

POLITICIZED INTELLIGENCE / WOUNDED DEMOCRACY

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The current political climate in Washington DC towards the American Intelligence Community (AIC) is perhaps at an all-time low. Not only is there a special prosecutor taking over for a fired FBI Director to investigate the President of the United States, trying to determine if the Commander-in-Chief in fact colluded with a foreign nation to undermine the sanctity of the American electoral system, that same President seems to take every opportunity he can to denigrate, call into question, and heap insults upon the AIC in its entirety.

While some may not consider such behavior from Trump to be surprising (if nonetheless disappointing), the reality is this atmosphere is the consequence of a trend that has existed for almost the entire 21st century and has crossed party lines and involved two other presidents. This disturbing trend has remained somewhat hidden from mainstream eyes and ears. More importantly, the damaging consequences to democracy that can emerge from politicized intelligence have gone even more unnoticed and undiscussed.

George W. Bush

The obvious event that started the downward turn between the political and intelligence communities in America was the lead-up to the Iraq War under George W. Bush. Its ultimate expression came with Colin Powell's speech to the United Nations where he 'made the case' for Weapons of Mass Destruction being present in Iraq. The information presented was from the AIC. However, the subtle nuance missed (and which to this day deeply irritates members of the AIC when discussing the issue) is that the Intelligence Community does not present policy suggestions to the government. Its job is to simply present its analysis based on the evidence that was sourced from various venues, both open and classified. How leaders then interpret and present those analyses, that evidence, to the public is the sole and exclusive responsibility of the government.

The problem, of course, was that WMDs were never discovered in Iraq and subsequently said intelligence analyses were deemed 'inaccurate' by many politicians in a fairly blatant attempt to avoid public blame. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld was particularly vocal in this passing of the

responsibility buck. This clearly left a sour taste in the collective mouth of the AIC, which felt it had simply done its analytical job to the best of its ability and, having never given a policy recommendation or even offered a definitive conclusion about WMDs in Iraq, did not exactly appreciate being ‘thrown under the bus’ as the saying goes in the United States – used for political convenience and its prestige and purpose undermined and misunderstood. Most importantly, the AIC felt somewhat handcuffed in that it knew it would be inappropriate to air its grievances in public. As a result, public perception was being de facto misled.

Barack H. Obama

While most assume there were no major missteps during the Obama administration when it comes to politicizing intelligence or isolating the AIC, they are forgetting the complex use of drones in the war on terror overseas. Obama’s foreign policy and counterterrorism initiatives were definitively marked by the fortuitous technological advancement and dominance of the United States over the drone market. Few realize that America employed a two-tier system of drone usage, one controlled by the Department of Defense (DoD) and one commanded by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). It is in breaking down these two tiers that some unnecessary slipperiness is exposed during the Obama tenure. The DoD-usage of drones was more closely monitored and rigidly hierarchical in terms of command structure. The process of analysis and approval was indeed labyrinthine. But the CIA-level of drone usage was tagged more to classified information and covert operations. As such, an impression was allowed to develop over time publicly that the CIA drone program was akin to ‘spies run amok’ or some other Hollywoodized-style ‘rogue system.’

In reality, this perception was exaggerated: the CIA did not feel there was anything about its usage of American drone technology that could be categorized as rogue or inappropriate to the standard calculation of US national interests. Those interests are set and/or approved by the President of the United States. That Obama did not make any special effort to make the public aware of this distinction and thereby stop the growing public perception of CIA rogue kill lists via drone was particularly disconcerting to the AIC. Once more, it felt it was being placed in the position of doing exactly what it was supposed to do while the Commander-in-Chief allowed falsehoods and misperception to sully the Intelligence Community’s image. Coming on the heels of the Bush-WMD fiasco, it made the AIC feel as if the White House was grinding on old scar tissue and that Obama had played a bit fast-and-loose with public opinion to leverage his own personal image and Q-rating. The AIC took note but again did not do anything publicly.

Donald J. Trump

In the Trump Presidency, we perhaps have the nadir of this phenomenon. Not only is the Commander-in-Chief openly talking and tweeting about the relevance and allegiance of the Intelligence Community, he also accuses it of actively leaking information to the detriment of his

office. For the IC's part, it feels nervous about the current President's understanding of classified information and the procedural norms tied to the releasing of such information. It is easy to glance over these statements without fully understanding the calamity they represent: to have the executive branch of the government and its intelligence community openly engaged in an adversarial rather than cooperative relationship is beyond shocking. That some of this takes place across social and regular media for full public view is doubly shameful. Obviously, the Russian hacking scandal and its aftermath only pushes these conditions to even more extremes of non-communication. And while the AIC stayed largely quiet with their complaints during the previous two Presidential administrations, it seems apparent that it has now decided to take the gloves off and let fly with a few haymakers of its own with the current administration. All to the detriment of democracy.

The Consequences

Politicizing intelligence is more than just the same old, same old, politics-as-usual cynicism that is so pervasive across global society today. It is also not just risky behavior that hinders the American national security scene as it produces poor communication and a lack of trust. It fundamentally weakens one of the great and undervalued structural aspects of American democracy. It is a lesser-known check-and-balance that we do not discuss very often but which represents a core aspect of our political stability and rationality. This is especially so when it comes to formulating and pursuing foreign policy and national security interests. Just go look at China, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, or Venezuela if you want to understand how damaging it can be to society overall when intelligence is either compromised by the government or made to heel and obey the ever-changing policies of different administrations, when intelligence is not allowed to remain above the fray of politics. This weakening has an added negative impact: it undermines public faith and trust in its security institutions and the leaders meant to run them, which has severe consequences on scholars and their academic institutions that want Intelligence and National Security Studies to represent a viable, exciting, important, and HONORABLE career for public service.

For the last fifteen years the United States Intelligence Community has become, despite its own preferences and professional standards, more and more politicized. It has been forced into this position by circumstance and is awaiting the administration that can right the ship and put America's governing institutions back into their true and proper places. Unfortunately, that administration is, at the moment, nowhere in sight, leaving us all to guess just how much long-term damage is being done to democracy in America.