III. PROFESSIONAL INSIGHTS

Understanding US Intelligence Records

How Journalists and Scholars Can "Get it Right"

by Gary B. Keeley

FUNDAMENTAL FACTS ABOUT INTELLIGENCE RECORDS

Beginning before the Second World War and continuing today, US intelligence entities amassed a vast collection of records. Most of these remain classified to protect the sources and methods of collection. Understanding the types and volumes of records can assist researchers locate declassified records[1] to understand how collection and analysis agencies produced those records and how "customers" or "consumers" of intelligence used them. This is not as well-understood today as it could be.

The records discussed here are those created by the US Intelligence Community (IC). However, much about US records could also apply to other intelligence entities around the world. Most journalistic and scholarly publications focus on the US IC, particularly and narrowly on covert action. Gaps in records are significant because not only has the US IC been involved in much more than covert action but only modest numbers of non-covert action records have been released by the US.

The reasons for the paucity of records should be well-known. Nevertheless, it bears repeating that "secrecy" and its underlying "need-to-know" principles exist to protect the sources and methods so that the clandestine collection of intelligence information may continue. It should be apparent that when sources and methods are revealed in an unauthorized manner, whether leaked to the press or scholars or obtained by another intelligence service, the targets of collection will take steps to prevent further collection by the compromised sources and methods or use such knowledge for purposes of deception. It should also be apparent that a leak to the press is a leak to every intelligence agency in the world because they all read the press. It is understood by all intelligence officers, often from painful personal experience, that open publication of leaked classified information reduces the ability of an intelligence agency to support policymakers and military commanders.[2]

Without secrecy, intelligence collection cannot occur. Leaders want their agencies to collect and demand that they protect that collection because intelligence is considered to be a normal and routine part of the foreign policy process. Critics of intelligence often seek to separate intelligence from policy, but that is impossible. Intelligence, and intelligence records, are a part of foreign policy that includes diplomacy, economic and cultural policies, and military activities. Limiting access to information about intelligence collection, and the records which detail sources and methods, is how all governments enable continued collection.

Some US IC records that historians might have found valuable were destroyed routinely with the permission of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), and according to established Records Control Schedules (RCS). Other records may have been misfiled and will be difficult to locate. Generally, however, the challenge with intelligence records is not that too few exist but that vast numbers fill archival shelves and digital repositories. Further, they are not as easy to declassify – without risking damage to ongoing collection – as imagined by those who routinely advocate for increased and more rapid declassification.

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1. The term "declassified" is commonly used to describe Intelligence Community (IC) records that reach the public. But "declassified" does not accurately describe many such records. If a record were "declassified," all of it would be released to the public. The IC long ago determined that it would not be able to release much to the public if parts of documents contained damaging sources and methods information. Many records, therefore, have been "redacted and released" rather than (fully) "declassified" or "released in full." This may be a distinction without a difference to most and, in fact, the two terms are often used interchangeably. This is one of many aspects of IC records that students and scholars should understand.

2. Gary B. Keeley, "The Imperative of Intelligence Services to Protect from Exposure the Sources and Methods of Intelligence Collection," *The Intelligencer* Vol. 27, No. 1, Winter-Spring ,2022, pp. 7-9.

US IC agencies preserved a vast quantity of records during the Second World War, the Cold War, and beyond. When the bulk of them are eventually declassified (and the waiting everyone can acknowledge is frustrating) a golden age of history involving a review of almost all events of the Cold War will ensue and historians will appreciate when, if and how intelligence played roles not known today.[3]

Even well-known moments in history in which intelligence played a role have been routinely misunderstood due to the absence of declassified records. For example:

- the decades-long erroneous and repeated assertions by multiple authors that the 1955-1956 Berlin Tunnel intercept operation was a failure,

- that US intelligence was surprised by the Soviet launch of Sputnik I in 1957,

- that the U-2 reconnaissance aircraft discovered the Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba in 1962, and

- that US intelligence was entirely surprised by the Arab attack on Israel in 1973.

Each of these, to a greater or lesser degree, was a "publishing failure" that illustrates that students of intelligence have had less access and understanding of the material than they believed. Had they had more declassified records or found all those that were available, they might have "gotten it right."[4]

Examples such as these can be multiplied almost *ad infinitum*. The most fruitful future research opportunities, and the largest challenges, belong to diplomatic historians and those of foreign affairs and international relations. Little of the intelligence available to customers during countless Cold War moments, particularly single-source reporting, has been examined to date.

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3. It is worth noting, too, that the National Archives holds thousands of pages of detailed records of the WWII Office of Strategic Services (OSS), many of which may languish unstudied in Record Group 226. CIA declassified them in the 1980s and 1990s and the National Archives then spent years organizing and building finding aids for them. Researchers will discover that OSS was at least as much if not more about espionage than it was about sabotage.

4. This author has looked at just a few very high-profile examples of inaccurate or incomplete understandings by journalists and historians of past events: Review by Gary Keeley of Steve Vogel's book, *Betrayal in Berlin*, in *Studies in Intelligence* Vol. 64, No. 2, June 2020; Amy Ryan and Gary Keeley. "Sputnik and US Intelligence: The Warning Record," Studies in Intelligence Vol. 61, No. 3, September 2017; Gary Keeley. "HUMINT Reports. Raised Suspicions about Soviet Missiles in Cuba," *The Intelligencer,* Vol. 27, No. 2, Summer-Fall 2022; Gary B. Keeley. "NSA Was Right: CIA Was Not. Challenges in Understanding What Went. Wrong before the 1973 Arab-Israeli War," *The Intelligencer* Vol. 28, No. 2, Summer-Fall 2023, pp. 22, 26-28.

FOUR BROAD CATEGORIES OF COLD WAR INTELLIGENCE RECORDS

From the perspective of a historian, Cold War IC records might be placed in four very broad categories:[5]

- First are administrative, legal, logistical, financial, communications and personnel records that document the skeletons of the agencies, detailing how they function.

- Second, daily work records in messages to and from offices worldwide, and in intra-office memos and longer studies that mostly remain within an agency's headquarters.

- The third and fourth categories are the result of daily work. Agencies disseminated both single-source ("raw") intelligence reports and all-source analyses to customers of intelligence.

Within each of these four broad categories, hundreds of message or document "types" or "vehicles" existed. The records probably total in the billions, with the number of pages far greater. The "types" varied from agency to agency and evolved from the 1940s to the 1990s and beyond. A general, simplified and unclassified look at each of these four broad categories may help researchers seeking to find and use these records. This information may be especially useful to those new to the field of intelligence and to scholars not familiar with intelligence records that might bear on their studies, particularly historians of diplomacy and foreign relations.

Category 1: Administrative, legal, logistical, financial, communications, and personnel records. Cold War support records are large in number, complex, scattered, and mostly still classified. They are the kinds of records most likely to be ignored by historians, although occasionally someone will write about Intelligence support and logistics. Many of these records were formally labeled "temporary" (to be destroyed after a certain period of time) and many contain personal information that IC agencies – and the National Archives – are unlikely to release due to privacy concerns. When studied, they can tell stories of the evolution of capacities, changing priorities, and the details of every administrative moment

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5. The author arranged IC records in these four categories. This system is neither formal nor official but is offered as one way to understand and to visualize very large volumes of records that nobody outside of the IC has seen. Alternative ways to categorize the records are possible.

of an agency. Without the activities documented in these records, IC agencies would have been unable to accomplish anything.

Category 2: Messages and studies about the day-to-day work of an agency. This category of records overlaps to some degree with the first category but is broader. It contains the material most useful to understand Cold War decision-making, activities, operations, internal organizational structure and change, hierarchy, leadership, training, internal motivations, careerism, reform, and a wide variety of working-level processes and procedures. These are memos sent to and from offices outside of Washington, DC, memos within a given agency's headquarters, or to another agency in Washington, and longer studies within headquarters including a wide variety of reviews, counterintelligence studies, and various investigations. Also included in this category are classified historical articles, monographs and books written by cleared officers, often close-in-time to the event, and informed by access to classified records from all four categories.

Only a very small percentage of these types of records have been declassified. They are important because one cannot properly or fully understand either the facts of what occurred, nor the complex and fast-moving decisions made, within any intelligence agency without the primary source records that explain the motivations, actions, operations and timelines.

"Adjacent archives" is a term often used by scholars, frustrated with ongoing classification, who decades ago turned to non-intelligence – adjacent – archives, both official and personal, to find records to help them understand intelligence activities. Such archives are composed of the memos, reports, studies, letters, diaries, and emails of non-intelligence agencies and personnel that sometimes shed light on intelligence. In some cases, as well, adjacent archives include material generated by intelligence agencies. These archives have been helpful to scholars but cannot entirely substitute for still-classified primary source records.

Category 3: Single-source ("raw") intelligence reports. These were the deliverables produced by collection agencies. Typically sourced to a single type of collection they were fact-based (without analysis and with no dependence on other single-source reports). Generally, single-source reports (often devalued by many authors with the term "raw") were provided by CIA open source (OSINT), by CIA and DIA human

sources (HUMINT), by NSA and military signals intelligence (SIGINT – both COMINT and ELINT) and other technical collection sources, and by the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) and its predecessors from overhead collection (IMINT – later GEOINT) managed by the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO). Additionally, observations by military attachés and Department of State foreign service officers (FSOs), including field analysis by FSOs, were disseminated.

Single-source reporting was broadly-disseminated to all-source analysts in CIA, DIA and the Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), as well as directly to large numbers of executive branch working-level and senior customers and military and civilian departments, agencies and organizations. Some also reached members of congress in the first half of the Cold War and many more reached the congressional intelligence committees after they were established in the late 1970s.

It is important to recognize that not only did some policymakers read some single-source reports, but officials in intelligence agencies also read the single-source reports of their own and other collection agencies. Generally, cleared personnel in the executive branch and in the intelligence agencies were very well-informed about developments around the world during the Cold War.

To protect sources and methods, most single-source reports transmitted to customers outside of a production agency, as well as to readers inside a production agency but without a need to know, obscured sources and methods details pertaining to the report.

CIA, NSA and some of the other agencies, have declassified some of their single-source reports from the 1950s and 1960s but far more remain classified than have been released, including most single-source reports from the 1970s onward.

Category 4: All-source analysis. Like single-source reports, all-source analysis was widely-disseminated to trusted, vetted, security-cleared executive branch officials. All-source analysis is the most well-known category of declassified records because more all-source analysis has been declassified than have records in the other three categories. This is so because all-source includes even fewer sources and methods detail than do single-source reports. With the sourcing mostly removed, all-source analysis is easier to redact and release without jeopardizing ongoing collection. National Intelligence Estimates (NIE) were perhaps the easiest to declassify.

The collection agencies devoted much effort throughout the Cold War to develop a finely-tuned dissemination system to move the appropriate single-source reports and all-source analysis to customers who needed to know and to do so in as timely a manner as possible. One of the great and mostly-invisible "successes" of the US IC was to place before large numbers of cleared executive branch civilian and military readers a wide variety of reasonably-accurate and current information day after day for decades.

Most intelligence customers had limited time to read intelligence in their always-busy days. All-source analysis was written to communicate as many of the important points as possible from the mass of single-source reporting and to do so in as brief and as coherent a text as possible. In this system, single-source reports were usually very briefly summarized. A two or three-page single-source report may have been reduced to two or three lines of factual evidence supporting the analysis. The trade-off with this arrangement was that customers of intelligence, particularly the most-busy senior policymakers, saw only a fraction of the detailed and often powerful single-source reports.

SINGLE-SOURCE REPORTS: THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS

The role and impact of single-source reports may not be well-understood outside of those in the IC and executive branch who were cleared to see sensitive intelligence. Most unclassified studies about the contributions of intelligence examine primarily the easily-understood and more-widely declassified all-source analysis, but single-source reporting also reached a large number of customers, particularly those who implemented policy at lower levels of the government ("implementers") who had more time to read because they had narrower portfolios than the most-senior officials. Senior officials were always well-served by personal briefers but far more details were to be found in the single-source reports.

Professor Christopher Andrew has often written about single-source reporting, usually focusing on SIGINT reports. Andrew wrote in 1995 that "…SIGINT still remains conspicuous by its absence from almost all biographies of postwar presidents and histories of American policy during the Cold War. George [H.W.]

SIGINT use by President Lyndon Johnson

An example of the use of intelligence by a very senior consumer is an oral history interview conducted by NSA in 1968 of one of its officials, Arthur McCafferty, who had served in the White House Situation Room during part of the administration of President Lyndon Baines Johnson.[1] McCafferty had a significant story to tell about the extensive use by the president and his aides of single-source SIGINT.[2] This attention to SIGINT at the most-senior level of the government may not be universal, but one might extrapolate from this episode to consider how other presidents, national security advisors, and others may have used intelligence, including single source reporting.

1. Find the five-page transcript of the McCafferty interview, declassified by NSA in 2005 and entitled, "Memorandum for the Record; Subj: Interview with Mr. Arthur McCafferty, White House Staff, on the use of SIGINT in shaping W.H. decisions on Southeast Asia," at the bottom of the first page of this link: *https://www.nsa.gov /Helpful-Links/NSA-FOIA/Declassification-Transparency -Initiatives/Historical-Releases/Gulf-of-Tonkin/*
2. For a summary of the use of SIGINT by the Johnson White House, see former NSA historian Thomas R. Johnson's *American Cryptology during the Cold War, 1945-1989*. Book II: Centralization Wins. NSA/Center for Cryptologic History CCH-E32-95-03, (1995), redacted and released by NSA on 9 July 2007, pages 352-355.

Bush, however claimed that it was a 'prime factor' in his foreign policy."[6]

If George H.W Bush saw SIGINT as a "prime factor," and Andrew likely means here the many and detailed single-source SIGINT reports, and not just those reports summarized and used as evidence supporting all-source analysis, then the president may have been seeing and using SIGINT reporting routinely. Whether that is an accurate understanding awaits the declassification of pertinent records. For now, little is known of the influence these reports may have had upon his decisions or, as Andrew writes, the

6. Christopher Andrew. *For the President's Eyes Only*, New York: Harper Collins, 1995, p. 5.

decisions of any other US president. Nor do historians know much about the use of SIGINT during the Cold War by any other president or any other working-level executive branch official.[7]

In his conclusion to the same book, Andrew drew perhaps the most significant and under-appreciated picture to date of the challenge facing historians not only of intelligence but of foreign and military affairs, a challenge which has ameliorated but little since 1995, when he observed that:

> "Not a single decrypt produced by the National Security Agency, the largest and most expensive intelligence agency in the history of Western Civilization, has so far been declassified. When NSA files for the Cold War period finally become available some time during the twenty-first century, they are certain to generate thousands of doctoral dissertations and some interesting reassessments of American foreign policy."[8]

Andrew did not explain why he expected "thousands" of doctoral dissertations to be informed by declassified SIGINT, but this author sees that number as reasonably accurate, notes that few such dissertations or even detailed articles have yet been published, and observes that Andrew might as well have been referring to the thousands of events on any timeline of the Cold War. Intelligence professionals know that intelligence reporting and analysis – of all nations, not just the U.S. – likely played a role in many if not most of the events of the Cold War and Andrew appears to have suspected that.

Diplomatic historians have written about the decisions leaders and mid-level officials reached and the actions they ordered or took personally, but know much less and therefore have written much less about why national leaders, military commanders and diplomats acted the way they did. Causation is lacking in the history of many Cold War moments. The revisions to history that Andrew suggests will come when enough intelligence, including single-source reporting, has been declassified to reveal if, when and how customers of intelligence used single-source reporting and all-source analysis to plan initiatives and manage events.

In 2010, Andrew could still say that:

> "The many studies of policy-making in East and West which fail to take intelligence into account are at best incomplete, at worst distorted…. The starting point for any attempt to assess the role of intelligence during the Cold War is to recognize how much we still do not know. Signals intelligence is perhaps the prime example. Though SIGINT was far more voluminous than intelligence from human sources (HUMINT), it is still entirely absent from most histories of the Cold War."[9]

These were breathtaking observations in 1995 and are even more so given that Andrew could repeat them in 2010 and that they remain true today. In just a few paragraphs (and he has written similarly elsewhere) Andrew eviscerates most Cold War history that does not discuss the role of intelligence. The wait for declassified records is long and difficult but future generations of historians will delight in the records carefully preserved by the several U.S. intelligence agencies and eventually declassified.

FINDING AUTHORITATIVE RECORDS

In the meantime, everyone researching an intelligence topic or an event in which intelligence may have played a role should begin with *cia.gov*, *nsa.gov*, and the other public-facing IC websites, as well as records of these agencies now at the National Archives,[10] and similar archives and websites for the intelligence agencies of other nations.

It may seem a pedestrian or even offensive suggestion that professional historians ought to check IC websites for declassified records but cleared IC professionals, who read what journalists and scholars write and are not "dead Romans" without a say in what is said about them, have long noted that even specialists sometimes fail to cite, or perhaps even find, declassified primary sources pertinent to their topics. Certainly, many records sought on IC websites will not be available if they have not been declassified, but one must nevertheless begin with those who created, used and archived the records.

Each of the public-facing U.S. IC websites has sections for history and declassified records. These websites host not only millions of pages of unclassified and declassified records, at least in the U.S., but also, and importantly, long studies, periodical articles,

7. See, in this regard, the textbox in this article about the use of single-source SIGINT by President Lyndon Johnson.
8. Andrew, p. 537.
9. Christopher Andrew. "Intelligence in the Cold War," *The Cambridge Histories Online*, Vol. 2, 2010, p. 417.
10. At the NARA website, search Records Group (RG) 457 (NSA) and RG 263 (CIA) to browse some already-declassified records.

monographs and books written by officials of the various agencies, often not long after specific events.

Most readers of this article will know other key sources but it is worth repeating for those new to intelligence history: Researchers should consult the IC's *Studies in intelligence* (published for the IC by CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence – CSI), NSA's *Cryptologic Quarterly*, *Cryptolog* and other older NSA journals, NGA's *Pathfinder* and NRO's *Space Sentinel*, as well as articles written by current or former IC officers in unclassified professional intelligence journals such as the *Journal of Intelligence History* (JIH), *Intelligence and National Security* (INS), the *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* (IJIC), as well as the increasingly substantial journal, *The Intelligencer*, of The Association of Former Intelligence Officers (AFIO).

It is worth noting that those who hold or have held security clearances write unclassified articles based on their deep understandings about intelligence processes, events and records. Researchers should, in particular, avidly seek out declassified histories written by IC historians because those histories were informed by classified records and by the personal knowledge of those who contributed to the histories. In many instances, internal histories, once declassified, become "primary" sources for uncleared historians who never see the primary sources relied upon by the cleared authors. The internal histories may be mostly narrative and lack sophisticated scholarly models and theories but are invaluable to historians. Before historians can effectively use academic models, they need to know more about what happened than they do now.[11]

FIVE CHALLENGES FOR HISTORIANS

First, and this has been addressed here, ongoing classification obviously impairs the ability of researchers to fully understand many aspects of intelligence organizations and activities and to know at all of many others.[12]

Second, the volume of records, even were it possible and wise to declassify it all at once, would drown everyone.

Third, email and, in earlier decades voice telephone calls, are almost impossible to obtain. Email has been used extensively to "do work" since at least the early 1990s, and telephones were used throughout the Cold War. Email supplemented and in some cases eventually replaced some of the records vehicles discussed here. The vast majority of the email sent by staffs in intelligence agencies will likely never be released because it often mixed official and personal information and was both official and informal at the same time. The problems caused for historians by the use of telephones followed by the rise of email and various messaging systems, is not limited to the intelligence community. All entities subject to a historian's gaze use email, just as they all used to employ telephones, and today rely on text messaging and similar tools. Mountains of emails were exchanged, as were millions of phone calls, but obtaining access will be difficult. Without it, however, it will likely be impossible for non-IC historians to ever completely and accurately reconstruct what agencies were doing and why. IC historians, on the other hand, may at times have access to some email.

Fourth, every time anyone updates a website – and that includes "outside" websites, not only those in the IC – they overwrite (delete) what was there before. Daily, everywhere, primary source information of eventual use to historians, inside and outside the IC, is being deleted. Paper is now rarely used or archived. Instead, websites are simply "updated." Despite the "wayback machine" and related archiving features, locating or even learning of the existence of older online information is difficult once a website has been updated.

Fifth, and perhaps the most serious challenge to historians of even Cold War intelligence – even before email and websites further complicated record-keeping – is the impossibility in most cases of discovering many decades later which customers of intelligence saw which single-source report or piece of all-source analysis. Consequently, it will be difficult in many instances to learn how officials did or did not use intelligence.

The IC's dissemination systems were not designed to track every customer's interaction with

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11. For some insightful guidance to assist historians, see Nicholas Dujmovic. "Getting CIA History Right: The Informal Partnership Between Agency Historians and Outside Scholars," *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 26, No. 2-3, April-June 2011, pp. 228-245.

12. While not the focus here, every article and book about intelligence by every practitioner, every journalist and every scholar should in some manner remind or acknowledge that "secrecy" exists not to hide malfeasance or incompetence, although that has occurred, but to protect the sources and methods of intelligence collection in order that an intelligence agency can continue to collect. Authors should also routinely caveat their conclusions with clear statements that future

declassifications could alter their assessments.

George Marshall's use of intelligence –An example of routine management by senior officials

A history published in March 2023 by CIA's Chief Historian, David Robarge, offers general insight into how intelligence customers used the IC's product.[1] Robarge studied declassified records about the interactions with and management and use of intelligence by former senior official, George C. Marshall, Army Chief of Staff, then Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense. Much has been written about Marshall, of course, including about some instances of his interaction with intelligence. This new history focuses specifically on his relationship with intelligence and, although this was not Robarge's goal, also serves as a case study in how historians might address the unknown use of intelligence by other officials later in the Cold War.

Although many of Marshall's interactions were "only" about managing and protecting intelligence rather than using it to make decisions, Robarge's review of Marshall's involvement with intelligence takes the reader inside his world, his offices and his interactions with other officials, to reveal how routinely intelligence came up.

It is worth noting that Marshall's service at high levels of the government was in the 1940s – 1950s, before intelligence became routine, voluminous and sophisticated. Note also that in many instances even Robarge, who is a cleared CIA historian, was unable to learn from the record whether Marshall had or had not seen a given piece of intelligence. Robarge handled this by stating clearly that he could not determine whether Marshall had seen it. Historians will likely use similar phrasing in many instances when they are unable to connect a given piece of newly-declassified intelligence to a given official in a specific moment. However, were historians to follow that path every time they were unable to connect intelligence reports and analysis with decision makers, the end result would be to dismiss much of the intelligence effort because historians will, in many cases, be unable to demonstrate direct linkages. Dismissing intelligence in that manner would be a mistake because intelligence often played a role and causation cannot be determined in many instances if intelligence is not considered.

1. David Robarge. *The Soldier-Statesman in the Secret World: George C. Marshall and Intelligence in War and Peace,* Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, March 2023

every piece of intelligence. That herculean task would have required an additional agency or additional large staffs. Agencies know which "offices" or entities within a customer set received intelligence and, for more senior policymakers, particularly those with daily intelligence briefers, may be able to discover what the agencies provided in briefings in past years. It is important to note that many policymakers and even senior officials at the working, implementation level had access to not only all-source analysis and not only single-source reports but to briefers who digested the material before presenting it to officials. Anything important that the IC knew would have found its way to policymakers.

However, much intelligence reporting and analysis was available electronically from the late 1970s onward and it was often impossible to know which cleared official saw which report, much less how much time a given official spent on it and much less still – and this is the most important question – whether the official acted on it. Very general tracking of the sort websites and blogs use today was instituted much later but is not detailed enough for many historical inquiries, remains classified and, in any event, is useful only for intelligence disseminated beginning in the very late 20th century.

The inability in most cases for historians to learn which of the thousands of cleared U.S. executive branch officials – from the president to a principal officer or deputy at any level, to a planner to a desk officer – saw and acted or did not act on any given single-source report or all-source analysis publication may cause endless problems as more single-source reports and all-source is redacted and released in coming decades. The intelligence reports

and analyses might finally reveal more about causation than is now known – how, when and why officials made decisions and what role intelligence played in their decisions – but may just as likely frustrate historians who cannot be certain if a given item reached or influenced a given official.

Historians are trained to be skeptical so are likely to be reluctant, absent direct evidence, to assert that a particular official acted on a given intelligence dissemination, even when historians know that given reports or analyses were sent to pertinent offices and customer sets.

Do historians then simply dismiss the majority of the extraordinarily large numbers of intelligence items because they cannot be certain if and how officials may or may not have used them?

Not all intelligence was read and sometimes intelligence that was read was not believed or acted upon. Still, dismissing it entirely would be a mistake, and hundreds of thousands of Cold War era intelligence professionals and intelligence customers could offer hundreds of thousands of specific instances and moments in time when intelligence proved valuable, often crucial. Unfortunately, most of those have died and the rest will have – including this author – by the time the bulk of the Cold War intelligence record has been declassified decades from now.

Some of the challenge of connecting intelligence to action will be mitigated by the declassification of internal histories written decades earlier by cleared IC historians with full access to the primary source record. It bears repeating that those histories will become, of necessity, primary sources for historians because those histories may be the closest that historians can come to understanding what happened in the absence of primary source records or in cases when it is otherwise impossible to determine the role and value of intelligence.

It will be important also for students to remember that anything important known by the IC was briefed to those in the executive branch who needed to know. Specific evidence of those briefings may be hard to come by, but they were a routine practice up and down the leadership chain.

Connecting single-source intelligence reports and all-source analysis to decisions and actions by policymakers and those who implemented policy will be a thorny epistemological challenge for historians of any past event in which intelligence may have played a role. This author's hope is that historians put aside some of their skepticism about their subjects and understand that the IC disseminated many millions of written products and tens or hundreds of thousands of briefings specifically to those who needed them, did so on a timely basis, daily and over decades. Some percentage of it was unread, inaccurate or not heeded but much was accurate, read and considered by both senior officials and those who implemented policy.

Caveat scriptor.

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