

Field of Biographic Research

Organized biographic intelligence is a newcomer in the general field of government intelligence in the U. S. Many of the principal countries, those of Europe in particular, have long possessed highly developed and specialized biographic organizations. This Government has always been interested in important foreigners, and biographic information has for many years been funnelled back to the Department from its representatives abroad. However, as with many types of intelligence activity, the war period provided the stimulus for an organized biographic program to replace previous uncoordinated and haphazard methods.

Because of the lack of adequate personality information to meet the needs of the Government during the war, several agencies developed their own biographic programs; most of these were discontinued as their parent agencies were abolished. In many respects this was a fortunate development, for some of these biographic units were conceived in haste and were highly duplicative. Their elimination simplified the problem of developing a coordinated interagency biographic program. This problem was faced and solved in 1946 with considerable success; the principal intelligence agencies were each assigned responsibility for collecting, processing, and reporting biographic information on persons within their areas of interest.

A study of Sherman Kent's recommendations on how the biographic intelligence function should be performed provides an excellent point of departure.*

In essence, Kent's biographic operation involves a file containing many names with a wide variety of both factual and "critical appraisal" data. This file, which is a "scissors-and-paste job", is to be maintained by people of "clerical-plus status" and it is to be central. The supervision, direction and use of this file is to be carried out by high-grade professionals in the regional units who are to put in the requisite hours on biographical business.

This committee finds a number of significant points in Kent's analysis:

(1) He believes the work to be one of the most important jobs of an intelligence organization, and an enormous one. This Committee agrees completely.

(2) The ideal biographic file is to be large and should include both factual and critical data on each name. BI's files are set up on this pattern but hardly include a very wide variety of data on every person. This would be impossible to achieve and there is considerable doubt as to the need for full data on each name in the files.

(3) "All biographical stuff" should be kept in a central file. This concept is in accord with the Committee's own experience and with general practice in intelligence agencies. As far as the Committee has been able to determine, biographic or personality files and indexes are central in the Departments of the Army, Navy, in CIA, the FBI and within the Department, in SY and DC/R.

*Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy, Sherman Kent, Princeton University Press, 1949. All subsequent quotations in the Foreword of this Report are from Mr. Kent's book.

(4) A large amount of factual data must be assembled on a large number of people, the job to be performed by a staff of clerical-plus status. Assuming that Kent wants the biographic file to be maintained intelligently, the Committee vigorously disagrees with this point. The assembly of even factual data is far more than a scissors-and-paste job. This is the first misconception.

The job of collecting and filing biographic information, even of a factual nature, requires every process of research carried on elsewhere in the R organization. Were this work to be performed by a scissors-and-paste crew, one of two evils would result: either the file would be too small or it would be gigantic, unwieldy and eventually worthless. In the process of collecting and filing biographic information, one must constantly keep in mind two basic points: what type of individuals should be selected for inclusion in the file and what type of information contributes to a better understanding of them.

A biographic file must have information which is useful, pertinent and quickly accessible. The file must be large enough to meet the variety of needs imposed on it, but not so large as to become and end in itself out of all relation to reality and need, completely engulfing those maintaining it. Certain general criteria concerning the types of persons and of information on them can be established as guide to the collectors and processors. The application of these criteria to specific countries, to groups within these countries or to individuals within these groups must be left to those actually performing the work.

Unless the file is to suffer from the evils mentioned above, the biographic staff must:

(a) have sufficient training to recognize biographic information. Kent's proposal that a scissors-and-paste crew assemble a large amount of factual data by "clipping biographical dictionaries and current newspapers" infers a rather common misconception that biographic information is readily available on a platter and merely has to be cut up and filed. This is incorrect. Factual biographic information is unfortunately all too rarely available in this manner. Relatively few foreign countries publish biographic dictionaries or similar volumes which are sufficiently complete, accurate and current to be useful; a scissors-and-paste crew would soon exhaust these published sources. However, the biographically trained eye can recognize a wealth of biographic information in published or official documents originating in these same countries but rarely labelled as such. Therefore, the biographic staff must be trained to know what biographic information is and where to look for it.

(b) be familiar with the languages of the countries. Biographic information is not always available in English, and as Kent points out it is questionable whether there is such a thing as a fool-proof translation, even assuming that a staff were available to translate daily the hundreds of possible biographic items into English in order then to determine whether they were of biographic interest and should be included in the files.

(c) know something about past and present political, economic, cultural and sociological conditions in a country. Biographic information cannot be collected without reference to developments in a country. Otherwise the scissors-and-paste crew might collect items about a national hero, dead for many years, or include in the files a long article about a farmer who devised a better rabbit trap merely because the item contained a long biographical statement about the farmer.

(d) relate its activities to the needs of the large organizational area of which it is a part and to the general present or future programs of the organization. A biographic file cannot be built in a vacuum. The biographic staff must have sufficient competence to understand directives issued to it and sufficient knowledge and background to be in a position to discuss intelligently the demands or directives with those issuing them. A scissors-and-paste crew might be able to collect factual information on all cabinet members of Patagonia but it could not intelligently assemble similar information on leading members of the opposition who in a change of government might form a new cabinet. Nor would such a crew be in a position to discuss the problem intelligently with those outlining the project.

(e) be familiar with biographic nomenclature and social habits and patterns of a country so as to index names correctly and understand family relationships. This is a technical but very important problem in which the biographic staff must specialize and have full competence. The indexing of the garbled or incorrect names in many documents originating in countries which do not follow the English system of family names would lead to the establishments of countless files on titles of persons, on middle or first names, etc. with the resulting duplicate or triplicate files on one person, loss of data and general confusion. Most important, the unit would lose the respect and confidence of its consumers and the need for such a staff would be rightly questioned. This is not an academic problem. Files actually maintained by scissors-and-paste crews which BI has examined contain many entries for Bey, Hermanos, etc. not to mention the chaos in Chinese and Japanese names. Some of the criticism directed against BI is directly related to this problem. The case is cited in which information on two people with identical names was so completely merged into one file that it became totally useless. That file was set up by a scissors-and-paste method because of a lack of personnel familiar with the country.

(f) evaluate factual information in terms of accuracy and need to determine whether it should be included in the file. Kent would have his scissors-and-paste crew "snipping biographical dictionaries and current newspapers" and it is assumed, any other raw materials providing factual data since the two sources he names are hardly sufficient for the purpose. Before a biographic dictionary is clipped one must decide first of all whether the volume is a scholarly and accurate Who's Who or one of those publishing

schemes in which the criterion for determining who is included and what is said about them is not the record but the amount of money paid to the publisher. One must then decide whether all the biographies are to be included or only selected groups, and whether the full biography on any one person is to be clipped or whether superfluous data is to be excluded.

A better example is the daily FBIB report which contains hundreds of names, many highly garbled or inaccurate. Kent's clerical-plus staff might be proficient at clipping and pasting the report; it would be helpless confronted with the task of unscrambling the names and determining which of the hundreds of items should be selected for inclusion in the files.

The biographic staff must therefore know and evaluate its sources, determine which biographic dictionaries are worth examining; what the political complexion is of the newspapers from which biographic items should be considered for clipping, and so forth. This evaluation, which must take place before the item is clipped rather than after, is of particular importance because it determines not only what should go into the file but also is the point of departure for two other activities; first improving the sources, i.e. collecting additional information; secondly, determining priorities in the processing of incoming data.

Kent's scissors-and-paste crew must by definition restrict itself to processing what is presented to it. The biographic file therefore would tend to grow by the accident of distribution. Who is to determine whether this crew is wisely spending its time clipping this or that newspaper, biographic directory, despatches, ONI or MA reports? The biographic staff must determine not only which documents are to be processed each day, but also whether the sum total intake is inadequate and should be improved. A collection activity must be based on general or specific needs and programs, inadequacies in the files as they show up in use, and an evaluation of sources as received. If material is to be processed fairly automatically by the scissors-and-paste crew - and how else could it perform its duties? - then that evaluation would be lost to the detriment of an intelligence collection program.

Secondly, no such group could possibly handle all incoming material. A priority problem is involved. One factor determining day to day priority is the biographic staff's knowledge or evaluation of particular sources from any one area. From experience NA reporting is found to be better than MA reporting in country X. In general it should be handled first. In country Y the reverse may be true. Newspapers in certain countries may yield more useful data in a given amount of time than a processing of despatches from the same countries. The problem varies from source to source, from country to country and from area to area and is beyond the competence of a scissors-and-paste crew which might devote its energies for a day to clipping an inaccurate biographic dictionary and burying in a backlog highly significant telegrams. General supervision or directives are not the answer. The problem can only be faced document by document and day by day, by those on the intake firing line.

(5) Factual data, Kent states, must be in a central file where it can serve telephone customers. Presumably these customers are to be served by the scissors-and-paste crew. That is another misconception. The satisfactory answering of requests even of factual data, whether by telephone or in writing, requires in many cases alertness, initiative, judgment and knowledge of the subject. The requester's use of the service is dependent upon his confidence in the person performing the service. Nearly everyone may be able to determine when a person was born - if the fact is readily available in a Who's Who (and one may ask whether it is worth maintaining a special unit to parrot a Who's Who, when it would be cheaper to have a copy of the publication on the desks of all concerned). If the item is not immediately available it requires research to uncover it. As Kent points out it is impossible to say where factual data begin and end, before the answer is found. A biographic unit providing an adequate service - and if it isn't, one of its main reasons for existence is eliminated - must be staffed by persons who can discriminate, recognize what is involved in the request and proceed to answer it, fully informed about the subject matter. In fact, from the point of view of efficiency, a well-informed person can usually answer an inquiry in far less time than an untrained non-professional.

(6) The Committee's comments have been restricted so far to examining the implications of Kent's proposals for a central file of factual material maintained by a clerical-plus staff. The Committee has attempted to emphasize that the job even in those terms requires a competent staff of professional caliber trained in the techniques of collecting and processing biographic information, and well informed in language and area knowledge. However factual data is merely the point of departure for the more important information which Kent describes as "critical appraisal" or the "critically evaluative part". Kent suggests two possible ways in which this work might be done: first, by building a biographic staff with high grade professionals or secondly, by decentralizing the file into the regional units. He recommends a compromise between the two with a central file maintained by a clerical-plus staff, with the biographic research work handled by high grade professionals who would put in the requisite hours on biographical business. He recognizes that there would be a tendency for this staff to starve biographical work in the face of other deadlines or higher priority work but he somewhat piously states that "this must not happen".

The Committee does not agree with Kent's compromise. It has all the disadvantages of compromise and none of the advantages.

Kent's proposal is unsatisfactory because:

(a) Precisely this tendency to starve biographic work has appeared in every case in which this system has been tried. After the war ID established a biographic program similar to his proposal. Biographic work, however, soon was starved out and whatever new files that were maintained were reduced in value because of the paramount fact that biographic information must be collected before it is needed; it's usually too late to start when the need arises.

(b) It would present an extremely complicated administrative problem.- Quite apart from regulating the time that professionals in regional units are to devote to biographic business, how are they to relate their activities to the work of the clerical-plus group? Who is to direct the program, procedures and priorities of the latter? The sum total of professionals in the regional units? In addition, although Kent states it is impossible to draw the line between factual and evaluatory information, he proposed an administrative separation of file staff based on just such a distinction.

(c) The evils which Kent sees in a biographic staff with "high grade professionals" are more imaginary than real. First, he believes that since it is ridiculous to divorce people from things they do, the biographic staff may become a cluster of regional research units duplicating a good part of the business of the main regional show. Secondly, he believes it is a poor practice to stop the duplication by telling the main regional units that they should not have professional knowledge of the personalities in their respective areas.

As outlined above any biographic activity requires area knowledge and any central file worth the effort must be staffed by professionally competent people and not by a scissors-and-paste crew. If the Committee's thesis is valid, the evaluatory data could be handled more efficiently, and without the administrative hocus-focus required by Kent's compromise, by a few professional additions to an already existing and operating professional staff than by many high grade professionals in the main regional units. True, the biographic staff on an administrative chart might look like a cluster of small regional research units but there is no other way to develop a central file adequately; it would not, however, and has not duplicated the work of the main regional show. Secondly, this Committee does not believe that BI's existence has ever been predicated on the assumption that the main regional units should not have professional knowledge of the personalities in their respective areas. BI's duties are, among other things, to supplement that professional knowledge with specialized intelligence on persons in the area. In essence the regional officer is a generalist on his country or area. He is supported by, or works with, specialists in certain subjects (minerals, agriculture, industry, etc.) including one of the most important - persons, the importance of which in the total understanding of a country underlines the need for close working relations between the area generalist and the biographic specialist.

In brief the Committee has agreed with part of Kent's analysis of the problem but has disagreed with his conclusions. The job of collection, filing and reporting biographic intelligence is essentially a research operation, requiring a competent professional staff.

What then are the essential characteristics of a biographic intelligence operation? Kent has described an intelligence organization as a "strange and wonderful collection of devoted specialists molded into a vigorous production unit". This is certainly a true description of a person engaged in biographic intelligence.

The person on whom the success of a biographic intelligence program depends is the biographic analyst. He must be intelligent and he must have a variety of skills. He must have a firm working knowledge of the language of the country or area to which he is assigned, so that the source materials from that part of the world are open to him. He must be grounded in political science to understand the policies and activities of different governments. He must have delved into the history, culture and temperament of the people of the land, preferably by residence in the country itself, so that the behavior of the people will not escape him in his analysis of individual members of that nation. The biographic analyst must have the power of concentration and perseverance in searching out the pertinent information. He must be able to discern the significant and to discard the ninety-five per cent of chaff. He must evaluate, analyze, collate and interpret data which by themselves mean little but which placed in their proper context tell a story. Last, the analyst must be able to write clearly and concisely in order to communicate his findings effectively. The daily routine of the biographic analyst will strike the uninitiated as dull, as a lot of grubbing, as any work among the minutiae and trivia that do not draw headlines. Yet this is the foundation of intelligence; it is a task for the penetrating eye and the reasoning mind.

Secondly, a biographic intelligence operation to be successful, must have vast amounts of materials at its command; these range from large unsorted collections of information of potential biographic significance, possibly not even located in this country, to carefully selected and pruned data actually placed in the files. Thirdly, the material must be organized in such a way that the known but unexploited data is available for use given a change of program, emphasis or emergency and that the actual files are maintained with uniformity of technique, but flexibility of area need, immediately ready to be brought to bear on any biographic problem as it arises.

In reviewing the activities and record of the Division, and taking a long range point of view, the Committee believes the Division has gone through several general stages of development. First it had to organize itself, then develop and regularize the collecting and organizing of materials into a workable scope. It had also to develop a reporting program which itself has gone through several stages from the mere delivery of a biographic file to a customer, to summarizing pertinent parts of the file, to summarizing the whole file, to evaluation of the individual on the basis of the file. Most of the Division's reporting activities are at this stage; occasionally they have gone a step further which may be an indication of the road towards a full biographic intelligence operation. The size of the files and the depth of information about individuals may provide a means by which to evaluate and measure persons on a scale far more accurate and significant than in the past. The Division's future course - and the ultimate objective of any biographic operation - is not to become a cluster of regional units duplicating the main show and writing bigger and better cabinet projects. Rather it is to get the information and by the various processes of research study persons in detail and in depth so as to suggest their intentions and capabilities, and in turn provide the regional and operational units with a more accurate yardstick for their own work.

The Committee feels that this objective should constantly be kept in mind by those engaged in the administrative and operation of the Division, and above all, those who make use of the Division's product.

A biographic operation is a new and relatively untried activity. It has tremendous potentialities. The Committee believes the day is not too distant when some of these potentialities can be realized and biographic intelligence can take its place as one of the important and recognized arms of total intelligence.

Prepared in 1949

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