

Review - Reducing Uncertainty: Intelligence Analysis and National Security

Written by Kate Drew

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KATE DREW, JUL 11 2015

Reducing Uncertainty: Intelligence Analysis and National Security

By Thomas Fingar

Stanford University Press, 2011

Books and movies often portray U.S. intelligence as a salacious world of secrets and spies, evoking images of Liam Neeson scaling buildings and alighting moving trains. Heroes and villains at the same time, these characters warp some of the most crucial government agencies until little truth is left, but thrilling stories remain. For Thomas Fingar, the intelligence community is much less sexy.

In his book, *Reducing Uncertainty*, Fingar provides an accessible portrayal of the U.S. intelligence community, based on his long history of experiences in the field. *Reducing Uncertainty* tries to explain the roles and responsibilities of those within the intelligence sphere, with emphasis on the many changes that have occurred over time—particularly Post-Cold War, and then Post-9/11. In this feat, he is successful—systematically taking the reader through the inner workings of intelligence, explaining the assignments analysts take on, the difficulties many face, and their goals in producing intelligence products.

Fingar's characters are fluid, often forced to adapt, but never lose sight of their purpose. Told in the first person, and strewn with anecdotes, *Reducing Uncertainty* is successful in making an obtuse subject relatable, though with a trace of arrogance. As former deputy director of national intelligence for analysis, a position he held while also chairman of the national intelligence council, Fingar himself is well aware that he is equipped to tackle the complexities within the often misunderstood realm of U.S. intelligence.

During the 20th century, national security efforts were focused on thwarting threats from other world powers—Russia during the Cold War, and other state actors in the years after. Following 9/11, intelligence collection and analysis became more difficult due to the increased presence of non-state actors, which are harder to pin down. Terrorist organizations operate outside traditional bounds, are tough to penetrate, and their actions can be unpredictable.

He stresses “a shift in focus from the security of the nation to the safety of individual citizens,” (p. 59) after 9/11, which in turn, led to changes in the demands put on, expectations from, and abilities of the intelligence community. This shift is evident, Fingar notes, in the critical response to Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab's botched attempt to detonate his “underpants bomb” on Christmas Day 2009—a plot many Americans felt should have been thwarted by intelligence (p. 59-60). The Nigerian citizen's suicide mission failed instead when his device did not detonate properly on a flight from Amsterdam to Detroit, which he boarded without difficulty.

The ultimate goal for intelligence is to provide insights and signposts for policy makers, providing as much color as possible, in order to facilitate better decisions, Fingar writes (p. 99). He debunks the myth that the intelligence community operates as a rogue elephant, running rampant, and pursuing its own agenda. For many Americans, the Snowden leaks and revelations that the U.S. government was spying on its citizens raised serious privacy concerns, but Fingar argues there is nothing to fear. “We want to know the ultimate destination of terrorists who have completed

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their training in South Asia and departed for Europe or North America, not what one fifteen-year-old thinks about another's boyfriend," he writes (p. 49).

Fingar notes the limits that constrain the intelligence community and the sometimes unrealistic expectations it faces. He compares intelligence analysts to baseball players. "We never have batted 1.000 and never will, but getting it mostly right, most of the time, in time to shape, prevent, or prepare for developments with the potential to affect our nation, our citizens, and our interests is and will remain our most important goal and criterion for success," Fingar writes (p. 18).

For him, the intelligence community plays an important role, but the fruits of its labor are often kept secret. In Washington, Fingar argues, there is only "policy success" or "intelligence failure" (p. 51). This is a popular notion within the intelligence community, meaning that its successes—often classified—are attributed to politicians, while its mistakes are dragged out in the press. He does a good job in conveying just how little the public knows, and what it often fails to comprehend. Americans will never know how many terrorist attacks were prevented, no one will tell them—but the flaws in the 2002 Iraq WMD estimate are quite well known.

To sharpen his main point—that the *raison d'être* for intelligence is to provide insight—Fingar provides examples from his own career. At times he appears quite taken with himself, which is a bit unpleasant, but these anecdotes help to make the subject more relatable. Fingar succeeds here, in particular, in his discussion of National Intelligence Estimates, or NIEs. Estimates are often the subject of scrutiny, particularly when declassified, given their weight as the intelligence community's "most authoritative written judgments". NIEs pull together its judgments on a particular issue or situation.

Fingar plunges into the failures that surrounded the Iraq WMD estimate, and his personal experience in attempting to avoid the same mistakes in the 2007 estimate on Iran's nuclear program. He constructs a narrative detailing the missteps reflected in the 2002 estimate. The ninety-two-page estimate on Iraq, as Fingar explains, was produced in less than three weeks, prepared in the midst of the Bush Administration's eagerness to validate a war, and based on faulty intelligence. "The Iraq WMD estimate was the product of flawed data, flawed analysis, and flawed procedures," Fingar writes (p. 166). It became a talking point for critics, driving the need for the fallible yet determined intelligence community to get it right the next time—which came in 2007. "We had to get this one right, and we had to be seen to have gotten it right. The stakes were that high," Fingar writes (p. 198).

In the eighteen months prior to preparing an estimate on Iran, Fingar implemented a number of changes to analytic tradecraft, including the introduction of a course called "Analysis 101", aimed at making sure analysts across agencies received uniform training. When he agreed to launch the 2007 NIE, Fingar writes, he felt confident that the changes were taking hold (p. 199-200). Although the tale is quite personal and dotted with pride, he warrants at least some of the accolades he gives himself.

The 2007 Iran estimate, which was subject to several drafts and reviewed by a number of agencies, did not receive the praise that Fingar hoped it would, but it also did not draw serious criticism—a feat difficult to accomplish in Washington. "Washington can be a very tough town, and I probably should have been attentive to the dogs that did not bark," Fingar writes, adding that absent criticism and lacking public exoneration are tantamount to praise (p. 214-215).

In his "Tale of Two Estimates", as the penultimate chapter is titled, Fingar manages to convey the complex nature of intelligence work—from the embarrassment of failure to the overwhelming drive to succeed. The intelligence community is not a collection of spies, but a collection of government agencies—tasked with duties like the rest, though with arguably more difficult assignments and enormous expectations. It is made up of highly skilled government workers, all doing their best—and trying to come as close to 1.000 as possible.

Despite his ego, Fingar's book is a comprehensive, yet relatable, portrayal of U.S. intelligence and its role. Policy makers are customers, and intelligence is a product. The analysts do the work. It may not be as exciting as watching Liam Neeson, but Fingar's description is honest.

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Kate Drew is an M.A. candidate at the Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute, where she is pursuing a dual degree in Journalism and International Relations. She completed her undergraduate degree in Finance and International Business at Villanova University in 2010, and worked in the five years following as an Editorial Analyst at Value Line Publishing. Her research interests range from international economics to intelligence and security.