Why U.S. military intelligence falters

by Leo Scanlon

History of the Military Intelligence Division, Department of the Army General Staff: 1775-1941
by Bruce W. Bidwell, Colonel, U.S. Army (ret.)
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The archives and documents of the U.S. government are open to citizens and scholars in a measure unparalleled in any other nation. Ironically, our government seems unable to use this heritage to avoid the pitfalls of current history, and we find ourselves more and more in the midst of new crises with very old roots.

Colonel Bidwell's history of the Military Intelligence Division (MID) is part of an effort by University Publications of America, to make the treasure of the National Archives more widely available through scholarly studies.

Today's headlines point to a real crisis in the way in which intelligence evaluation leads into the formulation of military objectives. Dozens of popular books examine one or another facet of that problem as it relates to the sensational events of the Iran-Contra scandal. *History of the Military Intelligence Division* is not one of them. The book is confined to a chronicle of the efforts of far-sighted military thinkers to develop an intelligence capability appropriate to a republican military institution.

The bankers' intelligence establishment

It does not deal with the political conflicts that have marked that effort, and which have thrown up obstacles to military intelligence competence. This is a serious shortcoming.

The interesting problem which has confronted the military intelligence establishment, especially during the 20th century, has been the interplay and conflict between the private intelligence agencies, largely staffed by the law firms of major financial houses, and the intelligence services of the military, charged with serving the national interest. These financial houses generally define their interests as broader than, and sometimes antithetical to, the national interest: The resulting conflict of objectives has fueled many behind-the-scenes wars.

For example, beginning with the World War I era, the founding of organizations such as the American Protective League and the Committee on Public Information, and the attempt to blend these private organizations and their political agenda with the military has created a series of confrontations which have reached an apex in the current Iran-Contra controversy.

Colonel Bidwell describes the outline of this conflict, in particular in the matter of Walter Lippmann's activities on behalf of the privately funded Committee on Public Information. Lippmann's actions, informed by his idea that the United States should become a new type of empire, created intense jurisdictional fights with the relevant divisions of MID.

Gen. Douglas MacArthur and the circles associated with him maintained a fierce philosophical and strategic opposition to such policies; they fought to build a national intelligence capability which would be based in the military, and thus subordinated to the national command authority. One of MacArthur's students, Army Maj. Ralph van Deman, was, by his own account, "converted to intelligence" by MacArthur, and went on to organize the modern MID. Along the way, he had more than a few jurisdictional brawls with the financial interests which have traditionally controlled the Departments of State and Justice.

Major van Deman was confronted with a political intelligence problem which bears directly on the crisis facing the United States today. During World War I, and the years after the armistice, the Justice Department fostered and built a vast domestic apparatus allegedly designed to "catch German spies" or "catch Bolsheviks." This apparatus became notorious for exploits as inane—and as unconstitutional—as those run by Ollie North's domestic operations division during the Iran-Contra caper. MacArthur and van Deman conducted rear-guard battles to bring this business under military control, and stop the abuses of a vast private army which, not surprisingly, never caught a single spy.

Bidwell documents the spore of this conflict, but his book is not designed to address the substance of the battle. There may be little direct military archival material on these matters, but it should be noted that, to the extent that these issues are excluded from this work, the relative importance of MacArthur's, and even van Deman's role in the shaping of a military intelligence capability, appears to be "leveled out."

History of the Military Intelligence Division was written to establish, for the record, how the present MID came into existence, and to identify the critical role such a capability had in shaping modern combat up to the beginning of World War II. It fulfills this limited objective, and therefore is a vital guide to any who wander through the house of mirrors which is the history of intelligence operations.