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Why the CIA No Longer Works—and How to Fix It

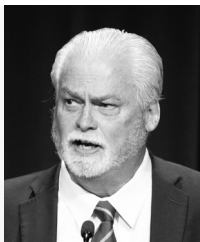
Charles S. Faddis

Author, *Beyond Repair: The Decline and Fall of the CIA*

The following is adapted from a talk delivered at Hillsdale College on October 3, 2023, during a conference on "U.S. Intelligence: History and Controversies."

WE NEED the CIA, but we also need to recognize the uncomfortable reality that the CIA is not performing at the level we require. It is not keeping us safe. It must be repaired, and it must be repaired quickly.

The CIA was created after World War II with one overriding primary mission—to prevent a reoccurrence of what happened at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. We were never going to allow an enemy to surprise us on that scale again. We were never going to find ourselves blind regarding a threat of that magnitude and immediacy. We would be forewarned and forearmed.



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Beyond Repair: The Decline and Fall of the CIA.

Then came 9/11. Members of Al Qaeda hijacked four airliners. They crashed three of them into their targets. They were prevented from succeeding with the fourth only by the heroism of the brave American passengers.

Al Qaeda was not some unknown entity. It had been around for years. Osama Bin Laden had threatened to attack us on our own soil for years. Al Qaeda had blown up two of our embassies in East Africa. Al Qaeda had almost sunk the USS Cole in Yemen. Al Qaeda had tried once before to take down the World Trade Center.

Yet we had not a single source inside that organization capable of warning us of the 9/11 attacks that would kill almost 3,000 Americans.

On May 2, 2011, U.S. special operations personnel attacked a compound in Pakistan and killed the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks. That operation in and of itself was clearly a success. But the fact that it took us almost ten years after 9/11 to find and kill Bin Laden should give us pause.

Bin Laden fully understood the technical capabilities of American intelligence. After his escape from Afghanistan, he established himself in a compound with no internet service. He had no cell phone. He communicated with his organization via a courier system and dealt with those couriers face to face. There were no emails, text messages, or phone calls for us to intercept.

Finding Bin Laden meant getting a source inside Al Qaeda at a level high

enough to know his physical location. It took almost a decade for the CIA, with all its resources, to acquire such a source, even though this was probably the CIA's single highest priority.

More recently, in 2020, we found ourselves amidst a worldwide pandemic that originated in China. Despite attempts to characterize this as a natural outbreak of a disease found in bats, it has become abundantly clear that COVID-19 was the product of gain-of-function research in a bio lab in Wuhan, China. It has also become clear that there were numerous warning signs regarding the dangers of the work and substandard lab practices in Wuhan.

Biological warfare threats are real and have been considered so for many years. Collecting intelligence about both state-sponsored and terrorist biological warfare programs is one of the CIA's top priorities. The existence of the lab from which COVID emerged was not a secret. Neither was the fact that the Chinese were working overtime to make coronaviruses more dangerous to humans.

Yet we received no warning prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. When people began to get sick here and around the world, the CIA could apparently provide no useful information regarding the origins of the disease. Even now, years later, it seems unable to tell us precisely how the pandemic began. We had no sources inside China's top bio lab. We apparently have no sources there now.

Why is that? Why is an organization staffed with highly talented people and provided with unparalleled resources failing to perform its core functions?

There are two reasons: bureaucratization and politicization.

BUREAUCRATIZATION

Forget for a moment all the gadgets and technology. The core business of the CIA is recruiting spies inside

Imprimis (im-pri-mis), [Latin]: in the first place

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target organizations, handling them securely, and producing intelligence for policymakers in Washington, D.C.

At its heart espionage is a very old business. Its essence has remained unchanged for thousands of years. And it is not a science—it is an art. There is a reason intelligence officers talk about *tradecraft*. Espionage requires innate skills. Not everyone can do it.

CIA case officers may be called upon to do many things during their careers, but when it comes down to it, their primary job is spotting, assessing, developing, and recruiting spies. That means getting close to people who are often very objectionable, figuring out what makes them tick, and convincing them to help you by betraying their colleagues and their countries and to trust that you can keep them alive while they do so.

CIA RECRUITERS NO LONGER FOCUS ON THE KEY PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAITS CRITICAL TO SUCCESS IN THE WORLD OF SPYING. THEY LOOK AT ACADEMIC DEGREES, EXISTING LEVELS OF LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY, AND INCREASINGLY AT THINGS LIKE SKIN COLOR AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION. TRAINING HAS BEEN SOFTENED AND IS INCREASINGLY FORMBOOK IN NATURE. WE ACT AS IF ANYONE CAN BE TAUGHT TO CONDUCT ESPIONAGE—AS IF THIS IS NO LONGER AN ARCANE CRAFT TO BE PRACTICED BY A SELECT GROUP OF UNIQUE PEOPLE.

That means getting a Russian intelligence officer to take actions he knows will result in his execution and the disgrace of his family if he is caught. It means persuading an Iranian nuclear scientist that working with you will make his countrymen safer and their future better. It means convincing a member of Al Qaeda that you are not the enemy of Islam and that you know your trade well enough to keep him from meeting a grisly fate.

All of this requires someone who has impeccable gut instincts, can make decisions on the fly, and can navigate through a maze of mirrors and tolerate extremely high degrees of ambiguity. When you are face to face with a very dangerous person on the street in a slum in South Asia or in a desert in the Middle East, you do not have time to deliberate. You can't phone CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, for guidance. You must know intuitively what to do and take immediate action.

The people in charge of our government, including those who run the CIA, have forgotten this. They have done their best to turn the CIA into just another federal agency. Recruiters no longer search for intangibles or focus on the key psychological traits critical to success in the world of spying. They look at academic degrees, existing levels of language proficiency, and increasingly at things like skin color and sexual orientation.

Training has been softened and is increasingly formbook in nature. We act as if anyone can be taught to conduct espionage—as if this is no longer an arcane craft to be practiced by a select group of unique people.

We have buried operations under endless layers of middle management. Case officers in the field may spend days just trying to complete the requisite paperwork for a single asset meeting. Every moment they are sitting behind a desk is a moment they are not out meeting sources, recruiting new sources, or learning the environment around them.

In Washington, the management ranks are increasingly filled with

individuals who seldom travel far from Langley and have never demonstrated that they can accomplish anything on the street. They have laughed at the boss's jokes. They have demonstrated their fealty to the prevailing groupthink. They have moved paper, attended meetings, and climbed the corporate ladder. But in large measure, they have no idea how to run an op or recruit a source.

At its core the CIA is meant to do what everyone else considers impossible. It is supposed to be run by people who want to steal the crown jewels and will do so if asked. Not anymore. Now it is run by people who look for ops with no possible downside and, therefore, no particular upside either.

The CIA has proved unable to put a source inside a Chinese bio lab, within the leadership structure of the Taliban, or next to Vladimir Putin. Those kinds of operations require the willingness to take risks and the ability to manage those risks. We no longer have either.

POLITICIZATION

On September 11, 2012, two American compounds in the Libyan city of Benghazi were attacked by a well known Islamic militia with a history of attacking Western targets. One of the compounds, occupied by the Department of State, was overrun. The American ambassador to Libya, who was visiting from Tripoli at the time, was killed.

The other compound was occupied by CIA personnel and was better prepared to resist. Those inside held out long enough for an ad hoc relief force from the embassy in Tripoli to arrive and for the CIA personnel to be evacuated. No military relief force was sent by the Obama administration.

Throughout the attacks on the compounds, a continuous stream of reporting was sent to Washington from the field. All that reporting told

the same story: a large-scale assault had been launched on two American-occupied compounds by a heavily armed Islamic terrorist group.

Nevertheless, in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and others in the Obama administration began to peddle the narrative that a peaceful demonstration in Benghazi had simply gotten out of hand—that this was not an act of terrorism. The backlash against this transparent lie was immediate. The Obama administration came under scathing criticism.

Enter Mike Morell, acting director of the CIA, who stepped forward to take the blame for the erroneous claims of a peaceful demonstration. Analysts at the CIA, Morell said, had written an assessment to this effect, and he had passed it on to the White House. Obama and company were blameless. The CIA had given them bad intelligence.

This was absurd on its face. CIA analysts do not review a mountain of reporting about ongoing attacks using heavy machine guns, mortars, and rocket-propelled grenades and then write up an assessment saying, “We think they meant this to be peaceful.” Nor, obviously, has any evidence of such an assessment been produced.

In short, the Director of Central Intelligence had injected himself into a domestic political dispute, covering for a blatant lie concocted by the administration. He did so, presumably, because he believed that Secretary of State Clinton would become the next president and that he would be named to a senior post in her administration. Interestingly, when Clinton lost in 2016, Morell was given a post with a six-figure annual salary at a Washington think tank aligned with the Democratic Party.

In the runup to the 2016 election, people within Clinton's campaign concocted the idea of smearing Donald

Trump with false accusations of colluding with Russia, based on a dossier filled with lies, gossip, and innuendo. When this failed to prevent Trump's election, they carried on the deception with an eye to destabilizing the Trump presidency and perhaps even removing Trump from office.

The involvement of the FBI in this effort, known by its FBI codename Crossfire Hurricane, has been extensively documented. What has been much less talked about is the CIA's role.

The extensive investigation of what transpired during Crossfire Hurricane has shown that American intelligence sought the involvement of a number of allied intelligence services, most notably the British. It has also shown that with the passage of time, the British in particular became increasingly enthusiastic about their involvement as it became clear to them that this activity was inappropriate and illegal.

Such interaction with close allies doesn't happen without the involvement and assistance of the CIA. That is not the way it works. If you are in London, for instance, meeting with British intelligence and counterintelligence services, you are doing so not only with the knowledge of the chief of station in London, but also with his or her permission and assistance.

John Brennan, the CIA's director at the time, not only had to know about Crossfire Hurricane; he also had to approve it. When Brennan stepped down as head of the CIA, he was replaced by Gina Haspel. She had been the chief of station in London throughout Crossfire Hurricane and

had to have been directly involved in the interactions with the British services that were part of this plot.

We should also note that when news of Hunter Biden's "laptop from hell" threatened to derail Joe Biden's 2020 campaign for the White House, 51 former intelligence officers came forward and signed on to a now infamous letter branding the laptop as a product of Russian disinformation. I have seen the contents of that laptop and retain a copy to this day. I can assure you it was immediately obvious in looking at the laptop's contents that it was real and that it suggested strongly that Joe Biden himself was compromised by a number of foreign actors—chief among them the Chinese Communist Party.

A NEW DIRECTOR MUST MAKE IT CRYSTAL CLEAR THAT THERE IS NO MORE BUSINESS AS USUAL, THAT THE CIA IS RETURNING TO ITS ROOTS, THAT THERE WILL BE ZERO TOLERANCE FOR ANY INVOLVEMENT IN DOMESTIC POLITICS—AND THAT INDIVIDUALS WHO INVOLVE THEMSELVES IN POLITICS WILL BE PROSECUTED. A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF SENIOR OFFICERS SHOULD BE REMOVED IMMEDIATELY. THERE MUST BE A CLEAR SEA CHANGE. EVERYONE MUST UNDERSTAND THAT REAL REFORM IS UNDERWAY AND THERE WILL BE ZERO TOLERANCE FOR FOOT DRAGGING, SLOW ROLLING, OR INTERNAL RESISTANCE.

Five former directors or acting directors of the CIA were among the 51 signatories to this letter, whose clear purpose was to bury the contents of the laptop and get Joe Biden elected. Both Mike Morell and John Brennan were among those five.

SOLUTIONS

If the CIA is critical to our survival—and I believe it is—we need to appoint someone to run it who knows the terrain. The new director will have to understand what is meant in

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describing espionage as an art. Some of what is needed can be taught—for instance, you can send people to language schools. But you can't teach the critical skills required to reach across cultures, connect with people who belong to an organization that exists to murder people like you, and then get

them to follow your orders. That takes raw physical courage. It takes perception. It takes instinct, insight, and immense self-confidence.

The new director will also need to have the full support of the president. When Wild Bill Donovan set up the Office of Strategic Services

(the precursor to the CIA) in 1942, he faced intense opposition. He succeeded because everyone in Washington knew he had a direct line to President Franklin D. Roosevelt and would pick up the phone if he had to. A director seeking to reform the CIA today will need an equal level of backing.

The new director must, from the very beginning, make crystal clear that there is no more business as usual, that the organization is returning to its roots and getting back to basics, that there will be zero tolerance for any involvement in domestic politics—and that individuals who involve themselves in politics will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

A significant number of senior officers should be removed immediately. Some of those officers are complicit in the actions I detailed above. Many others have stood by silently as a great organization has decayed and laws have been broken. There must be a clear sea change. Everyone in the organization must understand that real reform is underway and there will be zero tolerance for foot dragging, slow rolling, or internal resistance.

The records of every single person in a command position in the CIA—both at Langley and in the field—should be reviewed. Those individuals who made rank by playing it safe and currying favor with superiors should be immediately removed. They should be replaced by individuals with the brains, guts, and audacity to do what is needed. If they don't get the job done, they should be replaced in turn.

There can be only one measure of success—results. We must not be interested in more PowerPoint presentations or wiring diagrams. We must be interested solely in intelligence that gives us a decisive advantage over our adversaries.

Recruiting must be completely revamped. Quotas are absurd. Focusing on color, gender, and sexual orientation is at best irrelevant. We want the

best, and that means those people who possess the unique blend of skills and abilities that enable them to do what everyone else considers impossible.

Training must be toughened. The world is getting more dangerous by the day. If we are going to expect the case officers in a retooled CIA to crawl into the belly of the beast, get the intel we need, and come back alive, they will need to be tough enough and well-trained enough to do that.

The structure of the CIA must be flattened and simplified. The organization must be field-centric. It is not the job of those in the field to wait for people in Langley to finish rounds of meetings and reviews before moving. It is the job of people in Langley to keep up. Anything and everything that impedes those in the field in the accomplishment of their missions must be eliminated.

All this needs to happen immediately upon the appointment of a new director. There can be no more blue-ribbon panels or interminable outside reviews. We know what the problems are. We know how to fix them. What we have lacked until now is the willingness to do what is needed.

Somewhere in the world right now a terrorist group is planning a deadly biological attack on the United States. The Afghan and Pakistani Taliban organizations are conspiring to seize functioning Pakistani nuclear weapons. The Chinese are putting the finishing touches on a plan to blockade Taiwan and crash the global economy. The Venezuelans are discussing with the Russians the idea of putting hypersonic missiles on their soil that can carry nuclear warheads.

The only organization that has a prayer of providing the necessary insight into these and many other threats is the CIA. We needed it in 1947. We need it even more today. We have no time to waste in returning it to fighting form. ■