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Fixing Intelligence... Again

Matthew Collins

Winter was a cruel season for the US Intelligence Community. The Christmas bomb plot and suicide bombing of a CIA base in Afghanistan were high profile failures for our security services. What followed in the press was much accusation, counteraccusation, and ill informed conjecture. Cold war analysts used to say of old Soviet Union propaganda, those who speak do not know and those who know do not speak. The sentiment also applies to intelligence, whose dealings are understandably cloaked in a veil of secrecy. But when that veil is torn by failure, it is time for more public scrutiny of these activities.

The Christmas bombing was an analytic failure of the highest order. Familiar arguments about inter-agency cooperation and information sharing have been rehashed. Of course, analysts already have to sift through a voluminous mass of reporting already, so removing whatever stovepipes we have left will do little to solve this problem. The reality is that this was, first and foremost, a cognitive failure as were most strategic surprises, be they Pearl Harbor or Sept 11th. The president was correct in admitting as much, publicly. He should expect better and, indeed, deserves better.

The CIA bombing was an operational fiasco. While the public may be fascinated by this glimpse into the shadowy world of intelligence collection, this was both a blunder and a tragedy. Our spies are dedicated professionals who risk their lives regularly in service to their country. They are also human, and given to complacency and hubris. The first lesson given to intelligence collectors is never completely trust the source. Whether this basic tenant of tradecraft was ignored by these field officers or a bad plan was forced on them by blundering superiors, what followed was a tragedy that raises serious concerns about how we conduct such operations. The question, as posed by a well regarded former collector, is “Who was the juvenile ass that was running this operation¹?”

More troubling, perhaps, is the recent report published by the senior military intelligence officer in Afghanistan that after eight years of war, intelligence officers were struggling to remain relevant². A similar bombshell was released, albeit to a smaller audience about Iraq. In 2005, Colonel Derek Harvey, one of the most senior Iraq analysts at the Defense Intelligence Agency, wrote a blunt assessment of the state of the intelligence effort in Iraq, declaring that Iraq was not

¹ http://turcopolier.typepad.com/sic_semper_tyranis/2010/01/the-cia-and-the-passion-of-the-wogs.html

² http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/AfghanIntel_Flynn_Jan2010_code507_voices.pdf

the CIA or DIA's main priority³. He also outlined what needed to be done to fix the problem. While the memo was never officially published, it was quietly passed around the corridors of the Pentagon, reaching the architects of what we now remember as the Surge. The impact of MG Flynn's report on Afghanistan remains to be seen.

The public is right to be shaken by these events. But the understandably ill informed debate that followed has not addressed the acute, structural deficiencies of the intelligence community. These are not failures of technology or organizational structure, but the more banal problem of personnel policy. The hiring, promotion, and security clearance process has created a culture of comfortable, profitable mediocrity that continues to pervade the community.

Intelligence professionals occupy one of the most privileged of positions in the US government. After enduring the onerous hiring and security clearance process, employees have the closest thing to a lifetime employment contract as exists in the federal government. In 1996, a report published for Congress on intelligence reform noted that poor performing employees cannot be fired unless their failings endanger national security.⁴

A similar situation exists in the military. Intelligence is the quintessential "low density" specialty. Most specialties require a large number of junior officers and a progressively lower number of senior officers, ostensibly winnowing away poor performers. The intelligence specialty, by contrast, requires personnel to fill a number of staffs at so many levels with so many technical specialties that, while not every intelligence officer will make General, promotion rates are so high that almost everyone selected for intelligence can serve until retirement. As the Flynn report laments, this means underperforming intelligence officers are usually ignored, not fired.

The security clearance process has also skewed the hiring process and has carried over into the private sector. Defense contractors account for over half of all intelligence personnel, most of which were either former military or civilian intelligence officers. At a recent hiring event, a former military officer with a graduate degree from Oxford was turned away from an intelligence defense contractor for not having the right clearance. The company was, however, quite interested in a former enlisted service member with an intelligence background and high level clearance. Without demeaning either's service, it is reasonable to question a hiring process that favors a community college graduate over a Rhodes Scholar for a job that primarily involves reading and writing.

The clearance process also creates an almost perverse incentive to keep underperforming and even malevolent individual in the system. The disgraced former CIA Executive director Dusty Foggo shows the extreme limits of how far a clearance can be parlayed. In a legally brilliant and horribly unethical use of the "Graymail defense," Foggo turned a 20 year sentence for corruption into 3 years by threatening to undo a career's worth of covert operations. To add insult to injury, his pre trial agreement reinstates his clearance after he is released from prison. After a Major

³ Rowan Scarborough, *Sabotage: America's Enemies within the CIA* (Regenry Publishing: Washington DC 2007), pp 199-210

⁴ http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/congress/intel_prep_c21/index.htm Pg 95

with a secret clearance killed over a dozen soldiers at Ft Hood, one can reasonably question how reliable the clearance process is for determining someone's reliability.

Operating as they do, under the necessary veil of secrecy and with their security clearances ensconcing them from meaningful accountability, we should not be surprised that the community produces mostly mediocrity with flashes of brilliance and ineptitude. An organization's culture is built around the behaviors it rewards or punishes, and we have seen little of either from our intelligence community. Unless something can be done to shake up this culture of mediocrity, it is only a matter of time before our next season of spectacular failure.

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