U.S. Strategic Warning Intelligence: Situation and Prospects

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Strategic warning long has been a core function of national intelligence services. Many people believe, and U.S. law states, that intelligence can provide no greater service than warning of impending threats to national...
security.¹ The trauma of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 prompted the United States to build a post–World War II intelligence structure to prevent future such surprises. Strategic warning became a formal analytic task of the Intelligence Community (IC), along with strategic (or research) intelligence, estimates, and current intelligence.

Yet strategic warning has always had a precarious existence. Enemies of warning consistently threatened the function on several substantive and bureaucratic grounds, and repeatedly killed specialized warning organizations. Those pressures grew in the wake of congressional reaction to the twin failings of the 11 September 2001 (9/11) attacks and the error-filled National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) of 2002 on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD). At this point, the evolution of strategic warning in the United States can be assessed, along with the causes of the various changes and their implications for the IC’s performance. Also possible are suggestions for improving what is now a deeply flawed U.S. strategic warning system.

BACKGROUND

The emergence of the Cold War in the late-1940s prompted the United States to build formal structures and to develop new techniques for accurately assessing threats. In 1948, three Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) analysts, with assistance from British intelligence, began to compile a list of “indicators” of possibly imminent hostile actions by adversary states.² In time, this group invited personnel from other agencies to join them, thereby expanding the group, which eventually became known as the Watch Committee. The name was descriptive. Intelligence officers scrutinized incoming intelligence reports, watching for indications that the Soviet Union planned an attack on the United States or American interests broadly, including attacks on allies and friends. Cynthia Grabo, an early participant in such work as an analyst with the U.S. Army and then with the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), described the indicator lists the Watch Committee used:

An indicator list, simply defined, is a compilation of projected, anticipated or hypothetical actions which any nation might take in preparation for hostilities or other inimical actions. Such lists, often compiled without regard to whether it was likely or even possible to collect the desired information, proved of assistance to both collectors and analysts, provided they were not regarded as a bible of what to expect.³

Over time, warning analysts refined this approach into what has become known as the “indications and warning” (I&W) method of conducting
warning analysis. Early in the post-war period, the United States also developed warning intelligence relationships with close allies, which continue to this day.4 Meanwhile, in January 1949, the U.S. Army G-2 began a similar warning effort in a section devoted to following Soviet military activities, which came to be called the Intelligence Indications File (IIF). In April 1950, CIA and IIF analysts became concerned about North Korean intentions toward South Korea. Buried in the body of an assessment, the Army wrote, “The outbreak of hostilities may occur at any time in Korea.”5 Senior decisionmakers unsurprisingly ignored the message—an early lesson on the importance of direct, persuasive communication between warning officers and senior decisionmakers.6 Neither the IIF nor the Watch Committee specifically forecast the North Korean invasion of 25 June 1950, which was a strategic surprise—and a warning failure.

The invasion of South Korea triggered greater U.S. government interest in what Grabo called “the indications business.”7 The Department of Defense (DoD) in mid-August 1950 expanded the Army’s effort to include intelligence personnel from other military services and invited CIA, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and State Department representatives to join the effort. It re-named the organization the Joint Intelligence Indications Committee (JIIC); as before, a U.S. Army brigadier general chaired its weekly meetings and its reports circulated widely in government.8 Still, the new organization failed to warn of the Chinese military buildup in Manchuria that led to China’s massive intervention in the Korean conflict in October 1950.

Soon after the Chinese attack, the Intelligence Advisory Board (IAC), the senior national-level intelligence board and predecessor of the current U.S. National Intelligence Board, decided it did not need two warning committees. The IAC kept the JIIC but renamed it the Watch Committee in January 1951.9 The Watch Committee remained under Army chairmanship for four more years. Throughout the Korean War, the Watch Committee focused on that war, largely duplicating the current intelligence activities of other intelligence entities while ignoring other issues, a practice that would recur.

In 1954, at the urging of the U.S. Air Force, the IAC augmented the warning function by creating the National Indications Center (NIC), which supported the Watch Committee and was located in the Pentagon. The Watch Committee’s charter was to warn of military threats to the United States and its allies along with situations that Communist countries could exploit.10 While it provided no mandate to do opportunity warning—alerting policymakers of opportunities to act to advance U.S. interests—the charter was an implicit directive to identify exploitable U.S. and Western vulnerabilities. But, like opportunity warning, the mission of
providing a variant of net assessment was largely ignored. In 1973, the Office of Net Assessment, a part of the Office of the Secretary of Defense headed by Andrew Marshall, assumed this aspect of the warning function. At the same time, the chairman of the Watch Committee was generally a senior CIA officer or the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, who often in the 1950s was a senior military officer.

Crisis situations monitored by the NIC in the 1950s included the French government’s war in colonial Indochina, Chinese attacks on the coastal islands of Quemoy and Matsu, the Warsaw Pact’s military intervention in Hungary in 1956, turmoil in Lebanon in 1958 that led to U.S. military intervention, and troubles with the Soviets over the status of Berlin. The NIC also established a special committee to monitor events in Berlin in 1958, but it was discontinued before construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961. The NIC tracked these crises as did the other current intelligence shops throughout the IC. Grabo later argued that the NIC had successfully monitored and warned of Soviet actions during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, believing, too, that this performance was “probably the high tide of the Watch Committee and the NIC.” Her definition of “success” differed dramatically from most assessments of the performance of intelligence in 1962, which still tend to emphasize the failures of the estimative process, not tactical military warning.

The Watch Committee in the late 1950s and early 1960s remained a senior-level organization. Its chairman was a two- or three-star military officer or civilian equivalent, and its members included the CIA, State Department, the DIA (after its creation in 1961), the National Security Agency (NSA), and the FBI. The DIA represented the military services, whose delegates were observers on the Committee. The NIC consisted of fairly senior military and civilian analysts who, Grabo recalled, never numbered more than “about 13.” Support staff raised the total number of NIC personnel to roughly 30. The NIC developed a 24-hour-per-day “watch center” that monitored various kinds of traffic for signs of activity in the arenas highlighted by the indications lists; some analysts also researched existing and potentially emerging warning issues. A specific occurrence of an “indicator” became an “indication” worth noting, analyzing, and perhaps including in a warning report.

The Watch Committee developed a routine and issued “warning” reports periodically, normally weekly and numbered sequentially, just as current intelligence was published. It further developed the I&W method. As the I&W method and warning functions became institutionalized, each major military command built a variant of the NIC in its intelligence directorate; these centers mainly supported their own commanders although they also interacted with the rest of the Defense Department’s
warning establishment. The Watch Committee enjoyed considerable status within the U.S. government as a whole and could, in a crisis situation, make autonomous analytic decisions and get a warning message to the White House within one hour.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{MEETING GLOBAL THREATS}

The 1960s saw a diffusion of global threats to U.S. interests, leading to debates within the Watch Committee and the NIC about what issues to follow, consistent with what they informally called the “beartrap” clause of their charter—their mandate to focus on Soviet-related threats. In addition to monitoring the USSR, China, Cuba, and other Communist countries, in these years the Watch Committee followed events in Laos, Korea, parts of the Middle East, South Vietnam, and Thailand, and monitored the Sino-Indian conflict of 1962.\textsuperscript{19} In the late 1960s the NIC spent most of its time following events in Southeast Asia, as did much of the rest of the U.S. government. In so doing it again largely competed with line analytic units in producing current intelligence.

U.S. intelligence generally gets poor reviews of its performance on the Vietnam conflict during both the French and American periods. For example, the Watch Committee’s chairman refused to accept Army civilian analyst George Allen’s assessment in early 1954 that the Communist Viet Minh planned to, and had the ability to, trap the French troops at Dien Bien Phu, leading the Committee to not warn of an impending French political and military disaster.\textsuperscript{20} And, while a U.S. post-mortem of the enemy’s Tet offensive of January 1968 claimed that strategic warning had been moderately effective, most observers are more critical.\textsuperscript{21}

The IC did much better a year earlier, warning of the 1967 war between Israel and its Arab neighbors and accurately forecasting its outcome. But the Watch Committee stumbled again in 1968, this time over the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact intervention in Czechoslovakia, which unfolded over a period of several months as the “Prague Spring” generated worries in Moscow that Czechoslovakia might abandon socialism. The Committee watched intently but did not produce a formal warning of the invasion. Cynthia Grabo characterized the analytic errors of this failure as:

- A widespread belief that the Soviet Union had “matured” since the suppression of the Hungarian revolt twelve years before, and would not do such a thing again.
- A failure to perceive how seriously the Soviet leaders viewed the situation in Czechoslovakia and how committed they were to restoring orthodox [i.e., Communist] control by one means or another.
A prevalent view that the importance of détente with the United States would deter Soviet leaders from taking overt military action to assert control in Czechoslovakia.

Inadequate attention to a host of crucial details (small but highly significant indications), particularly in the military preparations, which were lost in the tremendous volume of information received.

*An excessive emphasis on current reporting rather than in-depth analysis of cumulative indications* (emphasis added).

The inadequate integration of military and political developments into a coherent pattern that would have provided clearer insight into the Soviet decision-making process.

The repetition in current intelligence reporting of Soviet announcements that their military actions were “exercises,” without clarifying that these announcements were merely cover for bona fide military preparations.

A relaxation of vigilance and weakening of warning judgments during the seeming delay in Soviet action in the three weeks prior to the invasion.\(^{22}\)

Grabo noted that a few analysts had accurately interpreted Soviet actions and anticipated the intervention but they, like George Allen in 1954, were unable to convince the majority who established the Watch Committee/NIC position. Instead, disagreements led to compromise language that fell short of a clear warning message. These analytic mistakes were similar to the recurrent errors Grabo discerned in the 1950s and 1960s that finally, after the Czechoslovak failure, led her to write her classic book on warning to help new warning specialists avoid yet again making avoidable errors.\(^{23}\)

By the early 1970s, according to Grabo, the National Indications Center and the Watch Committee, once so vibrant, had become ineffective for several reasons.\(^{24}\) The NIC’s once-considerable freedom to draft and quickly disseminate warning reports disappeared when the Watch Committee decided, at a time now apparently lost, to review and edit its work before warning messages were disseminated. In 1963, the U.S. Intelligence Board (USIB) decreed that warning reports had to be fully coordinated across the IC before dissemination. That coordination process led NIC analysts to say less and to use more bureaucratically congenial language. Analysts of current intelligence preferred that the NIC not say anything that they had not previously written; NIC products thus differed little from current intelligence pieces. The NIC/Watch Committee settled into a weekly schedule of production, whether they had important warning messages to convey or not. In the détente period of the early 1970s, senior IC managers believed that the world had become less dangerous, meaning there was less perceived need for a threat-warning institution. Meanwhile,
the NIC’s watch function continued to consume the activities of an appreciable number of capable people, making the NIC a target for resource raiders from across the IC.

The Watch Committee had the misfortune of meeting on 6 October 1973. Literally as Egypt and Syria were launching the Yom Kippur War, the Committee concluded that Arab–Israeli tensions reflected a recurrent border dispute and assessed the outbreak of major hostilities as unlikely. Subsequently, in March 1975, with many failures on their record, the Watch Committee and NIC were abolished, replaced by a smaller Strategic Warning Staff (SWS)—a DIA unit located in the Pentagon. At various times the SWS and other DIA elements wrote for serial DIA warning publications that focused on the needs of the military commands and were not coordinated across the IC or disseminated widely. The I&W method remained the primary analytic doctrine.

ADDRESSING OTHER PROBLEMS

To redress similar perceived problems within the Office of National Estimates (O/NE), Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) William Colby in 1973 established a group of National Intelligence Officers (NIOs), usually about 15 in number, who were senior analysts responsible for specific regions of the world and an evolving set of functional issues. The NIOs were to interact closely with key intelligence consumers, becoming trusted advisors. The NIOs had warning responsibilities within their areas of responsibility, splintering the role of the Watch Committee.

In the mid-1970s, both houses of Congress established committees to investigate allegations of inappropriate actions by IC agencies, which led in turn to the creation of the current intelligence oversight committees. In August 1978 the Subcommittee on Evaluation of the new House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence (HPSCI) issued a report on warning intelligence that contained recommendations for improving the function, especially by creating a National Intelligence Officer for Warning (NIO/W) and an inter-agency, national warning staff.

In 1979, DCI Stansfield Turner established the National Intelligence Council (NIC), whose chairman and vice chairman more closely coordinated the activities of the individual NIOs. The NIC structure added institutional formality, a mechanism for coordinating the activities of the NIOs, and some additional seniority—all of which helped the NIC perform better, protecting it from bureaucratic attacks by IC members.

Also in 1979, in the wake of the HPSCI report and another major warning failure—the surprise overthrow of the Shah of Iran—DCI Turner issued DCI
Directive 1-5, which created a new system of “National Intelligence Warning” that built on earlier methods and established the position of National Intelligence Officer for Warning.\(^{27}\) The Directive gave the NIO/W specific responsibilities, including coordination of the warning activities of the regional and functional NIOs, and provided definitions that remain valid:

a. *Warning* as used herein encompasses those measures taken, and the intelligence information produced, by the Intelligence Community to avoid surprise to the President, the [National Security Council], and the Armed Forces of the United States by foreign events of major importance to the security of the United States. It includes strategic, but not tactical warning.

b. *Strategic Warning* is intelligence information or intelligence regarding the threat of the initiation of hostilities against the US or in which US forces may become involved; it may be received at any time prior to the initiation of hostilities. It does not include tactical warning.

c. *Tactical warning* is notification that the enemy has initiated hostilities. Such warning may be received at any time from the launching of the attack until it reaches its target.\(^{28}\)

Note that “warning” is defined as the avoidance of “surprise” about “events of major importance” to senior civilian and military leaders. This meant, in practice, that NIO/Ws and much of the National Intelligence Council provided both threat and opportunity warning, with primary but not exclusive focus on the needs of senior civilian policymakers. Defense warning remained focused on military threats. The old “beartrap” restrictions were thereby lifted.

The new warning “system” was soon tested as the IC monitored chaotic events in Afghanistan involving rival Communist groups within the Afghan national government. The IC wondered how Moscow would redress what was, in the Soviet view, a deteriorating political situation. While current intelligence reporting in 1979 on Soviet activity was extensive, the IC did not specifically warn of an invasion. In response to a National Security Council request to assess the event from the warning perspective, the IC in October 1980 published a 73-page report that nevertheless concluded that the IC’s “Indications and Warning System” had generally worked well, enabling issuance of three “Alert Memorandums”—then the IC’s formal warning notification format—one in September 1979 and two in December, including one on 19 December 1979, a week before the invasion.\(^{29}\) The report concluded that the I&W method had generally enabled and reflected a good understanding of Soviet military practices. But the official responsible for this warning problem was the National Intelligence Officer for General Purpose Forces—not the new NIO/W.\(^{30}\)
Successive NIO/Ws generally had the following assets and responsibilities. Their small personal staffs relied heavily on interaction with experts in line analytic units and the other NIOs but were free to issue warning messages to the DCI and senior policymakers as they alone considered appropriate. NIO/Ws and other NIOs shared mutual warning-related concerns, tracked those concerns, helped communicate warning messages developed within their own areas of responsibility to senior decisionmakers, and prioritized warning-related collection. This way of doing strategic warning can be termed the “hybrid” structural model—a small central warning office interacting regularly with analysts who deal primarily with current intelligence issues. NIO/Ws also worked closely with the DIA’s Strategic Warning Staff, later renamed the National Warning Staff (NWS). Both groups issued warning messages to an overlapping set of consumers and challenged line organizations to be more alert to warning issues. The NWS focused on military threats, while the NIO/W interacted closely with senior consumers of intelligence throughout government on a wide variety of military and civilian issues, including threats and opportunities. The system worked well.

A NEW DoD SYSTEM

Meanwhile, the Defense Department again created its own warning system, this time called the Defense Warning System (DWS), which cooperated with the NIO/Ws to varying degrees over time through the National Warning Staff at the Pentagon. For example, in the late 1980s, NIO/W John Bird had a moderately close working relationship with the NWS, while in the early 1990s NIO/W Charles Allen chaired weekly meeting of a newly established “Warning Committee” that included the DWS. The DWS consisted of DIA personnel assigned to the Joint Staff J-2, the military services, the intelligence arms of the unified and specified commands (now called combatant commands), U.S. Forces Korea due to chronic concerns that North Korea might again attack South Korea, and some foreign military intelligence services. The DWS’s focus remained exclusively on military threats. Its warnings always contained bad news. The primary consumers of its warning messages were the commanders of the combatant commands.

U.S. intelligence monitored the Iraqi military build-up that preceded Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and issued a warning to U.S. military commanders, yet senior civilians in the administration of President George H.W. Bush apparently were surprised. NIO/W Charles Allen publicly claimed in his own defense that he and his staff had indeed done their job by issuing warnings; but Allen did not cite any policy officials with whom he communicated. Former DoD warning officer
Daniel Landers agreed with Allen, saying the system worked because the military combatant commands were alerted and the U.S. Central Command raised its alert status, or WATCHCON. But Allen’s assistant NIO/W at the time, civilian Mary McCarthy, acknowledged that there had been a warning failure. This case illustrates the often narrow focus of military warning and yet again the critical importance of communicating warning messages to all relevant decisionmaking recipients, not just military leaders.

THE POST-SOVIET WARNING CLIMATE

Warning declined in priority after the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. The formerly bipolar, deeply competitive world suddenly became unipolar and the United States seemed to be its unchallenged hegemon. There seemed no possibility of an existential threat arising in any direction. The DoD boasted in its *Joint Vision 2020* strategic vision document, published in 2000, that it would achieve “full spectrum dominance” over all military rivals.

Aware of the changing world and the controversy over the adequacy of warning of the invasion of Kuwait, DCI Robert Gates in 1992 commissioned a “Task Force on Improving Intelligence Warning” to study the strategic warning function. A distinguished panel, concluding that warning was not performing adequately and that the causes were systemic, recommended changes. In the judgment of former NIO/W Mary McCarthy, the Task Force found that “with the exception of Defense, all intelligence agencies had treated warning intelligence assessments as by-products of their routine analytical activities, an approach that had proven inadequate; that there had been little accountability; and, most disturbingly, that the system previously in place had been largely notional (emphasis added).” To correct these problems, Gates designed what McCarthy called a comprehensive system to integrate regional and functional experts with professional warning specialists headed by the NIO/W, who would remain the principal advisor to the DCI on warning issues. Gates assessed that the NIO/W and line analytic units had previously operated with excessive independence and in parallel. In essence, Gates evidently saw that the “hybrid” model was not hybrid enough and sought to strengthen the NIO/Ws.

Throughout the 1990s, the continuing absence of a peer competitor to the U.S. military and the growing number of small threats to American interests from non-state actors seemed to many people in the IC to indicate that concerns about major inter-state war, the primary purpose of the strategic warning function during the Cold War, were no longer relevant. In response, the DWS broadened its mission concept somewhat
and monitored such low-intensity conflicts as the fighting in Bosnia after 1992 and other more generalized threats to stability, such as government collapse, civil war, the deterioration of some states’ control of strategic weapons, weapons proliferation, terrorism, and narcotics trafficking.41

But the DWS held to its threat warning focus and chose not to suggest in its formal products opportunities for policymakers to advance U.S. interests. Many people in the IC, especially in Defense intelligence, maintained incorrectly that any opportunity warning effort was incompatible with the longstanding U.S. political standard that intelligence must avoid direct involvement in policymaking. In an important sense the IC thereby chose to become less relevant to senior civilian consumers. Former senior U.S. policy official James Steinberg summarized the problem:

Policymakers look to the intelligence community to uncover facts that will help them achieve their goals. Contrary to the views of some critics, most policymakers do not resist bad news if it is reliable and timely, because they know they cannot succeed by sticking their heads in the sand and pretending that adverse developments will go away if they simply ignore or dismiss them. But often policymakers feel that the intelligence community views its mission as solely being the bearer of bad news or “warning”—that is, telling the policy community about all the obstacles to achieving their objectives, rather than identifying opportunities and how to make the best of the situation to achieve them. Yet for many analysts such a role is tantamount to “supporting” the policy and thus violates the most sacred canon of analytical objectivity and policy neutrality (emphasis added).42

Mark M. Lowenthal has offered an example of successful opportunity warning, evidently by line units: in 2003 intelligence support apparently gave President George W. Bush insights that led him to negotiate with Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi the end of Libya’s WMD programs, which subsequently facilitated NATO’s regime-change war against Qaddafi in 2011.43

Disenchantment with warning performance became more pronounced after al-Qaeda’s attacks on New York City and Washington, DC in September 2001 increased concerns about terrorism, which traditional warning offices seemed ill-equipped to handle. Many people erroneously considered the 9/11 attacks to be a strategic warning failure. Moreover, other intelligence units, prominently including the DCI’s Counterterrorist Center, which DCI William Casey created in 1986, were already working on counterterrorism (CT) issues.

In 2004, the IC’s senior leadership gave newly appointed NIO/W Kenneth Knight a mandate to reassess the warning function. That review included an extensive survey of classified and open-source literature on warning, detailed
interviews with current and former senior intelligence and policy officials, a series of workshops with an advisory panel composed of veteran government officials and academic experts, and discussions with outsiders engaged in “warning-like” activities, including pension fund managers, risk consultancies, and insurance executives. The review generated several recommendations for improving the national warning system, such as updating directives that governed warning, reinvigorating the warning community’s interactions with policymakers, modernizing warning tradecraft, moving away from the emphasis on shorter-term crisis monitoring and current intelligence, and expanding the scope of warning to better address new and emerging threats and challenges. These and other recommendations were encapsulated in Intelligence Community Directive (ICD) 201, which the new Director of National Intelligence (DNI) John Negroponte signed in June 2006.

THE NEW ODNI ENTERS THE FRAY

Meanwhile, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and the flawed NIE on Iraqi WMD of 2002, Congress pressed the IC to better link its judgments to specific reporting. In response, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) issued ICD 203, Analytic Standards, which set standards for analyst “tradecraft” and mandated clarity in distinguishing analysts’ judgments from “underlying” intelligence—that is, reporting. These standards, which emphasize evidence-based conclusions, were often at odds with IC warning products, which necessarily tended to rely on more speculative, possibilities-based analysis.

In January 2011, DNI James Clapper abolished the position of National Intelligence Officer for Warning, thereby eliminating a dedicated warning structure. Much as DCI Colby did in 1973, Clapper assigned warning responsibilities to newly created “National Intelligence Managers” (NIMs), who were to more closely integrate IC-wide collection and analysis—including warning—in their specific areas of responsibility as they individually saw fit. Their warning responsibilities were and remain imprecise. This decision left most warning to the analysts of line units under what we call the “Every-Analyst-A-Warning-Analyst” (EAAWA) philosophy of warning analysis.

Clapper commissioned a review of the warning function in 2014, chaired by a member of his ODNI staff. Evidently, after considerable debate, the IC decided to stick with the EAAWA approach to warning. Clapper surely did not revive the “hybrid” warning structure—dedicated warning professionals headed by a NIO/W or a warning-focused NIM who interact closely with specialists on the National Intelligence Council and the in-line analytic units. The IC also embraced “anticipatory intelligence,” which is
now one of seven core IC mission objectives for analysts in general.\textsuperscript{49} The 2014 \textit{National Intelligence Strategy of the United States} affirmed that threat and opportunity warning continue to be core IC responsibilities within the context of “anticipatory intelligence,” or “AI.” The ODNI thereafter published several internal documents outlining how “AI” is part of the standard package of “tradecraft” skills of all analysts.\textsuperscript{50}

**DEFENSE DEPARTMENT ADJUSTMENTS**

In 2009, the Defense Department abandoned its longstanding, separate strategic warning system.\textsuperscript{51} But soon after becoming Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in October 2011, General Martin Dempsey asked about his non-existent warning analytic support, prompting the DoD to form a committee to revisit the strategic warning function. The committee’s report led the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Lieutenant General Ronald Burgess, to issue directives in 2012 that re-established a warning office in the intelligence directorate (J-2) of the Joint Staff at the Pentagon and assigned warning-related responsibilities to other Defense organizations.\textsuperscript{52}

The new DoD warning system largely adopted established I&W and other warning methods but also developed some new warning doctrine.\textsuperscript{53} The new office heads a structure known as the Defense Warning Network (DWN), which includes the intelligence-related components of the Defense Department, has modest involvement with the rest of the IC, and interacts with some foreign military intelligence services. The DWN’s senior decisionmaking body, the Defense Warning Council, is composed of representatives of DWN member organizations. The DWN tracks “enduring” warning problems—issues that are bureaucratically established as issues U.S. defense intelligence should continue to monitor—and looks for “emerging” warning issues that may become intelligence and policy challenges in the future.\textsuperscript{54} It recognizes opportunity warning in principle, and discusses possibilities in “communities of interest” roundtable sessions.\textsuperscript{55} The DWN mainly involves four general categories of enduring military threat warning problems:

1. Force-on-force conflict: traditional military issues such as inter-state war, but also including varieties of irregular conflict such as cyber warfare.
2. Internal instability: conflicts within states, including coups, state disintegration, civil wars, and humanitarian disasters.
3. “Functional” threats: transnational or irregular threats such as terrorism, pandemic diseases, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, cyber issues, space and counter-space warfare, and economic issues.
4. “Existential” threats to the United States and its allies, such as WMD attacks.\textsuperscript{56}
Clearly emerging warning problems and opportunities may take other forms. Each member of the DWN has warning duties in its area of responsibility within the department; that is, it “owns” problems bureaucratically. “Ownership” involves responsibility for assigning the readiness levels of affected combatant commands, a task which has military resource implications and a characteristic that strategic warning does not have in civilian departments. This arrangement is consistent with normal DoD bureaucratic practices, not the broader characteristics of the warning function as previously practiced by most NIO/Ws. But this system soon underwent changes when a new J-2 in 2014 re-subordinated the previously largely independent warning element to the J-2’s current intelligence unit. The DWN immediately began to evolve into a current intelligence shop—the same mistake that damaged the Watch Committee in the 1960s and apparently the NIO/Ws in their later years.

INSTITUTIONAL IMPEDIMENTS TO STRATEGIC WARNING INTELLIGENCE

U.S. strategic warning intelligence is therefore both troubled and continuing to evolve as the IC recognizes the need for a warning function but remains conflicted about how to perform it. For many reasons, strategic warning now cannot function well because of the deeply embedded cultures of IC agencies. Eight major issues account for much of the history recounted herein and most of the challenges that warning faces. Since they all involve basic philosophical and institutional factors, the challenges will be difficult to overcome.

Analysts Cannot All Be Warning Analysts

The Every-Analyst-A-Warning-Analyst warning model currently in vogue in the Intelligence Community has all analysts performing warning analysis under the vague concept of “anticipatory intelligence.” In the EAAWA scheme, which had adherents long before 9/11, warning is a part-time duty of all strategic analysts, who perform warning-like analyses when they identify unusual and noteworthy issues in the areas for which they are responsible. But any one analyst may encounter a warning issue infrequently or never. Warning messages are communicated primarily through normal publication outlets and the personal contacts of the managers of the organizations involved. The most compelling logic of this warning structure holds that the analysts responsible for, and ostensibly expert on, all subjects the IC identifies as important to U.S. national interests should be best able to appreciate changes and assess their meaning, thereby generating accurate warning messages. This reasoning has some merit. Observant analysts have sometimes brought anomalous and noteworthy developments to the attention of their managers as warning, instead of current intelligence, issues.¹⁵⁷
But the disadvantages of this system are much greater. Line analysts have
day-to-day responsibilities primarily for production of current intelligence,
meaning they focus mainly on immediately important issues and may miss,
or purposefully ignore, big but slowly evolutionary changes that might
have significance beyond their short time horizons. Managers focused on
maximizing current intelligence production, especially pieces for the
President’s Daily Brief (PDB), emphasize issues senior intelligence
consumers identify as important to them.
The production-focused incentive structure of line analytic units means
that analysts devote most of their creative energies to what their offices want
and what is best for their own careers. Therefore, they may not typically have
the curious and skeptical outlook that seasoned warning analysts have. As
Richard Betts has usefully suggested, line units employ variants of “normal
timey,” while warning requires the use of different analytic approaches,
which in the aggregate he called “exceptional thinking.” While line analysts
use “normal theory” because it usually works well, they may be ill-prepared
to either identify a need to think “exceptionally” or choose effective
alternative analytic methods in the rare cases in which they approach a new
problem in an unconventional manner. They also do not do what NIO/W
Ken Knight required of his staff—the preparation of indicator lists and
collection and communication strategies in advance of crises.
The IC’s growth in size in recent years has added layers of management,
increasing the bureaucratic “distance” between analysts and senior
consumers, and exacerbating the challenge of building and maintaining
consumers’ trust in the analyst originators of warning messages—the lack
of which is a chronic cause of warning failures. Consumers’ confidence in
intermediate intelligence managers is likely to only partially fill the gap.
The IC in the past told the senior analysts of the Office of National
Estimates, the Watch Committee, National Intelligence Officers, and now
the National Intelligence Managers, to stay in close touch with consumers
for this exact reason. The EAAWA model rejects this wisdom.

In 1959 the Watch Committee was an active, dedicated strategic warning
office, but when the IC asked line analysts to also be alert for the
emergence of issues of warning significance. Thomas Patton suggested
some ways to help keep line analysts alert to warning issues. Even then he
was plainly skeptical that his proposed methods would work. He suggested
that intelligence services could wage a:

… relentless educational campaign among the body of intelligence personnel.
This method faces some of the obstacles of a highway safety campaign or a
campaign against sin; and it is possible that in laying extensive general stress
on the warning problem that we might overdo it and give rise to unbalanced
or unduly alarmist intelligence reporting and estimates.
Because of these concerns, Patton favored the use of an organization specializing in warning. While Patton’s concerns remain valid, we see no signs that IC managers now “overdo” such a campaign.

**Unwillingness to Recruit Desirable Warning “Personality” Characteristics**

The EAAWA model assumes that all analysts can do warning analysis well. But, in sharp contrast, virtually all warning specialists in government and business, along with students of deception, argue that the personal characteristics of successful practitioners of both strategic warning and the related intelligence sub-specialty of deception display something special. They find that few people make good warning analysts. If the mental and psychological needs of the warning function are indeed unusual, the ramifications for institutions that do not carefully choose their warning personnel are potentially very negative.

Excellent insights come from people who have studied both warning analysts and practitioners of deception. Cynthia Grabo devoted a large section of her book to the personality traits that strategic warning analysts should have. With some 20 years of experience watching young warning analysts come and go when she wrote her book, Grabo identified characteristics of good warning analysts, including: “basic intellectual attributes” of insatiable curiosity, aptitude for detailed research, imagination, a retentive memory, and recognition of that which is important; along with “attributes of character or temperament,” including motivation, a capacity for hard work, and initiative.\(^64\)

Former NIO/W Mary McCarthy wrote in 1998:

> [T]he “art and science of assessing threats”… requires laborious, methodical, rigorous analytic work; it requires imagination, and it requires a diversity of outlooks. With the exception of a few notable pockets of excellence, the [U.S. Intelligence] Community would appear to need a boost in all three departments.\(^65\)

Deception specialist Barton Whaley suggested that four personality traits are especially well suited to conducting military deception and recommended that the issue of character be a topic of future research.\(^66\) Whaley asserted that good deceivers among military planners, and by extension other deceivers, should:

1. Be iconoclastic, prepared to break procedural rules to make one’s own in order to accomplish the larger mission.
2. Have an odd sense of humor by appreciating the pleasures of deceiving others.
3. Have an empathic mind by knowing one’s enemies.
4. Have an “alert mind” or a “prepared mind” that is flexible and open to new and unusual events. This characteristic “tolerates the absurd, the ridiculous. It notices the anomalies, the discrepancies, the incongruous happenings that crop up from time to time.”

This logic makes sense because, in essence, warning personnel and deceivers are each trying to understand and exploit the others’ situations and goals as well as psychological, analytical, and institutional propensities at individual and group levels. Whaley said such traits are a mix of personality and experience, of genetics and learning.

Michael Handel, a long-time student of surprise and deception, argued that the effective practice of deception is a “creative art,” not a science or even a craft; for that reason, he considered it difficult to teach deception to someone who does not have “an instinct” for it. Given our belief that warning analysis and deception share many characteristics—and that in their chronic dynamic interactions both warning specialists and deceivers must know each other well to be effective—we assert that Handel also argued that warning analysis is an art. Handel held that there is probably no way to become good at deception except through experience. We suggest by similar reasoning that warning analysts cannot become good without practice, meaning that line analysts who encounter warning issues only sporadically under the EAAWA model may not be good at warning even if they are very good analysts.

Dave Snowden, a developer of the Risk Assessment and Horizon Scanning (RAHS) process, a warning model used by the government of Singapore, claimed that people who best do RAHS work are those who are comfortable with “… abstraction and change. This means people with very broad experience or people who have a classic liberal education.”

Ben Gilad, a business intelligence specialist, asserted that the best business warning analyst has skills and traits often considered contradictory:

… someone who is a detail-oriented, big-picture type of person, fearless and full of self-doubts, a great political networker introvert, analytical to a fault with a sixth sense … and, finally, a broad-minded, focused person.

He claimed that analysts also need an ability to synthesize—that is, to “paste together a puzzle of emerging reality from a variety of unrelated bits”—and integrity.

Prominent psychologist Philip Tetlock and his colleagues included an assessment of the personal character traits of successful forecasters in the 2015 report of their study for the IC about how to improve forecasting, or prediction. While forecasting is one task of a warning specialist, it is rarely
the job of line analysts focused on producing current intelligence. The abstract of a paper summarizing Tetlock’s conclusions stated:

We report findings from a geopolitical forecasting tournament that assessed the accuracy of more than 150,000 forecasts of 743 participants on 199 events occurring over 2 years. Participants were above average in intelligence and political knowledge relative to the general population. Individual differences in performance emerged, and forecasting skills were surprisingly consistent over time. Key predictors were (a) dispositional variables of cognitive ability, political knowledge, and open-mindedness; (b) situational variables of training in probabilistic reasoning and participation in collaborative teams that shared information and discussed rationales...; and (c) behavioral variables of deliberation time and frequency of belief updating. We developed a profile of the best forecasters; they were better at inductive reasoning, pattern detection, cognitive flexibility, and open-mindedness. They had greater understanding of geopolitics, training in probabilistic reasoning, and opportunities to succeed in cognitively enriched team environments. Last but not least, they viewed forecasting as a skill that required deliberate practice, sustained effort, and constant monitoring of current affairs.75

By extension, analysts good at forecasting will generally do better at warning than other analysts. Expertise, and the willingness to constantly replenish and rebuild it, are also important. Tetlock noted that people with expertise are better forecasters. His clear statement of the positive value of expertise differs markedly from the interpretation of his work common in the IC: mainly that expertise is detrimental to analysis because it allegedly generates close-mindedness. Tetlock specifically said his findings have often been thus misrepresented.76

David Mandel and Alan Barnes reached similar conclusions in their study of the forecasting accuracy of assessments of the Canadian Intelligence Assessment Secretariat, an analytic component of the Canadian Privy Council Office. They found that “experienced” analysts forecast better than junior analysts.77

Rose McDermott, a foreign policy and intelligence specialist at Brown University, has suggested that the IC more frequently uses personality tests to identify characteristics particularly relevant to intelligence analysis in general, including open-mindedness or the absence of premature cognitive closure.78 By implication, such testing might also be useful for finding people with the characteristics Grabo and others identify as desirable. However, we are unaware of any IC agency ever explicitly recruiting warning analysts; warning long has been a discipline to which people generally were assigned for brief tours. Only occasionally have practitioners,
such as Grabo, specialized in warning for extended periods, generally out of personal interest or conviction.

Hence, knowledgeable observers identify similar characteristics of effective warning professionals. As many practitioners have noted, capable deceivers study carefully the characteristics of the people and institutions they target for deception. Genuinely inept intelligence people are hard to target because they have little ability to solve intelligence analytic puzzles, leading deceivers to overestimate their analytic capabilities and resulting in missed deception messages; this is not an IC problem. Mediocre analysts are easiest to fool because they know basic analytic tradecraft but not much more, meaning that deceivers need do little more than exploit the practices taught in training courses. Therefore, people with mediocre warning skills—a core feature of the EAAWA model—may, when working against competent deceivers, be worse than useless. The best defense against competent deceivers is first-rate individual analysts and teams who identify inconsistencies in collected information that others miss. History suggests strongly that only a cadre of professional warning specialists can even somewhat consistently provide this kind of defense to analytic organizations by advising, cajoling, prompting, and challenging line analysts who are stuck using normal theory when exceptional thinking is instead required.

Therefore, what the UK Royal Navy’s chief of intelligence during World War II, Admiral John Godfrey, said about intelligence generally makes especially good sense for warning analysts. Godfrey said, “It is quite useless, and in fact dangerous to employ people of medium intelligence” in intelligence, adding, “Only men with first class brains should be allowed to touch this stuff. If the right sort of people can’t be found, better keep out altogether.”

Weak Training of “Warning” Analysts
Because some IC agencies have variously long regarded warning to be a somewhat distinct practice that can be conducted as an additional duty, they have adopted modest training programs to convey the basics of the standard I&W method and a few other insights about warning. As of 2016, the Defense Intelligence Agency had only a four-and-a-half day course designed mainly for relatively junior military and civilian Defense Department analysts. Few strategic analysts take this course. The CIA and the FBI have at times offered a similar course. The new analyst programs of both CIA and DIA—the CIA’s Career Analyst Program (CAP) and DIA’s similar Professional Analyst Career Education (PACE)—are training courses that contain only a few hours of instruction on warning. From 2006 to 2013 the National Intelligence Council sponsored a course
on warning, open to analysts throughout the IC, called “Warning Tools, Tradecraft, and Practice.” It no longer exists.

More troublesome is the limited exposure analysts generally get to the different kinds of thinking important as elements of warning versus current intelligence. The IC as a whole, with the exception of the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), has embraced a recruiting and training philosophy that denigrates expertise by focusing on recruiting primarily young, relatively inexperienced, and moderately educated people whom they train in agency ways to make them proficient in the types of analysis currently in vogue—mainly current intelligence. Training focuses heavily on structured analytic techniques that have not been systematically demonstrated to improve analysis. Welton Chang and Philip Tetlock have argued that IC training programs also ignore analyst overconfidence and do not emphasize generating good judgment. These are huge deficiencies for any intelligence analyst, but are especially debilitating for a strategic warning analyst. The IC maintains this philosophy despite IC doctrine that emphasizes the importance of subject matter expertise.

The result unsurprisingly is continuing problems with analysis, which the DoD is trying to redress by developing accreditation programs of the sort common in technical professional and some blue collar vocations. This effort, too, seems certain to fail in its primary purpose, and cannot consistently produce good warning analysts, a different and harder job.

Therefore, we maintain that the IC as a whole, with the INR a prominent exception, has adopted a dysfunctional recruiting, training, and management philosophy for its analysts. It has failed to learn the primary reasons for its continuing analytic problems. The IC has also failed to learn appropriate lessons from the chronically troubled history of the strategic warning function.

Despite the generally weak state of warning training in the IC, the Defense Intelligence Agency in 2012 directed the National Intelligence University (NIU) to establish a warning certificate program, a sequence of four courses that provides graduate-level education on warning-related subjects. The Defense Warning Network grants graduates of this program certification as “warning advocates” within the DWN. The program began in August 2013. We believe that the NIU program is the only substantial educational (as opposed to training) program on warning anywhere in the world and regard it as a rare positive development for the strategic warning function.

Dysfunctional Organizational Cultures and Warning Priorities
Two negative aspects of contemporary U.S. intelligence have related organizational cultural roots: increased intellectual conservatism and the
dominant focus on current intelligence. First, intelligence officers have become more intellectually—not politically—conservative in recent decades, especially since the broad attacks on intelligence that accompanied the tactical warning failure of September 2001 and the NIE on Iraqi WMD of 2002. They fear controversies that may cause more bureaucratic or political problems for the agencies and their own careers, especially by angering senior national political leaders or senior intelligence officials who are even more wary of angering policymakers. The many manifestations of this fear include unwillingness of IC leaders to defend themselves against even clearly unjustified criticism.

The special significance for warning of this fear is that it generates distrust, which seriously damages the mutual understanding, respect, and confidence between intelligence producers and consumers that much history shows to be essential to effective warning. And, fear of criticism keeps analytic messages of all sorts conservative in the sense of leading analysts and their managers to: (1) wait until situations are clearer before they “make the call”; (2) be less definitive about messages; and (3) add caveats to reduce chances of being wrong—simultaneously reducing their chances of being presciently “right” and thereby useful to policymakers. These characteristics inhibit the kind of “leaning forward” that is necessary to give timely warning.

The desire to please consumers has led agencies to produce mainly current intelligence. This focus damages the warning function in several ways. It enables managers to avoid giving warning by claiming (accurately) that senior leaders want current intelligence on issues of immediate priority. It emphasizes reporting on the new and recent, shortening time horizons to below that useful for many warning messages because effective warning must account for the time required for both decisionmaking and policy implementing actions to occur. The bureaucratic incentives associated with current intelligence emphasize “production” numbers, especially articles published in the PDB. Because warnings should be issued only when events warrant, lest credibility suffer, and because warning “products” include interpersonal relationships that are not easily measured, organizational incentives both punish the warning function generally and discourage good people from working warning issues. The focus on current intelligence denigrates expertise, which is often critical to identifying both emerging warning issues and the subtle changes in the status of indicators of even the traditional and enduring warning issues that are monitored using the established I&W method.

Recent history shows that good organizations with missions other than current intelligence continue to be damaged by institutional incentives that primarily value current intelligence. In 2006 the CIA’s Strategic Assessment Group (SAG) was a component of the Office of Transnational Issues (OTI), a line analytic unit; it had a long-term research focus,
developed innovative analytic techniques, interacted widely within the IC and outside government, and by many accounts produced high-quality work. But it produced only a small number of reports. That year the OTI’s director abolished the office because it failed to produce enough current intelligence. Given the CIA’s institutional incentives, the move made good bureaucratic sense: the SAG had reduced the OTI’s aggregate production, thereby hurting the office’s director in the ongoing competition with other office directors.

Rigid Priority Systems Hamper Warning

The IC’s relatively rigid collection priority identification and tasking systems are obstacles to effective strategic warning. For many years, the United States relied primarily on its intelligence agencies’ close relationships with consumers to identify their needs. But in 1995, President Bill Clinton ordered, via Presidential Decision Directive (PDD) 35, the priority of a small number of issues, which the Clinton administration did not later update. His successor, President George W. Bush, created the current National Intelligence Priorities Framework (NIPF) process early in his first term after the weaknesses of Clinton’s system became obvious.

The problem for the warning process of formal priority systems like the NIPF is that collection and analytical priorities are identified by senior consumers of intelligence who virtually by definition identify issues that worry them now, while the primary purpose of warning is to identify issues that decisionmakers do not yet know will one day concern them greatly. The NIPF system periodically updates collection requirements, but too infrequently for rapidly emerging warning issues. The system embeds some flexibility for collectors to devote modest shares of collection assets to low priority issues that seem to warrant investigation should they choose to exercise the responsibility—something which seems to occur only occasionally in an IC characterized by substantial institutional fears and inertia. This means that collection gaps invariably impede the research and monitoring needed by warning analysts. Warning would be able to use the NIPF’s limited flexibility if it had bureaucratic clout, but the EAAWA model gives it no institutional home and no distinct bureaucratic power.

Organizational Ownership of Warning Problems

Intelligence services are bureaucracies that have bureaucratic needs, including the possession of responsibilities that rationalize their continued existence. Especially, but not exclusively, in the Defense Department, sub-organizations of the intelligence services “own” warning problems. In member organizations of the DWN this may sometimes work well,
especially because those with a direct interest in an issue—for example, the U.S. European Command (EUCOM) regarding the continuing instability in Ukraine—are likely to be vigilant and expert on the subject. Should tensions in Ukraine be heightened or reduced, EUCOM has authority to raise or lower its alert status accordingly.

But serious drawbacks to this system exist. First, “ownership” creates a potential for parochialism and politicization. Per the EAAWA model, the “possessing” Defense Department organization or analyst may be under considerable pressure from a military commander or manager to see a situation in a specific way. This may reflect good judgment but can also reflect the personal wishes of senior officers or help to justify the perceived needs of organizations. A heightened threat status, for example, may be useful for helping justify next year’s request for a larger budget. This recurrent practice has led some observers to suggest that consumers should distrust intelligence from organizations with vested parochial interests in the implications of its analyses, in contrast to the recurrently demonstrated need for mutual trust between warning intelligence people and the decisionmakers they serve.

Second, possessing organizations may be concerned with only part of a problem—the piece defined by their own organizational responsibilities, not the bigger picture. Hypothetically, for example, EUCOM’s worries about Ukraine may have a Russian angle. If so, EUCOM would tend to see Russian actions from a European perspective. But Russia is a large country with global interests, and its actions in Ukraine may reflect in part Moscow’s policy concerns elsewhere, perhaps vis-à-vis China, the United States, Afghanistan, or somewhere else. Hence, EUCOM analysts may see European trees but miss the global forest, while other regionally focused military organizations are simultaneously seeing other parts of the whole. Under the EAAWA model, analysts with typically narrow analytic responsibilities may “own” slivers of a warning problem, perhaps making the problem worse. The fact that the IC consists of 17 major, independent organizations with overlapping responsibilities exacerbates this problem.

Third, warning issues are normally addressed within the standard bureaucratic processes, which impose “coordination” or “collaboration” requirements within and among intelligence units. These requirements slow agreement about the need for a warning message and lead to language compromises that damage the clarity of messages, producing what has been called the “lowest common denominator syndrome.” This issue, which has long hurt production of national intelligence estimates, is especially troublesome in the warning arena because of the need for clear, persuasive messages that can convince policymakers to make difficult decisions under conditions of considerable uncertainty. The complex mechanisms of the existing coordination processes inherently damage the
timeliness of warning messages even if there are no substantive disagreements among agencies.

Coordination requirements grew in the post-9/11 period because Congress demanded, and successive DNIs tried to produce, intelligence that is “integrated” across the IC. This means, in American bureaucratese, that while single agencies often draft reports and publish them on their own, IC-wide coordination (or “collaboration”) is required to get major papers, especially PDB articles, to publication. As Roger George and others have noted, “feeding the beast” of the PDB has become an enormous drain on the IC as a whole given the new coordination rules crafted by the ODNI under congressional pressure.102 Normal IC coordination processes thus contribute significantly to warning failures.103

Fourth, the ownership model means that analysts from outside the “owning” organization have no formal access to debates about the warning problem. The pool of minds that potentially can address any issue is thereby limited for entirely bureaucratic reasons. If any lesson is to be learned from the history of warning, it is that one or a minority of analysts accurately assess an emerging issue but are routinely over-ruled by the majority or by senior officials. The “ownership model” dramatically increases risks that this phenomenon will continue.

Warning About Opportunities as Well as Threats

Effective warning cannot be about just military threats. For several reasons, warning must address a broad range of threats and offer policy opportunities to senior decisionmakers if it is to survive as a distinct intelligence function. Given its continuing precarious institutional status, approval from satisfied senior officials is essential to the bureaucratic health of the warning function. Gregory Treverton observed that threats come in two varieties: “threats that come with threateners” and “threats without threateners.”104 During the Cold War, the Western world’s strategic warning offices developed a dominant focus on a clearly, purposefully threatening Soviet bloc, but that is no longer the case. Newly emergent economic, health, and environmental concerns are more diffuse and impersonal; warning must adapt to consider both categories of threats.

Opportunities come in many varieties and are, as James Steinberg has noted, very important to policymakers.105 Understanding this, former NIO for Latin America Randy Pherson tried to convey to his consumers a roughly even mix of threat and opportunity warning messages.106 He saw opportunity messages as a useful antidote to the negative reactions of policymakers to warning personnel who dropped only “cow pies” on decisionmakers. Moreover, threats and opportunities are often related.
By identifying early an impending threat, decisionmakers can act preemptively in military and other settings.

Major threats occur infrequently, especially during periods of relative calm in international relations, such as the early 1970s détente era and immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. But bureaucracies do not typically have the luxury of claiming that they will likely one day again be useful and deserve preservation against that possible occurrence. In contrast, opportunity-related analysis can occur constantly, helping to support decisionmakers and earning a clientele who can help protect the warning function. We hesitate to argue in such terms, but the warning function lives in a world in which sometimes small-minded bureaucratic concerns are powerful; bureaucratic enemies of warning have recurrently used periods of global calm to gut the function, requiring a re-building thereafter—a problem because continuity is important to maintain the skills needed by warning specialists. The extensively resourced U.S. IC can, if it wants, easily dedicate a modest number of people to specialty research and writing on strategic warning issues; well-respected CIA analyst Jack Davis proposed as much in 2003, without effect. ¹⁰⁷

The IC should regard the warning function as a kind of insurance policy. Insurance offers protection against catastrophe. But insured people do not mind not having to make a claim; their premium payment is not wasted.

**Defense Organizations Cannot Adequately Address Non-Threat Warning Issues**

Warning elements exist mainly in military and defense departmental organizations for the obvious reason that warning has long been a security threat-focused activity. But the expanding scope and complexity of warning issues in recent decades increasingly includes non-military threats and opportunity warning. Given the nature of defense organizations, to expect them to effectively address the broadening scope of warning, including opportunity warning, is unreasonable for several reasons.

First, military organizations naturally focus on military threats for obvious reasons, supplemented by a concern for defense budgets, popular expectations, and organizational cultures that focus on fighting conventional wars. National leaders or legislatures frequently explicitly direct them to focus primarily on military aspects of national defense. Even militaries that embrace broader national goals—such as those of Canada and Sweden whose emphasis in recent years has been on peacekeeping missions—have become active users of military intelligence. Most military intelligence personnel and institutions are therefore nearly hard-wired to thinking in military terms, having been educated and trained to function in defense-related ways. The DWN focuses primarily on
defense issues even though it recognizes non-military threat and opportunity warning as parts of its mission. Even more narrowly, the Australian Defence Warning System listing of its consumers consists wholly of Defence Ministry decisionmakers.¹⁰⁸

People join the armed forces as uniformed members and the defense ministries as civilians because they tend to think in defense-related ways, and those organizations generate formal instructions and incentive systems that foster such thinking. Even if the military were to choose to expand the scope of its coverage of warning issues to include, hypothetically, infectious diseases—as after the U.S. military was called upon to support international health organizations in western Africa in 2014–2015 after the outbreak of Ebola there—such priorities are unlikely to last. Capable military intelligence people understand that such work is peripheral to core organizational missions and is therefore unlikely to be personally career enhancing. Hence, the organizational cultures of both military- and civilian-run defense intelligence organizations discourage the broader warning mission.

Moreover, military organizations as a general rule are not equipped intellectually to address such issues as financial panic and emerging pandemics. Military organizations do not inherently have the expertise needed to perform detailed studies of economic, medical, or domestic security–related warning issues. This work is best left to organizations such as the U.S. Treasury for financial issues, to the Centers for Disease Control for epidemics, and to the FBI for domestic security. Limited expertise notwithstanding, military organizations tend to be aggressive bureaucratic infighters, meaning they are likely to claim ownership of issues that may somehow affect their people or resources, even if they are not the best equipped to handle such matters. The lesson for the U.S. government is that the IC cannot count on a relatively robust Defense Department effort to conduct warning on all issues of importance to the country; civilian agencies must contribute, too.

PROSPECTS FOR STRATEGIC WARNING INTELLIGENCE

Recent history indicates that the strategic warning intelligence situation in the United States is not healthy. The EAAWA concept is fundamentally flawed, as many observers in and outside of government—including Gates, McCarthy, Davis, Betts, and the HPSCI—have noted over the years. The invention of an “anticipatory intelligence” mission recognizes a need for warning but does not address the core challenges of strategic warning while institutionalizing several major problems for the warning function. These are big steps backward that appear to reflect both an ignorance of the strategic warning function and a denial of its importance.
The institutional causes of these challenges lead us to conclude that a major structural reorganization of the warning function is necessary if it is to finally escape the obstacles it has faced chronically for decades. We favor the “hybrid” model, which features a strong, independent warning office that provides advocacy, support, guidance, and direction to the warning mission, either within the NIM structure or in some new one, which will interact with the line analysts who provide much of both the expertise and the actual warning function. Alternative extreme possibilities are a separate organization that owns strategic warning or a pure EAAWA model.

History indicates rather clearly that strategic warning needs an institutional home that is moderately, but not excessively, independent. Warning needs independence from normal coordination processes to ensure rapid development of sometimes controversial warning messages, while at the same time being an integral part of the national intelligence community; an independent power base should also give it some clout in setting collection priorities. Its performance measurement and incentive systems must be different than the production-quantity focus driven by the tyranny of current intelligence. Warning professionals would guide, prod, and help the line analysts who do much of the analysis that goes into warning messages, but senior warning officials would develop the trust that warning needs to be credible to senior consumers. This has been done at times in the form of the 1950s-era Watch Committee and the NIO/Ws of the 1980s; senior warning officers had authority to issue warning messages on their own and credibility enough to have influence. When layers of review or wide coordination requirements have affected warning, as on the Watch Committee in the 1960s and on the Defense Warning Network now, the quality of strategic warning has immediately and drastically suffered.

A dedicated warning staff should be small for several reasons. First, small size would make it a less appealing target for bureaucratic enemies, including budget monitors. Andrew Marshall’s Office of Net Assessment is a good example of this virtue. Raiding a small warning function will not be lucrative. Second, good warning personnel are rare, for reasons Philip Tetlock and others have explained. The complexity of strategic warning and the constant battle with deceivers mean strategic warning should employ only very good people—for reasons Admiral Godfrey noted—who also are senior and well connected to policymakers, to build the mutual trust essential to successful warning. In warning, more than in other areas of strategic intelligence analysis, quality is far more important than quantity. Third, small organizations are inherently more flexible than larger ones, and warning needs to be both able and willing to listen to novel and insightful, if controversial and unwelcome, views from all of its people and act quickly when an unusual perspective seems to have merit.
Such reforms should not, however, be expected in the near term. If current problems continue, senior national decisionmakers or Congress should consider more drastic steps. For example, prominent former CIA analysts unhappy with the state of analysis, generally at the CIA and the IC more broadly, have proposed, some two decades apart, the creation of new analytic organizations as remedies for chronic perceived analytic deficiencies similar to those currently being experienced.

In the early 1990s Harold Ford suggested the creation of an independent, national-level “think tank” to do national estimates, based on the model of the Research and Analysis (R&A) arm of the wartime Office of Strategic Services (OSS), which included some of the best minds in the country devoted to combatting an existential threat, and which Ford considered the best intelligence analytic outfit the United States has ever had. He suggested that the proposed think tank would dive deeply into important issues and reach useful conclusions that the current intelligence-focused IC of his day did not do as well as he thought desirable. Ford suggested that the head of the organization be a person of national reputation. It should be staffed by the IC’s best analysts and excellent outsiders—a small group of senior “elite” intelligence officers who have unusually direct access to senior decisionmakers. The purpose of this institution would be to ensure that excellent insights and advice reach decisionmakers without interference by the normal processes of the intelligence bureaucracy. The warning element should similarly be composed of talented and well-connected people. Such an organization could remedy most of the recurrent institutional problems of both strategic warning and estimative intelligence.

Roger George not so long ago suggested that, to escape the tyranny of current intelligence, the United States might need to shift its main intelligence analytic effort, now done at the CIA, to a new, private-sector organization. In principle, George’s new analytic organization could feature either an every-analyst-a-warning-analyst or a separate warning unit. Whatever the decision, it surely should not feature “anticipatory intelligence.”

We suggest two other possibilities, which have some challenges and are also likely to be opposed by established IC bureaucratic interests. First, the ODNI could create a small organization, dedicated to providing warning to the NSC staff, composed of senior, well-regarded intelligence officers whose functions would include warning-related communication between the White House and the IC’s components. The office should be accessible, as a matter of policy, to all IC personnel, who could bypass normal hierarchies on issues they believe merit senior-level attention but are not being adequately worked by normal processes.

Second, the IC could designate a small number of elite, senior intelligence officers within the line analytic units of IC agencies who have warning...
responsibilities and are given unfettered access to senior decisionmakers. These people, too, should be directly accessible by all IC employees who see a major warning issue that is not being worked adequately in normal ways.

Finally, despite and because of the changing world, strategic warning will remain a critical intelligence function, but its future in the United States is uncertain. Given the powerful inertia of bureaucracy, we suspect that another major intelligence failure may be needed to make the IC again appreciate strategic warning. Mary McCarthy warned in 1998 that “disaster looms” because the U.S. IC did not have adequate collective warning-specific skills—a situation that has worsened in the two decades since she wrote.

DISCLAIMER

All statements of analysis or opinion herein are those of the authors and interviewees, and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Department of Defense or any of its components, or of the U.S. government.

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Discussion with Ken Knight.


Joseph Gordon has seen these documents.


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