THE FUTURE AND SURVIVAL OF AMERICAN INTELLIGENCE

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How can the Intelligence Community recover, adapt, and advance in the current era with these new enemies?

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11th, American intelligence has been a significant focus of the media and of American foreign policy. Intelligence has more recently garnered attention, however, due to its highly publicized and widespread failure. An October article in the New York Times highlighted one aspect of the seemingly never-ending failures of the intelligence community (IC): the loss of informants (Barnes & Goldman, 2021). A recent release from a counterintelligence mission center reported a great loss of intelligence agents, some to compromise and many who have died. This article reveals just one aspect of the current state of the American intelligence community: the world is changing, and it appears the IC cannot keep up. Since the establishment of an organized intelligence community in the 1940s, the enemies, missions, and resources available to the IC have changed frequently and quickly (Office of the Director of National Intelligence). Adaptability has proved to be the most valuable asset to intelligence and foreign policy officials, and with this report, it appears this asset is needed now more than ever. If intelligence is to continue being one of the greatest assets to policymakers and the military, it must become more adaptable to both the agent and the enemy.

To fully comprehend the abilities and mission of the intelligence community, one must understand how it has evolved to where it is today. The oldest civilian intelligence branch, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, was created in 1945 with three core tenets: analysis, intelligence policy and coordination, and analytical outreach. From this bureau spawned the greater intelligence community, including the Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency (Office of the Director of National Intelligence). Intelligence guided the US military and presidential administrations through major historical events such as the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and of course, the attacks of September 11. But how did intelligence procedure and techniques take shape during these events?

The Cold War saw the development and significance of human intelligence (HUMINT) coming from all human sources, and primarily the success of the Russian KGB (U.S. Naval War College, 2021). Betrayal was seen early in the history of the Intelligence Community, occurring all too often during the Cold War period. However, as the war progressed, the United States acquired its own bloc of spies and crucially pivoted towards technological-driven intelligence (Sulick, 2014). Covert action was the next important development for the United States, described in Michael J. Sulick’s “Guide to Study of Intelligence” as “a middle option between diplomacy and middle action… intended to hide American involvement (2014).”
In the post-Cold War era, “the United States had a defining national strategy based upon the clear and present global threat of an expansionist Soviet Empire,” (Weinrod, 1996). With the Soviet threat came the concern of more compromised intelligence, thus prioritizing the acquisition of trustworthy counterintelligence. In the Gulf War, the United States and its coalition of allies created a program with heavy focus on “HUMINT, electronic intelligence, reconnaissance, and analysis (Cordesman, 1994).” Intelligence satellites were crucial to the electronic intelligence used in the Gulf War. Prior to 9/11, counterterrorism efforts depended on after-the-fact intelligence gathered from attacks such as the World Trade Center Bombing, the Manila Airlines Plot, and the East Africa Embassy Bombings (9/11 Commission, 2004). In the 20 years since 9/11, American intelligence has been preoccupied by the war in Iraq, the search for Osama Bin Laden across the Middle East, and the recent fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban. But what exactly is our nation’s current intelligence strategy and who are our enemies now?

The Central Intelligence Agency recently announced the creation of a new China Mission Center, intended to “further strengthen (the CIA’s) collective work on the most important geopolitical threat we face in the 21st Century, an increasingly adversarial Chinese government (Barnes, 2021).” Chinese technology is constantly advancing, and with a rocky history of breaches and turned agents, China is one of the Intelligence Community’s, and Biden’s, primary threats. The creation of this new mission center means redistributing resources within the Intelligence Community to optimize understanding of China. But China is not our only target—CIA head William Burns has made clear that Russia is not far behind China on his agenda. Russia has a history of being “disruptive” for the agency (Barnes, 2021). It appears that Russia has played an important role in the recent intelligence failures mentioned in the report.

How can the Intelligence Community recover, adapt, and advance in the current era with these new enemies? As mentioned in nearly every critique of the IC, adaptability is key. Adaptability must first include adaptation of the Intelligence Community organization, informant programs, and intelligence collection procedures. As seen with the development of the China Mission Center, the organizations within the various agencies and branches must reflect the prioritization of the subjects of interest. New organizations may also need the addition of resources, ranging from changes in technology to personnel additions. With the informant programs, the Intelligence Community must recover from the hefty losses of informants to American opposition. This should come in the form of increased recruitment, new training programs tailored to the strengths and weaknesses of countries like China and Russia, and developments of safer practices to prevent further losses of officers. Lastly, intelligence collection procedures must match their targets. Our nation’s focus right now is on Russia and China, each of which have different tactics, skills, and weaknesses in their own intelligence practices. Though this may require an entirely new approach to training and acquisition, these efforts are necessary to protect the homeland and her agents abroad. Overall, the Intelligence Community must adapt their current practices and their future programs to ensure the safety of their own agents and the optimization of intelligence gathering abroad. New enemies bring new challenges, and the IC must meet these new levels of expectations.


National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, Law Enforcement, Counterterrorism, and Intelligence Collection in the United States Prior to 9/11 (n.d.).


