

October 2nd, 2006

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The Big Secret of that Leaked NIE

October 1st, 2006

During this past week, politicians and commentators from across the political spectrum have been weighing in on the now-declassified “Key Judgments” of that leaked National Intelligence Estimate about the Iraq war and its impact on terrorism.

As usual, it’s turned into a partisan brawl. Those on the left assert that the NIE supports their contention that the Iraq war has made the terrorist threat worse, while those on the right insist that the NIE supports the President’s assertion that the Iraq war will reduce the terrorist threat.

Unfortunately, everyone is having so much fun scoring political points that they’ve all missed the astonishing, deeply disturbing secret that the NIE’s Key Judgments inadvertently reveal.

I spent several years of my life managing the production of these NIE’s for President Reagan, and before disclosing the overlooked secret contained in this one, please allow me to explain just what NIE’s are and how the process works:

Simply put, an NIE is a projection of trends and developments that reflects the combined thinking of the 16 agencies that comprise our country’s intelligence service. Its purpose is to provide the President with an understanding of what the future is likely to be – and to provide this understanding soon enough, and clearly enough, so that if the President doesn’t like what lies ahead he can take steps to change the future before it happens.

The President’s Radar

In this sense, an NIE is to the President what radar is to the captain of a 747. If the radar tells the captain there’s a mountain 50 miles ahead, the captain has time to decide what to do – to maneuver to a higher altitude so he can fly over the mountain, for instance, or to change course to fly around it. But if the radar doesn’t tell the captain there’s a mountain dead-ahead – or if the radar doesn’t see that mountain until it’s a half-mile dead-ahead – then it’s failed. It will be too late for the captain to respond.

Moreover, if the radar screen displays so much information—about what’s ahead, what’s behind,

above, below, and what's off the port and starboard wings—that the captain's eyeballs start to bleed when he looks at that luminous green line sweeping around the screen, then the radar is worse than useless. It's a downright hazard, and the pilot would be better off shutting it down and flying by the seat of his pants. In other words, the radar must provide information about what lies ahead not only soon enough to take action – but also clearly enough so the pilot can understand what danger is real and what dangers are merely theoretical possibilities.

One problem inherent to NIE's is that they sometimes reflect nothing more than the institutional biases of each of the 16 participating agencies. A second inherent problem is that sometimes these agencies are so determined to not be proven wrong about what the future holds that they try to have it both ways, for instance by obscuring their projections beneath an avalanche of “on the one hand, on the other hand” sentences.

The best and most concise description of NIE's that suffer from these problems comes from President Reagan's great Director of Central Intelligence, William J. Casey: “total crap”.

That's why Casey's orders to me were to make certain that the NIE's we produced for President Reagan overcame these problems.

First, I was to sort through the differing judgments of the 16 agencies to understand if they were basing their conclusions on the facts contained in the text of the NIE itself – or merely on long-standing institutional biases. If the latter, my job was to confront the agency representatives and then work with them to align their judgments with the facts.

Second, when an agency wanted to dissent from the consensus, it was my job to assure that this dissent was written as clearly as possible so the President could understand not only what this agency was saying, but why it had chosen to dissent from the majority view.

Finally, when all the bureaucratic fighting had ended and we had hosed the blood off my office walls, it was my job to run the crucial “Key Judgments” of the NIE through my word processor one last time, to assure that the finished product was intelligible to an intelligent but busy policymaker. That meant knocking out all the “on the one hand, on the other hand” sentences and replacing them with sentences that made a point. It meant eliminating the gobbledygook sentences that invariably had crept in, such as: “We judge that Soviet leaders will be neither too hasty nor too reluctant to either over-react or under-react to the developing circumstances flowing from the new initiative.” It meant weeding out Key Judgments that were accurate but worthless – such as the old standby: “We judge that the future of US-Soviet relations will be volatile and subject to change.”

Casey the Wordsmith

When I had done the best I could, the NIE went to Casey, who himself would read through it – pen in hand – and make whatever changes he thought would clarify or sharpen the Key Judgments. No matter how busy Casey was – and he was a very busy man – he always found the time to wordsmith the NIE's because he believed that arming the President with the best possible

intelligence greatly enhanced the President's ability to develop the best possible policies to accomplish his objectives.

The final step in the Estimates process was a closed-door, secure-room meeting of the 16 intelligence agency chiefs, to hash out the final text of the Key Judgments that would be sent to the President. Casey himself would chair these meetings, and while sometimes they were friendly and workmanlike, more often they were contentious and, well, explosive. At one of these meetings, the State Department's intelligence chief delivered himself of a rambling outburst whose point – as best we could understand it – was that the revolution we were predicting in a certain country wasn't going to happen because there were other countries in even worse shape that weren't likely to see revolutions.

The deathly silence that followed – none of us had the slightest idea of how to respond to logic like this – was finally broken by Casey himself. “That's the stupidest goddamned thing I've ever heard in my life. But if that's your position, so be it.” Then he ordered me to modify the NIE to include the State Department's dissent (“...and write it just the goddamned way he said it.”) and then get the finished version printed and distributed.

Reading through the now-declassified Key Judgments of the NIE on Trends in Global Terrorism, it's obvious that our intelligence service has abandoned the Casey approach. Some sentences in the Key Judgments contradict themselves, and some are trite (“We judge that groups of all stripes will continue to use the Internet....”). Others are classic examples of the “on the one hand, on the other hand” syndrome. And still others are simply unintelligible – they are neither right nor wrong, but written in a way to make them subject to whatever interpretation the reader wishes to make.

No issue is more important to our country's security than the future of terrorism, and nothing could be more helpful to the President than a clear and accurate projection of what that future is likely to be. That is what this NIE should have provided, but doesn't.

Now you see the “secret” that the Key Judgments of this NIE inadvertently reveal – and it isn't about Iraq or about the future of terrorism. It's about our own intelligence service, and what this NIE has revealed is that our radar is busted. That's frightening, and what's even more frightening is the realization that if we know it, so too do our enemies.

Rest assured they will be looking closely to see if the President decides to just ignore his busted radar and fly by the seat of his pants – or if he decides to get it fixed.

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Herbert E. Meyer