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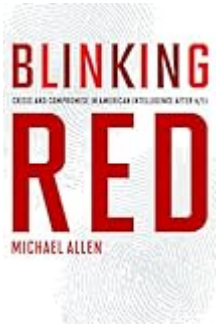

Michael Allen. *Blinking Red: Crisis and Compromise in American Intelligence after 9/11.* Dulles: Potomac Books, 2013. xxi + 250 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61234-615-1.

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Blinking Red: Crisis and Compromise in American Intelligence after 9/11 is a fascinating book that provides an insiderâs view into how the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act (IRTPA) became law in the years following the 9/11 attacks. Michael Allen, who served in the Bush administration White House during the period covered in the book, has written the most comprehensive account available of one of the most important periods of intelligence reform in our nationâs history. While some sections of the book may seem a little âinside baseballâ to readers outside the Washington Beltway, Allen provides details and insights into the maneuverings in the White House and on Capitol Hill during the debate over the intelligence reform act that I have not seen published elsewhere.

Allen writes that his goal is to provide the âdefinitive historyâ of these events (p. xvi). This may be a bit ambitious, but if journalism is the first draft of history, then this book–based largely on interviews with key players, material from the 9/11 Commission archives, and Allenâs own experience as a participant in many of these events–is at least a well-researched and valuable second draft.

As Allen describes approvingly, following the terrorist attacks of 2001, the 9/11 Commission argued that âthe U.S. intelligence system needed a powerful leader to merge its scattered bureaucracies into a more unified enterprise to counter Americaâs new enemies: stateless international terroristsâ (p. ix). The commission pushed for a new post of director of National Intelligence (DNI) to be established, with enough authority to be able to truly direct the activities of the many agencies that make up the American intelligence community. Most of the book relates the relatively brief struggle in 2004 over the IRTPA, which ultimately became law and established the position of DNI and the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), among other reforms.

Allen is well suited to write this history. During the debates he describes, he worked on the bill as a White House legislative affairs officer; and after leaving the White House in 2009, he was director of the Bipartisan Policy Centerâs National Security Preparedness Group, a private group formed as a successor to the 9/11 Commission. (An earlier follow-on to the 9/11 Commission, called the 9/11 Public Discourse Project, had existed in 2004 and 2005.) More recently, he was the majority staff director for the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, so he has seen the intelligence business from both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. (I should note that during the summer of 2004, I worked at the Office of Man-

agement and Budget [OMB] as an intern, focusing on intelligence reform and analyzing the recommendations of the just-released 9/11 Commission Report, but I was not directly involved in the events recounted in this book.)

Although most of the book is devoted to the legislative struggle over the IRTPA, Allen provides useful background–but not very deep analysis–on a number of other aspects of post-9/11 intelligence reform, such as the Scowcroft Report, the first major study of intelligence reform to be completed after the terrorist attacks. The Scowcroft Report remains classified, and Allen offers one of the most thorough discussions available of the report and its significance for later intelligence reform.

Allen puts the struggle over the intelligence reform bill in stark terms, describing it as a âclash of world viewsâ (p. 100) that pit the Senate, which wanted a strong DNI and significant reform, against the House, many of whose members worried that such reforms would reduce the influence of the Department of Defense over intelligence matters and would ultimately lead to a reduction in intelligence support for the military. Allen successfully conveys the drama in these events, although occasionally the prose seems a bit breathless and overdone. To judge by the book, for example, the only food that gets eaten on Capitol Hill is steak–whether itâs âslabs of steakâ at a secret dinner, steak and eggs for breakfast, or a good old-fashioned rib-eye. The reader wonders how anyone in government is able to watch their waistline.

The book is a useful reminder that the national intelligence structure we have today as a result of the post-9/11 reforms was very controversial, and in many cases small changes in the wording of legislation have had an outsize impact in determining how agencies function. During the debate over the establishment of the NCTC, for example, a key issue was whether it should be involved in âoperationalâ level planning or should instead be restricted to only conducting broader âstrategicâ level planning. On the one hand, critics in the House wanted to make sure the NCTC did not get into the business of actually conducting counterterrorism operations, so they favored the use of the term âstrategic.â Senate supporters of a strong NCTC worried, on the other hand, that if the centerâs mission was limited to purely strategic planning, that would be, in Philip Zelikowâs words, âcode for you donât do real workâ (p. 125). In the end, a compromise was reached by which the NCTC was given the mission of conducting âstrategic operational planningâ–a curious phrase, but which seemed to do the trick of helping to bring both sides together.

One of the most interesting features of the book is Allenâs description of the roles played by several organizations and individuals who are not likely to be well known outside Washington policy circles, such as Scott Palmer, chief of staff to the Speaker of the House, and Robin Cleveland, a senior official at the OMB. Palmer is portrayed as the hero of the story, deftly shepherding the intelligence reform bill through the Senate and House conference process.

Allen describes the difficulty that the Bush administration had in finding someone to take the new job of DNI. The first choice, Robert Gates, was concerned that the position was too weak, and looked unsuccessfully for reassurance that the DNI would have clear authority over the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director. Allen quotes Gates: âAs they say in the movie âThe Highlander,â there can only be oneâ (p. 154). In the end he turned down the job because he was not convinced the DNI would be that one. Allen writes that Admiral Vernon Clark, the former chief of Naval Operations, was also offered and turned down the DNI post. I had not remembered that nugget of information, and I do not know whether this had been known publicly before the publication of this book.

The bookâs main narrative ends with the passage of the IRTPA and the establishment of the DNI and the NCTC, but Allen does briefly review the early history of the DNI position, as the first occupant of the office, John Negroponte, was followed in rather quick succession by Admiral Michael McConnell and then Admiral Dennis Blair. Allen ends the story by noting that âafter the resignation of the third DNI in its first five years, many commentators asked whether the position had been set up to failâ (p. 164).

This is not an academic book, and Allen provides very little in the way of any overarching theme or argument other than that the passage of the IRTPA was the product of compromise. But he interviewed many of the key figures in these events, and made use of the 9/11 Commission archives and other important collections. As a result, the book provides numerous details and insights not available elsewhere about secret meetings, late-night negotiations, and Oval Office conversations. While it is a useful addition to the literature on intelligence reform, its primary value is to provide a detailed case study of the intelligence reform legislation that followed the 9/11 attacks. Much of the story related in this book has been told elsewhere, although previous work has not offered as much detail or the juicy nuggets of insider informa-

tion that give the reader the sense of being in the room with the participants.[1] On the overall impact of the 9/11 Commission, Allen argues that the commission was âone of the most successful commissions in history,â a finding generally in line with that of Jordan Tamaâs more scholarly study, *Terrorism and National Security Reform: How Commissions Can Drive Change during Crises* (2011).

The book is clearly written from the perspective of someone in favor of significant intelligence reform and in support of the views of the 9/11 Commission and Senators Susan Collins and Joe Lieberman. One chapter, for example, is titled âAttackers,â and the attackers in question–the enemies of the piece–are those in Congress who opposed the Collins and Lieberman reforms. But Allen is still quite evenhanded in his account; too much so, in fact, as I would have liked to see more of his own views and analysis of these events and their significance for today.

He writes in the preface that understanding the origins of the DNI can help âilluminate whether the intelligence failures on 9/11 and in Iraq have been addressedâ (p. xi), and more discussion of these broader issues would have been useful. The central question that runs through the book is somewhat more limited: whether or not the most prominent feature of post-9/11 intelligence reform, the establishment of the position of DNI, has been successful. Allen offers a lukewarm affirmative answer, noting that while the clout of any individual DNI is really up to the president, there is value in having someone above and outside the line agencies of the intelligence community: âThe DNI can do what individual agencies are unable to do: think of anyone but themselvesâ (p. 169).

The book takes us up only to the appointment of James Clapper as DNI in 2010, and the story to that point strongly suggests that the position is too weak. By then there had already been three DNIs, and Allen notes that at least two of them, McConnell and Blair, have both argued strongly that the position needs more authority to be effective. But the story may have changed more recently, as Clapperâs relatively longer tenure in office may suggest that he has found a more effective model for the position than that followed by his predecessors.

Clapper has been a relatively low-key DNI, at least in public not appearing to insist on the same level of preeminence that Blair, in particular, did. The finding and killing of Osama bin Laden, which is not discussed in this book, can be seen as supporting the value of the Clapper model. In the search for bin Laden, the DNI appears to have largely let legacy agencies of the intelligence community–particularly the CIA and its Counterterrorism Center–do their job. Although the entire intelligence community contributed to the decade-long search, the DNI and the NCTC appear to have stayed out of the way of the operators, with the result being success.[2]

Even more recently, however, the controversy over the National Security Agencyâs (NSA) surveillance programs following the leaks by Edward Snowden suggests that the role of the DNI as it has evolved, as a coordinator rather than true director, can have a less positive effect. Here, as with the search for bin Laden, Clapper and the Office of the DNI have not been the focus of attention. This may be entirely logical, as the official most often in the public eye has been NSA Director Keith Alexander. Clapperâs best-known comment on the affair is his embarrassing testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee that the NSA was not collecting intelligence on Americans.[3]

The continuing controversy over the NSA begs the question of whether or not a more powerful DNI, such as Allen gently advocates for, could have helped anticipate this problem. General Michael Hayden has suggested that the story about NSA surveillance was bound to come out some day, saying that âthe debate was coming.â[4] If so, why didnât anyone on the inside realize the risk to the administration and intelligence community that disclosure of the extremely sensitive NSA programs might pose, and also realize that after the Bradley Manning leaks, another, even greater set of disclosures was possible? It seems that the Office of the DNI could have been such a place where these risks could have been understood, and thus the debate over the office–as described in this fascinating and important book–remains alive today.

The views stated here are the authorâs own, and are not necessarily those of the Naval Postgraduate School or the U.S. government.

Notes

[1]. On the struggle over the intelligence reform bill, see also Helen Fessenden, âThe Limits of Intelligence Reform, â *Foreign Affairs* (November 1, 2005), `http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/61204/helen-fessenden/the-limits-of-intelligence-reform.` Useful broader discussions of American intelligence reform include Philip Zelikow, âThe Evolution of Intelligence Reform, 2002-2004,â *Studies in Intelligence* 56, no. 3 (September 2012): 1-20; and Michael Warner and J. Ken-

neth McDonald, *US Intelligence Community Reform Studies since 1947* (Washington DC: CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, April 2005).

[2]. See, for example, Peter L. Bergen, *Manhunt: The Ten-Year Search for Bin Laden from 9/11 to Abbottabad* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012).

[3]. Scott Shane and Jonathan Weisman, âEarlier Denials Put Intelligence Chief in Awkward Position,â *New York Times*, June 11, 2013. Note that Robert S. Litt, the General Counsel of the Office of the DNI, has said that Clapper did not lie; instead, he had understood that he was being asked about whether or not the intelligence community collects information on the content of Americansâ phone calls, which it does not. Robert S. Litt, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, January 3, 2014.

[4]. Michael Hayden, interview by David Gregory, *Meet the Press*, December 15, 2013.