



The CIA's Past and Future

As the 100th birthday of Sherman Kent, the “father of Intelligence Analysis” approaches, Ex-Patt looks at the CIA and its direction. | James Bohland

Sherman Kent, known as the father of American intelligence analysis, is one of the most revered figures at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The legacy of Kent's public service continues to define the agency, especially through the intelligence analysis school named in his memory and the in-house journal he founded. Kent's most important contribution to the intelligence community lies in a theory of intelligence he developed and implemented at the CIA in its early years.

Advocating expert, all-source strategic estimates as the best option to serve the needs of the state, Kent's policies functioned well during the Cold War. However, the increased demand for immediate actionable intelligence since 9/11 has diminished the CIA's ability to conduct important long-range strategic estimates. While the killing of Osama Bin Laden stands as a testament to the ability of the CIA's new policies to root out terrorists wherever they hide, the intelligence wars of the future lie not in the mountains of Afghanistan but in the waters, skies and nations of the Pacific. If the US hopes to compete with peer rivals for mastery of these regions, its intelligence agencies, specifically the CIA, should look back to Kent to find a way forward.

Sherman Kent arrived at the CIA in 1950. Following the reorganization of the agency in the wake of its failure to provide warning of the outbreak of the Korean War a year later, Kent became the director of the new Office of National Estimates (ONE). Designed to be the heart of national intelligence operations, ONE was tasked with creating National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) – the wide ranging all source strategic intelligence documents produced by the CIA for policymakers. Through his position, Kent established the basic theory of intelligence analysis that served the agency throughout the Cold War. Kent's intelligence theory and methodology revolved around the collection of the 'basic-descriptive' facts and current events of a targeted state. From there, ONE would complete the process by producing a 'speculative-evaluative' report on the possible actions of the state and deliver it to policymakers who would then act on it.

The implementation of these policies at the Office of National Estimates proved a remarkable success during the Cold War. If containment meant parrying Soviet expansion, knowing where Soviet thrusts would come and the limits of the power behind

them proved essential to its success. Kent's system not only produced the intelligence necessary for policymakers to counter Soviet actions, but also provided the necessary assessments to engage the Soviet Union in total war, should the need arise. As Donald P. Steury, a former CIA analyst wrote in a 1994 review of Kent's policies, “American intelligence analysts became encyclopedic in their knowledge of politics and economics, in the peoples and countries of the globe, but war, or rather the potential for war, remained their bedrock concern, especially with reference to the Soviet Bloc.” Harold P. Ford, director of ONE after Kent's retirement and subsequent director of ONE's successor, the National Intelligence Council, noted that “as the database on the USSR meanwhile expanded and improved,” the estimative field narrowed and the quality of intelligence improved.

The striking successes of Kent's policies can be seen in ONE's accurate predictions of Soviet weapon developments, communist China's behavior in international relations, the Sino-Soviet split, the rise of 'Third World' nationalism and neutrality, and the implications of changing world economic and technological conditions in US security. Nevertheless, these intelligence practices so suited to the Cold War fell by the wayside at the CIA as the Berlin Wall came crashing down. The end of the Cold War and the rise of the Fukuyaman “End of History” mindset amongst intelligence officers and policymakers in Washington served to further reduce the desire for strategic intelligence. Nevertheless, in today's world the need for strategic intelligence is once again becoming a top priority for policymakers. If the CIA hopes to guide the US through the coming decades, it must reverse the trends of the 1990s and 2000s.

The Loss of Strategic Intelligence

Jubilation and budget cuts followed the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990. In the years between the fall of the wall and the confirmation of George Tenet as Director of Central Intelligence in 1997, the CIA had five directors, lost billions of dollars in funding (forcing it to reduce its workforce by twenty-five percent), and was publicly shamed when Aldrich Ames and Harold Nicholson were ousted from the agency as Russian moles. Richard L.

Russell, an analyst at the CIA during the 1990s, noted that this reduced workforce “was increasingly exhausted from working one crisis after another, focused on current intelligence to the detriment of longer-term strategic research to warn policy makers of crises that laid over the horizon.” This exhaustion in turn led to several dramatic intelligence failures.

The first major failure came during the Gulf War when the CIA misdiagnosed and then authorized the bombing of the al-Firdos bunker. The bunker, thought to be of critical importance to the Iraqi Army, instead housed only the families of Iraqi officials. This mistake led to the erection of an ineffectual wall of bureaucracy within the agency. Unfortunately, this bureaucracy failed to prevent future embarrassments when the CIA mistook and then authorized the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade during the Kosovo War of 1999, believing it to be a Serb weapons factory. Russell notes that these bombings demonstrate how the CIA opted to add bureaucracy to the Agency throughout the 1990s, instead of “[building] analytic muscle that would lead over the [long] run to better [...] intelligence.” These examples also demonstrate the way in which the CIA of the 1990s operated as a type of military intelligence agency, providing tactical intelligence to the military, instead of focusing on the larger strategic issues of the day. Ironically, even with this shift towards current intelligence at the CIA expanding in the 1990s, effectiveness at the agency grew very little. This trend expanded in the years after 9/11.

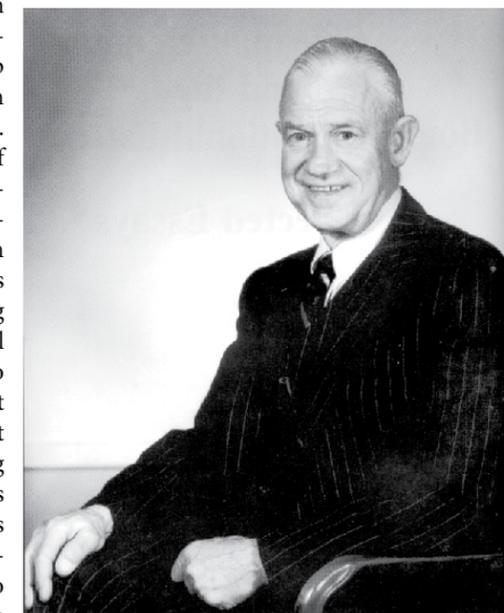
In 2007, when inquiring about the state of American strategic intelligence over the past decade, John G. Heidenrich, an analyst at the Defense Intelligence Agency, received a stinging rhetorical answer to his question from another analyst: “Is American [...] strategic intelligence up to the demands of the global environment and our national policies and strategies? [...] the answer is no.” In the years following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the focus of the CIA shifted dramatically away from producing strategic intelligence and towards generating actionable intelligence. For example the CIA's Counterterrorism Center, whose main goal is to hunt down terrorists using actionable intelligence, saw its ranks swell from around 300 employees at the time of the 9/11 attacks to somewhere around 2,000 employees, or ten percent of the CIA's work force today.

This shift in focus has drastically reduced the time spent conducting deep strategic research, as analysts are forced to rush from crisis to crisis without being able to spend time on their own research. In addition to this, as the President's Intelligence Advisory Board noted in a 2013 report, “US spy agencies [are] paying inadequate attention to China, the Middle East and oth-

er national security flash points because they [have] become too focused on military operations and drone strikes.” If the US desires to develop a strategy to confront these looming future threats, its intelligence agencies must return to the policies instituted by Sherman Kent at the Office of National Estimates in the early 1950s.

The CIA has opted to remember Kent in name only, choosing both consciously and by force of nature to stray from the intelligence principles he implemented in the CIA in its infancy. While reexamining the uses of these techniques for current and future intelligence challenges would be a good start for the CIA, other reforms must also be considered. A thorough study of the problems stemming from the policymaker/intelligence analyst relationship would help the CIA with its bureaucratic outreach. In addition, in an era of austerity and sequestration, one should consider the degree to which the CIA bureaucracy has created a self-fulfilling prophesy of its national importance in order to garner a larger allotment of dwindling government funds. While examining these difficult questions will improve the CIA's performance in the future, the CIA needs to focus in the near term on improving its human capital.

As Sherman Kent noted in 1965, “there is no substitute for the intellectually competent human – the person who was born with the markings of a critical sense and who has developed them to their full potential; who through first-hand experience and study has accumulated an orderly store of knowledge; and who has a feeling for going about the search for further enlightenment in a systematic way.” If the CIA can attract the type of people noted by Kent so long ago, it will have gone a long way toward improving itself, and preparing itself to meet the challenges facing America now and in the future. 🌟🌟🌟



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