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What Intelligence Edge?

Lt. Gen. William Odom's (USA, ret.) op-ed piece on the Ames case in The Post July 15 is symptomatic of the real crisis in U.S. intelligence: refusal to learn from past mistakes.

According to Odom, the United States had "a remarkable intelligence edge throughout the Cold War." In fact, the Ames case is another indicator that net assessments of U.S. and Soviet intelligence performance are premature. Meanwhile, many serious U.S. errors are on the public record.

For many years the National Intelligence Estimates said the Soviets would not try to match the United States in strategic nuclear forces. The Soviet counterforce threat was not foreseen in the mid-1960s, and "Why the SS-20?" was a burning question in the mid-1970s, when the answer was obvious. Recent revelations on the history of the Soviet ABM program confirm once again that strategic "arms control" was simply a Soviet ploy to allow the Soviets a chance to catch up. U.S. intelligence did not anticipate the Soviet collapse and still denies that militarization of the Soviet economy was one of the principal causes.

While Team B led to recognition of Soviet nuclear war fighting objectives in 1976, this was not integrated into the NIEs as a whole. U.S. intelligence did not recognize many shortfalls and vulnerabilities (unreliable strategic missile, space warning and tracking systems) and the vulnerabilities of Soviet silo-based missiles.

Fortunately, a false alarm of a massive U.S. missile launch from the Soviet satellite launch detection net was not forwarded to a very paranoid Politburo in 1983. The CIA belatedly recognized the missile vulnerability problem by plagiarizing analysis previously rejected, but by that time the Cold War was nearly over.

U.S. intelligence never had reliable production estimates for most Soviet weapons. The United States estimated the Soviet nuclear weapon stockpile at 27,000 to 30,000 weapons, but the Russians report 45,000 weapons. Even that may be low.

If, as Odom claims, "the Soviet General Staff knew its operations were transparent to U.S. intelligence," one must ask: Where were the missing 15,000 nuclear weapons stored? Where were the re-fire missiles that would deliver many of the weapons? When did the United States discover the 1979 Soviet decision to move three brigades of SS-23 missiles into East Germany and Czechoslovakia? What portion of the three brigades were located and where?

When did the United States detect the Politburo's decisions to launch a full nuclear strike on the United States in response to one Pershing II missile? To violate the ABM Treaty with the Krasnoyarsk radar? To deploy mock-ups rather than real missiles on the ABM launchers at Moscow?

Why did U.S. intelligence not discover the shelter construction program for the *nomenklatura*, as much as 800 meters underground, until the 1980s, when they had been spending (at least) 2 to 3 percent of their GNP constructing such facilities since 1970? When did the CIA discover the two production reactors and the reprocessing facility in the underground complex near Krasnoyarsk? When did the CIA discover another such underground nuclear factory in the Urals?

Odom makes an even more remarkable claim: "Soviet military readiness, capabilities and *resource expenditures* were often more accurately known to U.S. leaders than to the Politburo" (emphasis added). Compare this with what Odom wrote a year earlier: "All the evidence pouring out of Russia" [demonstrates] "that the CIA woefully underestimated the military sector."

If the CIA had more accurate information on Soviet military outlays than the Politburo, why did the CIA double and triple its estimates in 1976, after ignoring what it had learned from Leonid Brezhnev several years earlier? Why did the CIA nearly double its estimates again in 1982?

According to a KGB colonel, only two Western analysts understood the "monstrous degree of militarization of the Soviet economy," and even they underestimated it. The CIA didn't make the cut. Yet R. James Woolsey, director of Central Intelligence, says the CIA's estimates of Soviet military expenditures had been about right.

For 30 years, the CIA denied the Politburo's "traditional policy" of preferential growth of military expenditures at the expense of the Soviet consumer. After Mikhail Gorbachev and other senior officials confirmed the policy, the CIA still denied it. When Gorbachev confirmed that the Politburo had approved 45 percent growth in military expenditures for 1981-85, the CIA first ignored him and then denied it, despite having the evidence that the actual increase was more than 50 percent in 1981-85.

The CIA covered up the 1982 revision in its

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estimates of Soviet military expenditures to match the Politburo's data. Even a panel of five professors commissioned by the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence failed to discover what had happened.

Treating failures as triumphs is a disservice to the craft of intelligence and, borrowing Gen. Odom's own words, "a danger to the country's security." Woolsey and Odom have confirmed that the real crisis in U.S. intelligence, of which the Ames case is a symptom, is the CIA's own description of their corporate culture: "We may not always be right, but we are never wrong."

Evidently Sens. Moynihan and Warner now agree that "fundamental reform" of U.S. intelligence deserves consideration. Warner's bill to create a presidential commission for this purpose could be a step in the right direction. If the fundamental problems are not effectively addressed, U.S. intelligence will produce even more errors and waste.

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