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In *Before Intelligence Failed* Mark Wilkinson, a former commissioned officer in the British army, endeavors to explore the intelligence failure surrounding the 2003 Iraq War by tracing the history of the United Kingdom’s intelligence on chemical and biological weapons in the thirty years before the war. The book is centered upon three case studies of UK intelligence into the biological and chemical weapons programs of the Soviet Union, South Africa, and Libya, which Wilkinson uses to explore whether UK intelligence on Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program in the early 2000s was a continuation of the past relationship between intelligence and foreign policy or if it instead represented a departure from the past. In the end he does see “significant differences in the purpose of intelligence [in Iraq] compared with the case studies” (p. 164). He notes that “in the three case studies in this book, intelligence agencies appeared to work independently: they sought intelligence to describe and analyse possible threats and risks, leaving it to the policy-makers to decide, over time, based on the strength of their findings, whether these threats and risks should inform foreign policy” (p. 165). In the case of the Blair government’s case against Iraq, however, Wilkinson finds that UK policymakers already had a predetermined foreign policy goal and cherry-picked intelligence to support that position. Wilkinson argues that this “marks a fundamental shift from the apparent purpose of intelligence seen in the three case studies” (p. 165).

Wilkinson finds that in the cases of UK intelligence on the biological and chemical weapons programs of the Soviet Union, South Africa, and Libya the British intelligence infrastructure had a hard time getting policymakers to take the issue seriously or take action against these foreign governments. Wilkinson believes that the UK political establishment ignored intelligence on these states’ WMD programs because they did not want raising the matter to impact negotiations on other matters
and because it fit their agenda of winding down the UK’s own program as a cost-saving measure.

The Libya chapter focuses on the use of intelligence agencies to conduct “clandestine pseudo-diplomatic” negotiations with a pariah state. Wilkinson ultimately concludes that although UK intelligence likely played a small role in the matter, Libyan disarmament in late 2003 was more a result of a confluence of factors both domestic and foreign that led Muammar Gaddafi to abandon his WMD program.

Wilkinson’s research paints the picture of UK intelligence being much more competent than US intelligence, although to be fair that conclusion is biased both by a small set of three case studies on a narrow subject (biological and chemical weapons) and by being centered around interviews with former UK intelligence officials. The book is based almost exclusively on confidential interviews with unnamed British intelligence officials and on secondary sources, with very little archival research being utilized. This makes the book less academic than most, but this is also partly a result of the confidential nature of the subject matter.

Wilkinson spends considerable time demonstrating the direct relationship between national interest, national security, and intelligence—a relationship that seems self-evident to this reviewer and likely to the vast majority of readers. The issue is more about the politicized interpretation of national interest by both the intelligence community and policymakers.

In this vein, the main takeaway from Wilkinson’s research is his conclusion that UK intelligence is “incapable of meeting the time-sensitive demands of a government needing to construct cases rapidly for pre-emptive war” (p. 184). Wilkinson argues, I think persuasively, that when intelligence agencies are tasked with producing the case for war on short notice, the politicized nature of that request makes the task ripe for exaggerations and uncorroborated inaccuracies.
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