



IT'S A CULTURAL THING:

THOUGHTS ON A TROUBLED CIA, PART ONE

by Garrett Jones

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Since retiring from the CIA in 1997 after almost twenty years as a case officer ("spy runner," "asset handler," or "agent recruiter," to those outside the business), I have followed the Agency's failures and successes through the media. The Agency has probably never been as close to termination as an organization as it is now. Numerous presidential commissions and Congressional committees are currently engaged in fault- and fact-finding about recent Agency missions. These groups by their nature are concerned either with the details of individual operations or with sweeping reforms in structure and organization.

The director of the CIA (DCIA), Porter Goss, will need to address these specific issues as the Agency tries to move forward, but one of the repeated themes in these reports is that the Agency must change its "culture"--the day-to-day details of its operation. Much of the Agency's culture is positive and a normal outcome of the nature of its business. Even some of the culture that outsiders find hard to understand may be healthy and useful. But some of the Agency's culture does have to change: a few features that were always counterproductive have now become intolerable. This article identifies some of these specific cultural problems and offers possible remedies.

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

The Directorate of Intelligence (DI) is where the intelligence analysts live in the CIA. The job of an intelligence analyst is to take all-source raw intelligence reports (human, satellite, communications intercepts, etc.) and open-source information and then distill this mass of information into a finished intelligence product. The finished product should provide the U.S. policymaker with the best information and interpretations of the foreign policy issues that confront him or her. The DI's failure to properly evaluate and process the intelligence information on Iraq's WMD illustrates several points that recur in DI products. These recurring practices are sources of continuing confusion and unhappiness for the DI's intelligence consumers.

"Do you have anything to add?"

I have seen far too many DI products that simply summarize publicly available information and/or attach so many caveats in answering policymakers' questions that the answers are effectively without value. It may be useful for busy policymakers to have a summary of publicly available information, but such a summary is not an analytical judgment on current intelligence. Neither is answering a specific question with an array of equally possible outcomes. While it may be human nature and bureaucratically wise for the DI to try to give an extensive answer to every question posed, it is also intellectually dishonest and a disservice to the policymaker. "We don't know" can be a valuable answer, even if it is not what the questioner wants to hear. The DI should be required to change its processes to require it to make an accountable judgment that it has sufficient intelligence reporting available to make a meaningful analytical judgment on any question posed to it.

Words of Estimative Probability

When writing analytical judgments, a DI analyst can use any word s/he wishes--"likely," "possibly," etc.--to estimate the probability of an event's occurring. This is imprecise at best. This problem could easily be overcome by acting on a proposal made by Sherman Kent, the man who invented the profession of intelligence analyst, which the DI rejected at the time it was first made. He observed that my "maybe" might be the same as your "probably," and someone else's "certainly" may be my "probably". To prevent confusion, only certain words describing probability should be permitted in intelligence reporting. These allowed words would be defined on a numeric scale of 1-10 or 0-100. As part of the intelligence product, these allowed words and their numerical values would be made known to the consumer, so that the analyst and the consumer can

communicate precisely. The simplicity and clarity of the idea should refine both the analyst's intent and the consumer's understanding of analytical judgments.

Analysts in Operations

The CIA formed the Counterterrorist Center (CTC) in the mid 1980s to bring together DI analysts with specialist knowledge of a subject matter and case officers collecting on the terrorist target. It was originally an effort to better target and exploit assets across the Directorate of Operations' traditional geographic boundaries. (For the most part, the DO is broken down along geographical lines, such as the Middle East, Africa, etc.) This was a good idea and worked well as originally conceived. There have since been a number of intelligence centers (IC) set up to cover several different multinational subjects.

From its founding in 1947, one of the CIA's cardinal rules was that intelligence should be collected by a different group of people than those who analyzed what the intelligence meant and its value. The CIA's founders understood that a collector of intelligence invested far too much professional and personal energy into a source or a method to be able to evaluate the resulting intelligence in an unbiased manner. In fact, when the old CIA headquarters was first opened, the hallway doors between the DI and the DO were permanently locked. DI and DO personnel were not to mix. The DI had no stake in how much time and money the DO had expended in collecting a piece of intelligence. Their only task was to evaluate the accuracy and importance of the collected intelligence.

Unfortunately, it has become common practice in many ICs for analysts to both direct the collection of intelligence, and because of their training, make the first cut on the meaning and value of the intelligence. When it comes time for the DI to produce a formal product, among the first people the DI sound out on what the intelligence means are the analysts responsible for its collection. This is a fundamental error and may be at least partly responsible for the failures surrounding the Iraqi WMD question. This is not to say that collectors' opinions on the intelligence should not be considered: they often have subtle and meaningful insight into the situation. However, their opinions should be one data-point among many, not the first draft of a National Intelligence Estimate.

The current practice is a profound violation of analytical tradecraft. If you are going to collect, collect; if you are going to analyze, analyze. Having analysts involved in the collection process is a good idea, but having invested themselves in collection, they must not be involved in the subsequent analysis.

Reports Officers

Reports Officers (ROs, sometimes called Collection Management Officers), work for the DO, but their primary job is to interface between the DO collectors and the first-line intelligence consumers, who are for the most part DI analysts. ROs are the intermediaries between collectors and consumers. While they are not required to have experience or specialization in the given subject or geographical area, they are tasked to give the DO collectors feedback from the intelligence consumers on the value of the raw intelligence reports, possible gaps in coverage and to identify new areas of interest. Conversely, ROs are to tell the consumers of the reliability and past performance of the DO sources and provide them a general sense of the access the source has to the intelligence targets. ROs are also supposed to ensure that the clerical details of a raw intelligence report are handled correctly: ensuring that the correct addresses are on the report, that an up-to-date source description is used, and that they are the last editorial check to ensure the wording of the report conforms to Agency style.

It appears from media reports on the Iraqi WMD issue that the interface role of the ROs is completely broken. Neither analysts nor case officers are being well served by the current system.

It is time to start over and redesign the RO function. The interface role between the collectors and the consumer has to be done in a different way. The clerical part of the RO's job is non-controversial and clearly needs to be done. Whether moving the interface part of the job to the DI and retaining the clerical part in the DO, or creating some independent review panel, there has to be a better way. If due regard is given to the collector/analyst problem, the RO interface function may be an excellent task for DI analysts to take on when they are seconded to the DO.

DIRECTORATE OF OPERATIONS

In the DO, some things have been broken for years, and it is about time they were fixed.

The Not-So-Meritorious Promotion System

In a bureaucracy such as the DO, the promotion system is supposed to do two things well, reward past superior performance and select the people who will advance through the organization and become the future senior officers. In the DO, it works this way: until GS-13, it is pretty much pass/fail. (This is for case officers in the DO; it varies over other Directorates and job titles.) There is no competition to speak of, if you show up and do the job the promotions will come. (The DO had to do this for retention reasons, given how expensive it is for a family to live in the Washington D.C. area.) At GS-14 on up, it becomes competitive, "sort of." The way it works is there are two lists; the first list is that of every one who is eligible for promotion and recommended for promotion by their respective component chief. The second list is everyone else who is eligible for promotion. Both lists are ranked by merit, i.e.; performance to date, from one to whatever. The first list is then matched to the number of available promotions and those folks are promoted. Generally, the recommended list is roughly the same size as the available number of promotions. If there are any positions left after the first list has been promoted, then starting with number one, folks on the second list are promoted until all the promotions are filled. Promotions to the Senior Intelligence

Service (SIS, the grades above GS-15) do not even go through the motions of a merit system. The component chiefs take their picks to the DDO (Deputy Director for Operations) and then battle it out over who has the most influence with him this week.

Where there are competitive lists (GS-14 and GS-15); the two lists are not ranked against each other. The first dozen or so folks on the not-recommended list may be as good as or better than anyone on the recommended list, but they will not be considered for promotion until the recommended list has been promoted. This often happens. This is not fair, but you could say that many things in life are not fair. Unfortunately, being unfair is not the worst part of this system. The real problem with this system is, especially at the SIS level, that whatever kind of management and leadership that you have had before, you will have again. I have read many articles written about the CIA and the DO in the last few years, and in all of them, no one has ever called for more of the same. More of the same is what the DO's promotion system fosters. If you liked the past, you are going to love the future.

The quickest way to change things is to have one list for promotions above GS-13, including the SIS levels. Everyone is ranked by merit on the same list and the top performers on the list are promoted. A few folks with new ideas, uncomfortable and threatening ideas to the status quo, may be just what the DO needs. At this point, it cannot hurt to try.

"They Did What?" How the Agency Does Not Learn from its Mistakes

Whether you call them after-action reports or lessons-learned studies, these usually consist of two main parts: identify what your organization has done well or poorly, and then disseminate what you think you have learned to everyone involved. This is an inarguably good idea, but the CIA--and the DO in particular--has yet to buy into it. The DO does not require lessons-learned study, has no guidelines on how to produce one, no personnel responsible for preparing them, and no mechanism for routinely disseminating such a product if one were produced. When an outside body such as the Inspector General does undertake a review or investigation, the results are normally shared with only a few high-ranking individuals. These select readers are often the people responsible for the failure in the first place and have the most at stake in concealing their errors.

If you are neither trying to learn from your mistakes nor circulating information on how to do better to the *entire* organization, you cannot improve performance. True, such a standardized review will require a commitment of resources and may embarrass otherwise good people. Consider however, the resources it will take to repair a disaster. Isn't a little constructive criticism good for everyone? Perhaps one could begin by reviewing generally acknowledged mistakes as a normal course of business. If that proves useful, then the practice could be extended. As far as potential security problems in such a process, since everyone in the DO has high-level security clearances, posting a suitably redacted report available to all in the DO on a classified system is a trivial problem.[1] This is a simple idea that should have been implemented a longtime ago.

Worldwide Presence vs. Worldwide Capability

Within the Agency in the early 1990s, two contrasting schools of thought arose about the number of overseas stations the DO should maintain. One school of thought is that the DO should be on the ground as a permanent presence in as many different locations as possible. Another school believed the DO should conserve its resources, have a permanent presence in only a few key locations, and then be prepared to surge into other geographical locations on a temporary as needed basis. These competing premises are ones upon which reasonable people can disagree. The Agency opted for the worldwide capability model and during the following years, many DO stations were closed overseas. I believe there is a qualitative difference in the effectiveness and reliability of collection operations that are based on a permanent presence. I have participated in "surge" operations to cover breaking intelligence targets, and they are inherently risky, from both counterintelligence and reliability standpoints. They are also very expensive in personnel and money. In a "surge", operation you are trying to create in days what would normally take years of careful work. This is done by throwing money and personnel at the problem. You can get a way with this from time to time, but eventually this is going to turn around and bite you. I would much prefer to take the long view and carefully vet my collection operations. I believe intelligence collection is about quality, and quality operations take time and preparation. (Attempting to cover this gap by using foreign liaison services creates another set of problems, which will be addressed in part 2 of this article.)

A second reason that I prefer a worldwide presence is the stark fact that many of the Agency's best sources over the years have been volunteers of one sort or the other. It is human to believe that talent and hard work will see you through, but sometimes you can also get lucky. In the past, simply put, the Agency was not very hard to find. Most embassies had a DO officer immediately available and extensive preparations had been set in place to securely handle the genuine volunteer with valuable intelligence. With the closure of many stations, this is simply no longer the case in many places. To win the lottery, you have to buy a ticket. In this case, the price of a ticket is a station on the ground.

Toxic People and Due Diligence

In the past, the Agency has had a reputation of attracting and retaining some very "different" people. I have worked with a few of them, they have run the gamut from individuals who are astonishingly creative and a joy to be around, to those of whom one wonders how they made it to adulthood. In the agency, this second group are known as "toxic people." The Agency has a history of tolerating "toxic people" in positions of authority. The theory expounded at the Agency has always been that despite the damage they do to those around them, these "toxic" individuals are brilliant and the results they produce justify their retention and promotion.

In the past, the Agency may have been strong enough to tolerate "toxic" people and the damage they caused to careers and morale, but I do not believe that this is any longer the case. The current DO workforce will no longer suffer in silence at what

they perceive as arbitrary and abusive treatment by senior officers. With Congress looking over the DCIA's shoulder more than ever before, the DCIA and the DDO must demonstrate "due diligence" in their selections of individuals to fill senior positions. The days of senior DO officers with poor people skills and contempt for subordinates are over. If the DCIA does not take note of this change, it will come back to haunt him.

AGENCY-WIDE REFORMS AND PROBLEMS

Counterintelligence and Connectivity

Since 9/11, both the executive and the Congress have mandated that all elements within the intelligence community must be interconnected and must share information about possible terrorist threats. This is a reasonable reaction to the information fragmentation that was the norm among the intelligence community before 9/11. Unfortunately, there has not been any consideration of the unintended effects of the mandated change in procedures. In the intelligence business, information security equals inefficiency. Raise the efficiency with which you can share information and you automatically increase the possibility that information can be compromised. This has always been a conflict in the intelligence profession: sharing the information risks revealing its existence and endangering the source of the intelligence. The arrival of interconnected networks and computer databases has exponentially raised the damage a hostile mole can do to the intelligence community. In the past, a hostile mole could steal the papers on his desk; now he can steal his own work and everyone else's that is in the various database to which he has access. To paraphrase Paul Redmond, one of the CIA's counterintelligence gurus: "It is an actuarial certainty that there is a hostile mole operating within the intelligence community at any given time." The next mole is going to clean the intelligence community out because of interconnectivity. There are some computer security steps that can be taken, but bluntly, they are hard to do, expensive, and do not work well. This is a cost and an unforeseen consequence of interconnectivity within the intelligence community. It is a matter of when, not if. If the policymakers are not warned early and often, then the intelligence community leadership will deserve the outraged criticism it will receive.

Falling Through the Cracks

Since 9/11, all the components of the intelligence community have significantly redirected their efforts towards counterterrorism. Informed rumor (RUMINT, or rumor intelligence, as it is called) has it that of the FBI's 12,000 or so special agents, only 4,600 are working criminal cases, the rest working against counterterrorism, domestic security, and counterintelligence targets. One can wonder whether keeping the FBI out of the criminal enforcement business to such an extent is a good thing. It was comforting having the bureau focusing on organized crime, international gangs, and white-collar crime.

The classified personnel numbers at the CIA no doubt reflect a similar shift of resources. This means that subjects and areas to which the CIA used to devote resources have been downgraded in coverage. This means we are going to be surprised. No government handles surprise well, and national intelligence agencies are always found to be guilty. Neither the public nor Congress are going to understand it when the inevitable surprise happens. The CIA has taken some bad hits recently in this regard, and a few more maybe fatal. Generally, the public handles the truth fairly well, even if it is not what they want to hear. The DCIA or the new National Intelligence Director need to craft a program of informing the public of what it can reasonably expect in the short- and medium-term from the CIA. No intelligence service wants to tell the world where it is weak, and it will have to be a careful performance by whoever assumes the task. The alternative to reasonable expectations may well be a complete loss of public trust and a subsequent crippling of the CIA and the intelligence community.

Notes

[1] See Dan Baum, "Battle Lessons," *New Yorker*, Jan. 17, 2005, for the Army's mechanisms to share "lessons learned."

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