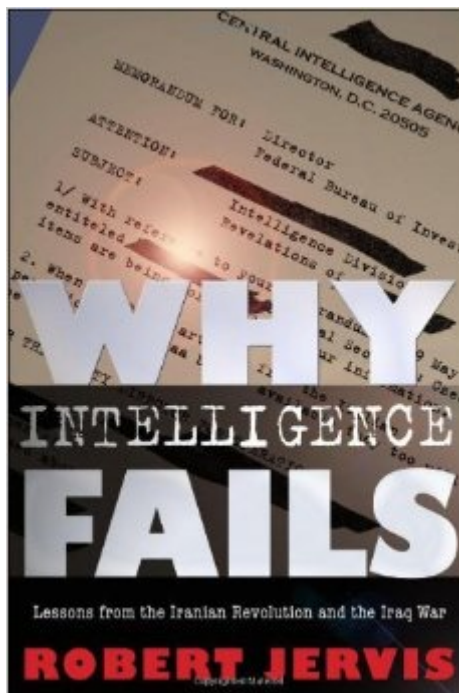


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Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons From The Iranian Revolution And The Iraq War (Cornell Studies In Security Affairs)



Synopsis

The U.S. government spends enormous resources each year on the gathering and analysis of intelligence, yet the history of American foreign policy is littered with missteps and misunderstandings that have resulted from intelligence failures. In *Why Intelligence Fails*, Robert Jervis examines the politics and psychology of two of the more spectacular intelligence failures in recent memory: the mistaken belief that the regime of the Shah in Iran was secure and stable in 1978, and the claim that Iraq had active WMD programs in 2002. The Iran case is based on a recently declassified report Jervis was commissioned to undertake by CIA thirty years ago and includes memoranda written by CIA officials in response to Jervis's findings. The Iraq case, also grounded in a review of the intelligence community's performance, is based on close readings of both classified and declassified documents, though Jervis's conclusions are entirely supported by evidence that has been declassified. In both cases, Jervis finds not only that intelligence was badly flawed but also that later explanations—analysts were bowing to political pressure and telling the White House what it wanted to hear or were willfully blind—were also incorrect. Proponents of these explanations claimed that initial errors were compounded by groupthink, lack of coordination within the government, and failure to share information. Policy prescriptions, including the recent establishment of a Director of National Intelligence, were supposed to remedy the situation. In Jervis's estimation, neither the explanations nor the prescriptions are adequate. The inferences that intelligence drew were actually quite plausible given the information available. Errors arose, he concludes, from insufficient attention to the ways in which information should be gathered and interpreted, a lack of self-awareness about the factors that led to the judgments, and an organizational culture that failed to probe for weaknesses and explore alternatives. Evaluating the inherent tensions between the methods and aims of intelligence personnel and policymakers from a unique insider's perspective, Jervis forcefully criticizes recent proposals for improving the performance of the intelligence community and discusses ways in which future analysis can be improved.

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Customer Reviews

Undoubtedly the most interesting portion of this very interesting book, is the CIA sponsored post-mortem report on why the Iranian Revolution caught CIA by surprise. Remarkably, this report is presented in full with very few redactions and includes the critiques of the report by senior CIA officials. As such it makes for fascinating reading. The brief given to Jervis (then a part time CIA consultant) and an unnamed CIA officer who was to assist in this work was to concentrate on the specific issue of the analytic tradecraft employed by CIA Iranian analysts prior to the revolution. On the whole Jervis and his shadowy assistant produced what appears to be a very fair report. This report concluded that given the information available to them, the two CIA political analysts assigned to Iran did a pretty credible job. One of these analysts was actually an Iranian target expert and Farsi linguist. Yet it is clear that these analysts took a very narrow view of their specialty and failed to place political events in the context of social and economic changes then effecting Iran. They also failed to make use of open source information on Iran or examine the strong Shia religious influences affecting Iran. As Jervis noted in his report what was then CIA's office of political analysis failed to communicate with its office of economic analysis. Further the National Intelligence Officer (NIO) for Iran failed to communicate with any of the analysts working Iran or to provide any guidance to them. Although his brief specifically did not include collection issues, Jervis also noted that the U.S. Embassy staff in Tehran (including CIA officers) included no Farsi speakers and did not have significant contacts outside of the Iranian Government.

Why does intelligence fail? Is there anything we can do to address failure? Those are key questions

addressed by political scientist Robert Jervis. His methodology is appropriate: he uses two case studies to examine intelligence failure and how one might diagnose failure and improve matters to reduce the odds of major failure in the future. The two case studies are the Iranian Revolution and the fall of the Shah and the inaccurate intelligence on weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the run up to the Iraq War and the deposing of Saddam Hussein. The first of the case studies is based on Jervis' own report to the CIA after the failure of intelligence in the Iran event. Here, the Shah of Iran was overthrown and the United States was caught unaware. Intelligence breakdowns of one sort or another were a part of this (from descriptive rather than analytic intelligence, pre-existing beliefs about what was going on, and the like). While Jervis notes some means of addressing problems, he notes that it would not be certain that--even then--the rapid fall of the Shah would have been clearly predicted. The second case study is the failure of intelligence regarding WMD in Iraq. The book examines the nature of the failure and then tries to explain that failure. Among factors leading to failure--confirmation bias (seeking information to demonstrate that there were WMD), individual analysts'/operatives' failures (e.g., trusting Curveball, a source of information on Iraq who was, as it turns out, not a reliable source). How to address intelligence failure? Jervis is critical of the "reforms" initiated within the intelligence community.

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