The Need to Maintain an Intelligence Capability

THAT the United States should maintain an intelligence capability after the Cold War is not a matter in serious dispute. The world of the 21st century is likely to be as fraught with peril and uncertainty as the world left behind.

The United States finds itself in a predominant leadership role, whether sought or not, and the exercise of that leadership has become more complicated. New forces are at work and new dynamics at play. The Government must understand them in order to respond to them. Often the options available to it will depend upon how early problems are identified. Choosing the right option, in turn, will depend upon knowing what the consequences are apt to be. Once a course is chosen, it becomes important to know what the effects of the decision have been so that adjustments can be made if necessary. In every instance, making the right choice will hinge upon the quality of the information available.

The volume of information openly available to the Government in the media and over computer networks has exploded in recent years, a trend which will continue. Yet intelligence capabilities will continue to be needed to collect information that is not available through conventional means. Once such information is obtained, analytical capabilities will be needed to combine it with the rapidly proliferating information available from other sources and seek to produce an objective assessment free of policy predilections.

Where the process works, intelligence provides information and insights that are unique, reducing the uncertainty of decisionmaking at all levels—from the President to the infantry platoon leader wondering what lies over the next hill. With it, there is a better chance of avoiding crisis or war, of success on the battlefield, of reaching and enforcing international agreements, of investing in the right military capabilities, and of protecting U.S. interests at home and abroad.

There will inevitably be a considerable body of information bearing on matters such as these that is not available to the U.S. Government through conventional means. The reasons for this are apparent:

- Some governments will seek to deny access to their territory to the outside world.
- Countries that plan hostile actions against others will seldom announce their intentions in advance and will try to conceal their preparations.
- Most countries will not provide detailed public accountings of their military capabilities or their plans for developing such capabilities.
- Once military forces have been deployed against the U.S. or its allies, adversaries will attempt to conceal their plans and intentions as well as the size, composition, and disposition of their forces.

- Countries that violate international treaties, United Nations resolutions, or international norms of conduct will ordinarily conceal their actions.

- Governments involved in diplomatic negotiations with the U.S. will not ordinarily reveal their strategies and objectives.

- Illicit activities such as terrorism, drug trafficking, and espionage will be carried out in the shadows, not in the open.

- Environmental and humanitarian disasters will occur in places that are not readily accessible and require information beyond the ability of observers on the ground to collect.

There are limits to what intelligence can provide. Intelligence may be able to collect "secrets" (information that is knowable but hidden) but some information will necessarily remain "mysteries"—it simply cannot be known. What a foreign leader is thinking, for example, cannot be known unless the leader makes it known. Whether the same foreign leader will be in power in a year's time is a "mystery" only time will reveal.

The efforts of some countries to conceal their plans and activities will succeed despite the best efforts to learn of them. No matter how many collection capabilities U.S. intelligence deploys, relevant information will be missed. Human agents will not have access to what is needed. Technical systems will not be in the right place at the right time or will focus on the wrong target or will simply be thwarted by bad weather. Even if relevant information is physically acquired by technical systems, it may not be processed in a manner that permits analysts to identify or use it.

Analysis is subject to similar foibles. It may be based on intelligence that proves inaccurate or unreliable or fails to take into account all of the available information. It may address the wrong issue or reach the wrong conclusions or reach the policymaker too late to influence the decision at hand.

One should not expect perfection. Intelligence is simply a hedge against uninformed decisionmaking, and even the most sophisticated of collection systems and analytical talent cannot provide guarantees.

Compared with the rest of the world, the intelligence capabilities of the United States are immense. No other country devotes as many resources to this type of activity. Billions of dollars have gone into building sophisticated technical systems over the last 50 years, and billions more will be required to replace these systems as they are lost or worn out or become obsolete or ineffective. Substantial sums are also required simply to operate them and keep pace with developments in technology. For all but a few countries, the cost of mounting an intelligence capability on a scale approaching that of the United States is prohibitive. While a number of governments are exploring investments in expanded intelligence capabilities, the preeminence of the United States in this field is not likely to be challenged, if we choose to maintain our advantage.

Precisely because of this position of strength, however, some believe the United States can afford to cut back its intelligence capabilities, at least until the next war or crisis comes along. But these are not capabilities that, if abandoned or allowed to wither, can easily or quickly be resuscitated. Whether a satellite system or a human agent is involved, neither can be developed and deployed without a significant investment of effort and years of time. Both are dependent upon large and competent infrastructures, and such infrastructures cannot be maintained without a degree of permanence and commitment.

Others believe U.S. intelligence activities should be cut back or eliminated because they perceive their overall contribution to policymaking to have been marginal, even, at times, negative. When considered in terms of its substantial cost and the frequency with which it has been a source of political embarrassment to the United States, the advocates of this view conclude, intelligence is not worth the candle. Others question the competence of U.S. intelligence agencies—in particular, the CIA—to carry out their missions. While the Ames spy case demonstrated the CIA's inability to detect a relatively clumsy spy who compromised the core of its Soviet operations, it was but the worst in a series of operational failures experienced by the CIA and other intelligence agencies, most of which at one time or another have suffered severe losses due to spies in their midst. Others fault intelligence agencies for "gold-plating" their facilities, wasting government funds, and keeping their overseers in the dark.

As noted in the Introduction, there have been problems, especially at the CIA, some of which have been substantial. While these episodes are deplorable, using them to justify cutting back or eliminating intelligence capabilities is a leap the Commission is unwilling to make. Problems are, to some degree, unavoidable where intelligence activities are concerned, despite the best of intentions or management structures. Operations will, on occasion, be compromised despite reasonable precautions being taken. Mistakes will occur either as a result of poor judgment or individual incompetence. This is not to excuse or minimize such failures, or to suggest that every reasonable effort should not be made to prevent them, but only to recognize that problems to some extent are inevitable and, in the United States more so than in other countries, will continue to be highly publicized. The issue is whether the benefits justify the costs, including the problems which inevitably will occur.

For the public, this is particularly difficult to assess. Over the years, Americans have been exposed principally to the failures of intelligence and are largely oblivious of its successes. The Commission, on the other hand, has seen both. While failures have occurred too often, they have hardly been the norm. The accomplishments of U.S. intelligence have been, and continue to be, impressive. The details of specific cases cannot be made public without raising security concerns, but the following examples, *all occurring since the Cold War ended*, illustrate how U.S. intelligence serves the nation's interests:

- U.S. intelligence uncovered the first evidence suggesting that North Korea was planning to construct a nuclear weapons capability and supported the subsequent diplomatic efforts to restrain and end such activities.

- In at least two cases, with the help of U.S. intelligence, the sale of radioactive materials that could be used in the production of nuclear weapons was halted by other governments.

- Since 1990, U.S. intelligence has uncovered the clandestine efforts of several countries to acquire weapons of mass destruction and their related delivery systems. In some cases, this information provided the basis for diplomatic actions by the United States and by the United Nations to counter such efforts.

- U.S. intelligence played a crucial role in supporting U.S. combat operations in Panama and the Persian Gulf by collecting information on the size, capabilities and location of hostile forces, providing information which permitted the targeting of precision-guided weapons, assessing the damage inflicted by U.S. and allied aircraft, and warning of threats to the security of U.S. and allied forces.

- The deployment of U.S. military forces to Somalia, Rwanda, Haiti, and Bosnia to perform other than combat missions similarly received the vigorous support of intelligence agencies, which provided information on threats to the security of U.S. forces as well as on local conditions.

- U.S. intelligence played a key role in the rescue of the downed American pilot in Bosnia.

- U.S. intelligence provided support key to the U.S. side in numerous bilateral and multilateral negotiations.

- U.S. intelligence has played an instrumental role in the efforts of the Colombian government to break up the Cali drug cartel, including the arrest and/or capture of its leaders, and, in other cases, provided information which kept drug shipments from reaching the United States.

- U.S. intelligence has played key roles in helping other countries identify and/or arrest several notorious terrorists, including Carlos the Jackal in Sudan, the alleged ringleader of the World Trade Center bombing in the Phillippines, the head of the Shining Path terrorist group in Peru, and those involved in the bombing of Pan Am 103.

- On at least two occasions, U.S. intelligence provided information that led to successful U.S. diplomatic efforts to head off potential armed conflicts between two countries.

- Information was provided by U.S. intelligence on two occasions which foiled assassination plots abroad and led to the arrest of the perpetrators.

- In several instances, U.S. intelligence uncovered foreign competitors of U.S. commercial firms using bribery and other illegal tactics to obtain contracts with foreign governments. Diplomatic intervention with the government concerned to assure a “level playing field” eventually led to a U.S. firm obtaining the contract by winning the competition.

- U.S. intelligence has identified violations of military and trade sanctions imposed by the United Nations in connection with the situations in Iraq and Bosnia, and provided the principal capability for monitoring the "no-fly" zones in both countries.

- On several occasions, U.S. intelligence provided information warning of financial collapse in other countries, leading to actions by the United States and other governments.

- U.S. intelligence has provided information with respect to human rights abuses and election-rigging by certain governments which has altered the U.S. diplomatic posture towards those governments.

- U.S. intelligence has provided information about the military capabilities of other governments that has altered the research and development of U.S. weapons systems, providing potential cost savings and improving their effectiveness.

- U.S. intelligence has provided information to civil authorities in the United States, as well as in other countries, to help cope with natural disasters, environmental problems, and humanitarian crises.

- U.S. intelligence has supported United Nations' peacekeeping and other operations around the world.

- Considerable information has been provided by U.S. intelligence to the Bosnia War Crimes Tribunal.

It is impossible to quantify the accomplishments of U.S. intelligence of which these are examples. Clearly, however, over the last five years conflicts have been avoided, wars shortened, agreements reached, costs reduced, and lives saved as a result of the information produced by U.S. intelligence.

The United States had such information only because it chose to maintain a dedicated and capable intelligence apparatus. While that apparatus is expensive and will from time to time be a source of embarrassment, even consternation, the Commission has no difficulty reaching the conclusion that it is justified. Intelligence is an important element of national strength. The country should not lose sight of this amid the spy scandals and management failures of recent years. The performance of intelligence can be improved. It can be made more efficient. But it must be preserved.