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BOOK REVIEW

Book Name

Spies, Lies, and Algorithms: The History and Future of American Intelligence

Author: Amy B. Zegart.

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Reviewed by: Syed Raza Abbas ¹

Amy Zegart is a famous American political scientist whose research focuses on US intelligence, emerging technologies, and global political risk management. She has also authored five books on her given research interest areas. She is currently serving as a professor of political science at Stanford University. Her other positions as a research fellow include senior fellow at The Hoover Institution and senior fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies. She also writes frequently on the issues of her interest at The Atlantic. The main theme of this book revolves around American intelligence history, challenges, threat perception, modus operandi, legal and ethical jurisdictions, and how well the American intelligence apparatus is adapting to and coping with emerging technologies. This book has ten chapters and 405 pages, including

¹ Syed Raza Abbas is a Research Assistant at Strategic Vision Institute (SVI), Islamabad. He can be reached at razaabbas@thesvi.org

acknowledgments, notes, selected readings, and an index. The author has used research articles, op-eds, newspapers, official reports, congressional hearings and briefs, declassified documents, and interviewed serving and retired officials from the US intelligence community to produce this research work as a book.

This book discusses the US intelligence community and its apparatus in detail. The rising challenges to intelligence and counterintelligence are due to the democratization of information via social media and disruptive technologies. Information abundance is causing analysis paralysis for intelligence agencies worldwide. According to a study, the available information doubles every two years, and processing such information requires quantum computing with state-of-the-art processing chips. That is where emerging technologies play their part, such as AI and miniaturized processing chips that can sift through big data and extract relevant information from crude data. Intelligence agencies are an essential organ of the state, but they do not play a role in policymaking. The famous saying in the US intelligence community is that “Intelligence officers by their nature are skeptics, while policymakers are optimistic.” In the history of US intelligence, the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) chiefs had problems with the US presidents. President John F. Kennedy distrusted his CIA chief, John McCone. Richard Nixon nursed deep suspicion for the CIA and ended up firing CIA director Richard Helms in 1972. Bill Clinton had problems with CIA director James Woolsey. The reason for such deep distrust and suspicions was that the job of intelligence is to give exact and real-time information without sugarcoating. The decision to take action on actionable intelligence is the job of policymakers. The difference arises in the urgency of taking action and delaying the action. Intelligence analysis is easier said than done due to scarce actionable intelligence data, information asymmetries, ambiguous outcomes, high denial probability, and deception by hostile actors. CIA had successes at times, but it also failed

miserably in Latin America, intelligence laps that led to 9/11, and the misinformation about Iraqi WMDs.

The awful history of the CIA in regime change operations in Latin America also dented the image of the CIA at home. That's why former US President Jimmy Carter banned the covert operations by an executive order. The House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence (HPSCI) and Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) overlook the affairs of the CIA. CIA operatives must brief and justify their actions to the committee when called upon. The US intelligence community, comprising 17 agencies, has a liaison officer working with Hollywood writers, directors, and producers. The purpose is to produce spy content and improve the agency's public relations at home and worldwide. The rise of open-source intelligence platforms (OSINT) is a recent phenomenon. This phenomenon has its own benefits and risks. OSINT platforms are operated by different independent observers, think tanks, and people of particular interest. Three trends have democratized nuclear threat intelligence collection and analysis. Rise in the quantity and capability of commercial satellites, the explosion of connectivity and other open-source information on the internet, and advances in automated analytics like machine learning. The first CORONA satellite had a resolution of twelve meters, which meant that the image could not distinguish between two adjacent objects on the ground unless they were twelve meters apart. In 2000, one commercial satellite had a sub-two-meter resolution. By 2019, twenty-five commercial satellites were offering sub-two meter resolutions. Most of them provided resolutions under one meter.

This book is eloquently written and can be classified as an academic book because the author has described the intelligence apparatus of the US in detail. This book can also be taught in universities worldwide as a course on intelligence apparatus and how it operates. The author herself is working in academia and has

classified this book into chapters, and each chapter deals with a separate organ of intelligence. This book has debunked many myths that I used to hold about intelligence agencies before reading this book. It has helped me better understand the factors that are at play in spying and how they gather intelligence, analysis, take action, and counterintelligence. My favorite chapters in this book are Chapter 5 and Chapter 6. Chapter 5 outlines “Why Analysis Is So Hard” and the seven deadly biases that intelligence operatives go through.

The author argues in Chapter 5, p. 119, discussing the “Confirmation Bias.” In 2002, as war was brewing in Iraq, confirmation bias again led to intelligence failure. In October, Congress received a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs. That intelligence estimates proved to be misinformation, and American forces never found the Iraqi WMD sites. The whole Iraqi WMD story was peddled by an unreliable CIA source code named “Curve Ball.” Former CIA director John Brennan called Curve Ball a fabricator and the estimates seriously flawed. This proves how confirmation bias can lead to serious miscalculations in intelligence and make the analysis so hard and challenging. In chapter 5, p. 123, the author discusses the “Availability Bias” and argues that “What you predict depends on what you have experienced.” This was in relation to when the CIA was analyzing the compound of Osama Bin Laden (OBL). The estimates of CIA analysts about the pacer walking in the compound were actually OBL, ranging from 40 to 95 percent. The variation was because those who had lived through the experience of Iraqi WMD’s flawed assessment were skeptical, and those who had recent successes in Afghanistan and other places were optimistic that the person walking in the compound was OBL. In Chapter 6, the author discusses counterintelligence. On p. 146, the author argues that “at least eighty countries are known to have conducted intelligence operations against the United States, including allies like France, South Korea, and Israel. A civilian US

Navy Intelligence analyst, Pollard passed hundreds of classified documents to the Israelis, including American assessments of the military capabilities of Israel and other Middle Eastern States.” This chapter teaches us that in counterintelligence, everyone spies on everyone, foes and friends alike. In conclusion, this book is recommended for academics, policy practitioners, and people with a keen interest in intelligence affairs. It delves into the secret world of intelligence, which is not often discussed as candidly in the mainstream.