing so. In fact, this lapse represented a failure to apply well-established and frequently used watch-listing procedures.

Most of the empirical errors in Zegart's analysis of 9/11-related intelligence stem from her extremely heavy reliance on postmortem inquiries, especially the 9/11 Commission report. In fact, much of *Spying Blind* is little

more than a repackaging of that report. Zegart's most serious mistakes concern strategic intelligence about the jihadist terrorist threat. The 9/11 Commission staff used several techniques to suggest that the intelligence community's strategic analysis was inadequate. Most notably, they equated strategic analysis -- which in this case meant assessment of the nature, shape, and severity of the Islamist terrorist threat represented by al Qaeda -- with only one type of report and brushed aside numerous finished assessments in other formats that the intelligence community had produced on the subject prior to 9/11. Zegart uses the same approach and asserts, implausibly and incorrectly, that this flow of information provided only fragmentary insights and missed the big picture.

The intelligence community used other channels in addition to regular written assessments to convey to policymakers a strategic view of the jihadist threat. These included briefings of the most senior officials; special memos from the CIA director; countless discussions in the interagency Counterterrorism Security Group, chaired by the NSC's Richard Clarke; and the assessment portions of covert-action findings. But the 9/11 Commission never mentioned the use of these channels, and so neither does Zegart.

Zegart does disagree with the commission on one important point (although she buries the disagreement in an endnote). The commission asserted that on the eve of 9/11, policymakers and intelligence officials still did not fully appreciate the seriousness of the threat posed by the jihadist movement and al Qaeda. Zegart presents substantial evidence that they did. This difference reflects two different agendas: Zegart's objective is to show that even organizations that understand a threat have trouble adapting to it; the commission's agenda was to muster support for its plan to reorganize an allegedly broken intelligence community. Zegart apparently does not recognize the logical inconsistency in her presentation: she relies heavily on the 9/11 Commission as a source on many issues despite having convincingly discredited it on the central issue of whether the policy and intelligence communities fully appreciated the terrorist threat. Furthermore, given that policymakers were fully aware of the jihadist threat and there is no reason to believe that strategic insights about al Qaeda were missing or incorrect (neither Zegart nor the commission provides any evidence to the contrary), then strategic intelligence must have done its job effectively. The missing piece was something very different: tactical information about a specific plot -- a common problem in counterterrorism.

Legacy of Ashes and Spying Blind exemplify several all-too-common attributes of commentary about intelligence and intelligence reform. One is looseness in the use of evidence (which is ironic, given the tight sourcing standards that are appropriately demanded of the intelligence community). Another is uncritical (or selective) acceptance of whatever a commission or committee says. Zegart exhibits this tendency not only in her discussion of the intelligence community's record on 9/11 but also in her blanket reference to the more than 300 unimplemented recommendations of prior commissions and committees -- evidence, in her view, of the agencies' supposed failure to adapt to new challenges. She does not admit the possibility that any of these recommendations might have been misguided, mediocre, or tailored to fit the needs of the bodies that proposed them.

Zegart also lacks any sense of performance standards, a common problem among commentators on intelligence. Failures are enumerated, whereas successes are omitted, and the only implied standard -- perfection -- is an unattainable one. Zegart provides one of the more methodologically absurd examples of this sort of performance evaluation when she states that the CIA had a "100 percent failure" rate on 9/11 because it missed all 11 opportunities to disrupt the attacks. (She also presents a similar list of 12 opportunities the FBI missed.) When opportunities are defined only as chances that were missed, the failure rate will naturally be 100 percent. Zegart never counts the opportunities that were successfully seized -- some of which helped create the very missed opportunities she laments.

UNAVOIDABLE FAILURE

Richard Betts' book provides a much-needed antidote to these outsized expectations. Betts has studied intelligence failures for three decades and understands that the nature of the intelligence business makes some

failures inevitable. The "enemies of intelligence" Betts refers to in his title can be anything -- human, organizational, or situational -- that impedes the intelligence mission and contributes to failure. Enemies internal to the intelligence community -- negligence, poorly designed organizations, and imperfect flows of information -- get almost all of the attention in public commentary. But, as Betts observes, they are not as big a problem as is often assumed. The larger obstacles are hostile states and organizations that withhold secrets and what Betts calls "inherent enemies": "a collection of mental limitations, dilemmas, contradictory imperatives, paradoxical interactions, and trade-offs among objectives."

These inherent enemies of intelligence agencies generally receive the least attention of all. They can be as simple as funding constraints or limited personnel, which force agencies to focus on certain targets while devoting fewer resources to others. And they can be as complex as determining how and when to issue warnings to policymakers about impending dangers. As Betts' elegant analysis shows, such warnings are not just a matter of intelligence agencies blowing a horn and policymakers jumping in response. Rather, they involve a far more complicated process that includes weighing the danger of false positives against the danger of false negatives and the costs of action against those of inaction. Betts is correct in arguing that these inherent enemies constitute an almost insurmountable obstacle and that intelligence failures are not only inevitable but natural. "The awful truth," he writes, "is that the best of intelligence systems will have big failures."

This, however, does not mean reform is impossible or unnecessary. Further change in the intelligence community is both feasible and worthwhile. But policymakers must begin by heeding Betts' sound recommendation that reforms be evaluated "not just according to what they may fix but what they may break." They must also accept two uncomfortable truths. First, any improvement is likely to be marginal. Betts likens the situation to a baseball player raising his batting average by 15 points: it is worth making the effort and could possibly help the team, but it is hardly the stuff of major overhaul. Second, they must acknowledge that the other branches of government will have to adapt to the reality that the intelligence agencies will never live up to the unrealistic expectations that citizens and politicians have placed on them. The United States must stop hoping for an intelligence superstar who will save the rest of the team from its errors and instead focus on assembling a solid, reliable interagency lineup.