Wanted: A Definition of "Intelligence"

Michael Warner

> **Without a clear idea of what intelligence is, how can we develop a theory to explain how it works?**

...all attempts to develop ambitious theories of intelligence have failed.

Walter Laqueur[1]

In a business as old as recorded history, one would expect to find a sophisticated understanding of just what that business is, what it does, and how it works. If the business is "intelligence," however, we search in vain. As historian Walter Laqueur warned us, so far no one has succeeded in crafting a theory of intelligence.

I have to wonder if the difficulty in doing so resides more in the slipperiness of the tools than in the poor skills of the craftsmen or the complexity of the topic. Indeed, even today, we have no accepted definition of intelligence. The term is defined anew by each author who addresses it, and these definitions rarely refer to one another or build off what has been written before. Without a clear idea of what intelligence is, how can we develop a theory to explain how it works?

If you cannot define a term of art, then you need to rethink something. In some way you are not getting to the heart of the matter. Here is an opportunity: a compelling definition of intelligence might help us to devise a theory of intelligence and increase our understanding. In the hope of advancing discussions of this topic, I have collected some of the concise definitions of intelligence that I deem to be distinguished either by their source or by their clarity.[2] After explaining what they do and do not tell us, I shall offer up my own sacrificial definition to the tender mercies of future critics.

Official Solutions

The people who write the laws that govern intelligence, and administer the budgets and resources of intelligence agencies, deserve the first word. The basic charter of America's intelligence services—the National Security Act of 1947 with its many amendments—defines the kind of intelligence that we are seeking in this manner:

> *The term 'foreign intelligence' means information relating to the capabilities, intentions, or activities of foreign governments or elements thereof, foreign organizations, or foreign persons.*[3]

Study commissions appointed to survey the Intelligence Community have long used similar

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[1] Walter Laqueur, A World of Secrets The Uses and Limits of Intelligence (New York, NY, Basic Books, 1985), p. 8.

[2] I credit Nicholas Dujmovic, Directorate of Intelligence, and his fine compilation of intelligence quotations for many of the definitions recorded here

[3] 50 USC 401a.

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language. The Clark Task Force of the Hoover Commission in 1955 decided that:

> *Intelligence deals with all the things which should be known in advance of initiating a course of action* [4]

An influential report from the mid-1990s (produced by the Brown-Aspin Commission) provides this definition:

> *The Commission believes it preferable to define 'intelligence' simply and broadly as information about 'things foreign'—people, places, things, and events—needed by the Government for the conduct of its functions.* [5]

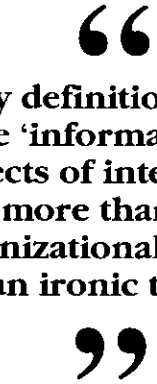
The Joint Chiefs of Staff qualify as both employers and consumers of intelligence, so they deserve a say as well. Their latest *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* defines intelligence as:

> *1. The product resulting from the collection, processing, integration, analysis, evaluation and interpretation of available information concerning foreign countries or areas.*
>
> *2. Information and knowledge about an adversary obtained through observation, investigation, analysis, or understanding.* [6]

And finally, the Central Intelligence Agency has weighed in with the following sentence:

> *Reduced to its simplest terms, intelligence is knowledge and foreknowledge of the world around us—the prelude to decision and action by US policymakers.* [7]

All of these definitions stress the "informational" aspects of intelligence more than its "organizational" facets—an ironic twist given that all of them come from organizations that produce and use intelligence, and which thereby might be expected to wax poetic on the procedural aspects of the term as well.



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Private Attempts

Authors writing about intelligence for commercial publication might seem to enjoy a little more freedom and flexibility than the drafters of official government statements. Nonetheless, many outside authorities also say that intelligence is basically "information." Here are some examples, beginning with one of the earliest theorists in the field, CIA's redoubtable senior analyst, Sherman Kent:

> *Intelligence, as I am writing of it, is the knowledge which our highly placed civilians and military men must have to safeguard the national welfare.* [8]

Former Deputy Director of Central Intelligence Vernon Walters published a chatty memoir of his long and eventful public career, *Silent Missions*, that offers a more detailed definition:

> *Intelligence is information, not always available in the public domain, relating to the strength, resources, capabilities and intentions of a foreign country that can affect our lives and the safety of our people.* [9]

Another high-ranking CIA officer, Lyman Kirkpatrick, was

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[4] Commission on Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government (the Hoover Commission), "Intelligence Activities," June 1955, p. 26. This was an interim report to Congress prepared by a team under the leadership of Gen. Mark Clark.

[5] Commission on the Roles and Capabilities of the United States Intelligence Community, *Preparing for the 21st Century: An Appraisal of US Intelligence* [the "Brown-Aspin Report"] (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996), p. 5.

[6] Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Publication 1-02, 12 April 2001, p. 208.

[7] Central Intelligence Agency (Office of Public Affairs), *A Consumer's Guide to Intelligence*, (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1999), p. vii.

[8] Sherman Kent, *Strategic Intelligence for American Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949), p. vii.

[9] Vernon Walters, *Silent Missions* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), p. 621.

a true student of the business while he served in the Agency and enjoyed a second career as a respected commentator on intelligence topics. He contributes the following:

> *[Intelligence is] the knowledge—and, ideally, foreknowledge—sought by nations in response to external threats and to protect their vital interests, especially the well-being of their own people.*[10]

And last but not least, a study of the American intelligence establishment commissioned by the Council on Foreign Relations in 1996 noted:

Intelligence is information not publicly available, or analysis based at least in part on such information, that has been prepared for policymakers or other actors inside the government.[11]

What Is Wrong with 'Information'?

Nothing is wrong with 'information' *per se*. Policymakers and commanders need information to do their jobs, and they are entitled to call that information anything they like. Indeed, for a policymaker or a commander,

> **"The equation 'intelligence = information' is too vague to provide real guidance in [our] work."**

there is no need to define intelligence any further.

For producers of intelligence, however, the equation "intelligence = information" is too vague to provide real guidance in their work. To professionals in the field, mere data is not intelligence, thus these definitions are incomplete. Think of how many names are in the telephone book, and how few of those names anyone ever seeks. It is what people *do* with data and information that gives them the special quality that we casually call "intelligence."

With all due respect to the legislators, commanders, officials, and scholars who drafted the definitions above, those definitions let in far more than they screen out. After all, foreign policy decisionmakers all need information, and they get it from many sources. Is each source of information, and each factual tidbit, to be considered intelligence? Obviously not, because that would mean that newspapers and radio broadcasts and atlases are intelligence documents, and that journalists and geographers are intelligence officers. The notion that intelligence is information does not say who needs the information, or what makes the information needed in the first place. Intelligence involves information, yes, but obviously it is far more.

Let us begin again. The place for definitions is a dictionary. A handy one found in many government offices (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate*) tells us that intelligence is:

> *...information concerning an enemy or possible enemy or an area, also, an agency engaged in obtaining such information.*

Of course, one should hardly consult just any dictionary on such an important matter. *The* dictionary—the *Oxford English Dictionary*—defines intelligence as follows:

> *7a. Knowledge as to events, communicated by or obtained from one another; information, news, tidings, spec. information of military value... b. A piece of information or news... c. The obtaining of information; the agency for obtaining secret information; the staff of persons so employed, secret service... d. A department of a state organization or of a military or naval service whose object is to obtain information (esp. by means of secret service officers or a system of spies)*

Sherman Kent expressed something similar in a 1946 article on the contemporary direction of intelligence reform.

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[10] Lyman B. Kirkpatrick, Jr., "Intelligence," in Bruce W. Jentleson and Thomas G. Paterson, eds. *Encyclopedia of US Foreign Relations*, Volume 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 365.

[11] Council on Foreign Relations [Richard N. Haass, project director], *Making Intelligence Smarter: Report of an Independent Task Force* (New York, NY: Council on Foreign Relations, 1996), p. 8.

> *In the circumstances, it is surprising that there is not more general agreement and less confusion about the meaning of the basic terms. The main difficulty seems to lie in the word 'intelligence' itself, which has come to mean both what people in the trade* do *and what they* come up with. *To get this matter straight is crucial: intelligence is both a process and an end-product.*[12]

This seems to be getting somewhere, but it is hardly concise. We need something punchy. At this point, the same Walter Laqueur who complained above about the lack of a coherent theory of intelligence uncannily proved his own point by rendering Kent's point in a sentence that contains no new insight but economizes on words:

> *On one hand, it [intelligence] refers to an organization collecting information and on the other to the information that has been gathered.*[13]

Professors Kent and Laqueur recognized that intelligence is both information and an organized system for collecting and exploiting it. It is both an activity and a product of that activity.

[12] Sherman Kent, "Prospects for the National Intelligence Service," *Yale Review*, 36 (Autumn 1946), p. 117. Emphases in original.
[13] Laqueur, p. 12.

"Intelligence is several things: It is information, process, and activity, and it is performed by 'lawful authorities.'"

National Intelligence Council officer Mark Lowenthal reminds us that intelligence is something broader than information and its processing for policymakers and commanders, even when that information is somehow confidential or clandestine. His useful primer on intelligence contains this definition:

> *Intelligence is the process by which specific types of information important to national security are requested, collected, analyzed, and provided to policymakers; the products of that process; the safeguarding of these processes and this information by counterintelligence activities; and the carrying out of operations as requested by lawful authorities.*[14]

Lowenthal is on to something important. Intelligence is several things: It is information, process, and activity, and it is performed by "lawful authorities"—i.e., by nation-states. But he still has too much freight loaded on his definition. Information that is "important to national security" could include intelligence, all right, but also many other things, such as the number of American males of age to bear arms, the weather conditions in Asia, and the age of a politburo member. Indeed, almost anything "military" can be subsumed under Dr. Lowenthal's definition, and many things diplomatic fit as well. He has the right categories, but he has made them too broad. In addition, his definition is partly tautological in saying that intelligence is that which is protected by counterintelligence.

Nonetheless, one senses that we have found the right road. Lowenthal adds that interesting clause at the end: "the carrying out of operations." Why did he associate operations with information processing? My guess is that is he is a good observer who draws what he sees. He knows that information agencies using secret information have been—and very often still are—intimately associated with agencies that conduct secret operations.

In ancient times that coincidence might have occurred because the agent and the operative were the same man. In many cases, the operation and the information are one and the same; the product of espionage could only be known to its collector (for fear of compromising the source) and thus the collector becomes the analyst. This is how the KGB worked, and no one can say that the KGB lacked sophistication in

[14] Mark M. Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2002 [second edition]), p. 8.

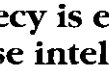
the intelligence business. Other nations, however, have differentiated analysis and operations and placed them in separate offices, sometimes with and sometimes without a common director. Funny, though, that both the analytical and the operational offices are commonly described as "doing" intelligence.

The Missing Ingredient

Why is it that the word "intelligence" is used to describe the work of analytical committees *and* covert action groups? Of signals collectors *and* spies? Why do so many countries—Western and Eastern, democratic and despotic—tend to organize their intelligence offices in certain patterns around their civilian leaders and military commanders?

Another good observer, Abram Shulsky, has noticed this aspect of the intelligence business. Looking at this wide variety of intelligence activities, he laments, "it seems difficult to find a common thread tying them together." But soon he picks up the scent again: "They all, however, have to do with obtaining or denying information." Furthermore, Shulsky explains, these activities are conducted by organizations, and those organizations have something in common: they have as one of their "most notable characteristics...the secrecy with which their activities must be conducted." Secrecy is

Secrecy is essential because intelligence is part of the ongoing 'struggle' between nations.



essential because intelligence is part of the ongoing "struggle" between nations. The goal of intelligence is truth, but the quest for that truth "involves a struggle with a human enemy who is fighting back."[15]

Shulsky thus emphasizes the need for secrecy in intelligence activities and organizations. Indeed, he comes close to calling secrecy a constitutive element of intelligence work, saying "the connection between intelligence and secrecy is central to most of what distinguishes intelligence from other intellectual activities." But then he retreats when confronted with the problem of explaining how it is that covert action (clandestine activity performed to influence foreign countries in unattributable ways) always seems to be assigned to intelligence agencies, rather than to military services or diplomatic corps. Why did it happen in the United States, for example, that the covert action mission was assigned to the Central Intelligence Agency despite the Truman administration's initial impulse to give it to either the State Department or the Secretary of Defense? Shulsky notices the pattern, but wonders whether it means anything:

> *Even if, for practical bureaucratic reasons, intelligence organizations are given the responsibility for covert action, the more fundamental question—from a theoretical, as well as a practical, viewpoint—of whether covert action should be considered a part of intelligence would remain.*[16]

The institutional gravitation that tends to pull intelligence offices toward one another has been observed by others as well. In 1958 a CIA operations officer noticed the same tendency that puzzled Shulsky. Rather than setting it aside, however, he attempted to explain it. Writing under the pen-name R. A. Random in the CIA's then-classified journal *Studies in Intelligence*, he suggested that intelligence, by definition, always has something secret about it:

> *Intelligence is the official, secret collection and processing of information on foreign countries to aid in formulating and implementing foreign policy, and the conduct of covert activities abroad to facilitate the implementation of foreign policy.*[17]

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[15] Abram N. Shulsky (revised by Gary J. Schmitt), *Silent Warfare: Understanding the World of Intelligence* (Washington, DC: Brassey's (US), 2002 [third edition]), pp. 1-3, 171-176

[16] *Ibid*

[17] H. A. Random, "Intelligence as a Science," *Studies in Intelligence*, Spring 1958, p. 76. Declassified

> **[Intelligence] includes clandestine operations that are performed to cause certain effects in foreign lands.**

This is getting somewhere. It calls intelligence an activity and a product, says it is conducted in confidential circumstances on behalf of states so that policymakers can understand foreign developments, and that it includes clandestine operations that are performed to cause certain effects in foreign lands. There is really little to quibble with in Random's definition. It includes many things that it needs, but without incorporating much or anything that it does not need.

Notwithstanding the quality of Random's definition, it drew a rejoinder six months later in *Studies in Intelligence* from a CIA counterintelligence officer pen-named Martin T. Bimfort, who complained that Random had neglected the discipline of counterintelligence in describing the constituent parts of intelligence. Bimfort amended Random:

> *Intelligence is the collecting and processing of that information about foreign countries and their agents which is needed by a government for its foreign policy and for national security, the conduct of non-attributable activities abroad to facilitate the implementation of foreign policy, and the protection of both process and product, as well as persons and organizations concerned with these, against unauthorized disclosure.*[18]

This does not seem to help. Bimfort has added bells and whistles to Random, but the addition of "counterintelligence"hints that Bimfort has missed one of the essential elements of Random's definition: its assertion that intelligence is a state activity that involves *secrecy*. If Bimfort had grasped that point, he should have conceded that an activity that is official and secret *ipso facto* implies subsidiary activities to keep it secret. Thus Bimfort's addition—"the protection of both process and product, as well as persons and organizations concerned with these, against unauthorized disclosure"—is not only ponderous, it is superfluous. It is, moreover, unhelpful, because it reaches beyond counterintelligence and subsumes all sorts of ordinary security functions common to many government offices and private enterprises

This criticism of Bimfort's critique brings us willy-nilly to something important. What is the difference between *security* (and the law enforcement aspects of catching and prosecuting security risks) and *counterintelligence*? I would argue that the difference is secrecy. Plenty of agencies and businesses have security offices; many also perform investigative work. But not all of those organizations are thereby intelligence agencies. Security and investigative work against foreign spies becomes "counterintelligence" when it has to be done secretly for fear of warning the spies or their parent service.

Indeed, secrecy is the key to the definition of intelligence, as Random hinted. Without secrets, it is not intelligence. Properly understood, intelligence is that range of activities—whether analysis, collection, or covert action—performed on behalf of a nation's foreign policy that would be negated if their foreign "subjects" spotted the hand of another country and acted differently as a consequence.[19]

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[18] Martin T. Bimfort, "A Definition of Intelligence," *Studies in Intelligence*, Fall 1958, p. 78. Declassified.

[19] The notion that people act differently when watched is a familiar one to social scientists, who long ago dubbed it the "Hawthorne Effect." The Western Electric Company's Hawthorne Works in the 1920s hosted a team of researchers interested in the effects of lighting on factory workers. The team, in sight of the employees, fiddled with the illumination levels and learned to its surprise that both brighter and dimmer settings increased output. Employees worked harder even when they mistakenly thought the lights had been adjusted. Did they just like the attention, or did they worry about the potential consequences of not increasing their output? As long as the workers knew they were being watched, the research team could not answer that question—or learn which light levels workers liked best. F. J. Roethlisberger and William J. Dickson, *Management and the Worker* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956 [1939]), pp. 14-18.

Toward a Solution

- A comprehensive definition of intelligence—one that says what it is, without also including all sorts of things that it is not—would have several elements. We can say now that "intelligence" is that which is:

- Dependent upon confidential sources and methods for full effectiveness.

- Performed by officers of the state for state purposes (this implies that those officers receive direction from the state's civilian and military leaders).

- Focused on foreigners—usually other states, but often foreign subjects, corporations, or groups (if its objects are domestic citizens, then the activity becomes a branch of either law enforcement or governance).

- Linked to the production and dissemination of information.

- Involved in influencing foreign entities by means that are unattributable to the acting government (if the activities are open and declared, they are the province of diplomacy; if they utilize uniformed members of the armed forces, they belong to the military).

Random's definition has come the closest to date to incorporating all of these elements. I can make him more elegant,

"Intelligence is secret, state activity to understand or influence foreign entities."

but I cannot supplant him. Here is my definition.

Intelligence is secret, state activity to understand or influence foreign entities.

Conclusion

Plato's *Republic* is an extended dialogue between Socrates and his students on the nature of justice. As their discussion begins, Socrates addresses the distinguished father of one of his young admirers, seeking the elder's opinion on the topic. As might be expected, the father replies in utterly conventional terms, and soon leaves Socrates and the young men to their theorizing, which takes off in several directions in turn Toward the end of the *Republic*, however, Socrates has led his students to an understanding of justice that looks remarkably like what the old gentleman had offered in the beginning. Convention often holds a wisdom that is not lightly set aside.

Perhaps something similar has happened with our definition of intelligence. The typical American, asked to define "intelligence," is likely to evoke an image of some shadowy figure in a fedora and trenchcoat skulking in a dark alley. We intelligence officers know that stereotype is silly; intelligence is something far more sophisticated than a "Spy v. Spy" cartoon. And yet the popular caricature possesses a certain wisdom, for it intuits that secrecy is a vital element—perhaps the key element—of intelligence. Intelligence involves information, yes, but it is secrecy, too. For producers of intelligence, it is more about secrecy than information. Convention holds a wisdom for us as well.

Why does this matter? Various agencies have gotten along well enough for many years, thank you, without a suitable-for-framing definition of intelligence. One can add, moreover, that providing them with such a thing is hardly likely to revolutionize their work. And yet, the definition I just proposed could assist the growing number of scholars who study the field and might ultimately help the Intelligence Community in several respects. It could provide a firmer institutional footing for covert action, which has long been a step-child in CIA—in no small part because some Agency leaders and policymakers downtown have regarded it as not really "intelligence" at all, but rather something that the White House happened to tack on to the Agency's list of missions. A better definition of intelligence might also guide declassification policy by clarifying just

what are and are not the "sources and methods" that the DCI is obliged by statute to protect. And finally, a stress on secrecy as the defining characteristic of intelligence should help future oversight staffs and study commissions to sort the various activities performed in the Intelligence Community with an eye toward husbanding that which they and they alone can do—and leaving the remainder to be performed by other parts of the government.