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A Report on Intelligence Alert Memoranda

Prepared by the
Product Review Division, Intelligence Community Staff

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A REPORT ON INTELLIGENCE ALERT MEMORANDA

October 1975

This study, prepared by the Product Review Division of the Intelligence Community Staff, responds to a request by the Director of Central Intelligence for a review of *Intelligence Alert Memoranda* produced to date. He wished to know both how well the system has served him and the community and how well it has served the high-level consumer. This report has been circulated among USIB Principals, and they have formally concurred in the review's findings. The document, "Procedures for Alert Memoranda," dated 9 January 1975, is being revised to reflect the recommendations noted in the study.

KEY FINDINGS

In view of the numbers of persons who either were important recipients or had some role in producing Alert Memoranda, a unanimity of views on all aspects of this intelligence medium was neither expected nor achieved. There was, however, substantial agreement among both producers and senior-level consumers on the following key points:

- The basic concept of the Alert Memorandum (AM) is sound. Those that have been produced to date have by and large done what they were designed to do.
- Alert Memoranda are being seen—and their message noted—by principals and senior aides in the national security decision process; they are not being short-stopped by lower-level staff mechanisms.
- The system is not being seriously abused by overuse. Given the circumstances which led to their preparation, few of the fifteen Alert Memoranda so far produced are judged to have been hasty or ill-advised. In general, those consulted judged this on the whole to be a good record.
- Conversely, no serious charges have been leveled at the community for neglecting the AM form when it might have been used. (One possible such case—the Mayaguez incident—was mentioned by one respondent, and this point is discussed later in the paper.)

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—There was general recognition among most of those interviewed that the production process has evolved—and improved—with the passage of time and as experience in this form has been gained.

Nevertheless, differences of view—some fundamental in nature—surfaced on a number of points of form and substance. The more important of these are:

—There are varying perceptions of the appropriate criteria for selecting particular situations to be handled by Alert Memoranda. This reflects a lack of consensus on the relative weights that should be placed on how important the subject is to US interests, how quickly it needs to be addressed by policy councils, and how likely it is to occur.

—Some respondents suggested that it would be helpful to have a more standardized format—one that had better attention-getting qualities and ensuring that each AM uniformly addressed certain questions. Others emphasized the values of an unconstrained form and style.

—Although the AM was designed as a community mechanism—and the National Intelligence Officer (NIO) has sought the views of other agencies when time permitted—the Alert Memorandum is still viewed by many to be either a CIA product or as reflecting a personal concern of the DCI rather than of the community. Close involvement by other agencies in recommending or participating in producing Alert Memoranda has been minimal—far less than we judge to have been the goal of the DCI and the USIB in establishing the system.

The findings are covered in greater detail in following sections, and recommendations are set forth beginning on page 10. The recommendations themselves are relatively minor. Indeed, the flexibility of the process has been important to its evolution and we see little need to introduce major new restrictive or prescriptive provisions.

An exception involves a few practices that have grown out of experience in producing Alert Memoranda and that now have become normative to the process. They should—in our view—be codified in the USIB-approved "Procedures for Alert Memoranda," dated 9 January 1975. There are three of these:

—The practice of speedily notifying Washington area intelligence operations centers as soon as a decision has been made to produce an Alert Memorandum.

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- The practice—when time permits—of promptly notifying US embassies and other appropriate field elements in the geographic area discussed that an Alert Memorandum is in process, with an invitation for comments and suggestions.
- The practice of electrically disseminating the finished paper to those same embassies and field elements.

In addition, we believe community participation would be made easier if—following close behind notification of other agencies that an AM is being prepared—the responsible NIO would forward to those same agencies an LDX statement briefly covering the salient facts of the case, including critical source references, a statement of the intended thrust of the paper, and an indication of the planned time of issuance and the extent of coordination sought.

The remaining recommendations for the most part can be met if the DCI and USIB place heavier emphasis on existing procedures to try to meet problems seen by some of our respondents. USIB discussion, for example, might help to clarify some of these issues. This particularly applies to the question of how to achieve greater community involvement in initiating and producing Alert Memoranda.

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INTRODUCTION

In a memorandum to USIB Principals dated 28 August 1974, the Director of Central Intelligence asked for early USIB consideration of a procedure for alerting the national policymaker "to the potential danger of an unfolding situation as early as possible in the unfolding process." Mr. Colby went on to say that the purpose of such an alerting mechanism would be "to put WSAG formally on notice that the community sees the possibility of a major problem, to inform it of steps taken to improve intelligence collection, and, if appropriate, to recommend that WSAG meet on the problem."

On 12 September the USIB agreed in principle to the idea, and the Intelligence Community Staff was directed to produce and coordinate within the community a statement on procedures. The completed document, "Procedures for Alert Memoranda," was approved by USIB and issued on 9 January 1975.

In the period since the subject was first raised at USIB, fifteen Alert Memoranda have been prepared. The first three of these were issued before formal USIB approval of the *Procedures*, but even those three were clearly responsive to the original DCI memorandum, and in accord with the USIB expression of approval. They have, therefore, been included in this survey. In all, the list of *Alert Memoranda* to 1 August include:

Alert Memoranda Produced During September 1974 to August 1975

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A case study approach was used in this review. For each Alert Memorandum produced we:

- interviewed those persons who were key to its initiation and production;
- reviewed with them the evidence and background circumstances relating to the memorandum;

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- consulted with others in the community on their views on the production and coordination process; and
- sought the views of consumers concerning the impact of the Alert Memoranda and their value to the policymaking process.

Summary statements of the results of this survey of the individual Alert Memoranda are included in the Annex.

We were able to be more thorough in our coverage of the circumstances surrounding the initiation, production, and issuance of the Alert Memoranda, relative to what we could accomplish in the survey of the *impact* of the alerts on national security *policymakers*. But even on the consumer side we feel we have obtained fairly accurate reflections of the views of WSAG Principals on the general question of the utility of the alerting system, largely through discussions with their senior aides.

We also considered major differences among Alert Memoranda in form, coverage, and objectives. And in discussions with both producers and consumers, we sought to identify—with benefit of hindsight—any that seemed to have been ill-advised and hasty or, alternatively, any subjects that might profitably have been addressed by Alert Memoranda but were not.

And finally, we reviewed the procedures used to produce, coordinate, and issue the Alert Memorandum to determine if changes in the USIB instructions—contained in USIB-D-28.5/8, "Procedures for Alert Memoranda," 9 January 1975—might usefully be made.

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