

*Intelligence in Recent Public Literature***Best Truth: Intelligence in the Information Age**

By Bruce D. Berkowitz and Allan E. Goodman. Yale University Press, 2000, 203 pages.

**Reviewed by Richard L. Russell**

Authors Berkowitz and Goodman make a powerful argument that the US Intelligence Community (IC) faces a great challenge to reform itself substantially or be overcome by the forces of the information and technology revolution. They argue that *intelligence* is best understood as simply *information* and to understand intelligence today, one has to understand what is happening in the world of information writ large. Although the book examines the IC in general, it pays particularly close attention to CIA. Berkowitz and Goodman—both widely published and highly regarded experts on intelligence with firsthand IC experience—note that, while the CIA recently celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the critical question to ask is: Can an organization that has 50 years of culture, history, and sheer inertia adapt?

During the Cold War, intelligence officials assumed that both their information and technology was superior to that available in the “outside world.” The authors argue, however, that in the new information technology era, that assumption is patently false. Today, the private sector will frequently have technology that is more advanced than that in use inside the government, and will almost always be better at developing products and services and delivering them with greater speed to consumers. The private sector may also have better information than the government.

Berkowitz and Goodman judge that the challenge for intelligence officials is to understand how to tap private sector capabilities while focusing IC assets on areas in which it has a comparative advantage. The organization of the IC, in order to keep pace with the private sector, has to be flexible to allow it to be able to shift focus constantly. Intelligence organizations should be able to “off-load” responsibilities to the private sector because companies are increasingly able to handle such tasking. To achieve this dexterity, “Traditional civil service tenure is probably suited only for employees with the most general, long-term skills.” As the skills the IC requires become even more specialized, the IC will need more flexible arrangements for engaging such services.

The authors view the IC as a bureaucracy—characterized by centralized planning, standard operating procedures, and a hierarchical chain of command—forged on the organizational assumptions of the 1950s. They argue the IC is ill-equipped as presently organized to grapple with the challenges of today and tomorrow: “It is hierarchical, linear, and isolated. This model worked well in the Cold War, when the United States had a single paramount threat—the Soviet Union—that changed incrementally. However, to monitor a world in which threats change and can appear suddenly from unexpected quarters, the IC needs a more flexible system.”

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The authors suggest that “virtual corporation” and “market-based management” examples from the private sector might be useful in guiding reforms to the IC. Informed by the “virtual corporation” example, intelligence consumers would have a “principal analyst” responsible for assembling the intelligence product tailored to policymaker interests and needs. The principal analyst would be responsible for assembling the team necessary to develop the product. Informed by the “market-based management” example, the IC’s organization would allow intelligence taskings to be sent out to the “market” for competitive bids from the IC as well as from the private sector experts and firms. The authors argue that a market-based system would redress the IC’s shortcomings in dealing with unanticipated threats due to its hard-wired structure and staffing which focuses attention on static topics.

Culture will be a major obstacle to reforming the IC. The authors argue that “Secrecy may be the single most important trait that has defined the intelligence culture.” They are quick to point out, however, that information today is more abundant, and it is increasingly possible to use nonsecret methods to obtain it, which puts the burden on the IC to justify why it needs excessive secrecy. Berkowitz and Goodman, moreover, assert that “Secrecy runs counter to the essence of the Information Revolution, where the free flow of information drives productivity and creativity. The procedures and technologies of the Information Revolution—open architectures, public data bases, and the ability to form networks with almost anyone, anywhere—are all defeated by secrecy.”

The track record for bureaucracies in reforming is not promising, and Berkowitz and Goodman warn that the IC and CIA could face one of two fates. The IC could gradually drift into irrelevance, perhaps with the exception of a few functions, or it could muddle along until a catastrophe exposes its systemic weaknesses. To avoid “reform by catastrophe,” someone—akin to the proverbial “man on horseback”—in the bureaucracy has to have a vision of how to reshape the IC, often by abandoning orthodoxy. The authors argue that the IC has already suffered significant failures in the last 10 years—most recently with India’s nuclear tests—which portend both the challenges and the need for reform.

This book is an important addition to the literature on the future of American intelligence. It could provoke officials in the IC, the policymaking community, and the public at large to take a critical look at the structure, mission, and challenges facing American intelligence in the aftermath of the Cold War. The authors, while sympathetic to the demands of intelligence, marshal a critical analysis of the IC in the hopes of sparking reform, which they persuasively argue is essential to the future efficacy of the IC in supporting American statecraft.

While some readers will take issue with the authors’ proposed reforms, the debate over the future course of American intelligence will be leavened by this volume. The idea of assigning a “principal analyst” to key policymakers would increase the CIA’s connectivity to consumers and help ensure that intelligence is relevant to policy. CIA already is moving in this direction, and perhaps this trend should be accelerated while focusing on the highest policymaking echelons. The implementation of “market-based” reforms, however, may prove more problematic. Although the idea might prove workable for long-term research projects, particularly in the technical fields, it would be poorly suited

for handling current intelligence demands. Expertise required to produce current intelligence has to be readily on hand and honed with longer-term, in-house research. Berkowitz and Goodman, moreover, give little attention to the personnel and contracting infrastructure that would be needed to support a robust “market-based” system. One could argue with merit that the IC would be wiser to spend resources on nurturing experts than on more bureaucrats.

Nevertheless, perhaps the greatest contribution of this book will be to enlighten those would-be reformers who lie dormant within the IC. Too many labor under a steady crush of daily tasking, leaving them little opportunity to see beyond the reach of their inboxes. This book may give those potential “movers and shakers” a map to help drive the IC along the bumpy road of reform.