

Plunging Point: Intelligence Failures, Cover-Ups and Consequences

Lance Collins and Warren Reed

Reviewed by Neil James

Non-fiction books written on Australian intelligence matters generally fall into four categories. The first, written mainly by academics, address technical or legal issues and are usually quite narrow in scope and relevance. The second, written primarily by political journalists, are potboilers or polemics notable mostly for the number and/or size of their howling errors of fact and understanding. The third, best forgotten and written almost exclusively by academics, journalists or supposed victims of intelligence abuses, are revisionist (and often paranoid) accounts seeking to reinterpret Australian history as being the result of various types of political conspiracy. The final category, written by former career intelligence officers such as Harvey Barnett and Michael Thwaites, are the ones worth reading because they deal at length with the professional, moral and political dilemmas inherent in the intelligence profession. *Plunging Point* fits mostly into this last category.

Collins and Reed, both well-known exiles from the Australian intelligence community, have largely avoided raking over the coals of their individual clashes with the community's hierarchy. They have instead written a thoughtful, wider study into why intelligence systems fail in the targeting, collection, analysis and dissemination of intelligence, or in convincing their customers of what is possible, true, likely, unlikely, unknown or unknowable.

Over the last thirty years the Australian intelligence community has been periodically gripped by philosophical and professional disputes that go to the heart of the intelligence profession, its management and accountability, and its strategic utility. With mixed success, over a dozen royal commissions and inquiries, generally peculiar to individual intelligence or security organisations, have grappled with various aspects of the underlying problem.

Left largely unaddressed in each inquiry is that most of the federal bureaucracy is in profound denial that fundamental problems persist. The ghost at the feast in most reports, most recently the one by former diplomat Phillip Flood, is that those most responsible for the problems are often those most unable to recognise them or those with the most to lose by admitting it to their political masters. Virtually alone among comparable countries, Australia has the silly habit of reflexively appointing generalist outsiders to senior positions in our six intelligence and security agencies. It has been a very long time since any of them was headed by a through-career intelligence professional. Even worse, four of the current agency heads come from policy-making backgrounds in DFAT and Defence.

Collins and Reed ask why can't our senior politicians and officials recognise the repeated idiocy of not adequately separating intelligence assessments of what is happening, or what could occur, from the 'policy advice' streams of what Australia wants to occur — until the actual decisions involved need to be taken objectively at Ministerial and Cabinet level? Why did we largely miss the rise of Islamist terrorism

in general and Jemaah Islamiyah in particular? Why did we not detect that Saddam Hussein was only pretending to still have WMD from the mid 1990s onwards? Why were our diplomats and defence strategists so continually unwilling to countenance any alternative to the Suharto dictatorship or Indonesia's brutal invasion, illegal annexation and ruthless long-term occupation of East Timor — even when this led to such doctoring of the intelligence passed to our allies that it caused major difficulties in the overall strategic relationship? Why do bureaucratic outsiders parachuted into intelligence management positions, and policy-makers in general, so fear the intellectual rigour and general objectivity of undertaking formal Intelligence Estimates of potential strategic problems (and choose to rely on woolly, subjective and brief 'assessments' instead)?

Both authors are former career intelligence officers with experience at both the coalface and at management level in collection, analysis and reporting. They are not just 'intelligence analysts', a title claimed with monotonous regularity by careerist bureaucrats and other dilettantes after relatively short-term, office-bound, stints in an intelligence agency. This enables the authors to address the intelligence process, and the decision-making processes it serves, discursively and holistically. The first half of the book sets the historical and international scenes, including discussion of various theories of national power, national decline, international relations, warfare, intelligence, and bureaucratic organisation and process. The second half tries, with less success, to apply these theories to contemporary trends and future scenarios, before launching into a comprehensive discussion on why intelligence failures occur in both the general and the Australian case. While largely dispassionate, some of the later chapters include overly-optimistic views of the role of the media in a free society, and the general discussion of Australia's involvement in the 2003 Iraq intervention comes down too firmly on one side of that debate only.

Plunging Point is well footnoted and has a comprehensive bibliography. What is sadly lacking in a work of this length and breadth is an index. There are also tell-tale signs of a rushed editing process and some inexcusable errors of basic fact. In New Zealand, for example, the Security Intelligence Service (SIS), not the police, is responsible for security intelligence matters.

There is a lot wrong in the Australian intelligence community and the first step to solving these problems is to identify and acknowledge that situation. *Plunging Point* provides a good entrée into the thorough debate needed. ♦

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