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475 Riverside Drive · Suite 1274 · New York, New York 10115-1274
(212) 870-2500 · FAX: (212) 870-2202 · aps@psqonline.org · <http://www.psqonline.org>

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CIA's Strategic Intelligence in Iraq

RICHARD L. RUSSELL

The CIA was the only agency to dissent: on the eve of the ground war, it was still telling the President that we were grossly exaggerating the damage inflicted on the Iraqis. If we'd waited to convince the CIA, we'd still be in Saudi Arabia.

—H. Norman Schwarzkopf, *IT DOESN'T TAKE A HERO*

War is the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty.

—Carl von Clausewitz, *ON WAR*

The role of strategic intelligence in the foreign policy decision-making process at the highest echelons of government remains a neglected field of study. Much of the scholarly literature on intelligence is written from the perspective of intelligence officers, while significantly less is written from the perspective of policy makers. As Robert Gates observes, “A search of presidential memoirs and those of principal assistants over the past 30 years or so turns up remarkably little discussion or perspective on the role played by directors of central intelligence [DCIs] or intelligence information in presidential decision making on foreign affairs,” while “in intelligence memoir literature, although one can read a great deal about covert operations and technical achievements, one finds little on the role of intelligence in presidential decision making.”¹

The study of intelligence from the policy maker's perspective would potentially yield a more robust understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of strategic intelligence and focus attention on areas where intelligence collection

¹ Robert M. Gates, “An Opportunity Unfulfilled: The Use and Perceptions of Intelligence at the White House,” *Washington Quarterly* 12 (Winter 1989): 35.

RICHARD L. RUSSELL is professor at the Near East–South Asia Center for Strategic Studies, the National Defense University. He previously served for seventeen years as a political-military analyst at the Central Intelligence Agency, where he specialized on security issues in the Middle East and Europe. Russell is working on a book on power politics, weapons proliferation, and war in the Middle East and South Asia.

and analysis need improvement. The need for improving strategic intelligence performance was painfully made clear to Americans by the tragic events of September 11, 2001, in which their intelligence community failed to detect the Osama bin Laden-orchestrated conspiracy that killed several thousand civilians on American soil.

In the United States, the principal intelligence entity responsible for providing strategic intelligence to the president is the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Despite media-inflated public perceptions, strategic intelligence generally plays only a modest role in the day-to-day affairs of statecraft. Michael Herman correctly points out, “Those in CIA who produce the President’s Daily Brief [PDB] and the National Intelligence Daily [NID] do not expect them to lead regularly to immediate action, any more than newspapers expect to change the world with every issue. Of all the contents of daily and weekly high-level intelligence summaries only a minute proportion feed directly into decisions.”² Herman notes that “the role of most intelligence is not driving decisions in any short term, specific way, but contributing to decision-takers’ general enlightenment; intelligence producers are in the business of educating their masters.”³

STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE AND THE SENIOR BUSH ADMINISTRATION

The impact of strategic intelligence on the American policy-making process reached an apex with President George Herbert Walker Bush. During his administration, the United States had its first commander-in-chief who had previously served as a DCI. Few, if any, presidents had had Bush’s grasp of the power—and limitations—of intelligence before occupying the Oval Office. The president who probably comes closest to Bush with prior intelligence experience was Dwight Eisenhower who, as commander of Allied forces in Europe during World War II, had relied heavily on intelligence, particularly intercepted German communications, to inform strategy. As Christopher Andrew observes, Bush’s “experience as DCI was to give him a clearer grasp than perhaps any previous president of what it was reasonable to expect from an intelligence estimate.”⁴ Ironically, Bush had accepted his appointment as DCI by President Gerald Ford with significant reservations. From his post in Beijing as chief of the U.S. Liaison Office, Bush in November 1975 telegraphed President Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger his acceptance of the nomination as DCI out of a sense of duty. Bush remarked in the cable: “I do not have politics out of my system entirely and I see this as the total end of any political future.”⁵

² Michael Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 143.

³ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁴ Christopher Andrew, *For the President’s Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995), 504.

⁵ “Telegram from George Bush to the President through Secretary Kissinger,” 2 November 1975, George Bush Personal Papers, Subject File—China, Pre-CIA, Classified [1975–1977], George Bush Presidential Library.

Bush proved to be less than prophetic on this score, but, as president, he personally paid close attention to intelligence and sought to integrate it into the policy-making process. Bush held a daily national security briefing at which CIA briefed him on the latest world developments. In attendance at these briefings were the President, his national security adviser Brent Scowcroft or his deputy Robert Gates—himself a former high-level CIA official and later to be DCI—his chief of staff, and once or twice per week DCI William Webster. The CIA briefer would present the PDB, a printed book, with a rundown of important intelligence reports and analyses. Bush read the PDB in the presence of the CIA briefer and Scowcroft or Gates in order to task the briefer to provide more information or have his National Security Council (NSC) staff lieutenants field policy-related questions as they emerged in the course of discussion of the intelligence briefings.⁶

The Bush administration is a particularly lucrative case for the study of the role of strategic intelligence in statecraft for several additional reasons. Most notably, the United States under Bush's leadership waged a major war in the Persian Gulf. CIA influenced the decision-making process to a degree well beyond that exercised in peacetime, because of insatiable policy-maker appetite for intelligence on Iraq and the region given the high risks to American national interests. In addition, many of the key policy makers who received a daily flood of intelligence during the war have published accounts of their time in office, which give outsiders invaluable insight into the policy-making process and can be mined for evidence of the impact of strategic intelligence on decision making. Finally, many military accounts of the war by scholars, journalists, and military officers are windows through which to view how policy makers and military commanders used intelligence during the Gulf crisis.

This article serves several purposes. First, it attempts to help fill a major gap in intelligence literature on the role of strategic intelligence in informing statecraft. Strategic intelligence in this article refers to the use of information—whether clandestinely or publicly acquired—that is synthesized into analysis and read by the senior-most policy makers charged with setting the objectives of grand strategy and ensuring that military force is exercised for purposes of achieving national interests.⁷ Strategic intelligence is a tool to help ensure that civilian authorities control military means for achieving political objectives, as Clausewitz sagely wrote of war. Second, the article traces the uses and limitations of strategic intelligence in major dimensions of the Gulf War to include the warning and waging of war. The article concludes with an assessment or balance sheet of the strengths and weaknesses of strategic intelligence during the Gulf crisis. It draws insights from this case study to inform the future evolu-

⁶ George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 30.

⁷ For treatments of strategic intelligence, see Adda B. Bozeman, *Strategic Intelligence and Statecraft* (Washington, DC: Brassey's Inc., 1992); and Sherman Kent, *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951).

tion of American intelligence and its support of statecraft, particularly in situations where policy makers face dilemmas posed by the use of armed force.

WARNING OF INVASION

American intelligence effectively tracked the physical build-up of Iraqi forces across the border from Kuwait in mid-July 1990. Details of the President's Daily Brief in the run-up to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait have not been publicly disclosed. Nevertheless, information from the National Intelligence Daily, CIA's current intelligence publication that received a wider dissemination among policy officials than the more tightly controlled PDB, has made its way into the public domain. The NID warned on 24 July that "Iraq now has ample forces and supplies available for military operations inside Kuwait" and during that day doubts grew as to whether Saddam Hussein was bluffing.⁸ DCI Webster traveled to the White House on 24 July and briefed Bush on satellite imagery showing the movement of two Republican Guard divisions from garrisons in central Iraq to positions near the Kuwait border.⁹ The NID on 25 July published an article "Iraq-Kuwait: Is Iraq Bluffing?" which stated that unless Kuwait meets Iraq's oil production demands—the ostensible Iraqi reason for military posturing along the border—Baghdad will step up pressure on Kuwait. The NID article, however, lacked specific intelligence on Saddam's intentions.¹⁰ Working-level analysts at CIA—primarily in the Directorate of Intelligence's Office of Imagery Analysis (OIA) and Near East and South Asia Analysis (NESA)—were the authors of analyses published in the NID.

One high-level intelligence official on the National Intelligence Council (NIC), charged with advising the DCI, was more forward leaning than the analytic judgments published in the NID. The National Intelligence Officer (NIO) for Warning Charles Allen on 25 July issued a "warning of war" memorandum in which he stressed that Iraq had nearly achieved the capability to launch a corps-sized operation of sufficient mass to occupy much of Kuwait. The memo judged that the chances of a military operation of some sort at better than 60 percent.¹¹ Allen on 26 July visited NSC's senior director for the Middle East Richard Haass and briefed him with satellite imagery that showed the magnitude of Iraq's military build-up near Kuwait.¹² Allen on 1 August personally informed Haass that an Iraqi attack against Kuwait was imminent. Haass, in

⁸ Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict, 1990–1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 50.

⁹ U.S. News & World Report, *Triumph without Victory: The History of the Persian Gulf War* (New York: Times Books, 1993), 21.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 31–32.

¹¹ Charles E. Allen, "Warning and Iraq's Invasion of Kuwait: A Retrospective Look," *Defense Intelligence Journal* 7 (no. 2, 1998): 40.

¹² Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 16.

turn, informed Scowcroft, but the White House refrained from moving to a crisis mode.¹³ Other analytic voices coming from the NIC may have significantly softened the alarm of Allen's warnings in the ears of key Bush administration policy makers. The NIO for the Near East and South Asia—more directly responsible for analysis of Iraq than Allen as the NIO for Warning—wrote in a 31 July memorandum that Iraqi military action, such as seizing the Rumaila oil field straddled on the border or Kuwait islands, was likely unless Kuwait made oil concessions. The NIO for the Near East and South Asia judged, however, that a major attack to seize most or all of Kuwait was unlikely.¹⁴

While strategic intelligence performed well in detecting and tracking the buildup of Iraqi military hardware along the border with Kuwait, there was a dearth of human source reporting on Saddam's intentions. Such reporting was needed to give a weight of evidence to competing analytic judgments between the NIOs and the working-level CIA analysts. Although a critical mass of intelligence led CIA to conclude by the afternoon of 1 August that an Iraqi invasion was imminent, the magnitude of Iraqi invasion plans was not anticipated by working-level analysts.¹⁵ Deputy Director for Central Intelligence Richard Kerr briefed the mainstream analytic assessment to a Deputies Committee meeting of key policy makers chaired by Undersecretary of State Robert Kimmit late in the day on 1 August. Kimmit and other participants recall that Kerr emphasized the limited land grab Iraqi option, not a massive invasion of Kuwait.¹⁶ Other accounts stressed that Kerr emphatically told the Deputies Committee meeting that the "Iraqis were ready to move."¹⁷

And move they did. Iraqi forces began their invasion of Kuwait at 0100 on the morning of 2 August. The invasion was led by two Republican Guard armored divisions, the Hammurabi and the Medina, and eventually included about 140,000 troops and 1,800 tanks. The armored divisions moved rapidly to Kuwait City, while Iraqi Special Force commandos attacked the city in advance of the armored divisions. Commandos loaded on helicopters seized key positions throughout Kuwait, including Bubyian and Warba Islands in the northern Gulf. On 3 August, a Republican Guard mechanized division secured Kuwait's border with Saudi Arabia. The 16,000-man Kuwait Army was overwhelmed. Iraqi forces fully occupied Kuwait in about twelve hours.¹⁸

Despite CIA's intelligence warning in the week before the invasion, Iraq's behavior had defied the Agency's earlier assessments of the regime. CIA judged in a 1989 National Intelligence estimate, "Iraq: Foreign Policy of a Major Regional Power," published under NIC auspices, that Baghdad after its bloody eight-year war with Iran needed time to rest, recuperate, and rebuild both its

¹³ Ibid., 5–6.

¹⁴ Ibid., 25.

¹⁵ Freedman and Karsh, *Gulf Conflict*, 73.

¹⁶ Gordon and Trainor, *Generals' War*, 28.

¹⁷ U.S. News & World Report, *Triumph Without Victory*, 33.

¹⁸ Freedman and Karsh, *Gulf Conflict*, 67.

conventional and unconventional military power before undertaking another major war.¹⁹ As Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor point out, CIA and intelligence community analysts suffered from “mirror imaging” in which they projected their own American values to the Iraqis. They assumed that because the United States had needed time to rest and rebuild after its major wars, the Iraqis would have to do the same.²⁰

Iraq’s situation was fundamentally different than that of the United States, however. Saddam had a large standing military and no doubt feared that demobilization would let loose unemployed and weapons-trained young men into the streets who would pose a risk to his regime. Saddam, moreover, preferred to launch a war against a minor power rather than suffer humiliation from the burden of debt that he acquired to the Gulf states during his war with Iran. Paul Wolfowitz, undersecretary of defense for policy during the Gulf War, also faulted the intelligence community for not warning the policy community about the changing character of Saddam’s public statements in early 1990. He has suggested, “Somebody should have catalogued his increasingly belligerent rhetoric, compared and contrasted his statements to prior formulations, and laid out one or more plausible explanations for the change.”²¹

In defense of CIA analysis though, its assessment on the eve of Iraq’s invasion that Saddam would likely launch a military campaign to seize a limited piece of Kuwaiti territory was forward leaning at the time. Many of the most astute observers of Middle East politics, including Arab heads of state intimately familiar with Saddam Hussein such as King Hussein of Jordan and President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, were predicting that Iraq was militarily posturing to politically pressure the Kuwaitis over oil production levels. King Hussein even assured President Bush in a 31 July phone conversation that the crisis between Iraq and Kuwait would be resolved without fighting. The king told Bush, “On the Iraqi side, they send their best regards and highest esteem to you, sir.”²²

A major shortcoming in warning of the Gulf war was the lack of human intelligence to help decipher Saddam’s political intentions. As Norman Schwarzkopf observed after the war, “our human intelligence was poor.”²³ Civilian policy makers shared his assessment of human intelligence during the war. As Secretary of State James Baker characterized the situation, “U.S. intelligence

¹⁹ Gordon and Trainor, *Generals’ War*, 9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

²¹ Jack Davis, “Paul Wolfowitz on Intelligence–Policy Relations,” *Studies in Intelligence* 39 (no. 1, 1995): 7.

²² Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, “Telephone Conversation with King Hussein,” 31 July 1990, OA/ID CF01043, Richard N. Haass Files, Working Files-Iraq, National Security Council, George Bush Presidential Library.

²³ H. Norman Schwarzkopf and Peter Petre, *It Doesn’t Take a Hero* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 319.

assets on the ground were virtually nonexistent.”²⁴ He judged that “there wasn’t much intelligence on what was going on inside Iraq.”²⁵

JUDGING THE DANGER OF WIDER WAR

Notwithstanding CIA human intelligence shortcomings in warning of war, CIA’s analysis was effective in gauging the magnitude of Iraq’s invasion and potential repercussions on the international political landscape. At the first meeting of the NSC convened on 2 August to discuss the crisis, the tone of participants was that of accepting Iraq’s invasion as a *fait accompli*.²⁶ CIA analysis delivered in the following NSC meeting on 3 August appears to have influenced the discussion of participants to a more assertive American policy stance. DCI Webster told the President and NSC officials that Saddam was consolidating his hold on Kuwait, and intelligence showed that he would not pull out despite Saddam’s public pledges to do so in a couple of days. Webster warned that Saddam would control the second- and third-largest proven oil reserves with the fourth-largest army in the world, Kuwaiti financial assets, access to the Gulf, and the ability to devote money to a military buildup. Webster also noted that there was no apparent internal rival to Saddam’s rule, and his ambition was to increase his power.²⁷ The NSC participants also discussed CIA analysis that argued that “the invasion posed a threat to the current world order and that the long-run impact on the world economy could be devastating. Saddam was bent on turning Iraq into an Arab superpower—a balance to the United States, the Soviet Union, and Japan.”²⁸ As General Colin Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recalled, Webster “gave us a bleak status report,” which prompted Scowcroft to declare that “We’ve got to make a response and accommodating Saddam is not an option.”²⁹

Strategic intelligence painted a dismal picture of the threat to Saudi Arabia posed by the Iraqi military behemoth in Kuwait. Saudi forces were no match for the Iraqis, and CIA estimated that Iraqi forces could reach Riyadh—located about 275 miles south of Kuwait—in three days.³⁰ In the 5 August NSC meeting,

²⁴ James A. Baker III with Thomas M. DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989-1992* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995), 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 267–268.

²⁶ Bush and Scowcroft, *World Transformed*, 317.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 322–323. The oil-related estimates in Webster’s brief probably originated in an analytic paper on world oil reserves prepared by economists in CIA’s Office of Resource, Technology, and Trade. See U.S. News & World Report, *Triumph Without Victory*, 65. For a first-hand account of the NSC meeting, see Memorandum for Brent Scowcroft, “Minutes from NSC Meeting, 3 August 1990, on Persian Gulf,” OA/ID CF01518, Richard N. Haass Files, Working Files-Iraq, National Security Council, George Bush Presidential Library.

²⁸ Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 237.

²⁹ Colin L. Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 463–464.

³⁰ Freedman and Karsh, *Gulf Conflict*, 88.

Webster reported that CIA was uncertain about Saddam's intentions and that it would be difficult to provide warning of an attack on Saudi Arabia. Webster remarked, moreover, that Iraqi forces were massing on the Kuwait-Saudi border, and reinforcements were on the way giving Iraq more forces in the area than were needed solely for occupying Kuwait.³¹ The minutes of the 5 August NSC meeting indicate that CIA analysts were more concerned about the potential for Iraqi offensive operations into Saudi Arabia than their Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) counterparts.³² By Schwarzkopf's account, it was not until mid-September that intelligence showed that Iraqi forces were moving to a defensive posture in Kuwait as Republican Guard divisions pulled back from the Saudi border and were replaced by tens of thousands of infantry digging trenches and building barricades, preparing for a long siege.³³

The debate over whether Saddam ever had designs on Saudi Arabia continues today. The Gulf War Air Power Survey (GWAPS) concluded in retrospect that it was unlikely that Iraq had intended to invade Saudi Arabia immediately after seizing Kuwait, because Iraqi forces assumed a defensive posture to hold Kuwait rather than to prepare for further land advances.³⁴ Nevertheless, over the medium to longer runs, had Iraq been allowed to consolidate control over Kuwait and had the United States not intervened on the ground to defend Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom would have been an attractive target of opportunity for Saddam's forces. Saudi forces standing alone would have collapsed in the face of a massive Iraqi air and ground campaign much as the Kuwaiti military had.

ASSESSING MEASURES SHORT OF WAR

In the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion, many in the United States, particularly those in the halls of Congress, were looking for American policy options short of waging war against Iraq. Many viewed economic sanctions as the best policy option to avoid the direct engagement of American troops in war overseas.

CIA analysis of international sanctions against Iraq became entangled in the policy debates taking place between the White House and Capitol Hill.³⁵ Webster in early August approved the dissemination of CIA's weekly reports on the effectiveness of international sanctions against Iraq to the President, De-

³¹ Bush and Scowcroft, *World Transformed*, 334.

³² Memorandum for William F. Sittman from Richard N. Haass, "Minutes of NSC Meeting on Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait, 5 August 1990," 18 August 1990, OA/ID CF00873, Richard N. Haass Files, Working Files-Iraq, National Security Council, George Bush Presidential Library.

³³ Schwarzkopf and Petre, *It Doesn't Take a Hero*, 346.

³⁴ Thomas A. Keaney and Eliot A. Cohen, *Revolution in Warfare? Air Power in the Persian Gulf* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 4. This book is an unclassified summary of the multi-volume Gulf War Air Power Study led by Cohen and commissioned by Secretary of the Air Force Donald Rice in 1991.

³⁵ For an analysis of CIA's unique bureaucratic position, situated between the executive and legislative branches of government, see Robert M. Gates, "The CIA and Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 66 (Winter 1987/88): 215-230.

partments of State and Defense, as well as the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. In general, CIA analysts judged that in the short to medium terms, sanctions seemed unlikely to force Saddam out of Kuwait.³⁶ Webster passed along this analytic judgment when he testified to Congress in December 1990 and said that economic sanctions had little prospect for forcing Saddam to withdraw his forces from Kuwait. Webster later reiterated this assessment in a 10 January letter to Congressman Les Aspin. He wrote that “Our judgment remains that, even if the sanctions continue to be enforced for another six to twelve months, economic hardship alone is unlikely to compel Saddam Hussein to retreat from Kuwait or cause regime-threatening popular discontent in Iraq. . . . He [Saddam] probably continues to believe that Iraq can endure sanctions longer than the international coalition will hold and hopes that avoiding war will buy him time to negotiate a settlement more favorable to him.”³⁷ To a Congress eager to seek economic sanctions as a way of escaping the hard issues raised by the prospect of sending American forces to the region, CIA’s bleak analytic assessment of their efficacy was not welcome news. To his credit, Webster refused to submit to the congressional browbeating intended to force him to change the Agency’s assessment.

The congressional and public discourse over the wisdom of sanctions was moot, because President Bush had already determined that war probably would be necessary. After an 11 October White House meeting, Bush and his top advisers had concluded that military action, not economic sanctions, would almost certainly be needed to evict Iraq’s military from Kuwait. The President also had accepted the view of Chairman Colin Powell that airpower alone was unlikely to achieve the task.³⁸ Historical hindsight and the eleven-year experience with the United Nations’ failure to use international sanctions to compel Saddam to alter course—particularly in regard to fully disclosing the scope of his weapons of mass destruction programs—shows that CIA’s judgment that sanctions would not significantly change Saddam’s political behavior was accurate.

GAUGING CONVENTIONAL AND UNCONVENTIONAL MILITARY CAPABILITIES

Intelligence estimates of Iraqi conventional military power stressed the mass of Iraqi ground forces coupled with their battlefield experience fighting the eight-year war with Iran. U.S. intelligence assessed that beyond the Republican Guard divisions and eight to ten regular army divisions, the quality of Iraqi divisions significantly decreased.³⁹ American intelligence was effective in identi-

³⁶ U.S. News & World Report, *Triumph Without Victory*, 150.

³⁷ Letter, William H. Webster to Les Aspin, 10 January 1991, OA/ID CF 01361, Virginia Lampley Files, National Security Council, George Bush Presidential Library.

³⁸ Gordon and Trainor, *Generals’ War*, 139.

³⁹ Freedman and Karsh, *Gulf Conflict*, 288.

fyng the locations of these less capable regular Iraqi army units along the Kuwaiti border as well as those of the more capable Republican Guard units, which backed-up frontline forces in a strategic reserve in northern Kuwait and southern Iraq. CIA in late 1990 assessed that Iraq would defend in place, try to force the coalition into a war of attrition on the ground, and attempt to create a stalemate that would undermine American political resolve.⁴⁰ From Saddam's perspective, the strategy had proved its worth in Iraq's war against Iran. He probably judged that the United States, with its purported fear of casualties, would be even more vulnerable to the strategy than Iran had been.

The Agency correctly anticipated the impact of Iraq's Air Force on the course of battle. CIA in October 1990 assessed that "The Iraqi Air Force would not be effective because it would either be neutralized quickly by Coalition air action or it would be withheld from action in hardened shelters. Within a few days, Iraqi air defenses would be limited to AAA [anti-aircraft artillery] and hand-held and surviving light SAMs [surface-to-air missiles]."⁴¹ The course of battle clearly showed CIA analysis to be on the mark, although it had not anticipated that many Iraqi pilots would flee with their aircrafts to Iran rather than face coalition pilots in air-to-air combat.

CIA analysis paid close attention to Iraq's unconventional weapons capabilities that Baghdad worked assiduously to hide from the world. CIA had tracked the development of Iraqi chemical weapons in the course of Baghdad's war with Teheran. CIA estimated before the war that Saddam's chemical stockpile was more than a thousand tons and included artillery rounds, bombs, and caches possibly moved into Kuwait. In fall 1990, CIA assessed that Iraq would use those stocks in the event of war with the coalition.⁴² These estimates had an impact on American policy makers. As Powell recalls, "We knew from CIA estimates that the Iraqis had at least a thousand tons of chemical agents. We knew that Saddam had used both mustard and nerve gases in his war against Iran. We knew that he had used gases on Iraq's rebellious Kurdish minority in 1988, killing or injuring four thousand Kurds."⁴³ CIA's grasp of Iraq's biological warfare program, however, was sketchy at best. In October 1990, American intelligence warned that Iraq's biological weapons capability was sufficiently sophisticated to cause coalition casualties within four hours after the weapons were used."⁴⁴

American intelligence had closely watched the growth of Iraq's ballistic missile capabilities, some of which were demonstrated in the missile exchanges between Baghdad and Teheran during the "war of the cities" in their eight-year struggle. Shortly before the war with the coalition, intelligence estimated that

⁴⁰ Keaney and Cohen, *Revolution in Warfare?* 108.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴² Rick Atkinson, *Crusade: The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), 86.

⁴³ Powell, *My American Journey*, 468.

⁴⁴ Atkinson, *Crusade*, 88.

Iraq's inventory of Scud missiles was about 300–700, but it was uncertain as to how many were Soviet-supplied Scud-Bs and how many were longer-range Iraqi modified variants.⁴⁵ American intelligence also had identified twenty-eight concrete launch pads for the Scuds in western Iraq, while it estimated that Iraq had thirty-six mobile launchers, both Soviet-supplied and Iraqi manufactured.⁴⁶

Intelligence estimates on Iraq's nuclear weapons program were less confident than on its ballistic missile programs and grew more conservative and alarmist as the eve of the coalition ground war approached. Before Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, intelligence judged that Iraq would not acquire nuclear weapons for five to ten years. In July 1990, Israel shared with Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney evidence that Iraqi work on high-speed centrifuges needed to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons was progressing fast, which in turn instigated a new American intelligence estimate. A special estimate prepared for President Bush in fall 1990 concluded that it would take Iraq six months to a year and probably longer to acquire a nuclear weapon.⁴⁷

Postwar revelations made largely by United Nations weapons inspections teams gave a truer picture of the scope of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs. Despite the air campaign against Iraq's chemical weapons facilities, UN inspectors discovered about 150,000 chemical munitions that survived the war.⁴⁸ American intelligence, moreover, failed to detect prior to the war that Iraq had more than seventy chemical warheads for its Scud missiles.⁴⁹ UN inspectors helped to lift the shroud of secrecy surrounding the massive Iraqi nuclear weapons program. In January 1992, Iraq admitted having a uranium enrichment program to produce nuclear weapons. Baghdad had bought the components for as many as 10,000 centrifuges for the large-scale production of fissile material. Had Iraq's efforts not been interrupted by the war, Baghdad could have produced enough uranium for four bombs per year.⁵⁰ The GWAPS assessed that Iraq's nuclear weapons program was fiscally unconstrained, closer to fielding a nuclear weapon, and less vulnerable to destruction by precision bombing than U.S. intelligence realized before the war. The target list on 16 January contained two nuclear-related targets, but after the war, UN inspectors uncovered more than twenty sites involved in the nuclear weapons program, sixteen of which were described as "main facilities."⁵¹

CONTROVERSY IN WAR

In the midst of the air campaign against Iraq, major analytic disputes erupted between CIA civilian analysts and their uniformed counterparts in the Penta-

⁴⁵ Gordon and Trainor, *Generals' War*, 230.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁴⁷ Freedman and Karsh, *Gulf Conflict*, 220.

⁴⁸ Keaney and Cohen, *Revolution in Warfare?* 71.

⁴⁹ Gordon and Trainor, *Generals' War*, 183.

⁵⁰ Freedman and Karsh, *Gulf Conflict*, 321.

⁵¹ Keaney and Cohen, *Revolution in Warfare?* 67.

gon and in Schwarzkopf's Central Command (CENTCOM) staff. The initial conflict occurred over the battle damage assessment (BDA) of CENTCOM's efforts to destroy Iraqi ballistic missiles and their mobile launchers. The political pressure on Schwarzkopf to stop Iraqi missile attacks against Israel and Saudi Arabia was intense and caused him to divert substantial military resources against the problem and away from his primary concern to prepare the theater for a ground campaign to evict Iraqi troops from Kuwait. The second controversy between CIA and CENTCOM emerged over the BDA of Iraqi ground forces, which for Schwarzkopf was a barometer for determining the kick-off of the ground campaign.

A major rift in analysis emerged during the war between CIA and CENTCOM intelligence analysts over the BDA of Iraqi Scuds and mobile launchers. During the air war in January 1991, Schwarzkopf told a television interviewer that thirty fixed Scud sites had been destroyed and that his forces may have destroyed as many as sixteen of about twenty suspected mobile launchers. Behind the scenes though, CIA heatedly contested Schwarzkopf's BDA of the Iraqi missiles and launchers. CIA analysts argued that there was no confirmation that any mobile launcher had been destroyed.⁵²

The military continued to dispute CIA's analysis of the issue well after the war. Coalition aircrews reported destroying about eighty mobile launchers, while special operations forces claimed about twenty more, according to the GWAPS. Most of these reports stemmed from attacks against decoys or vehicles and equipment such as tanker trucks, which from a distance resembled Scud mobile launchers.⁵³ The GWAPS concluded after painstaking research that "there is no indisputable proof that Scud mobile launchers—as opposed to high-fidelity decoys, trucks, or other objects with Scud-like signatures—were destroyed by fixed-wing aircraft."⁵⁴ That judgment vindicates CIA's wartime analysis—largely conducted by its Office of Imagery Analysis—and belies the critical appraisals of CIA analysis made by Schwarzkopf and other senior commanders.

The controversy over the BDA of Iraqi ground forces had its origins in Schwarzkopf's determination that the transition from the air campaign to a ground war would occur at the point at which Iraqi ground forces had suffered a 50 percent attrition. By his own admission, the figure was solely a benchmark and not a "hard and fast rule" for gauging how much Iraqi combat power had been eroded by the air campaign. Schwarzkopf in his autobiography acknowledged that the 50 percent attrition of Iraqi order of battle was an arbitrary figure: "Pulling a number out of the air, I said I'd need fifty percent of the Iraqi occupying forces destroyed before launching whatever ground offensive we might eventually plan."⁵⁵

⁵² Atkinson, *Crusade*, 144–145.

⁵³ Keaney and Cohen, *Revolution in Warfare?* 73.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁵⁵ Schwarzkopf and Petre, *It Doesn't Take a Hero*, 319.

Nevertheless, Schwarzkopf reinforced the importance of this 50 percent figure in deliberations with his civilian policy masters, who were eager to achieve that mark and to kick off the ground war. As with many things though, the devil of this BDA benchmark was in the details. As the GWAPS points out, no one really knew what would constitute a measurable 50 percent attrition of Iraqi combat effectiveness. CENTCOM staffers merely applied the indicators to measurable military equipment such as tanks, armored personnel carriers, and artillery in the Kuwaiti theater of operations.⁵⁶

CENTCOM was assessing in February 1991 that the air campaign was close to achieving the 50 percent attrition benchmark, but CIA analysts were substantially more conservative in their BDA of Iraqi ground forces. CENTCOM, for example, estimated in mid-February that it had destroyed about 1,700 Iraqi tanks or nearly 40 percent of Iraqi armor in the theater. CIA analysts, however, by examining satellite photography for blown tank turrets and shattered hulls could only confirm about one-third destroyed.⁵⁷

CIA brought the discrepancy in BDA to the President's attention. In a PDB memorandum, it reported that CIA was unable to confirm all of CENTCOM's reported damage to Iraqi forces. CIA informally sent the PDB memorandum to Schwarzkopf who went into a rage, because he was about to make the decision to launch the ground attack. He viewed CIA as cynically hedging its bets and providing itself with an alibi in the event that the Iraqis inflicted heavy casualties on U.S. forces.⁵⁸

President Bush asked Scowcroft to investigate the BDA dispute. On 21 February, Webster along with his NIO for conventional forces, retired Army General David Armstrong, met with Powell, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney, and a CENTCOM representative. Armstrong argued that aside from the dispute over the numbers of tanks destroyed, CIA was not interested in usurping Schwarzkopf's command prerogatives. Armstrong reiterated that regardless of the tank tally, Iraq's army was "highly degraded."⁵⁹ Despite CIA's argument, Scowcroft realized that rejecting CENTCOM's BDA would signal a devastating loss of confidence in the military. He saw no political alternative but to side with CENTCOM in the dispute. Subsequently, Powell announced that CIA was not to conduct and report BDA, which set the precedent for the loss of that responsibility long after the Gulf War.⁶⁰

Notwithstanding policy-maker difference to CENTCOM's BDA, postwar analysis showed CIA analysis to be superior. The House Armed Services Committee concluded that Schwarzkopf's BDA on Iraqi tanks was exaggerated by perhaps as much as 134 percent. For example, postwar analysis confirmed that 166 tanks from three Republican Guard divisions were destroyed, while CENT-

⁵⁶ Keaney and Cohen, *Revolution in Warfare?* 40–41.

⁵⁷ Atkinson, *Crusade*, 345.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 347.

COM had estimated during the war that 388 had been destroyed.⁶¹ As had been the case in the BDA of ballistic missiles, CENTCOM's overestimation of the BDA of Iraqi ground forces was in large measure due to an overreliance on pilot reports to estimate destroyed Iraqi equipment. Pilots fly high, fast, and in hostile territory under enemy fire and have only fleeting moments to see bomb impacts. They have too small an opportunity to assess damage fairly. In contrast, satellite imagery taken after the battlefield dust has had a chance to settle is a more consistently accurate means of gauging BDA.

DRAWING A BALANCE SHEET AND FUTURE LESSONS

Before addressing the specifics of strategic intelligence performance during the Gulf War, a broad characterization of the quality of the intelligence picture at the disposal of Iraqi and American policy makers and military commanders is in order. The Iraqis, for their part, lacked an accurate strategic intelligence picture of the theater. They were blind as to the coalition force deployments that made possible the operational concept for nearly enveloping Iraqi forces in the Kuwaiti theater in the ground campaign. In marked contrast, the American intelligence community provided its consumers one of the broadest and clearest pictures of an adversary that any American president and high command has ever had in the nation's history. The United States, by Schwarzkopf's own admission during the war, had managed to identify Iraqi units "practically down to the battalion level."⁶² The House Armed Services Committee concluded that American intelligence had an excellent handle on the units, locations, and equipment of Iraqi forces.⁶³

That performance is hard to reconcile with the disparaging postwar assessments of CIA's performance made by Schwarzkopf and other CENTCOM commanders. One wonders what General George Patton would have given to have had a comparable picture of opposing German forces in Europe during World War II. These criticisms, moreover, neglect the fact that CIA is not designed to be a "combat support agency." CIA's charter has been to provide strategic-level intelligence primarily to civilian policy makers and not tactical intelligence to battlefield commanders. While military commanders are prone to fault CIA for perceived shortcomings, they appear reticent to fault their own military service intelligence shops and DIA whose charters are to provide tactical combat support to field commanders. Accordingly, DIA and military intelligence manpower for conducting tactical military analysis dwarfs that of CIA.

⁶¹ U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, "Intelligence Successes and Failures in Operations Desert Shield/Storm," August 1993, 4 and 31. Hereafter cited as House Report. CIA published an unclassified study "Operation Desert Storm: A Snapshot of the Battlefield" in September 1993, which graphically depicts the highlights of battle in the Kuwait theater of operations.

⁶² Powell, *My American Journey*, 474.

⁶³ House Report, 4.

The House Armed Services Committee noted that at the height of the Gulf War, about one-third of DIA's several thousand employees were assisting the war effort, a number that exceeds CIA's total analytic workforce.⁶⁴

These observations aside, what does a balance sheet of American strategic intelligence during the Gulf War look like? On the plus side, CIA's analysis gave warning of war days before Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. CIA analysis gauged fairly well the threat posed to Saudi Arabia by a potential follow-on Iraqi attack, an assessment that probably had a major influence on the Bush administration's decision to counter and reverse Iraq's military land grab. CIA accurately assessed the dim prospects for international economic sanctions compelling Saddam to withdraw his forces from Kuwait. The international sanctions that have been on Iraq since the Gulf War have yet to compel Saddam to comply with UN demands, and it is doubtful that sanctions would have forced him to vacate Kuwait without war.

In hindsight, CIA analysts—in many cases imagery analysts—scored high marks for making accurate BDA of ballistic missile capabilities and the attrition of Iraqi ground forces even though their analysis is much maligned in the common wisdom of the lessons of the war perpetuated by military commanders. A small group of CIA imagery analysts stood alone in informing civilian policy makers that, contrary to Schwarzkopf's extravagant claims, CENTCOM had not destroyed a single Scud missile or launcher during the war. CIA's BDA, which caused substantial controversy toward the eve of the ground war, was proved with postwar analysis to be much closer to ground truth than CENTCOM's inflated BDA of Iraqi forces.

Strategic intelligence in the Gulf War has a fair number of entries in the debit side of the balance sheet. The greatest weakness of CIA's performance was its lack of human assets inside the Iraqi regime able to report on Saddam's plans and intentions. As Christopher Andrew points out, "Though a limited number of agents had been recruited in Iraqi diplomatic and trade missions abroad, none seems to have had access to Saddam's thinking or to his inner circle."⁶⁵

The lack of human intelligence contributed to an inadequate assessment of the magnitude of Iraq's ballistic missile and weapons of mass destruction capabilities. The House Armed Services Committee judged that the intelligence community had a good estimate of Iraqi chemical weapons, while it was hard to assess the performance on the biological warfare program because the UN had extracted very little information from the Iraqis on that issue. A debate also continues as to how many ballistic missiles and mobile launchers Iraq could have preserved during the war. Strategic intelligence performed badly against Iraq's nuclear weapons program. The House Armed Services Committee report assessed that American intelligence was unaware of more than 50 percent of all major nuclear weapons installations in Iraq.⁶⁶ To fill in the intelligence

⁶⁴ House Report, 7.

⁶⁵ Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only*, 533.

⁶⁶ House Report, 30.

gaps created by poor human intelligence, moreover, CIA analysts resorted to mirror imaging, which led analysts to judge that Iraq would only go for a limited land grab against Kuwait instead of an all-out occupation.

The poor human intelligence performance is not a lone incident in CIA's history. CIA has traditionally performed poorly in human operations against the United States's most ardent adversaries. In evaluating the performance of human intelligence one should point out the distinction that many intelligence professionals and scholars make between secrets and mysteries. Secrets are facts that can be stolen by human intelligence collectors. Mysteries, on the other hand, are projections of the future that are less vulnerable to human collection and tend to be the bailiwick of analysis.⁶⁷ As Gates reflects on CIA's human intelligence operations for gaining access to the intentions of our adversaries during the cold war, "We were duped by double agents in Cuba and East Germany. We were penetrated with devastating effect at least once—Aldrich Ames—by the Soviets, and suffered other counterintelligence and security failures. We never recruited a spy who gave us unique political information from inside the Kremlin, and we too often failed to penetrate the inner circle of Soviet surrogate leaders."⁶⁸ CIA has done a better job of human operations against lesser nation-state threats and at stealing technical secrets, but has failed too often in the human intelligence game against the intentions of the most formidable risks to American security. With the benefits of time, hindsight, and independent review, the lack of robust human intelligence sources is likely to be found as one of the prime root causes of the intelligence failure witnessed on 11 September 2001 in New York and Washington.

In the post-cold war age, American security has a narrower margin for error because of technological advances that allow nation-states as well as nonstate actors to project force farther and weapons of mass destruction that allow them to strike with more devastating effects. In this environment, the United States needs to rectify the substantial shortcomings in human intelligence collection operations if it is to successfully deal with issues of war and peace in the future. CIA must reform and make qualitative improvements in its human intelligence operations to increase the odds that American policy makers and military commanders will have access to the thoughts and intentions of their adversaries. Even if the intentions of U.S. adversaries prove elusive and remain hidden, a critical task for human intelligence is to illuminate the policy pressures at play on foreign leaders and to help analysts narrow the range of ambiguity for American policy makers. Substantially improved human intelligence capabilities will help ensure that in the event of a future war with Iraq or any other adversary armed with ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) the United States has

⁶⁷ The author is indebted to Robert Gates for reminding him of this important distinction. For a discussion of the role of secrets and mysteries in intelligence estimates, see Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Peering into the Future," *Foreign Affairs* 73 (July/August 1994): 82–93.

⁶⁸ Robert M. Gates, *From the Shades: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 560.

the strategic intelligence needed to target WMD assets before these weapons are used against American troops and citizens.

A Gulf War legacy that must be redressed is the removal of a civilian check of military BDA in wartime. The civil-military intelligence controversies that emerged during the Gulf War were reminiscent of arguments during the Vietnam War, in which civilian CIA analysts were more objective than the politically and operationally tainted analyses coming from DIA and military intelligence services. Since the Gulf War, CIA has been relieved of any responsibility for BDA, and its once impressive imagery analytic capabilities have been stripped from the Agency and moved to the National Imagery and Mapping Agency, a designated combat support agency controlled by the Pentagon. To ensure that accurate and objective strategic intelligence reaches senior civilian policy makers, CIA needs to resume its exercise of independent imagery analysis and again be charged with critical reviews of military intelligence analyses in peace and war to avoid future policy debacles like those suffered—although increasingly forgotten—during the Vietnam conflict. The absence of an independent civilian analytic check on military intelligence threatens American civilian control of the military instrument for political purpose.*

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