

***Playing To The Edge: American Intelligence In The Age Of Terror***

Michael V. Hayden (New York: Penguin Press, 2016) 448 pp., index.

***Reviewed by Hayden Peake***

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Twenty-one directors have headed the CIA in the 69 years since it was created in 1947. Three were admirals, two were Army generals, and 15 were civilians. Only one was an Air Force general and he had the added distinction of having served as director of the National Security Agency (DIRNSA), the only person to have held both positions. Now, retired four-star Air Force general Michael Vincent Hayden, like seven of his CIA predecessors, has written a memoir “to show the American people what their intelligence services actually do on their behalf.” (xi)

While Hayden’s decade of service in Washington—1999–2009—is the central focus of *Playing to the Edge*, the narrative weaves in his life story. After growing up in Pittsburgh—a dedicated Steelers fan—he attended nearby Duquesne University (earning both his undergraduate and graduate degrees in history), where he joined Air Force ROTC. Graduation found him with a five-year military obligation and a new wife, Jeanine, a classmate. Called to active duty as an intelligence officer in 1969, the family—including baby Margaret and son Michael, on the way—left Pittsburgh and found a new home in the Air Force.

After service as an imagery analyst at Strategic Air Command headquarters, there were intelligence assignments in Guam, Korea, Bulgaria (as air attaché), Germany, the Pentagon, and the National Security Council. By 1996, now a brigadier general, Hayden became commander of the Air Intelligence Agency in Texas. His next (and rare non-intelligence) tour was as deputy chief of staff, US Forces in Seoul (1997–99). It was while there that he was nominated—sort of—to be director of NSA. As Hayden tells the story, the Air Force chief of staff told him, “You’re not going to get it [but you will] be well positioned when the director of DIA position comes open next summer. That’s the one we’re really shooting for.” (8) His only interview for the position was with DCI George Tenet. Hayden was sworn in as director late in

March 1999. He adds wryly, “Stuff like that happens in Washington.” (9)

Hayden arrived at NSA at a time when “only about ten years of global technological advance separated the agency from operational deafness.” (12) Two incidents quickly drove this point home. The first was when the entire NSA computer system crashed and the agency went dark—completely down—for several days. The second was when he learned that he couldn’t “send an e-mail to everybody.” (12) Change was clearly necessary and Hayden established the TRAILBLAZER program that, with the help of industry, would provide an agency-wide upgrade of computers, software, and personnel to improve operational capability. At the same time, he had to deal with Congress—the source of needed funds and public trust—and their concerns about legality, in addition to privacy groups worried about “government spying on America’s private communications.” (18) Foreign anxieties were also a factor, mainly over the so-called “Echelon” program that some thought, wrongly, involved US economic espionage on European allies.

If these issues were not enough to fill his plate, Hayden encountered what he calls “guerrilla warfare” from some professionals with vested interests in the “Thin Thread” program, which was designed “to collect and sort metadata and then to point analysts to the rich veins of SIGINT ore within the mountain of information.” (21) When tested, it didn’t work well, but its adherents didn’t give up. Hayden summarizes the legal, operational, and ethical arguments they maintained, with sharp discontent, even after 9/11. The result was an outbreak of whistleblower revelations that eventually involved the Snowden disclosures, and public exposés to foreign governments. It took years to resolve the legal issues; the costly operational losses are still being felt.

From an overall point of view, the problem that Hayden was attempting to confront was the steadily growing volume of data NSA was collecting daily; 9/11

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only increased the daily take and multiplied the associated hardware challenges. He reviews how NSA worked with its Five Eyes allies and new South Asian partners to cope with the data while tracking indications of further attacks. Simultaneously, Hayden and George Tenet were called before Congress to explain why 9/11 had not been foreseen by the intelligence agencies. The session did not go well as they explained the mistakes, the financial cutbacks, and the legal constraints that had limited collection prior to the attack. Topics discussed in the closed hearings were promptly leaked to the press, a persistent problem noted in other situations throughout the book. Moreover, the committee members didn't seem to understand "how SIGINT works," concluded Hayden—and from then on he worked to eliminate that circumstance, with mixed results. (45)

Then came the orders to prepare for the Iraq war, "for better or for worse." (48) This, he explains, led to personnel conflicts with the mission and complications when the resulting intelligence analysis did not meet policymaker expectations. After Hayden became director of CIA he reviewed the entire effort for his successor, Leon Panetta, telling him that contrary to "the urban legend that we were pressured by the White House . . . to write a case for war," that didn't happen. "We just got it wrong," he writes, when it came to weapons of mass destruction. (50)

Throughout the post-9/11 period, NSA worked to increase collection capability and fill gaps in coverage under a very close-hold, classified program called STELLARWIND. When up and running, Hayden writes, "We had the theoretical capability to access a significant percentage of the calls entering or leaving the United States." (73) Hayden explains at some length how the program worked, the legal issues resolved by the White House (collection without warrants), and the benefits it produced. Emphasizing that "no one expected STELLARWIND to stay secret forever", (76) Hayden took pains to brief the congressional intelligence committees, the Justice Department, and other Intelligence Community elements. Still, when it did become public through a leak to the *New York Times*, the resulting furor created by Congress and the press was substantial and even hypocritical. Hayden lays out the details.

Two other secret operations—PRISM and 215—the metadata program that replaced "Thin Thread"—came to light after Hayden had left government when Edward

Snowden leaked their details. "PRISM was focused on foreigners; 215 was all about Americans . . . a repository of American calls—not content." (406) Hayden reviews the often acrimonious outpouring of misguided public reporting that resulted, while assessing the damage—political and operational—their exposure caused, and the corrective actions taken at various levels of government.

In July 2004, toward the end of Hayden's nearly six-year NSA tour, the 9/11 Commission published the findings of its congressionally-mandated investigation. Among other recommendations, it accommodated Congress's desire for visible change with a major restructuring plan. In his chapter on the fallout from the Commission's work, delicately titled "Is This Really Necessary?", Hayden calmly notes that "there were few in the Intelligence Community at the time who thought that restructuring was a good idea. I certainly did not." (154) On the related topic of the DNI powers, Hayden and his NGA director colleague, James Clapper, "warned the House Intelligence Committee . . . that a feckless DNI would actually make things worse." (158) Then-defense secretary Rumsfeld got involved. Seeing a threat to the intelligence agencies under his command in the original version, he succeeded in negotiating modifications to the proposed act that in the end created the feckless, or at least less threatening, office of the DNI. It was promptly passed by Congress in the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention act of 2004. (154) Hayden assumed a role in its creation when he was appointed the first principal deputy to the DNI (PDDNI) in April 2005. Early on in the assignment, in a display of initiative, Hayden had his staff draft a document stating that "the CIA station chiefs around the world would function as the DNI's personal representative to the local intelligence service." (170) Under the new organization, he reasoned, what objections could there be to such a sensible proposal? There were few from the CIA and most of the Intelligence Community agencies. NSA and NGA were exceptions. They wanted their officers to be eligible to fill the posts. The issue was put on hold, only to be resurrected under a subsequent DNI. This time, thanks to CIA director Panetta, the CIA was formally recognized as the DNI representative and the DNI was replaced. (174)

In May 2006, circumstances at the CIA were in something of a turmoil and the DNI recommended that Hayden succeed Porter Goss as D/CIA. Hayden's first reaction was to "order" his two very accomplished personal assis-

tants, Mary Jane Scheidt and Mary Elfmann, to “find Steve Kappes.” (180) A respected and experienced clandestine service officer who had resigned under Goss, Kappes was found in London. He agreed to return as Hayden’s deputy. Bringing him on board was insurance that Hayden’s appointment would not be “seen as a hostile takeover by the DNI.” (181) The confirmation process was ultimately successful, with only Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and a few other Democrats casting a “no” vote. (185)

On arrival, Hayden found that “powerful people were accusing the CIA of felonies” (179) and other wrongdoings, none of his making, that would dominate his three year tenure—and beyond—and which he treats in detail. These included the now-familiar topics of secret prisons, enhanced interrogation practices, the destruction of interrogation tapes, and “targeted killings.” (333) On the administrative side, a number of quandaries demanded attention. They included plans to release the Justice Department memos “that laid out in detail the techniques that had been authorized for CIA’s interrogation of high value terrorists,” (378) frequent contentious exchanges with congressional committees, (225, 401) and the SSCI report on “detention and interrogation of terrorists” (398) that eventually surfaced publicly after Hayden had retired and on which he offers incisive views.

There are separate chapters on the bombing of the nuclear reactor in Syria in September 2007, and the Iranian nuclear program. As to the former, Hayden writes, “We had shared a decade worth of sporadic evidence of North Korean-Syrian nuclear cooperation with our liaison partner.” (255) While the United States considered various options to deal with the threat, the liaison partner acted unilaterally and destroyed the facility and Hayden describes that reaction. With regard to Iran, Hayden says it was the second most discussed topic of his tenure. His review of the Iranian nuclear agreement concludes that while claims of “the most intrusive inspection regime in history [is] probably a bit of hyperbole, [it] may indeed be a tough regime for Iran’s known facilities.” (308) He adds that, while the Bush was unlikely to have “bought

this deal . . . it wasn’t like we had created a lot of better choices, either.” (309)

Several reviews of *Playing to the Edge* took Hayden to task for these operations and those he had conducted at NSA. One wrote gratuitously that the book “is also badly written” while noting that his frequent references to his favorite NFL team, the Pittsburgh Steelers, made his style “jock-bureaucratic,”<sup>a</sup> comments that say more about the writer than the general. One reason for the antagonism is Hayden’s repeated assertion that “the information that we got from [KSM] and others was incredibly valuable.” (189, 224) Another important reason was Hayden’s persistent but unsuccessful opposition to the *New York Times*’s publication of NSA’s STELLARWIND story that no journalist could support.<sup>b</sup>

The title *Playing to the Edge* was contributed by Hayden’s wife Jeanine, because it characterized his approach to challenging decisions as he traded risk with mission accomplishment in unprecedented times. And although the narrative is generally chronological, he manages to include his views on the staff and things like family day at CIA, “when families descend on headquarters” (272) to see where their parent(s) work. He also comments on contacts with his support elements—general counsel, public affairs, CIA’s Publication Review Board—and various functional centers, as for example counterintelligence and counterterrorism—at both NSA and CIA.

*Playing to the Edge* is a very readable, candid, important assessment of Hayden’s intelligence career that gives a unique view of intelligence in action at the highest levels of our government. When added to the contributions of his predecessors, the result is an irreplaceable portrait of the Intelligence Community in action.

a. George Packer, “Can You Keep A Secret?”, *The New Yorker*, 12 March 2016.

b. See for example, Mark Bowden, “‘Playing To The Edge,’ Michael V. Hayden, Bush-Era Spymaster, Defends His Record,” Books of the *Times*, *New York Times*, 23 February 2016.



