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Changes in Intelligence for an Age of Terror (Gregory F. Treverton. Intelligence for an Age of Terror. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.)

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Book Reviews

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A review by Scott Miller

Gregory Treverton's book Intelligence for an Age of Terror is a very important and valuable work on the shifts in intelligence demands, and the, heretofore, lackluster responses to these evolving demands. Without assigning blame for recent terror attacks, Treverton clearly delineates the state of American intelligence capabilities in the context of changing threats to United States security in the form of terrorism. Treverton highlights the pervasive influence of Cold War security interests on intelligence organization and tactics, examining how these predications on traditional interstate conflict and threats are inadequate and inappropriate to address the current terrorist threat. These shortcomings are theoretical and organizational, affecting both the culture through which intelligence officers and analysts view their work, as well as the bureaucratic structures that dictate jurisdiction and authority. Furthermore, Treverton does not simply list the current problems faced by intelligence, he draws on his extensive professional experience to suggest possible options for implementing the changes necessary to properly address the threat of terrorism. Though the extent of these deficiencies are ambiguous, there are concrete examples of how the previous Cold War-centric organization of intelligence is currently restricting effective management of the terrorist threat.

Treverton begins the book by discussing the changed nature of the risks intelligence seeks to combat, from a threat based on conventional warfare that respected boundaries of international law to a constantly evolving patchwork of groups who use any means necessary to accomplish their goals and actively change their tactics to exploit weaknesses in United States' defense. Secondly, Treverton explores the increasing number of intelligence consumers, including state and local government officials, whereas during the Cold War, intelligence was mainly used by high-level federal policymakers. Finally, Treverton acknowledges the problem of boundaries when faced with an enemy who does not respect boundaries — geographic or legal. I will briefly explore Treverton's analysis of each of these thematic problems, as well as his proposals for reforming intelligence to better suit its current needs.

The nature of the threat faced directly affects the organizational culture that dictates the type of intelligence sought, and the means used to obtain such intelligence. That is, during the Cold War states were the primary intelligence target, and as so, intelligence gathering and analysis is based on such a threat. Treverton argues that nation-states provide a valuable context and "story" for intelligence officers and analysts to guide their thinking. States have documented histories, bureaucracies, and in many cases, similar goals, such as the defense of homeland. Therefore, the aim of intelligence is primarily that of puzzle-solving, what Treverton describes as "looking for additional pieces to fill out a mosaic of understanding whose broad shape is given" (17). Intelligence is concerned with knowing a state's nuclear capabilities, or standing troop levels — information that has a definite answer, and that fits into the context that a state provides.

On the other hand, non-state actors, as the current primary security concern to the United States, do not have the intrinsic back-story and perspective that a state actor provides. Instead of trying to fill in gaps of knowable information — the number of active troops a state has, for instance — intelligence is concerned with understanding the nuances and proclivities of individual groups and their goals. This understanding is then used to form best guesses, essentially, of what these actors will do; however, since this sort of intelligence is based on human thought and action, answers are not definitive until actions are carried out. Treverton terms this sort of intelligence as "mysteries." Instead of knowing that North Korea has X nuclear warheads, the product of mysteries is a "best forecast, perhaps in the form of a probability with key factors identified as well as how they bear on the estimate" (18).

Obviously, this distinction in targets and subsequent outcomes is hugely relevant to the intelligence community's operations. Intelligence officers and analysts need to shift their thinking from trying to solve puzzles and finding definite answers to discovering terrorist intentions and forming comprehensive understanding of targets, so as to assess their intentions and make predictions based on probability as to where and when the next attack could take place. Treverton's explanation of theoretical problems and their subsequent application to structural organizations is really well done in this beginning section of the book. While there are plenty of places to lose the reader in the complexity of the issue being faced, Treverton carefully leads the discussion in a way that ensures that the reader will follow each logical extrapolation. Moreover, as this fundamental difference has received little mainstream attention, Treverton has brought valuable new ideas to the reform debate.

The next pattern Treverton discusses is the increased number of intelligence consumers and the wide range of actors this encompasses — from high-level federal policymakers to state and local law enforcement first responders, and even private sector groups that deal with critical infrastructure such as utilities companies. This necessary increase in consumers has lead to almost unanimous calls for augmented "information sharing," which Treverton rejects. He says that "information sharing" is the wrong phrase and attitude towards the problem of accommodating more and more consumers, because it perpetuates the idea that an agency owns the intelligence products it produces. Here again, Treverton demonstrates his years of experience by taking a serious problem in the intelligence structure, and rejecting the overly simplistic idea of information sharing, which reinforces "stovepiping" — a term used to refer to the vertical organization of intelligence agencies' information that precludes horizontal exchange with other agencies. Moreover, "information sharing" implies that the problem could be fixed by making it logistically easier to move information. Along these lines, the problem with intelligence dissemination is not in the technical means of doing so, but in the policies governing the exchange and distribution of products. Finally, Treverton (168-69) argues that information sharing implies that it is a top-down enterprise, in which federal agencies simply hand out intelligence products to state and local actors in a one-way fashion, when in reality, the nature of the terrorist threat demands cooperation occurring in both directions.

Instead of a superficial, ad hoc solution to the problem of increased consumers, such as intelligence sharing, Treverton argues that a more fundamental, systemic answer needs to be addressed. Currently, intelligence policy and organization fosters security procedures

that maintain "need to know" standards that are very exclusive. However, as the number of consumers who need to know vital intelligence mushrooms, these security measures are ill equipped to handle such an influx (169). Though acknowledged as a problem by many others, Treverton seems alone in his appreciation of the importance of proper information distribution amongst relevant actors, and the systemic and fundamental reforms that are required to address this problem.

Additionally, not only do the logistics of intelligence dissemination need to be reappraised, but the individual needs of different customers must be adequately met. For instance, private sector managers of critical infrastructure need to be apprised of the threats concerning their specific realm of responsibility, or in the case of individual private citizens, they need to be kept informed of the nature of threats facing them, and what the most appropriate responses are (185). While this may require much more manpower in order to organize such efforts, it is essential that relevant actors receive relevant intelligence that is actionable.

These two crucial points that Treverton exposes are necessary in order to mitigate the terrorist threat as much as possible. While perfect prevention of terrorist attacks is an unrealistic goal to attempt, a sober realization that up-to-date information in the hands of pertinent actors will help stem the impact and scope of another attack is very reasonable. In this sense, the more information state, local, and private citizens have, the more readily all parties will be able to respond to an attack. Compared to the notion of information sharing, this strategy is much more appropriate in that it provides a path for implementing policy-level solutions to facilitate two-way exchanges of intelligence and information, as

well as enabling more appropriate intelligence products to reach their respective audiences.

The final case of outdated intelligence policy Treverton discusses is the problem of how to adhere to certain legal and ethical boundaries while trying to combat an enemy that does not respect boundaries such as geographic borders or the distinction between military and civilian targets. This problem occurs within the context of a betrayed social contract between the American people and the intelligence community.

Treverton (235) writes that due to the secretive and sometimes illegal nature of intelligence, the American people have essentially agreed to give license to intelligence operations with the understanding that intelligence officials would be sensitive to American political values. With the perceived intelligence failures of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, along with abuses of power such as Abu Ghraib or the "Torture Memos," this trust and social contract has been broken. However, intelligence and interrogation remain vital pieces in the strategy to prevent terrorist attacks and maintain the United States' security, especially against terrorists who actively try and exploit these boundaries as weaknesses in American defense. Therefore, Treverton (249) argues that the social contract must be rebuilt in a new manner that addresses the terrorist threat by allowing certain intelligence operations to occur, but, at the same time, acknowledging and working to prevent the sorts of abuses that have recently marred the reputation of intelligence agencies. Treverton's treatment of this final problem is no less satisfying than his previous proposals, again, mainly due to the fact that he concentrates on foundational

issues of the problem, instead of trying to explain how to deal with the superficial aspects of intelligence abuse scandals or the individual cases.

An initial step in bridging this divide is to end the practices that gave rise to abuses of power, such as extraordinary rendition programs and enhanced interrogation techniques (240). Aside from preventing potential future abuses, this will aid intelligence and the broader campaign against Islamic extremists in a couple ways. First, as Treverton (240) states, "The conflict with Islamic extremist terrorists is ultimately a war of ideas, and we lose the war if we stoop to their methods." If the United States does not maintain certain legal and ethical standards, it will be committing heinous acts along with terrorists, thus plunging the entire campaign into moral ambiguity and undercutting its justification. Secondly, though Americans appreciate the checks and balances inherent in its federal government, other nations around the world do not necessarily see the recriminations and investigations that follow such an abuse of power, and instead are left with impressions of the United States as illegal and unethical (240). Since the campaign against terrorism and Islamic extremists is a global effort involving cooperation and alliances with many other countries in the international community, alienating foreign nations would further degrade the United States' legitimacy in the conflict. I find Treverton's concern with the opinion not only of American citizens, but of foreign nations refreshing in that he understands the value of public legitimacy. His contention that intelligence must not simply dupe citizens, or cover their tracks, but instead honestly hold up its end of the social contract is a solution that almost everyone would appreciate and champion.

While these abuses of power are not unique to the post-Cold War era and addressing them would not require any unusual circumstances, what is unique is the increased scope of operations that intelligence does require to combat terrorist threats. Certainly there needs to be an increased domestic intelligence role, including surveillance and investigation of American citizens. The key is knowing where to "strike the balance between privacy and security in the context of a changed threat and changing technology" (249). Treverton goes on to write that part of this balance is maintaining a context of legality to whatever programs are used, instead of the course the Bush Administration took immediately following the September 11th attacks by bypassing the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) and conducting surveillance of American citizens without a warrant. Instead of abandoning the legal framework of FISA, the administration should have worked with Congress to implement any changes to FISA in order to maintain protection of civil liberties, as well as the framework of legality in intelligence operations.

Legality and legitimacy are crucial to the effort against terrorism, as it will be a prolonged conflict, reaching beyond just the scope of military operations. Also, as a large part of this effort involves increased domestic intelligence, this adherence not only to codified law, but also to the less tangible well of public trust and political values, is fundamental to the success of intelligence and the broader conflict with Islamic extremists. As with previous sections, Treverton aptly explains that these deep-seeded problems cannot merely be fixed by a simple clarification of policy or quick revision; instead, a fundamental change has occurred in the nature of the threat facing the United States and the intelligence community charged with defending it. In order to properly

concentrate on this threat, intelligence must evolve from the Cold War product that defined its existence until recent history, and become more attuned to the unique threats it now faces, as well as the corresponding challenges involved in maintaining legal and ethical standards that the other side does not respect. In this sense, Gregory Treverton's book is a thorough, concise, actionable, and accurate plan for solving systemic problems that now frustrate intelligence efforts.