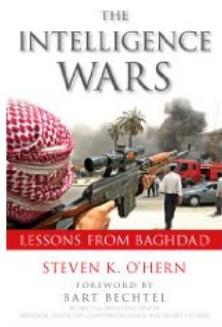




The Intelligence Wars: Lessons from Baghdad

Book Review by Robert J. Bebber



The Intelligence Wars: Lessons from Baghdad, Steven K. O'Hern, Prometheus Books (2008)

How is it the United States failed to see a growing insurgency within Iraq after a lightning fast victory over Saddam Hussein's military in 2003? In his book, Mr. Steven K. O'Hern does a valuable service by detailing America's intelligence failure. Despite the massive undertakings of the 9/11 Commission and other "post 9/11" intelligence reviews, major flaws still plague our intelligence system. These flaws place our uniformed service members at risk and undermine our national security.

Mr. O'Hern served as the director of the Strategic Counterintelligence Directorate (SCID) of Multi-National Forces-Iraq (MNF-I) for six months in 2005. The primary mission of the SCID was to identify and locate insurgents who were conducting attacks against Coalition Forces. It was mainly a human intelligence (HUMINT) operation, collecting information from Iraqis who were recruited and trained for the task.

O'Hern traces our intelligence failure in Iraq to three general areas: lack of emphasis and appreciation of HUMINT, the "stovepipe" structure of our intelligence community (i.e., agencies' keeping intelligence to themselves and not sharing it with one another), and the inability/unwillingness to acknowledge threats until after they have manifested. Much was made of the pre-9/11 era's "wall" between intelligence agencies in law enforcement and national security, who intentionally or by prohibition did not share intelligence. This failure led to the inability of analysts to "connect the dots," which might have better warned us of an impending terrorist attack. Despite the restructuring of America's intelligence community, O'Hern says we have failed to learn our lesson. "The single largest hindrance to effectively understanding and acting on intelligence is the intelligence community's collective failure to share information," (p. 208). Frequently, military intelligence units conducting operations do not share their information, creating overlap or even causing units to work at cross purposes.

In a highly readable style, O'Hern is quick to introduce readers to an underlying issue that directly affects the counterintelligence efforts in Iraq: the unwillingness of the military leadership at that time to acknowledge and respond to Iran's growing involvement. Senior intelligence officers were dismissive of the Iranian threat, instead focusing all efforts on the Sunni insurgents who, at the time, were responsible for most Coalition casualties. O'Hern points out that, within two years, Iranian backed groups would be causing most of the casualties. One need not be a geo-strategist to grasp that Iran would quickly assess a pro-American Iraq as potentially lethal to their regime. Given the speed with which the Coalition Forces toppled Bagdad, Iran had good reason to fear that they would be next. Iran began supporting various

Shiite groups in order to increase their influence and drive the Americans out, hoping to replicate the success of North Vietnam. Despite mounting evidence of Iranian involvement in attacks on Coalition Forces, O’Hern notes, military leaders in 2005 ordered the SCID to *not* focus on links between Iran and Shiite insurgent groups. This had disastrous costs in lives and resources, and almost certainly extended America’s military investment in Iraq. Direct acknowledgement by the senior military commanders that Iran was actively involved in the insurgency would not come until 2007.

Two entire chapters are devoted to HUMINT, with the intention to help the reader understand and appreciate its value. As someone who works in the signals intelligence community, this was both informative and illustrative. It speaks to the broader hubris of the American military’s reliance on technology. There is a cultural preference in the military for the “technological,” and the intelligence community is no different. The author notes that most who rise to senior levels in the military and intelligence community come from the technological side. He argues that in counterinsurgency operations, HUMINT is actually more important than other intelligence methodologies. O’Hern cites a number of returning military officers who wrote in professional journals that HUMINT was underutilized and needed more resources.

While it is certainly true that HUMINT is underutilized and under-resourced, there are several factors that make HUMINT less reliable than O’Hern would have us believe. HUMINT is easily susceptible to abuse and misunderstanding. One must always evaluate the motives of the source and be exceedingly careful since that information is usually provided in exchange for money. My own experience in Afghanistan showed that HUMINT also led to Coalition Forces being caught in the middle of tribal conflicts. It was not uncommon for local sources to finger rival tribes as being affiliated with insurgents and use the Coalition as a way to get revenge on their enemies. This can have tragic consequences for the local population and the military. O’Hern does not address this shortcoming.

He is, however, accurate on the need to change the culture of the intelligence community. It is hindered by professionals who place career advancement ahead of the mission. This creates a culture of risk-aversion and an unwillingness to share information. O’Hern advocates a practice of networking, similar to how law enforcement agencies combat gangs. Local, state and national agencies develop relationships horizontally and vertically in order to share information and coordinate activities. Military and civilian agencies can adopt the same practices in order to combat terrorism and insurgencies, both of which tend to be structured around networks. We would be fighting networks with networks. This is, perhaps, O’Hern’s greatest contribution to the ongoing dialogue of intelligence reform.

Bart Bechtel writes in the book’s Forward that it should be required reading for members of the military and policy-makers. Indeed, O’Hern has done a great service by providing the perspective of an intelligence officer recently returned from the field. It is critical for decision-makers to have a good understanding of whether their policies match their intentions and the consequences of their policies. Despite years of war and Herculean efforts toward reform of America’s intelligence community, it appears that we have much farther to go. *The Intelligence Wars* is one important step on that journey.

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