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Post 4/17/73

The Intelligence Debate

The real issues in the debate over the future of U.S. intelligence are illustrated by the controversy over the new Soviet bomber code-named "Backfire."

The military men at the Pentagon believe that Backfire could pose a threat to the U.S. The Pentagon's civilians, in the person of the new defense secretary, Elliot L. Richardson, are skeptical about the threat. It is up to the intelligence establishment to resolve the controversy.

Richardson concedes that the Backfire's capability to bomb the U.S. "cannot be ruled out." But, he told a Senate committee recently, "the weight of evidence favors the view that it is best suited for peripheral attack" in areas adjoining the Soviet Union, not against the U.S.

But the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, told the same committee that the Backfire would be best suited for peripheral attack only if there was no "appropriate tanker fleet for air-to-air refueling." He emphasized, however, that the Backfire has an air refueling capability, that the Soviet Union has a limited number of air tankers, and that it has new jet aircraft which could be adapted as tankers for the Backfire.

The weight of Moorer's evidence points in the direction opposite to Richardson's. "Given a suitable tanker force," he concluded, "the Backfire could prove to be an effective inter-continental bomber."

Who cares about bombers in an age of missiles? Military planners do. If the Backfire threat can be made to look plausible, the military would ask for the money to counter it. They

would also use it to strengthen their case for going ahead with the B-1 bomber. The controversy is really one of the preliminaries for the big debate on the B-1 and the Trident missile submarine, the most expensive weapons systems ever produced.

But the Pentagon's own Defense Intelligence Agency, the reputedly hard-line DIA, does not support the case made by the military about the Backfire's supposedly "inter-continental" capabilities. The DIA's director of estimates, Maj. Gen. Daniel O. Graham, has repeatedly challenged the claims made by Air Force intelligence in recent years about the emerging Backfire threat.

It could, therefore, be argued that Graham's appointment as the head of a new inter-agency intelligence committee, which has been presented in the press and in this column as an attempt to impose the DIA's "hard line" on the Central Intelligence Agency, is not as ominous as it seemed. A conflict of views between Graham and Moorer on the most fundamental issues of military intelligence also suggests that Graham might line up with the CIA's civilians rather than with the military in the big debates that loom ahead.

Moorer believes that it would be "highly imprudent" to base U.S. defense plans "on what we may now speculate to be the intended purpose of the opposing forces." He argues that "we should concern ourselves primarily with capabilities rather than intentions," because it is difficult to say what Soviet intentions might be, and, anyway, "intentions can change far more quickly than capabilities."

Graham, on the other hand, argues

in the current issue of the Army magazine that "estimates of future enemy forces are by nature estimates of intent — not just capability." He deplores the failure of the military to grasp this simple truth in the past, although he professes to believe that they are now "beginning" to understand it.

He patiently explains that as soon as one attempts to estimate the forces which the enemy might have a year or so hence, "you have entered the realm of intent." And he reminds the military that since the war the Russians have never deployed forces or weapons as fast as their capability permitted. Yet this is what the military repeatedly argued the Russians would do — and it had a most effective spokesman for this view in former Defense Secretary Melvin Laird.

Now even President Nixon, bemused by the success of the arms limitation talks, to say nothing of Defense Secretary Elliott Richardson or Henry Kissinger, do not press this view. The new director of the CIA, James Schlesinger, who at first created the impression that he was going to press his staff for a more hostile view of the Russians, has now convinced some of his most suspicious subordinates that his intentions are entirely honorable.

But the real test is still to come. The answer will become evident only in the interplay between the intelligence estimates, the defense budget, and the negotiations with Russia to limit and reduce strategic arms. This is what intelligence today is about, and why it is so important to get to the bottom of what is going on in the intelligence community.