

2008



H-Diplo Roundtable Reviews

www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables

Volume IX, No. 15 (2008)

14 July 2008

Richard K. Betts. *Enemies of Intelligence: Knowledge and Power in American National Security.* New York: Columbia University Press, September 2007. 264 pp. ISBN: 978-0-231-13888-8 (cloth). \$27.95.

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Stable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/EnemiesOfIntelligence-Roundtable.pdf>

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Introduction by Joshua Rovner, Williams College

“The intelligence community,” writes Richard Betts, “is the logical set of institutions to provide what one might call the library function for national security: it keeps track of all sources, secret or not, and mobilizes them in coherent form whenever nonexpert policymakers call on them” (5). Intelligence is also the logical place to explore how states perceive the world around them. Decades of work by political scientists and diplomatic historians have attempted to uncover the roots of misperception and misjudgment in international relations. Betts’ book focuses on the intelligence community itself: the set of institutions that is specifically tasked to ferret out information on international threats and opportunities. In the ideal, good intelligence informs policy judgment and leads to better decisions about strategy and statecraft. In reality, accurate and timely intelligence is hard to come by, and leaders are often wary of the intelligence community itself. Betts’ long study of intelligence has revolved around the question of why it so often fails to approach the ideal. *Enemies of Intelligence* revisits some of his well-known answers, adds some new ones, and applies them to contemporary controversies.

The obstacles to the effective use of intelligence are what Betts calls the “enemies of intelligence.” *Outside enemies* are the foreign targets of intelligence collection who conceal their activities and deceive the watchers. *Innocent enemies* include professional incompetence, poor organizational design, or other self-inflicted wounds that inhibit the quality of intelligence. Finally, *inherent enemies* refer to human limitations and trade-offs that come with decisions about intelligence. Human beings suffer from cognitive biases that skew their perceptions; this happens to the intelligence producer as well as the intelligence consumer. The low-level intelligence analyst and the high-level policymaker both interpret information through the prism of their own preexisting beliefs. The fact that information necessarily passes through these filters ensures that there will always be space between the objective facts, the analysis of those facts, and the policymaker’s response to new intelligence. Moreover, psychological limitations make it difficult to sense important changes in the international environment. Individuals look for patterns in the data, and this causes them to downplay or ignore anomalies.

The implications are unsettling. The existence of inherent enemies means that the major problems of intelligence are unsolvable. The intelligence community can try to outfox the outside enemies and mitigate the innocent ones, but the inherent enemies limit the accuracy of estimates, the timeliness of warnings, and the ability of intelligence to influence decisions about national security. Surprise attacks and intelligence failures are inevitable.

The reviewers in this roundtable agree that this is as a useful way to conceive of the obstacles to effective intelligence. Betts is unique among intelligence scholars for his devotion to theory, as well as his effort to make sure that his theories lead to practical recommendations for policymakers and intelligence officials. His three-part typology not only sheds light on the causes of failure, but it also speaks to the ongoing debates about intelligence reform in the aftermath of September 11 and the war in Iraq. Appropriate reforms must start with a plausible explanation for the causes of failure. Reforms that are

decoupled from those causes will not improve performance, and those that ignore the inherent enemies of intelligence will be costly and futile. This idea, of course, is anathema to reform advocates who believe that the solution to intelligence failure is reorganization and that surprise attacks can be prevented through better bureaucracy.

While the reviewers find the typology helpful, they also ask for elaboration. Erik Dahl begins by arguing that Betts puts too much emphasis on the inherent enemies. This is important for Betts because it underlies his claims about the futility of large scale reorganization, but the external and innocent enemies of intelligence beg for more discussion.

Richard Russell argues that focusing too much on the inherent enemies cannot help us distinguish between different levels of intelligence performance over time. In the short term, intelligence officials need fine-grained measures of success and failure in order to determine best practices. But there are broader implications in Russell's critique. The sense of fatalism in *Enemies of Intelligence* has implications for the public view of intelligence as well as the role of intelligence in the policy process. How can Congress and the public judge the intelligence community if we assume that surprises are inevitable? Why should we invest billions of dollars annually into a bureaucracy that is doomed to fail at least some of the time? What can policymakers expect from the intelligence services? Why should they bother reading intelligence in the first place?

Russell and Dahl are both experienced intelligence officers and scholars, and they sympathize with the difficulties involved in providing accurate estimates and early warning of future attacks. But they worry that Betts is too forgiving. Indulging in the view that failure is inevitable can absolve the intelligence community of serious shortcomings. As Russell puts it, "his argument that intelligence failures are inevitable can be too easily used as a shield to protect downright negligent strategic intelligence performances." For instance, Betts argues that the flawed conclusions about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction were reasonable given the paucity of available evidence. To Russell, this obscures the bigger point: the U.S. intelligence community focused on Iraq for more than a decade without being able to uncover useful data about its WMD program. This failure of collection was compounded by "shoddy analysis," and the result was a series of overly confident intelligence estimates that were based on extremely flimsy information.

The other side of the coin is that focusing on failure makes it hard to understand the success stories. There is no reason to let intelligence agencies off the hook if they have demonstrated the ability to succeed in difficult situations, and Dahl notes that several recent terrorist plots have been foiled partly because of effective intelligence work. A better understanding of the prospects and limits of intelligence requires looking beyond familiar failures like Barbarossa, the Yom Kippur War, and the sudden fall of the Shah. There may not be perfect solutions for the inherent enemies of intelligence, but there are ways of managing the problem.

Turning from the related issues of failure and surprise attack, Glenn Hastedt addresses the question of how policymakers use intelligence. Scholars have traditionally focused on

intelligence producers while giving short shrift to the behavior of intelligence consumers. But intelligence only matters inasmuch as it affects policy decisions; even perfect intelligence products are useless if they do not find a receptive audience.

In *Enemies of Intelligence*, Betts revisits a longstanding debate on the appropriate relationship between leaders and intelligence officials. On one side are those who seek to insulate intelligence from policymakers so that they are not infected with policy biases. On the other side are those who argue that insulating intelligence from the policy process makes it irrelevant to decisions about national security. Betts has previously leaned in the direction of relevance over pure objectivity, but admits to some doubt given the controversy over prewar intelligence on Iraq.

Hastedt identifies a different kind of tension lurking just under the surface of this discussion: whether it is possible for intelligence to remain objective in a democracy. Hastedt notes that preserving the analytical integrity of intelligence estimates is difficult because policymakers are strongly tempted to use intelligence in bureaucratic battles and public debates. Unfortunately, the public presentation of intelligence is usually stripped of nuance because policymakers cannot afford to hedge when they are trying to mobilize support for their plans. The incentives to politicize intelligence are thus built into the structure of the policy process.

Going public might make it impossible for intelligence agencies to remain independent of political considerations. Intelligence estimates offer conditional forecasts and usually do not include point predictions about future events. The reason is that information is ambiguous and international politics are uncertain. Recognizing these truths is fine as long as intelligence estimates are not used as political footballs in public or bureaucratic fights. The increasing use of intelligence in public, however, may force intelligence officers to make firmer conclusions than the evidence allows. If this is correct, then politicization has less to do with the interaction between leaders and intelligence officials than with the nature of contemporary policymaking.

The idea that September 11 marked a significant change in world politics has become commonplace in discussions of intelligence and national security. But did 9/11 really change everything? The answer has important implications for debates over the future of intelligence. Reform advocates warn against complacency in an era of change, where rogue states and terrorists have replaced great powers as the main threats to U.S. security. Skeptics warn against overreaction. Unsurprisingly, the question is the subject of debate among the participants in this roundtable. Betts argues that intelligence in the Cold War faced more straightforward challenges. The main target was a nation-state instead of a shadowy network of non-state actors, and important questions like the disposition of Soviet strategic forces could be answered with advanced technological collection assets like imagery satellites. Dahl agrees, noting that success against modern threats will require prosaic solutions (e.g. better cooperation between intelligence and law enforcement) rather than exotic technologies. On the other hand, Hastedt argues that Betts is too nostalgic for what he calls the “golden age of intelligence.” Estimates of the Soviet Union were consistently plagued with uncertainty. Without the benefit of hindsight, the

mysteries about Soviet intentions were no less perplexing than the mysteries about al Qaeda or Iran.

Betts' answer is more complicated, however. He recognizes the emergence of new threats like al Qaeda, but he also emphasizes that some problems are inherent and unchanging. This informs his view of the appropriateness of different kinds of intelligence reform. The rise of non-state threats requires changes in how intelligence agencies are allowed to operate. For example, Betts provocatively argues that the United States ought to set "priorities among liberties" when considering the balance between the need for domestic intelligence and the personal right to privacy (162-168). He rejects the choice between security and liberty as a false dichotomy, arguing instead that expanded domestic surveillance is permissible as long as the principle of due process is strengthened. The legal consequences of this argument are profound because, as Betts notes, there is no "hierarchy of liberties" in the Constitution. But the seriousness of the threat means that Congress and the courts need to think proactively about how to best maintain civil liberties while also improving intelligence collection. Failure to do so could lead to a situation in which individual rights are jettisoned in the aftermath of another attack.

But while some things have changed, Betts argues that most things have not. The inherent enemies of intelligence are not sensitive to changes in international politics. Psychological shortcomings and ambiguous data will inhibit intelligence regardless of whether the threats are from great powers or transnational terrorists. Betts' attention to the inherent enemies causes him to warn against radical efforts to reorganize the intelligence community.

The question of continuity and change is also related to Betts' distinction between "normal theory" and "exceptional thinking" (53-65). Normal theory involves the accumulation of knowledge that generates predictions about adversaries' expected behavior. Intelligence agencies cultivate institutional methods of predicting the most likely course of events in any given place, based on specific assumptions about adversaries' intentions and general theories about international politics. Normal theory is a necessary precaution against pure speculation and unchecked fantasizing about nightmare scenarios that lead to irrational and counterproductive policy responses.

The problem is that unusual events, however unlikely, can have catastrophic consequences for the unprepared. Events that are outside the parameters of normal theory are unlikely to be predicted by analysts working in the confines of the intelligence community. Nonexpert observers are more open to the possibility of anomalies, possessing the kind of exceptional thinking that may alert policymakers to looming dangers. The difficulty for intelligence community is cultivating the right balance between normal and exceptional thinking; that is, to make the most of the accumulated wisdom of professional analysts without falling victim to bureaucratic inertia and intellectual sclerosis.

Enemies of Intelligence is chock full of both kinds of thinking. Betts' theories on intelligence are informed by a long study of diplomatic and military history, but the book also offers fresh ideas on new dilemmas. Careful theorizing and historical analysis have been

conspicuously absent from public controversies over intelligence since the September 11 attacks. Betts' book, as well as the following commentaries, injects some badly needed sobriety into the debate.

Participants:

Richard K. Betts (Ph.D., Harvard, 1975) is a specialist on national security policy and military strategy. He is director of the Arnold A. Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies at Columbia University and senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. Professor Betts was a Senior Fellow and Research Associate at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC from 1976-1990, and has taught at Harvard University and the Johns Hopkins University's Nitze School of Advanced International Studies. In addition to numerous journal articles in *International Security*, *World Politics*, *Foreign Affairs*, and elsewhere he has published *Military Readiness* (Brookings, 1995); *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises*, 2nd edition (Columbia University Press, 1991); *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (Brookings, 1987); and *Surprise Attack* (Brookings, 1982). He has also co-authored or edited three other books, including *The Irony of Vietnam* (Brookings, 1979), which won the Woodrow Wilson Prize; and *Conflict after the Cold War: Arguments on Causes of War and Peace* (Pearson Education, 2005)

Erik J. Dahl received his Ph.D. from The Fletcher School of Tufts University, and was until August 2008 a research fellow at the Belfer Center of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. In September 2008, he will join the faculty of the Naval Postgraduate School as an assistant professor of national security affairs. He retired from the U.S. Navy in 2002 after serving 21 years as an intelligence officer, and from 1999 to 2002 he served on the faculty of the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. In addition to his Ph.D. and a Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy from The Fletcher School, he holds master's degrees from the London School of Economics and the Naval War College. His work has been published in *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, the *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, *Joint Force Quarterly*, *Defence Studies*, and *The Naval War College Review*. He is currently working on a study of unsuccessful terrorist plots against Americans during the past twenty years.

Glenn Hastedt received his Ph.D. in political science from Indiana University. He is professor and chair of the justice Studies Department at James Madison University, prior to that he was professor and chair of the political science department. He is the author of *American Foreign Policy: Past, Present, Future*, 7th edition (Pearson Prentice Hall 2008). He has edited two books on intelligence, *Controlling Intelligence* (Frank Cass, 1991) and *Intelligence Analysis and Assessment* (co-editor, Frank Cass, 1996). His most recent articles on intelligence include "Foreign Policy by Commission: Reforming the Intelligence Community," *Intelligence and National Security*, (2007), "Public Intelligence: Leaks as Policy Instruments," *Intelligence and National Security* (2005) and "Estimating Intentions in an Age of Terrorism: Garthoff Revisited," *Defense Intelligence Journal* (2005).

Joshua Rovner received his Ph.D. in Political Science from MIT in 2008. He is currently the Stanley Kaplan Postdoctoral Fellow in Leadership Studies and Political Science at Williams College, where he teaches courses on international security and American foreign policy.

His dissertation, "Intelligence-Policy Relations and the Problem of Politicization," won the Lucian Pye Award for best thesis in political science at MIT. He has published in *International Security*, *The International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, *Strategic Insights*, and *The Boston Globe*

Richard L. Russell holds a Ph.D. in Foreign Affairs from the University of Virginia and is a member of the International Institute for strategic studies. He is Professor of National Security Affairs at the National Defense University's Near East and South Asia Center for Strategic Studies. He also holds appointments as Adjunct Associate Professor in the Security Studies Program and Research Associate in the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service. Russell has published widely in the fields of international relations, American foreign policy, security studies, intelligence, and Middle Eastern security. Russell is the author of three books: *Sharpening Strategic Intelligence: Why the CIA Gets It Wrong and What Needs to be Done to Get It Right* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); *Weapons Proliferation and War in the Greater Middle East: Strategic Contest* (Routledge, 2005); and *George F. Kennan's Strategic Thought: The Making of an American Political Realist* (Praeger, 1999).

Richard Betts is arguably America's foremost scholar of intelligence, and in his excellent new book, *Enemies of Intelligence*, he offers reflections based on three decades of studying intelligence failures and the role of intelligence in national security. A number of the book's chapters are revisions of earlier works, including his classic 1978 *World Politics* article in which he first laid out his case for the inevitability of intelligence failure.¹ Roughly half the book is new, however, and while the book reads in spots more like a collection of essays than a coherent whole, it nonetheless represents a valuable overview of the key issues facing American intelligence today.

His typology of "enemies of intelligence," introduced in chapter 1, is somewhat useful: outside enemies (foreign adversaries), innocent enemies (such as intelligence professionals or policy makers who fail to produce or use intelligence effectively), and inherent enemies (such as natural human cognitive limitations and organizational constraints). But I found the title to be a bit of a red herring, because Betts quickly dispenses with the first two sets of enemies, and for most of the book focuses on the third set of inherent enemies, which he argues are the most difficult to overcome. A more tightly organized book might have maintained the "enemies" theme throughout, examining each type in turn, looking in more detail at questions such as how today's outside enemies—primarily terrorist groups such as al Qaeda, but also nation states like Iran and China—compare with the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

The real primary focus of the book—familiar to readers of Betts's other works on intelligence—is on the limitations of what intelligence can do. Betts argues that politicians and pundits who expect the intelligence community to do a significantly better job than it has in the past are likely to be disappointed. The best we can hope for, in his view, are "limited but meaningful improvements" in intelligence performance (184). As have a number of other scholars of intelligence, Betts writes that improving intelligence is similar to increasing a baseball player's batting average—marginal improvements can be possible, but in the end, even the best player will strike out much of the time. Betts calls this a "tragic view" of intelligence failure, and repeats a phrase of his that has been widely quoted: "intelligence failures are not only inevitable, they are natural" (51).

At the same time, Betts makes what might seem to be a contrary argument: that even though failures are inevitable, the U.S. intelligence community has actually done a pretty good job in recent years. He acknowledges that intelligence agencies failed to predict the 9/11 attacks and erred in estimating the state of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs, but he sees both as understandable and excusable mistakes. Before 9/11, he writes, the intelligence community had provided a considerable amount of long-range, strategic warning on the threat from al Qaeda. What it couldn't produce was tactical, specific warning of the plot being developed—but that, he believes, was not surprising,

¹ "Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures Are Inevitable." *World Politics* 31:1 (October 1978).

because such tactical warning is almost never available. And even if more intelligence had been collected—and more dots connected—the added information might just have resulted in more noise, drowning out whatever meaningful data there was.

Similarly, Betts lets the intelligence community off easy when it comes to the issue of Iraq's WMD. At first glance he seems to be harshly critical of intelligence, calling the episode “the worst intelligence failure since the founding of the modern intelligence community” (114). But he goes on to explain that the mistaken intelligence estimate was not itself an egregious failure, because it was the right estimate to have made based on the intelligence available. The real failure, in Betts's view, was in two different effects that the mistaken intelligence estimate had on American society and policy. First, it tarnished the credibility of the intelligence community, distracting attention from the otherwise good work done by American intelligence in the run-up to the war in Iraq. Second and more importantly, the mistaken WMD estimate “provided the warrant for war against Iraq, a war that was unnecessary and that cost far more blood and treasure than the September 11 attacks” (115).

I have relatively minor quibbles about two incidents Betts recounts in the book. In the first, he relates the often-told story about how on September 10, 2001, the National Security Agency intercepted messages that appeared to discuss the upcoming attacks—but it didn't get around to translating them until September 12 (107). Betts rightly notes that because these messages were unspecific, they would not have made much difference even if they had been translated more quickly. But he should have pointed out that the staff of the 9/11 Commission determined that those communications had probably referred not to the 9/11 attacks, but to the opening of a Taliban and al Qaeda military offensive in Afghanistan at about the same time.²

The second incident has practically achieved the status of an urban legend. Numerous authorities, including the 9/11 Commission, President Bush, and now Betts in this book, have reported that as a result of leaks in the *Washington Times* in 1998, Osama bin Laden learned the U.S. was monitoring his satellite phone calls (181). Not surprisingly—or so the story goes—bin Laden immediately stopped using that phone, and the U.S. lost a crucial source of intelligence that could possibly have led to his capture and the prevention of the 9/11 attacks. The problem is that the story may well be false. Although Betts notes in an endnote that the *Washington Times* has disputed the story, it would have been appropriate to mention that others have challenged the story as well, arguing that bin Laden's satellite phone usage had been described in media accounts dating back to 1996 and that it is quite possible he decided to adopt a lower profile in August 1998 because the U.S. had just tried to kill him with cruise missiles.³

² 9/11 Commission Staff Statement Number 11, “The Performance of the Intelligence Community,” 9. Available at http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/staff_statements/staff_statement_11.pdf.

³ Glenn Kessler, “File the Bin Laden Phone Leak Under ‘Urban Myths,’” *The Washington Post*, 22 December, 2005. The leak about bin Laden's phone habits has also been described as occurring during public testimony in either the trial of 1993 World Trade Center bomber Ramzi Yousef, or of the 1998 East Africa Embassy bombers, but neither of those scenarios is convincing. See Richard B. Zabel and James J. Benjamin

My own view is that Betts is more right than wrong in his key point about the inevitability of intelligence failure, but I have two major concerns about the book. The first is that he is too easy on the intelligence community. Acknowledging that some intelligence failures are inevitable does not mean that intelligence agencies and officials should be given a pass when they screw up. Betts writes so clearly, and he appears to dismiss his critics so casually, that a reader might easily come away from the book believing that what he calls his “charitable view of intelligence” is the last word on the matter among serious students of intelligence. He tells us, in fact, that his view “is widely accepted among the small corps of scholars who have studied cases of failure, but not among politicians or the public” (27).

While it is true that many prominent scholars do share Betts’s charitable view toward intelligence,⁴ others are much more critical of the American intelligence community and offer prescriptions quite different from that offered by Betts. Such alternative views can be found in the work of two other scholars whose recent books cover much the same ground as *Enemies of Intelligence*, but which take a very different perspective. Amy B. Zegart focuses on organizational and bureaucratic limitations on intelligence, and her *Spying Blind* is a harsh critique of the CIA and FBI for failing to adapt to the growing threat of terrorism despite numerous blue-ribbon commissions and studies before 9/11 that warned of the danger.⁵ Richard L. Russell, on the other hand, in *Sharpening Strategic Intelligence*, emphasizes the failures of the CIA to produce high quality human intelligence and strategic analysis.⁶ It is beyond the scope of this essay to examine who might be wrong and who might be right in this debate. But my point is that there is a debate underway among serious students of intelligence over the causes of, and possible remedies for, intelligence failure—a debate Betts only briefly acknowledges.⁷

My second concern is a broader one, about what I believe *Enemies of Intelligence* says about the state of intelligence studies and in particular the study of intelligence warning and failure today. I found the book mildly depressing—not simply because intelligence failure

Jr., *In Pursuit of Justice: Prosecuting Terrorism Cases in the Federal Courts*. Human Rights First White Paper, May 2008, pp. 88-89, at <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/>.

⁴ See for example, Richards L. Heuer Jr., “Limits of Intelligence Analysis,” *Orbis* 49:1 (Winter 2005), and Robert Jervis, “Reports, Politics, and Intelligence Failures: The Case of Iraq,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 29:1 (February 2006). For a more recent expression of a similar view, see Mark M. Lowenthal, “The Real Intelligence Failure? Spineless Spies,” *The Washington Post*, 25 May, 2008, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/22/AR2008052202961.html>.

⁵ Amy B. Zegart, *Spying Blind: The CIA, the FBI, and the Origins of 9/11* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁶ Richard L. Russell, *Sharpening Strategic Intelligence: Why the CIA Gets it Wrong, and What Needs to be Done to Get it Right* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁷ Betts does note Zegart’s criticism of the intelligence community for failing to adopt organizational and other reforms, but he argues that reorganizations tend to lead to significant disruption, and often cause new problems even as they fix old ones (144).

cannot be helped, but because it appears that the study of intelligence failure has not come very far in the 30 years since Betts began writing about it. As Betts describes, a rather large literature has developed dating back to the Cold War on the topic of intelligence failure and strategic surprise, so much so that the question of why intelligence fails might be called “overdetermined” (22). What is lacking, however, is a theory of why and when intelligence *succeeds*. Betts does describe a number of cases in which intelligence agencies have successfully warned of approaching dangers, but these are cited mostly to support his argument that “intelligence often does its job quite well” (190), and Betts does not attempt to analyze these cases in depth or draw conclusions from them.

I believe it is time to take a new look at the question of intelligence success. Studying success is difficult: As Betts observes, intelligence successes are less well publicized than failures, and it can often be difficult to determine whether a particular incident should count as a success or failure. The U.S. intelligence community does not appear to keep close track of its own successes, and what it does know it does not like to talk about, because revealing successful intelligence operations could provide useful information to our nation’s enemies.

But intelligence successes, in the form of failed terrorist plots, are already a part of the national discourse on terrorism. The administration frequently cites failed plots as evidence that the terrorist threat is real and its counterterrorism programs are effective. For example, in his State of the Union address in January 2007, President Bush described several prevented attacks, and said that “Our success in this war is often measured by the things that did not happen.”⁸ As Betts notes, in October 2005 the White House released a list of ten “serious al-Qaeda terrorist plots” that had been disrupted since September 11, 2001, along with five additional efforts by al Qaeda to case targets in the U.S. or infiltrate operatives into the country.⁹ Administration critics, on the other hand, argue that the cases cited by the government amount to little more than a molehill. And some scholars believe that the absence of successful terrorist attacks since 9/11 indicates there are few terrorists in the United States and the threat of international terrorist attacks against the U.S. is very low.¹⁰

Despite the difficulty of studying unsuccessful terrorist attacks, reliable information is available on enough cases to suggest that terrorist plots fail—which means that intelligence and security officials succeed—more often than many might realize. Three prominent examples are:

⁸ State of the Union Address, January 23, 2007, transcript as provided by the *New York Times*, 24 January, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/23/washington/23bush-transcript.html>.

⁹ The White House, “Fact Sheet: Plots, Casings, and Infiltrations Referenced in President Bush’s Remarks on the War on Terror,” 6 October, 2005. Available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/10/20051006-7.html>.

¹⁰ See for example, John Mueller, “Is There Still a Terrorist Threat?” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2006, and his *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

The New York City “Day of Terror” Plot. This plot, which was disrupted soon after the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993, is still one of the most important thwarted attacks in American history, but it is little remembered today. A group of Islamist extremists planned to bomb a number of New York City landmarks including the UN Headquarters, the Manhattan Federal Building, and the Lincoln and Holland Tunnels. The FBI had an informant among the plotters, and the men were arrested at a safehouse in Queens while they were mixing fuel and fertilizer in 55-gallon steel drums.

The Lackawanna Six. The case of these Yemeni-Americans, who traveled to Afghanistan in the Spring of 2001 to attend an al Qaeda training camp and met with Osama bin Laden, has been described by many observers as an example of government overkill. Most of the men appear to have turned away from violence after 9/11, and they were not actively plotting any attacks when they were arrested. But the group had clear links to senior al Qaeda leaders, and the case is instructive as an example of how a wide range of intelligence sources can be useful to authorities: the group first came to the attention of the FBI through an anonymous tip, and later information came from intercepted emails and from a detainee captured in Afghanistan.

The Fort Dix Plot. This more recent case typifies the sort of plots seen today and the variety of methods authorities are using to disrupt them. Six men described as Islamic militants were arrested in May 2007 and charged with plotting to attack the Fort Dix Army base in New Jersey and “kill as many soldiers as possible.” The men took part in paramilitary training together and conducted surveillance of Fort Dix and other military installations, but authorities were tipped off by a store clerk who became concerned when they brought in a video to be converted to DVD—and on the video they could be seen firing weapons while calling for jihad. The FBI eventually placed two different informants in the group, and watched for 15 months before arresting them when they attempted to buy AK-47 and M-16 machine guns.

Despite Betts’s argument that the business of intelligence has not changed fundamentally in recent decades (6), these few examples of thwarted terrorist plots suggest that there may in fact be something new about intelligence failure and success today against the problem of terrorism, compared with the challenges intelligence faced during the Cold War. Especially at the domestic level, intelligence and law enforcement officials appear to be successful in providing *tactical warning* of terrorist plots. It is this kind of warning that most experts, including Betts, tell us is not to be expected, and without which policy makers are left having to rely on broader, strategic-level warnings that often confuse as much as they enlighten.

More study is needed before we will be able to draw firm conclusions about the future of American intelligence in the war on terrorism. These cases of failed plots do, however, suggest that the study of surprise attack and intelligence failure is at least as relevant today as it was during the Cold War when Professor Betts wrote his early, pioneering work. As Betts argues, intelligence can never be perfect, and some failures are inevitable. We may never be able to get completely past the “tragic view of intelligence failure” so eloquently

described here by Betts. But in this age of mass-casualty terrorism, it seems clear that we need to try. The good news is that by studying cases of failed terrorist plots we may be able to learn something new about intelligence success, both to advance intelligence scholarship and (much more importantly) to offer new ideas for policy.

In *Enemies of Intelligence: Knowledge and Power in American National Security* Richard K. Betts builds upon insights from his previously published work on intelligence policy and adds new reflections on the complicated relationship between intelligence analysts and policy makers and the ever controversial question of why intelligence failures happen. Betts remains true to the positions he laid out in his earlier accounts of strategic surprise, “Analysis, War, and Decision” and *Surprise Attack*, which together have served as the starting point for thinking about problems of strategic surprise and intelligence failures for all who have since taken up the subject.¹

Now, as then, Betts asserts that “intelligence failures are not only inevitable, they are natural” (51). The root causes are many, ranging from the basic nature of world politics to cognitive and perceptual limitations by analysts, and including attempts at deception by the enemy and the enemy’s own uncertainty over how to proceed in between. Betts also remains skeptical about the potential for radical organizational solutions to produce significant improvements in our ability to prevent intelligence failures regardless of whether they are structural or norm oriented in focus. Still, Betts is not resigned to accepting all intelligence failures as inevitable. He advocates “limited changes based on realistic foundations” (3) as a means of improving the quality of intelligence work at the margins. The attainable goal in intelligence work is to improve one’s batting average thereby lessening the frequency and intensity of surprise and not to eliminate all surprise (187).

Betts further adds to our understanding of intelligence failures in this work by examining the 9/11 and Iraq WMD intelligence failures. He also tackles the important question of the relationship between civil liberties and intelligence. Particularly intriguing is his identification of three types of enemies of intelligence (8-14). Most recognizable are outside enemies, governments and groups with whom the United States is in conflict. These are the traditional enemies of intelligence. The second group of enemies he labels as innocent enemies. They typically are the targets of critics after surprise has occurred but according to Betts are less important than the amount of attention focused on them would suggest. They consist of individual intelligence officers, the leadership of the intelligence community, and policymakers. The third group of enemies of intelligence grows “out of the human condition and the dynamics of the intelligence function itself” (p.12). They are the inherent enemies of intelligence and addressing them must be done in the context of a dialectical process rather than a linear one.

In reflecting on Betts’ considerable insights on intelligence failures and the problem of strategic surprise, I believe we can identify three areas of inquiry, which current and future students of intelligence might profitably examine or reexamine. The first is the nature of Cold War surprise versus surprise today. Regardless of how the contemporary era is

¹ Richard K. Betts, “Analysis, War and Decision,” *World Politics* 31 (1978), 61-89 and Richard K. Betts, *Surprise Attack* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1982).

defined -- whether it be as the post Cold War period, the age of globalization, or Long War against terrorism -- the popular view is that this period is different from the one that preceded it. Betts suggests that this is at least true for intelligence noting that "compared with today, the last three decades of the Cold War was a golden age of intelligence" (p. 7). Gregory Treverton captures the perceived distinction between these two periods nicely by describing the Cold War as a period where intelligence services sought to solve puzzles and the current era is one dominated by mysteries.² Puzzles have solutions. One needs only to find the correct missing piece. Mysteries lack any such defining structure or clear end point. I wonder if this distinction between intelligence analysis during the Cold War and today and by extension the nature of intelligence failures then and now is not overstated. It is certainly true that puzzles, especially those surrounding the military capabilities of the Soviet Union were a preeminent concern of the U.S. intelligence community, but there were also many mysteries. Reading now-public Cold War national intelligence estimates on the Soviet Union and China I am struck by 1) how much analysts were guessing at regarding intentions and motivating forces and 2) how unlikely it was that they would ever really know. The existence of strong similarities between these two periods would seem to hold at least two policy implications. First, it would suggest that we need to go back and see how it was we tried to solve the intelligence mysteries of the Cold War with an eye toward identifying best practices for tackling today's mysteries. Second, it would seem to signal caution regarding expectations that technology or open source intelligence will bring about a significant improvement in the intelligence community's batting average. Advances in technology and additional access to published material from communist states did not solve Cold War mysteries. They may not solve today's mysteries either.

A second area of further inquiry involves one of Betts' innocent enemies of intelligence: policy makers. Students and practitioners of intelligence from Sherman Kent forward have written about how intelligence analysts and policy makers come from two different cultures and have differing views of the intelligence function. Moreover, all agree that intelligence does not dictate policy. Policy makers are free not to accept the intelligence they are given and have a responsibility to weigh intelligence against other interests, concerns, and pressures in making decisions.³ Understandably, the focus of intelligence failures and studies of strategic surprise has been on the organization and operation of the intelligence community along with the values and attitudes of intelligence analysts. *Enemies of Intelligence* falls comfortably into this genre although Betts does address policy maker attitudes and actions throughout the book. Policy makers, the consumers of intelligence, have received far less systematic attention in the literature. Correcting this deficiency is no easy task. We need look no further than the study of civil-military relations in which policy makers and military professionals are defined at the outset as co-equals. Most studies focus far more heavily on the organization of the military and the attitudes of professional soldiers than on their civilian counterparts.

² Gregory Treverton, *Reshaping National Intelligence in an Age of Information* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 11-13.

³ On this point see Sherman Kent, *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 202-206.

A greater focus on policy makers (congressional, presidential, and bureaucratic) in the civil-intelligence equation offers two advantages for future studies. First, it helps clarify and place limits on the concept of politicalization of intelligence. Betts notes that depending upon how it is defined the politicalization of intelligence can be seen as inevitable or corrupting (p.74). I would suggest that politicalization is a natural part of the intelligence process in the evaluation of information, the construction of estimates, and their reception by policy makers. It is rooted in the underlying reality that information is not self interpreting. What we tend to view as corruption is a phenomenon more accurately associated with the publicization of intelligence. Publicizing intelligence is the result of the differing environments in which policy makers and analysts operate. Where both policy makers and analysts need to build winning coalitions for their interpretations of events under conditions of uncertainty policy makers also need to sell their policies. "Secret" intelligence is a valuable tool for gaining allies, disarming opponents and changing the overall political climate in which policy is made and implemented but its full impact is only achieved by going public. Second, a focus on policy makers going public with intelligence would reveal that this is not a new phenomenon nor is it haphazardly done. Patterns exist. Intelligence has "gone public" in four different ways depending upon whether the issue at hand is a single isolated problem or a reoccurring and ongoing policy issue, and whether or not the intelligence is contested.⁴

An attention to policy makers and their frequent public use of intelligence raises the issue of whether we might best consider policy makers to be an inherent enemy of intelligence instead of an innocent enemy. The case for doing so rests on the fact that the publicization of intelligence is strongly rooted in the need to build support for policies. The conditions that generate this need appear to be growing: intensified legislative-executive conflicts, the lack of a foreign policy consensus among elites or the public at large, and the advent of 24/7 media coverage of events that emphasizes instant analysis of breaking news. The case against such a reinterpretation is the argument that viewing intelligence analysts and policy makers as inherent enemies not only miscasts the relationship between them but runs the risk of creating a kind of self fulfilling prophecy.

The third extension of Betts' treatment of intelligence grows out of the above discussion. If the publicization of intelligence is not haphazard, accidental, or rare but rather a patterned and reoccurring phenomenon, what is the relationship between secret intelligence and public intelligence? Is public intelligence an enemy of secret intelligence or can they coexist peacefully? If it is an enemy of secret intelligence is it an external, innocent or inherent enemy? Public and secret intelligence differ greatly in their fundamental qualities. Going back to the early years of intelligence we find the 1955 Hoover Commission defining intelligence as "dealing with all things which should be known in advance of initiating a course of action." DCI Admiral William Rayborn defined intelligence as information which

⁴ Glenn Hastedt, "Public Intelligence: Leaks as Policy Instruments, *Intelligence and National Security* 20 (2005), 419-439.

has been carefully evaluated as to its accuracy and significance.⁵ Public intelligence lacks these qualities. It is incomplete and lacks nuance and context. It is action prompting and presented with an oracle quality. It is accusatory; there is always a guilty party. Secret intelligence achieves its goals not by solving problems but by its ability to shape and move the public debate over what policy to adopt.

Over time it would seem reasonable to speculate that public intelligence might undermine the effectiveness of secret intelligence thereby increasing the possibility of intelligence failures. It could do so by increasing the tendency for black and white or worst case thinking among policy makers, making it more difficult to achieve consensus by raising the stakes over issues, and calling into question the credibility and competence of individuals and organizations involved in the production of intelligence. Finally, it might, as Betts fears, lead to the adoption of reform proposals that not only do not address the real causes of intelligence failures but make the problem worse.

⁵ Both statements can be found in Harry Howe Ransom, *The Intelligence Establishment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 7.

Richard Betts has produced a wonderful book for taking a step back from the rush of sound bites and screaming that poses as informed debate on media airwaves these days to give an historical, thoughtful, and insightful analysis of the uses and limitations in intelligence for informing American national security policy. Unlike most media talking-heads who have no legitimate claims to the title “expert,” Betts is a superb scholar who has thought long and hard about intelligence over the course of some three decades.

Betts too is unique because he is a scholar with empathy for the crushing responsibilities, workloads, and burdens carried by policy makers and intelligence officers. He strives to lend a scholarly hand to help policymakers and intelligence officials do their jobs better at a time in which most of the academy in the international relations field labors to develop theories which are too often intellectually impenetrable as well as irrelevant to the demands of harried practitioners. As Betts himself wisely notes, the marrying of policy analysis and theoretical work “is out of fashion in contemporary political science, but I continue to believe that separating study-based theory from experienced-based policy analysis impoverishes both.” (xii)

Betts tells readers upfront that he is a Democrat (xv), but his philosophy is conservative. Much like the great conservative thinker Edmund Burke, who warned of the violence that the French Revolution was to unleash contrary to lofty liberal philosophic expectations, Betts warns of the dangers of revolution in today’s intelligence community. Betts is a true American patriot in the best sense of the word and wants to strengthen American strategic intelligence capabilities to better defend the nation, but he is a dogged realist who knows the pitfalls and dangers of overly optimistic liberal reform agendas. By his account, “Limited improvements based on realistic foundations are better than revolutionary changes that founder or make things worse.” (3)

Betts insightfully lays out the causes of intelligence failure, which he calls “enemies of intelligence.” He puts the enemies into three sets. The first set is “outside enemies” who are in conflict with the United States and want to conceal their intentions, capabilities, and vulnerabilities. The second set Betts calls “innocent enemies” because they unintentionally threaten American intelligence and include negligent intelligence professionals, myopic leadership, and bureaucratic turf battles. And the third set is “inherent enemies” which stem from the fallen nature of man such as his mental limitations, dilemmas, and trade-offs that block accurate intelligence assessments and judgments. (8-12)

This book bucks a common reformers’ mindset that picking just the right institutional structures and bureaucratic alignments would bypass these “enemies” and eliminate strategic intelligence failures. Betts soberly argued that failures will always happen in his landmark 1978 *World Politics* article “Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures are Inevitable” and he holds firm to that argument in this book. Indeed, the intervening years since that article’s publication have proven Betts right with a slew of

American strategic intelligence failures: being blindsided by the Iranian revolution; underestimating and overestimating Iraqi WMD in the run ups to the 1990 and 2003 wars, respectively; failing to accurately gauge North Korea's nuclear weapons inventory; and missing India's nuclear weapons testing to tick off just a few cases.

Betts's analysis is empirically sound, but his argument that intelligence failures are inevitable can be too easily used as a shield to protect downright negligent strategic intelligence performances. Betts likes baseball analogies, so let us indulge in one here. A baseball player who has a lifetime batting average of .375 can argue that striking out is an inevitable part of the game, just as a player with a lifetime batting average of .180. Both players are empirically right, but the player with the .375 average might well be on the way to the Hall of Fame while the player with the .180 should be on his way to the Minor Leagues. Betts' argument does not help to distinguish between Hall of Fame- and Minor League-like strategic intelligence performances.

Illustrative of this distinction problem is the Iraq WMD controversy. Betts judges of that performance that "Although the bottom line analytic conclusion was wrong, in the absence of adequate collection *it was the proper estimate to make from the evidence then available.*" [italics in original]" (115) That may well be technically true, but it is as irrelevant as spring season batting averages. Regardless of whether or not going to war against Iraq was a strategically sound decision, the American intelligence community assessed in the run up to the 2003 war that Saddam's Iraq was reconstituting its nuclear weapons program and had active biological and chemical warfare programs and weapons. All of these strategic intelligence judgments were wrong and post-war investigation revealed that Saddam had disbanded his WMD programs eight years before the 2003 war.

The American intelligence community, in other words, had missed—due to slim or no human intelligence and shoddy analysis, both of which are core CIA responsibilities--a strategic change of direction in the behavior of one of the United States's most serious foes for almost a decade. One wonders if the intelligence community today suffers from a substantial time lag in gauging the status of Iran's nuclear weapons program, which the intelligence community assessed in a National Intelligence Estimate as being halted in 2003. The CIA performance in Iraq was much like a hitter who could not hit a curve ball to save his life and who should be dispatched to the minor league until he fixes his batting. Indeed, that is what has happened to the CIA; it has been demoted with the creation of the Director of National Intelligence to lead the intelligence community. The challenge today is how to get the analytic talent in the DNI's office to think about strategic intelligence issues and how to compel the CIA to adopt better human intelligence business practices, both tasks that the bowels of the CIA have persistently been unable to do.

This selected criticism should not overshadow a larger point. Betts's book is loaded with practical scholarly wisdom for policymakers, intelligence officials, legislators, citizens, and scholars, which was in short supply in Washington as it crafted the 2004 intelligence reforms. This book should be a guiding light for any further reforms of the intelligence community under the DNI's auspices. As Betts sagely observes, "If the public expects a shake-up of hidebound intelligence organizations, it will take presidential muscle, applied

unrelentingly through a trusted manager for the intelligence system, to make it happen.”
(139) The next president and his national security lieutenants should take Professor Betts’s sagely analysis to heart.

Author's Response by Richard K. Betts

I am grateful for the selection of my book for an H-Diplo Roundtable, and grateful to the three reviewers for their kind words and restrained criticisms.

Erik Dahl and Richard Russell take me mildly to task for being too easy on intelligence professionals' mistakes. I am acutely aware that my forgiving view strikes many as tolerance for bad work. My view also does not lend itself to an exciting, iconoclastic argument likely to draw enthusiastic readership – except perhaps among intelligence personnel who see it as excusing them. My conservative argument would not be my preference; I would rather be able to attach my name to a critique that yields more of a solution to an important set of problems. Nevertheless, my studies and thought over the years have ineluctably left me with the tragic view. In the absence of systematic and unambiguous data on the ratio of successes to failures, or the quality of performance afforded by available or obtainable information in particular cases, this is necessarily a subjective judgment. It is quite reasonable to find the argument depressing, as Dahl does, but I persist in seeing the glass as half-full.

Those who believe I am too undemanding can point to opportunities for correct judgment that were lost in cases of failure. Sometimes these are egregious, but I think that more often they seem so only because hindsight obscures the difficulties. If we held ourselves as scholars to the same standards of judgment or acceptable error rate in our own forecasts or research that the harshest critics of intelligence apply to the intelligence community, most of us would be toast. Of course in practice some professions are held to higher standards than others – physicians, airline pilots, nuclear power plant technicians – because their mistakes, unlike those of scholars, cost lives. Intelligence professionals fall in this category. But the fact that a lower error rate than is typical for most professions is demanded of one set of human beings does not explain why or how it can be expected.

Of course harsh criticism of intelligence performance is easily warranted if that performance is notably worse than the norm in other lines of work. I don't know how to measure comparative performance well enough for confident judgment, but my impression from studying numerous cases is that the intelligence batting average is no worse than for other jobs that face human adversaries who are trying craftily to mislead and outwit them (what I call the “outside enemies” in my book).

Russell thinks my analogy of analytical performance to a batting average “does not help to distinguish between Hall of Fame and Minor League-like strategic intelligence performances,” but pages 185-187 of my book try to make the same point as Russell does about sending poor performers to the minors. The limitation of the analogy is that there is no reliable way to compute a precise batting average in intelligence work. Intelligence managers have to make the same sorts of subjective judgments about the quality of their staffs' work as an academic committee that denies tenure or a research prize committee that makes an award.

Russell illustrates his less forgiving verdict with a discussion of the mistaken 2002 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. I am not sure that we are really far apart on this case. My charitable argument was that the NIE's conclusion was reasonable given the evidence available ("wrong for the right reasons"). It is quite reasonable to assert, however, that the available evidence should have been more substantial -- that the intelligence community should have been able to do a better job of collection. As one high-ranking official put it in conversation, "The shocking thing wasn't that the books were cooked, but that there was so little in the books." As I also argued on page 122 of the book, the NIE's Key Judgments could and should have been written differently to highlight the fact that the conclusion was based almost entirely on deduction and logic rather than reliable direct evidence.

Dahl believes that I exaggerate the academic consensus in favor of the charitable view that frequent failures are inevitable. Perhaps. In that passage I was referring to past scholarship on surprise attacks. Ariel Levite, a critic of this view and of my ideas, described the fatalistic view as the orthodox school of thought on the subject.¹ But some of the critics who are less charitable, such as Russell, cover a broader range of intelligence failures. In any case Dahl is right that the current debate includes many well argued sharp criticisms of the intelligence system. I am also glad to see that he echoes my recommendation to pay more attention to intelligence successes, and goes further than my cursory argument to outline a research agenda on that important issue.

Dahl and Glenn Hastedt disagree on how different current intelligence challenges are from those of the Cold War. This leaves me comfortable with the argument in my first chapter that the answer is both: some important differences, but even more similarities. This is not an issue, however, on which anyone should get hung up. The only responsible intelligence strategy is one that is open in all directions, old and unprecedented.

As I read him, Hastedt shares much of my view of the complex issue of politicization. I got the argument that publicity aggravates politicization from him in the first place, and my book does not develop it to the extent that he does in his comments here. I agree with most of what he says here, and he is bold to make the point since it contradicts the instincts of scholars (not to mention journalists) who thrive on openness and revelation of information.

To me, this uncomfortable point is reinforced most vividly by the recent controversy over the NIE at the end of 2007 on Iran's nuclear weapons program. The Key Judgments (KJs) for the NIE were written after a policy decision to stop declassifying such summaries. As long as the KJs remained classified, and the readers were familiar with the issues relating to Iran's nuclear program, it was correct to put the conclusion about suspension of weapon design efforts at the beginning, because that was what was *news*. The facts that Iran continued to develop uranium enrichment and other capabilities applicable to a future

¹ Ariel Levite, *Intelligence and Strategic Surprises* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987). For rebuttal see Richard K. Betts, "Surprise, Scholasticism, and Strategy," *International Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (September 1989).

weapon program -- which were discussed at length in the full estimate and noted at the end of the KJs – were common knowledge.

The decision to keep the KJs classified, however, was reversed, which gave their packaging a different effect when they were put out in public. Controversy ensued because the emphasis on the point that Iran had suspended its weapon design program in 2003 was misleading when described in the media, led many observers to think mistakenly that the NIE said that Iran was not pursuing a nuclear weapons option, and appeared to undermine counterproliferation efforts against Iran. Many in the public also did not realize that the media were not reporting on the full NIE (close to 100 pages, which remained classified, as distinct from the few telegraphic pages of KJs). Misunderstanding of the NIE could have been avoided if the public version of the KJs put the last one (which reminded that Iran retained the technical capacity “eventually to produce nuclear weapons if it decides to do so”) up front, and the first one (about suspension of the weapon design program) at the end. (This correct point was made by John Bolton in a bitter attack on the NIE.² Yes, even a stopped clock is right twice a day.)

More generally, revelation of intelligence analyses is undesirable because knowledge that the media and voting public will see them unavoidably politicizes the assessment process, which is already politically fraught, beyond repair. If estimates become grist for debate by pundits, legislators, and campaign advertisements, too much will ride on controversial intelligence judgments for policymakers, and the line operating department of State and Defense, to let an academic-style “objective” estimating process determine the outcome.

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² John R. Bolton, “Our Politicized Intelligence Services,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 5, 2008, p. A17. See also Robert Jervis, “Making Intelligence Public,” *Saltzman Research Note* (Columbia University, Arnold A. Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies, April 2008).