

Intelligence pathologists

THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY POST-MORTEM PROGRAM, 1973-1975

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For roughly two years, from late 1973 to late 1975, the US intelligence community produced—fearlessly or fecklessly, depending on one's point of view—a series of critical post-mortem assessments of its own performance in one or another (usually trying) circumstance. There was, of course, some precedence for this unusual activity, but not much:

- Intelligence production offices in the community had for years prepared various kinds of post-mortems. But they did so only irregularly, and then almost always in response to the complaints of high-level policymakers and military officers who wanted to know what-had-gone-wrong within the very same production offices. Rightly or wrongly, but understandably, post-mortems produced in this fashion were frequently dismissed by their requesters and others as unresponsive and self-serving.
- A special subcommittee of the National Security Council Intelligence Committee tried a new, hybrid approach to the post-mortem problem in the early 1970s, producing, with the community's indispensable help, two or three assessments presumably untainted by the special interests of the community. (The best known of these seems to have been a paper on the community's performance concerning the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971.) But for eminently understandable reasons, including their unofficial status and bureaucratically peculiar origins, these post-mortems were largely ignored by both the policymakers who had indirectly commissioned them and the community officials who were the supposed beneficiaries.

The principal architects of the 1973-1975 post-mortem program of the Intelligence Community (IC) Staff sought to avoid problems of this character. They wanted to create a system that would, somehow, serve the community's real interests and, simultaneously, the "legitimate" (as opposed to the political and the purely policy) needs of its critics.²

¹Author's note: This article was prepared at the request of two members of the Board of Editors of this journal. I have discussed its contents with one of them, and have conducted interviews with several past and present officers of the intelligence community, but the views expressed herein are my own.

I have not had recent access to the post-mortem documents discussed here, so I have had to use my memory and the resourceful press as major sources of information. Under the circumstances, some errors may have crept unbidden into the manuscript. If so, I extend my apologies.

I should also explain that I have deliberately omitted almost all names from this account, partly because they seem unnecessary in a non-scholarly, non-historical essay, and partly because it would be unfortunate if readers were distracted by controversial references to individual luminaries.

Finally, on a more personal note, let me record the fact that the post-mortem program, for which I bore a large responsibility, died quietly in 1975 without memorialization and without obituary. This, then—belatedly—is that memorialization and that obituary. R.W.S.

²Mutual suspicions between policymakers and intelligence officers have always existed but, not so surprisingly, seemed to reach a high point in the early 1970s. More than a few intelligence officers, for example, saw in the NSC-sponsored post-mortem on the 1971 Indo-Pak war (cited above), an effort to justify or shift blame for US policy before and during that conflict.

A total order. Perhaps too tall, especially inasmuch as the post-mortem program did not always enjoy the unalloyed support of the top IC Staff management. Still, the principal distinguishing characteristics of the program, as it was in fact instituted in November 1973, were: (1) official status, obtained via DCI and USIB (i.e., community) sponsorship; (2) preparation by an organization (the Product Review Division—PRD—of the IC Staff) that was separated, if not divorced, from any and all “line” production and collection offices and that was charged with, among other things, the preparation of post-mortems on a continual basis; (3) a serious, if not always successful, effort by this organization to strike a balance between objectivity (normally the privilege of the non-involved) and expertise (often the province of the involved); and (4) the great amount of favorable and unfavorable attention paid several of the papers by readers (and non-readers too) within and without the community.

Seven post-mortems were produced by PRD between December 1973 and September 1975. Five of these were specifically requested by the DCI; one was asked for by his Deputy for the Community; and one grew out of an IC Staff commitment to the DCI. Geographically, four concerned one or another problem in the Middle East, one dealt with Chile, one with India, and one with Southeast Asia. All are discussed in some detail below.³

It is the contention here that on the whole this series of post-mortems was a success, or at least not a failure. In any case, members of the community, together with observers and critics in Congress and the Executive Branch, should be aware that the program existed and for a time—until the unwelcome intercession of the House Select Committee on Intelligence (on which more later)—even prospered. For the community might one day decide to revive a candid post-mortem process with similar characteristics and objectives. It is likely, after all, to gain or accept only so much nourishment from granting a monopoly on post-mortems to “outsiders” in Congress or elsewhere. These, too, can be useful, but they should not be exclusive.

More important, the community could in the long run benefit from objective, mostly self-initiated post-mortems because, however embarrassing they might prove to be temporarily, they could help in a variety of ways to improve the quality of intelligence—in production, in collection, and yea, even in management. This, at any rate, is the hope of more than a few who not only understand the need for such improvement but who also comprehend the essentiality of the community's services to the nation.

The Seven Reports

1. *The Arab-Israeli War, 1973*: The cumbersomely titled “The Performance of the Intelligence Community Before the Arab-Israeli War of October 1973: A Preliminary Post-Mortem Report,” was published in December 1973. Soon thereafter it became the IC Staff equivalent of a best seller; it received good reviews from prominent critics (Kissinger wrote the DCI to say that it was “outstanding”), and it was as widely read as its rather restrictive classification permitted. In a sober mood, well aware that their best estimates about the likelihood of war had turned out to be (as later headlined in the press) “starkly wrong,” even members of the United States Intelligence Board (USIB) praised the document for its thoroughness, objectivity, and candor.

³Not discussed are several PRD papers issued during the same period which bore some resemblance to post-mortem studies but which did not, for one reason or another, bear post-mortem designations. One of these, interestingly enough, dealt specifically with an intelligence success; it was the only such paper ever prepared in PRD and the only one ever asked for (by policymakers, the DCI, USIB, or, indeed, any high-level community official). A post-mortem program, by its very nature, is likely to deal primarily with shortcomings—real or presumed—although there is no theoretical reason why this need be so.

The report itself reflected a prodigious amount of work and as much analytical effort as could be brought to bear on a difficult problem, the dimensions of which were clear but the causes of which were not. All pertinent intelligence published by the community from May to early October 1973—daily items, memoranda, weekly articles, Watch Reports, estimates, and research papers—was carefully read. Thousands of individual collection reports from the Department of State, CIA, DIA, NSA, and other agencies were also reviewed. Scores of intelligence officers and consumers were interviewed. All the data thus assembled were sifted and analyzed, chronologically arranged to serve as reference aids, and then interpreted in preliminary reports prepared by individual investigators. A paper (together with six annexes which were later dropped) was then produced and finally, after review by the DCI and his Deputy for the Intelligence Community, disseminated in early December.

In brief, after quoting from appropriate intelligence papers and examining the pre-war information available to the community from a variety of sources, the report concluded that: (a) a great deal of information indicating the imminence of an Arab attack on Israel had been collected and distributed to analysts in the months (especially September) prior to the outbreak of war;⁴ (b) analysts, perceiving growing Arab reliance on political and economic rather than military tactics to achieve their aims vis-a-vis Israel, rejected the evidence suggesting the contrary and in almost unequivocal terms predicted no war;⁵ and (c) they did so essentially because they were firmly committed to the (mistaken) proposition that an Arab attack could only result in a disastrous Arab defeat, or even "national suicide;"⁶ that any rational man could foresee this; and that, inasmuch as the Arab leaders (e.g., Sadat and Assad) were indeed rational men, they would obviously not make a decision to attack.

These conclusions of the post-mortem were relatively easy to reach, given the clear record of misestimates. Not so easy to isolate, however, were the reasons why the analysts clung so tenaciously to the faulty syllogism outlined above. But surely their awareness of recent history had something to do with it; although they believed that, sooner or later, war was probably inevitable, the analysts had been hardened by previous false alarms. Further, the long string of Arab defeats helped reinforce the analysts' faith in overwhelming Israeli military superiority. And the failure of the Israelis themselves to anticipate the attack—despite all their sensitivity, experience, and efficient intelligence machinery—reinforced the analysts' no-war consensus.

But, more specifically, what caused the analysts to hold so rigidly to this belief in the face of good signs of Arab preparations for war? What led them to believe that the Arab forces were no better than they had been in 1967, despite the years of additional training and the receipt of vast quantities of new and better Soviet equipment? (A joint CIA-DIA study published in July 1973, for example, asserted flatly that the Egyptian Army could not cross the canal in force.) And—the biggest mystery of all—

⁴ In the words of the report, as quoted in US newspaper accounts, US experts had been provided with a "plentitude of information which should have suggested, at a minimum, that they take very seriously the threat of war in the near term."

⁵ As subsequently reported by the press and as stated in the report: "[A thorough search] failed to turn up any official statement from any office responsible for producing finished analytical intelligence which contributed anything resembling a warning. . . . Instead of warnings, the community produced reassurances . . . that the Arabs would not resort to war. . . . The principal conclusions concerning the imminence of hostilities reached and reiterated by those responsible for intelligence analysis were—quite simply, obviously, and starkly—wrong." It should be noted, however, that an analyst from one agency (which was not responsible for finished analytical intelligence) did provide a briefing a few days before the Arab attack that suggested that war might be imminent. But this warning was strictly unofficial, was addressed to only a handful of officials, and was not put in writing.

⁶ They were also beholden to the conviction that the Arabs, *in lieu of war*, had decided to resort to the use of an oil embargo, or threat of embargo, as a means to pressure the West into forcing Israeli concessions.

what made these same analysts totally forget the wisdom of the previous spring, when State/INR produced an almost prescient memorandum which concluded that, in certain circumstances (which in fact came to pass over the summer), the Arabs would probably attack Israel in the fall, principally in hopes of achieving essentially political, not military, objectives?⁷

The post-mortem study concluded with several pages of recommendations for improvements in the way the community conducted its business. Better communications between and among the collectors and producers of intelligence—a problem as old as intelligence itself—were urged, and some new machinery for accomplishing this was suggested. The publication of a single community situation report during crises—in lieu of the four discrete reports usually issued (on a several-times-a-day basis)—was suggested. Ways of relieving the analysts of the burden of reading countless “raw” information reports, including a controversial scheme calling for more active screening and highlighting procedures on the part of collectors, were explored.⁸ A more effective system of community crisis “alerts” was proposed. And there were other notions advanced, some suggesting in general terms the need for budgetary reallocations (a bigger share of the pie for production offices). But, other than a proposal to find a systematic way to present the views of “devil’s advocates,” there were no recommendations that directly tackled the problem of analytical prejudices and preconceptions.

2. *Chile*: Soon after the anti-Allende coup in Chile in September 1973, the officer in PRD specializing in Latin American affairs was asked by the head of IC Staff to conduct an informal post-mortem examination of intelligence coverage before and during that event. His findings, issued in typescript in December 1973 (somewhat delayed by the intervention of the higher-priority Arab-Israeli post-mortem), included the judgment that although the analysts had done a respectable job of covering the increasingly turbulent domestic Chilean scene, they had been somewhat remiss in not really warning their leaders of the likelihood of a coup in the near term. It appeared to him that sufficient good information was available in time for them to do so. All in all, the PRD reviewer gave somewhat higher marks to DIA than CIA coverage.

The paper was never presented to or discussed by USIB or followed up by the DCI or any other senior community figure.

3. *The Indian Nuclear Explosion*: Though of modest size, the nuclear explosion set off by New Delhi in May 1974 set off political shock waves around the world and around Washington. The DCI wanted to know why he and his constituents had not been forewarned and called for another post-mortem.

⁷ A full discussion of this intriguing question, under the caption “A Case of Wisdom Lost,” is one of the most interesting sections in the post-mortem. The power of preconceptions, together with the analysts’ understandable feeling that those who might fear war were only crying wolf, is thoroughly explored, but the paper fails to provide an altogether satisfactory answer.

⁸ One way of handling the “information explosion”—in this instance the number of discrete information reports reaching analysts in the production agencies—is to computerize the data. This greatly reduces the amount of paper reaching the analyst and permits him to summon information as he needs it. Trouble is, this route is enormously expensive, is resisted by many mechanophobic analysts, and may not lead to a solution of the problem in any event.

There is at least an interim alternative, and it was proposed in the report: cut down the flow of words and paper to analysts by requiring the issuing agency to summarize, interpret, highlight, and condense (but not analyze). Many items (but of course not all) normally sent on an “as received” basis could be held, combined with other, similar documents, and disseminated in summary form, say on a weekly basis. Trouble here is that analysts—who on the one hand complain about “too much mail” and on the other want to read “everything”—do not trust anyone other than themselves to digest the material, i.e., all the material. And the collection agencies, which may lack adequate resources for the job, are in any case reluctant to take it on for a potentially ungrateful audience.

The report, published in July 1974, pointed to a curious sequence of events and raised a question about the way in which the community goes about its business. A year and a half or so before the event, a National Intelligence Estimate discussing the problem of nuclear proliferation concluded that India could (and indeed might) explode a nuclear device at almost any time. After the publication of this estimate, the flow of reports concerning Indian nuclear capabilities and intentions, hitherto reasonably heavy, almost ceased. So too, partly as a consequence, did the coverage of relevant material in intelligence periodicals and memoranda. Thus, in the months preceding the actual detonation, the possibility was simply ignored in intelligence publications.

The question, as more or less posed in the post-mortem: after the appearance of the NIE, did the community somehow feel that, having fully discharged its duties concerning this significant topic, it now could sit back and relax?

The answer was a frustrating "perhaps." At any rate, for whatever reason, the collectors and producers alike seemed to lose interest in India's nuclear effort after the NIE had pronounced on the problem. The post-mortem, in a mood of diffident daring, suggested that maybe, just maybe, this disinterest reflected a similar lack of regard in the *policy-making* community as well.

The post-mortem also concerned itself rather extensively with the problem of collection in countries with serious nuclear potential. It pointed out that, once a certain state of readiness had been achieved (as in India), the decision of whether to explode a device and to develop weapons was a political one and, in the event (again as in India), might be made on political grounds. The paper then urged (as it subsequently developed, with some success) that collection programs be revamped, requirements and priorities be revised, and the character and interests of the human collectors concerned be substantially altered.

4. *The West Bank*: A sequel to the Arab-Israeli post-mortem of December 1973 had been promised the DCI, and it appeared about a year later. Called "Military Intelligence During an International Crisis: Israel's West Bank Campaign in October 1973," it provided a brief examination of intelligence coverage of that campaign and suggested some significant possible consequences of that coverage. Although the report was in this way a valuable addition to the body of intelligence literature, it did not purport to be a post-mortem report of conventional breed.

5. *Cyprus 1974*: It was clear in late 1973 that the new Greek strongman, Ionides, was likely to cast a covetous eye on Cyprus. Intelligence memoranda of the time emphasized Ionides' aggressive interest in *enosis*, the reunion of Cyprus with the Greek motherland, and, because of this, foresaw trouble ahead between Greece and Turkey.

Six months or so later, however, in early July 1974, intelligence analysts—although by no means claiming that the issue was dead—suggested in effect that American policymakers need not be concerned with a crisis in the immediate future. *Inter alia*, they highlighted and implicitly endorsed a report from an "untested source" that Ionides would not move against Cyprus in the near term. On 14/15 July, however, Athens sponsored a coup in Nicosia that threw out the reigning Cypriot, Archbishop Makarios, installed a Greek puppet regime, and in general set the stage for *enosis*. Turkey invaded within the week, and war between the two NATO allies in the eastern Mediterranean appeared imminent.

The DCI, knowing that *he* had been surprised by the coup, was concerned that the community might have missed another one; if so, he wanted to know why; and so he called for post-mortem number five. The result was "An Examination of the

Intelligence Community's Performance Before and During the Cyprus Crisis of 1974," published in January 1975. This report, in the course of examining the published record, concluded that the analysts had misperceived Ionides' intentions in July. Perhaps they had been distracted by the Aegean seabed issue, which had flared in late June and which had then received much greater emphasis in an estimative memorandum than the Cyprus problem. Or perhaps they had made too much of the misleading report that Ionides would not soon move against Cyprus because they themselves did not wish to believe earlier signs (and their own fears) to the contrary. Indeed, perhaps the analysts had been persuaded that it would be irrational of the Greek leader to risk war with Turkey, the wrath of the United States, and the possible intervention of the Soviets, all for the sake of Cyprus; that although he was hardly less than eccentric, Ionides was not irrational; and that—in the now familiar syllogism—Ionides would thus not move precipitately (at least so long as the risks seemed so large).

The Cyprus post-mortem report also pointed out, in a positive vein, that the pre-July intelligence record on Cyprus was quite good. And concerning other topics of major interest—the possibility of Soviet intervention, the probable reaction of the Turks to the coup in Nicosia, and the outcome of the fighting on the island—it was judged that coverage ranged from right-on-target (*in re* the Soviets) to pretty good (the invasion) to adequate (the course of the fighting).

Concerning collection, the post-mortem noted some weaknesses, especially in Athens, and some strengths, as in Nicosia and Ankara.

The Cyprus report created something of a stir immediately upon publication. There were, for example, laments to the effect that the authors of the report had enjoyed the advantages of hindsight, a curious but commonly voiced complaint. (Of course they had. The process is by definition *post*, and a condition of such studies is precisely that they can be made in the light of hindsight.)

One official charged (and was partly right) that the paper contained several "factual errors," and an NIO asserted that the post-mortem fundamentally misapprehended the nature of estimative intelligence when it criticized analysts for their failure to predict the coup. Further, some of these analysts felt themselves unjustly accused of mistakes they hadn't made. This is surely not the time or place to rehearse old argument about specifics, but some general observations are in order:

- It is true, of course, as the NIO suggested, that intelligence analysts, lacking supernatural means of peering into the future, should not be expected to predict with precision. (It is also true, and too bad, that many consumers of intelligence do expect such predictions.) And certainly there is merit in the often-heard proposition that highlighting the serious possibility that an event will take place within the foreseeable future should be sufficient to alert policymakers, who are then, in the great scheme of things, supposed to devise appropriate responses.
- In the case of the Cyprus post-mortem, however, analysts were not faulted for failing to make a precise estimate about, for example, the date of the coup sponsored by Ionides. They were criticized, rather, for making what the authors of the post-mortem perceived to be a *negative* estimate, *viz.*, the clear implicit estimate made during the first half of July in daily publications that there probably would *not* be a coup in the near term. This estimate was strongly reinforced during the same period by what the analysts did *not* provide, *i.e.*, anything akin to the kind of warning sounded earlier to the effect that a crisis or a coup or some other major move by Ionides was likely, and

fairly soon. At best, the backtracking in July muffled the alarm; at worst, it would have told the policymakers that they could afford to relax for a spell. (In fact, the policymakers did not relax, partly because in some instances they simply weren't *aware* of what intelligence analysts were saying, partly because in other cases they just didn't *care* what the analysts were saying.) Finally, in sum, as the post-mortem suggested, if the analysts were right to sound warnings in June—and they were—then they were wrong not to do so in July.

6. *Egyptian Military Capabilities*: In February 1975, the members of USIB, meeting to consider a new NIE on the Arab-Israeli situation, made a last-minute change in the paper, radically altering a key judgment concerning the likelihood of war by estimating that the Arabs might attack Israel within a few days. They did so at the urging of one member who cited a number of very recent items of information which to him seemed to portend war. This member also cited a just-published memorandum written by analysts in his agency; this offered a similarly alarmist view and also presented a singular and (as it subsequently developed) distorted view of the state of Soviet-Egyptian relations at the time.

The memorandum had been published only a day or so after the appearance of a community paper that was relatively reassuring *in re* the prospects for war; this community effort, sponsored by an NIO, had been concurred in by all major intelligence components, including the agency now offering alarmist views at USIB. Consumers (in, for example, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, on the NSC Staff, and in the State Department) were understandably indignant or confused by the alarmist position of the second paper, especially since it made no reference to the milder conclusions of the community analysis. Indeed, one consumer cabled his principal in the field to say that the alarmist position was ill-founded—based on erroneous evidence—and should be ignored.

The National Intelligence Officer responsible for the community memorandum and the NIE thought that USIB should not have been so quick to amend a critical judgment in an important estimate. The NIO asked the DCI to call for a post-mortem look at the entire affair, and the DCI thereupon did so.

It was clear that this problem could not be handled in an orthodox way. It not only involved some delicate information, several sensitive interviews, and a number of private communications at high levels of the US Government, but it also focussed on only one agency of the intelligence community. All concerned agreed that, although the paper might in most respects resemble a conventional post-mortem report, it would be (and in fact was) given only to the head of the agency involved.

The specific conclusions of this "private" post-mortem cannot be reproduced here. But two of its recommendations, which regrettably came to naught, should be mentioned.

One—rapping USIB on its collective knuckles—suggested that USIB members should not on their own alter NIEs on the basis of information presented for the first time at the meeting called to consider that NIE. USIB should return a challenged paper to the appropriate NIOs and analysts for immediate checking and possible amendment. The other suggestion proposed, in the interest of potentially confused consumers, that intelligence memoranda issued by one agency which contradict the conclusions of recent community papers dealing with the same or similar topics should acknowledge the fact, i.e., bear a specific notice acknowledging the differences.

7. *Mayaguez*: The *Mayaguez* and its crew of 39 were seized by the Cambodian Communists on 14 May 1976. Within days the administration—taken completely by

surprise—wanted to know what the intelligence community had known and reported both before and after the seizure.

There was no time for a formal post-mortem, so a hastily assembled community-wide chronology of events was prepared by the NIOs and a more ambitious narrative account was rushed into print within three days by the IC Staff. This study revealed, among many other things, that the government—intelligence and operational-policy communities alike—lacked effective machinery for warning US merchant ships of possible hostile actions.

In August of 1975, the DCI asked PRD to produce a more thorough and careful post-mortem examination of the *Mayaguez* incident. Although he did not explicitly say so, the DCI indicated that he was moved in part by his desire to show both Congress and the White House that the community could examine its own performance during an international crisis with care and publish its findings with candor. And perhaps he hoped to head off any sensational and unjustified criticisms of that performance by the staff and members of the then highly active Pike Committee.

The PRD inquiry confirmed the earlier judgment that the warning system for US merchant ships was seriously deficient. In fact, there was no real contact between the community and those elements in the departments of State and Defense involved in the issuance of such warnings; intelligence officers had not even been aware that offices in these departments were so involved.

The report also confirmed that no intelligence agency had foreseen Cambodian seizure of a US ship. Prior to the event, there was some reporting by collectors of actions against coastal shipping in the Gulf of Siam (where the *Mayaguez* was intercepted), but most of these incidents seemed to involve only small coastal craft. There were also a few reports of episodes involving larger ocean-going ships—Panamanian and South Korean—but there had been no Cambodian seizures of these ships. Analysts receiving these ambiguous reports did not see in them a harbinger of hostile moves against US ships and thus (with one minor exception) did not mention them in their publications. There were various other reasons why they failed to do so, not the least of which were: (1) the almost complete dearth of information about the organization, composition, policies, and intentions of the new Cambodian Communist regime; and (2) the weariness of the community's analysts who covered Southeast Asia, analysts who had just witnessed the sudden fall of both Cambodia and South Vietnam and who were still trying to sort out the aftermath.

If, as the DCI wondered, the community could handle two simultaneous crises in two parts of the world adequately, could it also cope with two crises in *one* part of the world? For despite all the extenuating circumstances, it was simply a fact that had to be faced that, in the week before the seizure of the *Mayaguez*, the analysts had known from unclassified radio broadcasts reproduced by FBIS that the South Korean government had issued a public warning to *its* merchant ships to avoid the Gulf of Siam.

The post-mortem also looked closely into a question initially raised by the White House: was there an excessive delay between the community's first knowledge of the seizure of the *Mayaguez* and its notification of its principals in the White House and elsewhere? The essence of the answer provided by the post-mortem was "yes." The original CRITIC (Critical Intelligence) message received concerning the *Mayaguez* arrived in the community's operations centers at about 5:30 a.m. (Washington time), roughly two and a half hours before the President and the Secretary of State got the word, much, as it turned out, to their consternation.

The senior intelligence officers on duty when that first CRITIC message came in were uncertain about both the fact and the significance of the seizure. (So too, apparently, were a number of officials not in the intelligence community who were notified well before the President and the Secretary.) Subsequent clarifying CRITIC messages should have helped to resolve this uncertainty, but did not. To be sure, there was some confusion about what had actually happened and a concomitant disinclination to grapple with the question of what the event might portend. There were also some problems associated with the incorrect handling, timing, and numbering of the CRITIC messages. And then, too, there was an understandable reluctance among operations officers and others to rouse the top figures of the government from their sleep; the CIA Operations Center, for example, was the first to notify its principal, but did not do so until 6:35 a.m., the time of the DCI's normal awakening. But, as was clear in hindsight, none of these circumstances constituted a legitimate reason for the delay. Uncertainty is likely to attend the beginnings of any crisis. And clearing up the unknowns prior to notifying those who will be responsible for managing the crisis not only risks their wrath but also may jeopardize their ability to cope.

The post-mortem highlighted some of the problems associated with the CRITIC system, and it recommended in unequivocal terms that in the future the appropriate operations centers get in touch with each other immediately following the receipt of an initial CRITIC message. Had such a procedure been in effect vis-a-vis the *Mayaguez*, senior principals would almost certainly have been notified promptly.

Some Community Post-Mortems Not Produced

A number of formal community post-mortem reports that probably should have been written during this period (1973-1975) were not. Performance concerning at least three major developments—the leftist coup in Portugal in the spring of 1974, the rapid collapse of Cambodia and South Vietnam a year later, and the Cuban intervention in Angola in the fall of 1975—merited more careful and judicious examination than it in fact received.

- The community's face was not visibly red in the aftermath of the surprise coup in Portugal, nor did the community seem to blush because it had not foreseen Lisbon's subsequent (temporary) drift toward Moscow. In any event, no one called for a post-mortem investigation at the time. That came later, in effect—during the hearings of the Pike Committee in the summer of 1975.
- In the case of Vietnam, PRD did, at the request of the DCI, hastily prepare a paper—some called it a “mini-post-mortem”—that was given very limited but high-level dissemination. This, however, was completed even before the fall of Saigon and made no pretense of examining circumstances in a thorough way and in the light of true hindsight. Several months later, again at the request of the DCI, a second paper on the subject was prepared, but this time under the aegis of an NIO. It, too, could not lay claim to any real post-mortem status, in part because in this instance its principal drafters were examining their own performance.
- Concerning the community's (and their own) performance regarding Angola, the NIOs produced another post-mortemlike paper in early 1976, again at the specific request of the DCI. This, however, was not a full-scale effort, nor could it meet a test of objectivity.
- One 1976 development, unrelated to any specific event or crisis, may have warranted post-mortem investigation, and that was the CIA's and the community's unprecedented (and highly publicized) revision—from six percent to 11

to 13 percent—of their estimate of the percentage of the Soviet Gross National Product devoted to the military budget in recent years. Long carried at the lower figure, the proportion was increased—some charged very tardily so—after the receipt of new information and a prolonged study by teams of community experts. The significance of the change seemed to lie not so much in what it revealed about the size and strength of the Soviet military establishment, but rather in what it told about the determination of the Soviet leadership to allow the economy to bear such a burden. The change also raised serious questions about the community's and especially CIA's methodology for making cost estimates.

Post-Mortem Purposes . . .

In a sense—because they reviewed and recounted the past—the community post-mortem studies constituted a form of history. But they were history with a special purpose; to provide present and future members of the community—analysts, collectors, and processors, and managers alike—with a new means to measure and improve their performance. These reports, in fact, sought objectively to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the community's processes, systems, and attitudes, as manifested during a particular period or vis-a-vis a particular problem, and they tried, however imperfectly, to record the truth as best as could be ascertained.

To be sure, as already indicated, not all readers of these reports looked upon them in a kindly light. Some analysts and collectors, for example, although not named in the reports, felt themselves the targets of unfair criticism. But others recognized that there was merit in a program that could, by design, avoid many of the problems afflicting previous critical reviews of intelligence performance.

It was as if the Director, in establishing an independent post-mortem capability in the IC Staff, was seeking a perspective not available either to the producers of the play (the policymakers, who often believe themselves to be the only *responsible* critics) or to the actors on stage (the performing intelligence professionals who frequently feel themselves to be the only *qualified* critics).

- Intelligence post-mortems conducted or ultimately controlled by the policymakers can suffer from two conspicuous faults. They may reflect the relative ignorance of their authors concerning intelligence matters and thus may even neglect to ask the right questions, much less provide helpful answers. More important, they may seek in a self-serving way to pin blame for one or another policy problem on alleged intelligence deficiencies.
- Post-mortems conducted by the "actors" (in community production offices and collection entities) may try to do the same sort of thing, i.e., shift blame away from themselves. Or they may simply try to deny—sometimes correctly, but only rarely convincingly—that any real problem existed in the first place.

This is not to say that community post-mortems can be immaculately conceived or ever achieve the degree of objectivity they should strive for. Still, if post-mortems are commissioned by a DCI who insists on dispassionate analysis, and are prepared by qualified officers who have little or no stake in the outcome of the review, then they hold the *promise* of a unique efficacy. Put another way, it is simply a truism that the chances are better that the system will permit a constructive concentration on the nature and causes of intelligence problems and intelligence successes if the post-mortem task is undertaken by knowledgeable parties whose interests are not directly affected by the post-mortem "verdict."

... and Principles

Little formal methodology guided (or could have guided) the preparation of the community post-mortem reports. An effort was made, however, to meet certain minimum standards in all the formally published papers. These can be stated as general "post-mortem principles:"

- All published intelligence items relevant to a post-mortem investigation should be obtained and read. These include individual current intelligence reports, or portions thereof, as well as more ambitious intelligence studies such as National Intelligence Estimates. The vast bulk of reporting from intelligence and other sources should also be reviewed.
- As many as possible of the parties involved in the reporting and preparation of relevant intelligence should be interviewed; a representative selection of appropriate supervisors and office heads should be, too; and a fair number of high-level consumers should be asked to comment as well. (The names of individuals, however, should as a general rule be omitted from the published post-mortem report.)
- The post-mortem team should doublecheck the opinions and facts it gathers in the course of the investigation. The word of one intelligence officer or group of officers cannot be taken as final, not because such officers are necessarily suspect, but because they are as capable of shading meaning, or committing inadvertent errors, or speaking from ignorance, as any other comparable group of human beings. And sometimes what appear unquestionably to be facts turn out not to be.⁹
- Many, perhaps a majority, of the members of a post-mortem team should have served successful terms as intelligence analysts; some should be familiar with the specific area or topic under scrutiny; and some should also be thoroughly conversant with the various means of collection. At the same time, none of the members of the team should have been personally involved in the work being investigated; and none should function as representatives of any of the community's components—each member should try to speak for the community as a whole.
- The product of the post-mortem exercise should reflect judgments as independent and objective as those presumably reflected in finished intelligence itself. Post-mortem investigators, however, must ask themselves if the analysis they are studying is itself in fact objective. Are there signs of institutional or personal prejudice; riding of hobby horses; covering up or defense of past errors of judgment; excessive fascination with or fondness of particular countries or particular national leaders; or capitulation to the presumed policy interests of the consumers?
- To be effective, post-mortem reports should be well presented. The way in which even an eager readership receives a given report depends in part on how

⁹ To cite one example, during preparation of the post-mortem on the *Mayaguez* incident, investigators fixed the times of the (simultaneous) receipt in Washington of the first three CRITIC cables on the basis of machine-imprinted time stamps on the copies of those cables received by one particular operations center. Subsequently (but not too late to make the necessary corrections in the draft) it was more or less fortuitously discovered that those particular time stamps had been off by roughly half an hour, the result of a power shutdown over the previous weekend. The resultant errors exaggerated the length of the delay—bad enough as it was—between the initial receipt of the information by operations centers and the passage of that information to senior principals.

skillfully it is put together. Is it physically attractive, handy, easy to read? And are its contents pertinent, reasonably concise, well written, and above all, lucid? It is easier to extol clarity—and pertinence and concision and all the rest—than it is to achieve it, so writers should be given some help; competent editors can sometimes perform miracles.

Some Accomplishments

In the area of specific accomplishments, there is no theoretical limit to what a good post-mortem can do. As a practical matter, however, and as demonstrated by the fate of many of the recommendations of the community post-mortems issued in the past, there are a variety of hard constraints. It is a lot easier to isolate problems than to propose workable remedies. And it is, in turn, easier to propose such remedies than to implement them.

The post-mortems and the Product Review Division were responsible, however, for some specific and tangible improvements in the way the community conducted its business and, perhaps, the way in which the rest of the government responded to the community as well. For example:

- PRD's extensive work with watch and operations centers and in the general area of warning intelligence was in large part an outgrowth of post-mortem findings. Its various enterprises helped to lower the surprisingly high barricades surrounding all the intelligence operations centers and to establish mutually profitable contacts between these centers and similar centers in the White House, State Department, and Pentagon. The old, almost exclusively vertical lines of communication leading upward from each of these centers to its own principals were (loosely) tied—through telephone conferencing systems, personal contacts, a series of mutually profitable "business conventions," and the adoption of a number of important common procedures—into a horizontal network serving the government as a whole.
- In work that followed the revelations of the *Mayaguez* inquiry, PRD tackled and solved a number of problems associated with the CRITIC system. It was discovered that the CRITIC procedures and "rules"—designed to move vital all-source information from the field to the President and other top officials in Washington via the operations centers—badly needed overhauling. They were in certain respects out-of-date, unrealistic, and incomplete, and they varied from agency to agency. Indeed, there was no single system, only sets of systems, and not all these were compatible with one another. As was the case in the *Mayaguez* incident, this disarray had led to some problems and delays but, fortunately, no intelligence disasters. A failure to bring community-wide order into CRITIC, however, would have surely risked such a disaster in the future.
- Partly as the consequence of the revelations of the 1973 Arab-Israeli post-mortem, the DCI and the community (working through the IC Staff and PRD) in 1974 established a new form of estimative warning paper, the Alert Memorandum. The inspiration of a senior officer in one of the community's current intelligence offices, this kind of paper could when necessary be produced very quickly with light coordination by secure telephone, and could be delivered to top-level consumers in such a way as to virtually guarantee that they would read it.¹⁰ A survey of Alert Memoranda was made by PRD in the

¹⁰ These consumers had long complained that even when intelligence had "called it right," they sometimes hadn't gotten the word. Kissinger, for example, is said to have told one of the rare meetings of the National Security Council Intelligence Committee that a warning was not a warning unless it reached *him*. And, of course, he had a point.

summer of 1975 at the request of the DCI. It revealed that the system was working well—more than a score had been produced under the aegis of the National Intelligence Officers, and top consumers were in fact receiving and reading the memoranda.

- The same Arab-Israeli post-mortem pointed in 1973 to the excessive number of situation summaries published by components of the community during crises and to the complaints of consumers about this unnecessary and confusing duplication of effort. It then took three years of sporadic effort by PRD and others to work out procedures for the production of a single national crisis "sitsum" for high-level consumers.¹¹ But a "charter" was finally drafted by PRD and agreed upon by the community in 1976, and a national sitsum was actually issued during a crisis some two months later.

The Decline and Fall of the Post-Mortem

There were many reasons why the once-promising community post-mortem program died in the fall of 1975. Not least among them were shortcomings of the program itself, the departure from the community of its principal sponsors, the effects of bureaucratic politics and reorganizations, and a growing conviction among many intelligence officers that candid critical reviews of past performances represented, at best, an unbalanced look at the condition of the profession and, at worst, an unnecessary exercise in self-flagellation. It seems unlikely, however, that any of these circumstances, individually or in the aggregate, would have been controlling had it not been for: (1) the public reaction against the Constitutional and ethical abuses, both real and imagined, committed by CIA and the community over the course of two decades; and (2) the effort to exploit that reaction by the House Select Committee on Intelligence and its staff.

Although the House Committee initially professed a serious interest in evaluating the activities of the community and especially of CIA—how much did they cost, what were their risks, how successful were they?—its staff soon demonstrated that it was more anxious to condemn the community than to examine it.¹² It also demonstrated that for this purpose it was eager to concentrate on the substantive end of the intelligence business. Some of the post-mortems—forwarded to the Committee staff under threat of subpoena—may have helped to inspire this strategy and were in any event extremely useful to it.

In the end, the use and misuse of the post-mortems by the House Committee, together with the reactions of those in the community who had to contend with the Committee, were simply too much for the program. Still, the post-mortems then died with more than a mere whimper. They died, in fact, to the rousing accompaniment of a Constitutional confrontation between Congress and the President of the United States, occasioned by the President's refusal to grant Congress permission to release classified information drawn from the Mid-East post-mortem of 1973, and the Pike Committee's determination to assert its right to do so, no matter what the position of the Executive Branch.¹³

¹¹ It had also taken an order from the President to get the effort moving again. Truth is, both the practical and bureaucratic problems associated with this sort of enterprise were and are enormously complex.

¹² It did not really explore the reasons for the community's problems or show much interest in so doing—although the post-mortems and other available sources provided a clear opportunity for sober inquiry. Nor did it reflect on the Community's successes, of which, of course, there were many.

¹³ Neither side seemed at all anxious to bring this matter to a head. The Chairman of the Committee was apparently not sure he enjoyed the support of the House as a whole. The Executive was far from confident that it would win a test in the Supreme Court, which is presumably where the matter would have been decided had the stalemate persisted. Ultimately, of course, the Committee in effect caved in, although the issue as such was not resolved.

The Future

A post-mortem assessment of the 1973-1975 post-mortem program would no doubt reveal many ways in which it could have been improved. It might, in addition, uncover means to persuade in-house skeptics that future programs of comparable intent need not resemble an exercise in masochism.

If, in fact, the decision is ever made to resurrect candid post-mortem procedures, those responsible could do worse than to ponder some of the lessons of the recent past:

- Large, formal post-mortem reports should only concern the community's performance vis-a-vis especially important circumstances—such as major international crises and key analytical or collection problems—and should be produced only with the approval and bearing the imprimatur of the DCI. They should receive a broad readership within the community, subject of course to restrictions imposed by classification, and should be presented to the National Foreign Intelligence Board (or its equivalent) for rumination, discussion, and—if appropriate—action.
- The community's performance in less dramatic circumstances, involving particular incidents, might best be treated in shorter, more informal papers, disseminated on a more selective basis. These papers should be quite flexible in content and form and could appear as often as events seemed to warrant. Such papers might be issued as "Special Studies" or "Special Reviews," rather than as post-mortem reports *per se*.
- The successes of the community should receive greater attention than was customary in the 1973-1975 post-mortem series; not because the public relations aspects of such emphasis are tempting, but because it is as easy—perhaps easier—to learn from honest successes as it is from honest mistakes.
- Post-mortem reports and similar papers should be disseminated outside the community only with the approval of the DCI. There should be no blanket proscription of such dissemination; some papers could usefully inform, say, the NSC, or even respond to its requests for post-mortem reviews. But it should be generally understood that the primary audience for most community post-mortems should be the community itself.
- The subjects of post-mortems should not be confined to assessments of analytical and collection performance vis-a-vis a particular international incident or development. Some papers should address such broad (and sensitive) topics as: the quantity and quality of reporting and analysis on a given country (e.g., China) over a period of years; the controversial procedures followed last year during the preparation of the annual NIE on Soviet strategic forces; and the benefits and costs of the community's maintenance of competitive and duplicative analytical centers and collection programs.

Clearly, any future post-mortem staff would have more than enough to do. Even so, to allay apprehensions, it should be made obvious to all that there would be no trespass on the functions of the inspectors-general or the prerogatives of managers, that it would not be the role of "post-mortemists" to seek out mis-or-malfeasance or to supervise personnel. "Post-mortemists" are, however, historians of community error and accomplishment and as such—if it is true that those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it—are better read than ignored.