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News & Updates

Ensuring Proper Analytic Tradecraft: Temple Professor Richard Immerman Works to Improve Intelligence Analysis



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Ever since legal scholar and political philosopher Francis Lieber collaborated with the War Department in 1863 to produce *General Orders No. 100, Instructions for the Government of Armies of the United States in the Field*, academic scholars and other intellectuals have played a prominent role in the development and implementation of national defense policy. For a year and a half beginning in fall 2007, Richard H. Immerman, Temple University's Edward J. Buthusium Distinguished Faculty Fellow, Professor of History, and Director of the Center for the Study of Force and Diplomacy, continued this tradition by serving as the Assistant Deputy Director of National Intelligence for Analytic Integrity and Standards and Analytic Ombudsman for the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

Prompted by U.S. intelligence failures and the inability of analysts to either foresee the September 11 attacks or uncover weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 (IRTPA) created this position to correct analytical deficiencies within the intelligence community and to improve the overall quality of intelligence estimates.

To fulfill these goals, Immerman was charged – aside from general oversight and management of intelligence analysis and production – with protecting the “analytic integrity” of intelligence estimates. This not only meant ensuring that finished intelligence products were timely, objective, independent of political considerations, and based upon all sources of available evidence, but reflected the standards inherent to “proper analytic tradecraft.” Defined by a common set of analytic criteria, proper analytic tradecraft ensures that national intelligence estimates are properly vetted vis-à-vis a thorough, critical, and rigorous interrogation of national defense intelligence –

something, many argue, that was seriously lacking prior to 2004. Additional tasks for protecting the analytical integrity of intelligence estimates include providing detailed reviews of finished reports, drafting “lessons learned” and identifying “best practices” within the intelligence-gathering process, and making recommendations for improvement in the assessment and production of national security intelligence.

In addition to protecting the analytic integrity of intelligence estimates, Immerman was expected to draw on the skills set he developed as a historian to create and implement standards and procedures to ensure that intelligence assessments adhered to rigorous intellectual and methodological standards. Analytic standards include detailed descriptions on the quality and reliability of sources, caveats and expressions of uncertainty or confidence in analytic judgments, and distinctions between core intelligence and the judgments and / or assumptions of analysts. Analytic procedures, meanwhile, incorporate alternative analysis when appropriate, discuss the relevance of particular intelligence to U.S. national security, employ logical argumentation, highlight consistency or change over time in specific areas, and seek greater accuracy in the judgments and assessments of intelligence analysts.

Two additional functions rounded out Immerman’s responsibilities. The first was safeguarding objectivity in intelligence estimates. Working closely with analysts and administrators within the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), Immerman, who also had the title of Analytic Ombudsman, offered counsel, conducted arbitration, made recommendations, and – when appropriate – initiated inquiries into any “real or perceived” problems associated with intelligence analysis, including “politicization, biased reporting, or lack of objectivity.”

Immerman’s second function was to develop and administer a training program for intelligence analysts aimed at honing critical thinking skills and ensuring proper analytic tradecraft. He helped create a foundational/methods course titled Analysis 101. Later rechristened Critical Thinking and Structured Analytical Techniques, the course teaches analysts to think critically when assessing national defense threats and drafting intelligence estimates. Moreover, it helps them attain greater analytic proficiency by developing many of the cognitive skills used by professional historians. Selective use of evidence, distinguishing fact from assumption, recognition of diverse interpretation and multiple possibilities, and tolerance for ambiguity, constitute a few of these skills.

Immerman’s recent work at ODNI raises a number of important questions concerning collaborative efforts between scholars and the defense establishment and, more specifically, about the benefits – if any – that historians can bring to intelligence analysis. Can the skills, craft, and thinking of the professional historian assist analysts, or improve the overall quality of intelligence estimates? If so, how? Finally, what are the drawbacks to such collaboration? Do professional or ethical dilemmas inevitably arise when historians and other scholars work for ODNI or other defense-related agencies?

Immerman and others believe that historians and other scholars can bring tangible benefits to intelligence analysis. As “outsiders,” they offer a “fresh perspective” on issues pertinent to defense intelligence and national security. Moreover, their input provides “value added” to the analytic tradecraft of assessing and constructing intelligence estimates. Thanks to Immerman’s efforts at the ODNI, national security estimates now take 25 percent longer to craft than in the past. This – along with improved critical

thinking skills and greater analytical proficiency among analysts engendered through the aforementioned foundational/methods course – leads to a more thorough and rigorous interrogation of national security intelligence and, by extension, provides a greater chance that defense analysts and policymakers will “get it right.”

Getting it right in regards to intelligence estimates and judgments on national security threats, however, may be a matter of perspective. As a recent commentary in the *Weekly Standard* reveals, some individuals view Immerman’s work in defense intelligence as a detriment rather than an asset to U.S. national security. In an article titled “If Michael Moore had a Security Clearance,” conservative political pundit Gabriel Schoenfeld took issue with Immerman’s criticism of the Bush administration’s questionable use of CIA intelligence. Schoenfeld denounced Immerman as a “rabid ideologue” who “is not a dispassionate student of these matters, but a combatant in the political intelligence wars himself.” Schoenfeld also called the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran, which was reviewed by Immerman and his staff prior to publication, “bizarre,” arguing not only that the estimate was soft on Iranian intentions for developing a nuclear weapons program, but also that it contradicted itself by stating that Iran had abandoned the pursuit of a nuclear bomb on one hand while acknowledging that it continued to enrich uranium on the other. The article went on to criticize Immerman’s professional integrity and question his ability and – more acerbically – his willingness to lay aside political biases in order to protect the objectivity and analytic integrity of intelligence estimates. Asserting that Immerman’s position resembled a case of the fox watching the henhouse, Schoenfeld wrote that “those responsible for maintaining analytic integrity are themselves lacking in the very quality.”

Criticism of academic participation in national defense policy has also come from the other side of the political spectrum in recent years. When social scientists, humanitarian and legal scholars, and other academics collaborated with the U.S. military in drafting and implementing new counterinsurgency doctrine for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, such liberal pundits as Tom Hayden strongly disapproved. Hayden derided collaboration between academics and the military as “the Pentagon occupation of the academic mind” in an article written for the *Nation*. He and others condemned the working relationship between scholars and the Department of Defense, fearing that it would lead to the “militarization” of the university and the “weaponization” of academic scholarship.

Aside from these few strident voices from the far right and far left, most individuals – including Immerman and a majority of the people with whom he worked while Assistant Deputy Director – are sympathetic to the idea of historians and other academics contributing to national defense. The idea that scholars and government officials can work together to correct analytical deficiencies and improve the overall quality of intelligence estimates resonates with many representatives from both academia and the defense establishment. Immerman considers his work under the Director of National Intelligence to have been a highly successful collaboration. It was, he contends, a positive experience with few drawbacks. In addition to improving the overall quality of defense intelligence by addressing its analytic and methodological shortcomings, his work helped establish trust within the intelligence community, and improve working relations among its various branches, including the CIA, FBI, and Military Intelligence. Although instances of dissonance and friction sometimes arose – particularly from

military and CIA sources – most defense and intelligence officials were generally receptive to his work and respectful of his professional and intellectual credentials.

Overall, one can conclude that Immerman's time as Assistant Deputy Director has produced positive tangible results by improving the overall quality of intelligence analysis through instruction and new analytic standards that inject intellectual rigor into intelligence assessment. In addition, his stint at government service also demonstrated that historians and other scholars can play an integral role in the development and implementation of national defense policy. In closing, however, there is one caveat to Immerman's recent work that is worth mentioning. Due to the extremely sensitive nature of defense intelligence and the essential role it plays in national security, Immerman's publications are now subject to review by government officials in order to prevent intelligence leaks or the dissemination of classified materials. Although respectful of the classification system and cognizant of the need to protect sensitive material related to national security, Immerman is wary that government surveillance may force him to blunt criticism or pull punches in future analyses out of respect for his former co-workers and their close collaboration at ODNI. Given Immerman's dedication to the historical profession and his penchant for sound scholarship, his colleagues and students can expect his published research to retain the integrity, originality, and bite for which it has always been known.