

“INTELLIGENCE FAILURES”

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A PROUD TRADITION?**

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It is not unusual for intelligence agencies in democratic countries to take the rap for foreign policy blunders, but these have been tough times indeed for the CIA, MI6, and the other leading members of the Western [intelligence community](#).

Following the Blix-ification of David A. Kay and the discrediting of [Tony Blair's famous “45 minutes.”](#) US and UK politicians have been lining up like buzzards at a bus crash to demand explanations for how the CIA and MI6 managed to *overestimate* Iraq's WMDs, *underestimate* WMDs in Libya, Iran, and North Korea, and *completely miss* the role of Pakistan (and perhaps China) in franchising nuclear technology. Similar concerns are also being muttered in France, Germany, Israel, and Russia, which all reportedly reached similar conclusions about Saddam's stockpiles.

Before this latest flurry, there was also the flap over NSA/MI6 [spying on UN Security Council members](#), the [bogus Niger uranium documents](#), the failure to track down Bin Laden, and, of course the mother of all intelligence failures, [9/11](#).

One might indeed have hoped for slightly more accuracy from all these countries, at least with respect to Iraq. After all, Saddam did not acquire **his** WMDs from Pakistan. Except for Israel, it was these same countries, plus the US and the UK, that were largely responsible for providing him WMD technologies in the first place.

In any case, under acute pressure, President Bush has now courageously decided to appoint yet another Presidential Commission, one of a half dozen that he has created to shuttle fundamental policy issues to one side. And the nine-lived, unabashed George Tenet has even resorted to [defending the CIA in public](#) – a daunting task, given his track record. Evidently he must have indispensable knowledge of something, even if it is not WMDs or terrorism.

What can we conclude from this fiasco other than empty placebos like “try harder,” “get better sources,” or Tenet’s prosaic summary – “we were not completely right, but we were not completely wrong”?

If such errors were randomly distributed, one would expect that these agencies would occasionally drop the ball. But their long-run track record actually reveals that such monumental intelligence failures are nothing new. Indeed, there seems to have been a systematic bias toward producing them.

THE DISMAL TRACK RECORD

On matters of signals intelligence, where it just comes down to, say, monitoring international wire transfers or Chinese conversations with Pakistani proliferators, presumably the errors have been less frequent – though even there, a variety of new communications technologies are making the task much more difficult. And on the operations side, they may be good at the occasional “dirty trick.” But even there, of course, there have been any number of screwups.

But the track record on what we might call “strategic insight” has been downright dreadful. As the following list shows, where the signals intelligence is weak and real political or economic insight is called for, our “intelligence” agencies seem to have missed almost *every critical strategic turning point* in recent history. Like the proverbial wiz kid, they are “very smart and (almost) always wrong.”

Given this sorry track record, which the UK’s MI6 appears to have duplicated, we just may be tempted to agree with the UK’s Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, who once snapped, “Why don’t we just exchange secrets every week with (our enemies) , and skip all the fucking guesswork?”

In the case of US agencies, in addition to the recent failures already cited , there was also:

1. The 1998 [bombings](#) of the Chinese embassy in Serbia and the pharmaceutical plant in the Sudan;
2. The failure to predict the acquisition of nuclear weapons by India and Pakistan in the 1990s;
3. The failure to predict Iraq’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait;
4. The failure to anticipate the rapid demise of Portuguese colonialism and South African apartheid, and the Soviet Union in the 1980s;
5. The spurious “second missile gap” – the overestimation of Soviet nuclear weapons strength in the early 1980s;

6. The famous October 1978 estimate by the Defense Intelligence Agency, three months before the Shah of Iran's fall, that "the Shah is expected to remain actively in power over the next ten years;"
7. Innumerable miscalculations with the prospects for Communist victory in Vietnam;
8. The failure to anticipate that the Soviets would deploy nuclear weapons in Cuba in 1962;
9. The notorious expectation that the Cuban masses would rise up to support the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion;
10. The spurious "first missile gap" in the late 1950s;
11. The original WMD underestimate – the failure to predict the Soviet Union's acquisition of nuclear weapons in the late 1940s. December 1941's Pearl Harbor doesn't count, since there were no intelligence agencies around yet – one of the reasons for establishing them was to avoid such blunders.

At the risk of short-circuiting President Bush's new Commission, let me suggest that much of the systematic bias toward such strategic blunders derives from deep-seated institutional problems. Among the key culprits:

- The pool of talent that is attracted to careers in intelligence is pretty thin to begin with – Exhibit A being Sr. Tenet himself. My hunch is that if this fine fellow were forced to compete in the private sector, he would wind up as the Director of Competitive Strategy for a very small casino in Nevada. Over time, as the agencies have become larger and more bureaucratic, this problem has no doubt increased -- "intelligence analysis" has become reduced to lifeless, formulaic process, and those who rise to the top and survive are likely to be politically-astute bureaucrats, not creative analysts.
- That diminishing talent pool has been scattered across more than a dozen warring bureaucracies, including CIA, DIA, NSA, NIMC, and the various service intelligence units. This makes it even more difficult for any individual agency's boss to stand up and resist political pressures.
- The permeation of the community with "closed source" mythology. As a representative of the journalist ("open source") approach to understanding the world, I'd love to see a footrace on any given issue between the agencies, with all their secret sources, and a handful of top flight investigative reporters.

Unfortunately, these problems are unlikely to be solved by one or two commissions or Congressional investigations, or in just a few years. Even a public firing of Tenet, while deeply gratifying to many people, would only be a superficial response. For the foreseeable future, the only real antidote may be to elect a President who has some real depth to his own understanding of foreign policy, and yet is also astute enough to realize that the country is ill-served by having the intelligence agencies become lap-dogs for his preconceived ideas.

(For a helpful if dated history of the miserable track record of British and American intelligence agencies over the long haul, the interested reader is referred to Phillip Knightly, The Second Oldest Profession. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986)).



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