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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

## *Trump to the Intelligence Community: You're Fired*

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Assessments of President Donald Trump in any future history of the U.S. intelligence Community (IC) will differ dramatically from those of any of his predecessors. While Trump made little use of the IC to inform or implement policy, he abused and ignored it incessantly. The closest precedent is Richard Nixon. Yet Nixon reserved his scorn largely for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and kept it private. Trump is an equal-opportunity abuser and rages publicly. The IC struggled mightily to recover from the Nixon years. The same can be said for the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy and the flawed National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction. The damage done by Trump and his enablers may prove irreparable. He gauged the IC according to its service to his own, not the national, interests. Because intelligence professionals refused to politicize their estimates, Trump politicized their leadership. If there is a silver lining, it is the potential for a better and more accountable institution to emerge. Achieving that outcome won't be easy, however, and it will take precious time.

"Speaking truth to power" is the cardinal albeit imperfectly adhered to principle of the IC. Yet Trump broadcast his contempt for that principle shortly after he descended his golden escalator. Successful hacking of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign and the Democratic National Committee in February and March 2016 resulted in the release of a huge cache of stolen emails in June. By summer, the IC had reached a consensus that Russia was responsible, with the only dissension revolving around the question of whether the intent was to disrupt the election and destabilize U.S. institutions or more specifically to assist Trump's election. By August, the IC had developed sufficient confidence in its judgment that it communicated it under the highest classification to President Barack Obama.

The estimate attributed Russian "meddling" directly to President Vladimir Putin. It also uncovered conversations Russians held during the campaign with several Trump allies, including General Michael T. Flynn, whom Trump would appoint his first national security advisor. Fearful that public disclosure would reveal sources and methods, provoke Moscow's escalation, and/or fuel Trump allegations about a "rigged" election, Obama opted to keep silent. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) broke that silence in October, when it issued a statement jointly with the Department of Homeland Security: the Russian government, aiming "to interfere with the US election process . . . directed the recent compromises of e-mails from US persons and institutions." The statement bypassed the question of whether the Russians sought to promote Trump's candidacy. With "high confidence," the CIA answered that question affirmatively in a secret briefing to select senators soon thereafter.<sup>2</sup>

While after the election Obama ordered a 'full review' of the intelligence, Trump declared "war" on it, to use the words of *Foreign Policy's* Micah Zenko. He expressed doubts ("it could have been a guy in New Jersey"); he criticized ("it's ridiculous"), he scorned ("These are the same people that said Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction"), and he rejected ("I don't believe [Russia] interfered").<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As I have so often done in the past, I thank Frank Costigliola for his insights. I also thank Robert Shulman.

<sup>2</sup> Greg Miller, Ellen Nakashima, and Allen Entous, "Obama's Secret Struggle to Punish Russia for Putin's Election Assault," *Washington Post*, 23 June 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/world/national-security/obama-putin-election-hacking/>; Emmarie Huetteman, "Obama White House Knew of Russian Election Hacking, but Delayed Telling," *New York Times*, 21 June 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/21/us/politics/jeh-johnson-testimony-russian-election-hacking.html>; Joint Statement from the Department Of Homeland Security and Office of the Director of National Intelligence on Election Security, 7 October 2016, <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2016/10/07/joint-statement-department-homeland-security-and-office-director-national>.

<sup>3</sup> Micah Zenko, "Trump's War against Intelligence," *ForeignPolicy.com*, 14 December 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/14/trumps-war-against-intelligence/>.

Interpreting the assessments as challenges to the legitimacy of his election, Trump escalated his attacks in early January. That week the IC released an “assessment” making explicit that Putin had directed the effort to benefit Trump.<sup>4</sup> Director of National Intelligence (DNI) James Clapper, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (DCIA) James Brennan, National Security Agency Director Mike Rogers, and FBI Director James Comey briefed the president and the relevant congressional committees on the assessment. They cited the robust intelligence (withheld from the public) that underlay its judgments, and in private Comey gave Trump a heads-up on the Steele dossier, a file prepared by former British intelligence officer Christopher Steele that alleged Trump’s misconduct and his campaign’s collusion with Russia, while acknowledging concerns about its reliability. Trump exploded that none of this intelligence was reliable. The “briefers” were “dirty cops” and “sleezebags,” Obama appointees, and representatives of the “deep state.” The IC was conducting a “witch hunt.” In a tweet that enclosed “intelligence” in quotes, he falsely claimed the IC had leaked the Steele dossier and likened this dissemination of “fake news” to Nazi Germany’s propaganda machine.<sup>5</sup>

Veteran intelligence officers worried that the IC would never gain the trust and confidence of their “first customer.” They were encouraged, briefly, when the day after his inauguration Trump travelled to Langley to deliver his first post-inaugural speech, in front of the CIA headquarters memorial wall. The audience was aghast. Trump spent a few moments pledging his allegiance to the IC and attributing reports of his hostility to the “dishonest press.” He then used the remainder of the time to brag about himself. “It’s simply inappropriate to engage in self-obsession on a spot that memorializes those who obsessed about others, and about mission, more than themselves,” commented John McLaughlin, former deputy and acting CIA director, articulating the consensus. Trump’s speech was “despicable” and he should be “ashamed,” added Brennan.<sup>6</sup>

Trump probably failed to appreciate how pervasive and profound was the CIA’s, and by extension the IC’s, distress. He certainly did not behave as if he appreciated it. Bolstered by congressional allies, especially Devin Nunes (R, CA), the chair of the House Permanent Subcommittee on Intelligence (HPSCI) when Trump took office, he ramped up his criticism of the IC assessment, publicly called for a halt of all investigations into the “Russian hoax,” and fired Comey. A year later, despite IC security concerns, Nunes’s committee released a memorandum claiming that political opposition to the president, not intelligence collected, explained the Russian investigation. Thereafter, in the midst of Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s independent investigation, the HPSCI issued a report that cleared Trump and his campaign of any wrongdoing, charged the IC with “significant intelligence tradecraft failings,” and accused its leaders of leaking information to the media. A month later, however, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) issued a very different report. The SSCI confirmed the IC’s assessment of Russian interference in the 2016 election and identified the purpose as aiding Trump’s campaign. The dueling reports made headlines but failed to influence Trump, his relations with the IC, or public opinion.<sup>7</sup>

Attention to the reports doubtless would have dissipated rapidly had not Trump scheduled a summit with Putin two weeks after SSCI’s went public. On 16 July 2018, the two heads of state met in Helsinki, Finland. What they actually discussed remains unclear. Trump confiscated the notes of the conversations, and neither country issued a communique. Yet, at the press conference later that afternoon, a reporter asked Trump whom he believed, the U.S. intelligence community, which charged Russia with meddling, or President Putin, who denied it. Trump responded, “My people came to me — [DNI] Dan Coats came to me and some others — they said they think it’s Russia. I have President Putin; he just said it’s not Russia. I will say this: I don’t see any reason why it would be.... I have great confidence

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<sup>4</sup> Intelligence Community Assessment 2017-01D, “Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections,” 6 January 2017, [https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA\\_2017\\_01.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> David E. Sanger and Matthew Rosenberg, “From the Start, Trump Has Muddied a Clear Message: Putin Interfered,” *New York Times*, 18 July 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/18/world/europe/trump-intelligence-russian-election-meddling.html>; Calder Walton, “Is Trump’s Rage at US Intelligence Unprecedented?” *Prospect*, 12 January 2017, <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/world/trump-rage-us-intelligence-leaks-russia-hacking>; David Montgomery, “The Abnormal Presidency,” *Washington Post*, 10 November 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/lifestyle/magazine/trump-presidential-norm-breaking-list/>.

<sup>6</sup> Robin Wright, “Trump’s Vainglorious Affront to the C.I.A.,” *New Yorker*, 22 January 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/trumps-vainglorious-affront-to-the-c-i-a>; Bess Levin, “Ex-C.I.A Chief Blasts Trump’s ‘Despicable’ Speech at C.I.A. Headquarters,” *vanityfair.com*, 22 January 2017, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/01/john-brennan-donald-trump>.

<sup>7</sup> HPSCI Majority staff memorandum to HPSCI Majority members, “Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act Abuses at the Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation,” 18 January 2018, enclosed with Donald McCann to Devin Nunes, 2 February 2018, [https://fas.org/irp/congress/2018\\_cr/nunes-memo.pdf](https://fas.org/irp/congress/2018_cr/nunes-memo.pdf); House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence Report on Russian Active Measures, 22 March 2018, [https://republicans-intelligence.house.gov/uploadedfiles/final\\_russia\\_investigation\\_report.pdf](https://republicans-intelligence.house.gov/uploadedfiles/final_russia_investigation_report.pdf); Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, “The Intelligence Community Assessment: Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections, 3 July 2018,” [https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/publications/ssci\\_ica.pdf](https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/publications/ssci_ica.pdf).

in my intelligence people, but I will tell you that President Putin was extremely strong and powerful in his denial today.”<sup>8</sup> To Trump, the force of Putin’s denial resonated more than the IC’s evidence.

Journalists fretted about the long-lasting costs of Trump’s siding with Putin over the IC. Would the best and brightest in America still find intelligence work attractive? Would analysts pull their punches when producing estimates? Trump had called “incredible” Putin’s offer to allow US investigators to interrogate Russians associated with the “troll farm” that Mueller indicted for hacking (technically wire fraud and identity theft) during the 2016 campaign in return for permission for the Kremlin to question U.S. citizens accused of unspecified crimes. Could IC collectors count on Trump to protect sources and methods? By undercutting the IC for “doing its work precisely as intended,” Trump was generating “serious soul-searching throughout the community.”<sup>9</sup>

Many IC veterans skipped the stage of worrying. Brennan had already crossed normative lines by calling Trump a “snake oil salesman.” After Helsinki he described the president’s behavior as “nothing short of treasonous.” Though Clapper had previously been more temperate in his criticism, he now took off the gloves. The former DNI, who had served in the IC for a half-century, questioned Trump’s fitness for office and expressed his concern specifically over his access to America’s nuclear codes. To varying degrees other IC stalwarts were likewise critical. When Trump sought retribution against Brennan by trying to revoke his security clearance, a dozen of them signed an open letter protesting Trump’s use of his authority as a “political tool.” Current intelligence officers held their tongues-- for good reason. Only DNI Coats affirmed the validity of the IC assessment. When asked about the likelihood of another Russian cyberattack shortly before the Helsinki summit, he replied, the “warning lights are blinking red again” He added that Russian efforts to subvert US elections continued unabated. The comments proved fatal to his relationship with Trump; he resigned along with his deputy, the long-time IC veteran Sue Gordon, the next summer.<sup>10</sup>

2018 proved a tipping point. Notwithstanding the frequent headlines during Trump’s first year about the investigation of Russian interference, the attention paid by Congress, the press, and the public to the dysfunctional relationship between Trump and the IC rarely correlated with policies. The reason was largely the historic boundary between the intelligence and policymaking communities. That boundary to an underappreciated degree quarantined the most political of Trump’s foreign and national security advisors, Mike Pompeo. A fierce ideologue and partisan, Pompeo was everything a CIA director was not supposed to be. Trump appointed him for that reason, and he did not disappoint. Eager to voice his opinion on everything, Pompeo challenged his own agency’s assessment of the 2016 election. He was also uncompromising in his portrayal of Iran as an Islamic State analogue and an unmitigated threat to the United States and its regional interests.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Remarks by President Trump and President Putin of the Russian Federation in Joint Press Conference, Helsinki, Finland, 16 July 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-president-putin-russian-federation-joint-press-conference/>.

<sup>9</sup> David Ignatius, “The Intelligence Community Has Never Faced a Problem Quite like This,” *Washington Post*, 19 July 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-intelligence-community-has-never-faced-a-problem-quite-like-this/2018/07/19/15c170fa-8b98-11e8-a345-a1bf7847b375\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-intelligence-community-has-never-faced-a-problem-quite-like-this/2018/07/19/15c170fa-8b98-11e8-a345-a1bf7847b375_story.html); David Priess, “The ‘Time of Troubles’ Is Back for America’s Spies,” *foreignpolicy.com*, 26 July 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/07/26/the-time-of-troubles-is-back-for-americas-intelligence-community/>.

<sup>10</sup> Ellen Nakashima, “Former Obama Spy Chiefs upbraid Trump for his Remarks about his Intelligence Agencies,” *Washington Post*, 21 July 2017; [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/former-obama-spy-chiefs-upbraid-trump-over-his-remarks-about-his-intelligence-community/2017/07/21/01764e7e-6e82-11e7-b9e2-2056e768a7e5\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/former-obama-spy-chiefs-upbraid-trump-over-his-remarks-about-his-intelligence-community/2017/07/21/01764e7e-6e82-11e7-b9e2-2056e768a7e5_story.html); Mattathias Schwartz, “John Brennan, Former C.I.A. Spymaster, Steps out of the Shadows,” *New York Times*, 27 June 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/27/magazine/john-brennan-president-trump-national-security-state.html>; Dylan Scott, “Former CIA Director: Trump-Putin Press Conference ‘Nothing Short of Treasonous,’” *Vox*, 16 July 2018, <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/7/16/17576804/trump-putin-meeting-john-brennan-tweet-treasonous>; Rachel Chason, “James Clapper Questions Trump’s Fitness, Worries about Access to Nuclear Codes,” *Washington Post*, 23 August 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/08/23/james-clapper-questions-trumps-fitness-worries-about-his-access-to-nuclear-codes/>; Statement from former senior intelligence officials, 16 August 2018, <https://www.politico.com/f/?id=00000165-472c-d4e8-ade7-7fbce0330002>; Julian E. Barnes, “Warning Lights Are Blinking Red,” *Top Intelligence Officer Says of Russian Attacks*, *New York Times*, 13 July 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/13/us/politics/dan-coats-intelligence-russia-cyber-warning.html>; Julian E. Barnes, “Dan Coats, the Intelligence Chief, Finds His Voice. Will It Anger Trump?” *New York Times*, 17 July 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/17/us/politics/dan-coats-intelligence-trump.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew Rosenberg, “Trump Likes When C.I.A. Chief Gets Political, but Officers Are Wary,” *New York Times*, 7 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/07/us/politics/mike-pompeo-cia.html>; Paul R. Pillar, “Where Does Mike Pompeo Stand on the Issues? Too Close to Trump,” *New York Times*, 13 March 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/13/opinion/mike-pompeo-issues-trump.html>.

Yet the IC stood by its assessment of the election and Iran's compliance with the requirements of the Obama-negotiated Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. In addition, Trump could not draw on intelligence reporting to support proposals to ban Muslim travel to the U.S. or claims that his meetings with and exchange of love letters with Kim Jung Un would lead to North Korea's denuclearization. IC estimates even contradicted Trump's denials about climate change.<sup>12</sup>

In 2018, Trump fired Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and moved Pompeo to Foggy Bottom, where he could freely exercise his muscle in the policymaking arena. Undeterred by Gina Haspel's complicity in the CIA's extraordinary rendition and enhanced interrogation techniques and role in the destruction of videotapes of the waterboarding sessions, Trump (who championed waterboarding) appointed her Pompeo's successor. Well regarded by the CIA and throughout the community for her professionalism and know-how, Haspel, the first female DCIA, was widely perceived as an improvement over Pompeo, for whom she had served as deputy. Under Haspel's leadership, the CIA went about its business of collecting and analyzing intelligence as dispassionately as possible. Yet Haspel's strategy for avoiding political minefields and maintaining the agency's independence—and for retaining her job—was to keep her head down. She allowed Helsinki to come and go without comment.<sup>13</sup>

Yet in the summit's aftermath, as rumors circulated that the Russians might have compromising material on Trump, the entanglement of Trump's hostility toward intelligence with policy became unavoidable. The surprise is that it took so long, and that the catalyst was Saudi Arabia, not Iran, North Korea, or even Russia. On October 2, 2018, a team of assassins identified as Saudis ambushed, suffocated, and dismembered the dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi. A columnist for the *Washington Post*, Khashoggi was renowned for targeting Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in scathing critiques of the Riyadh government. To the surprise of practically no one, by November robust intelligence left no doubt that Mohammed bin Salman had ordered the gruesome murder. Outraged legislators from both parties demanded punishment, including a ban on weapons sales of that Saudi Arabia was using to commit atrocities against civilians in Yemen. Trump wanted to hear nothing of the kind. He valued Saudi Arabia too much as a customer. His son-in-law valued the Crown Prince as a friend. Following his template for Russia, he dismissed the intelligence as inconclusive. In December both houses of Congress nevertheless voted to cancel the arms deal with the Saudis. The Senate failed to override Trump's veto.<sup>14</sup>

By that time both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue were focusing more on Ukraine than on Saudi Arabia. The IC's contribution to the inquiries that led to the impeachment of Donald Trump for seeking to enlist Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky's help to damage Joe Biden's potential candidacy for the presidency was minimal. Yet it was seminal. A CIA whistleblower brought to the attention of the IC's inspector general (IG) Trump's conversation with Zelensky and the inappropriate storage of the reconstructed transcript on a highly classified computer system. Judging the complaint "credible" and "urgent," the IG alerted Acting DNI Joseph Maguire. Initially Maguire resisted passing the complaint on to Congress, as required by law, justifying the delay by maintaining there was no urgency and the alleged offense was beyond the pale of the IC. Political pressure compelled Maguire to relent, setting off the inquiry that would lead to Trump's impeachment. National Security Council and State Department personnel took center stage during the hearings. Yet, to Trump, the IC's

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<sup>12</sup> Tim Weiner, "When Trump Savages his Intelligence Chiefs, the 'Deep State' Has Reason to Worry," *Washington Post*, 31 January 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/01/31/when-trump-savages-his-intelligence-chiefs-deep-state-has-reason-worry/>; Shane Harris, "Donald Trump Rejects Intelligence Report on Travel Ban," *Wall Street Journal*, 24 February 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/donald-trump-rejects-intelligence-report-on-travel-ban-1487987629>; Courtney Kube, Ken Dilanian and Carol E. Lee, "CIA report says North Korean won't denuclearize, but might open a burger joint," *nbcnews*, 29 May 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/north-korea/cia-report-says-north-korea-won-t-denuclearize-might-open-n878201>; Ishaan Tharoor, "The U.S.'s Top Spies Issue a Challenge to Trump's Agenda," *Washington Post*, 14 February 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/02/14/the-u-s-s-top-spies-issue-a-challenge-to-trumps-agenda>.

<sup>13</sup> Adam Goldman, "Gina Haspel, Trump's Choice for C.I.A., Played Role in Torture Program," *New York Times*, 13 March 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/13/us/politics/gina-haspel-cia-director-nominee-trump-torture-waterboarding.html>; Julian E. Barnes and Adam Goldman, "Gina Haspel Relies on Spy Skills to Connect With Trump. He Doesn't Always Listen," *New York Times*, 16 April 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/16/us/politics/gina-haspel-trump.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Julian E. Barnes, "C.I.A. Concludes That Saudi Crown Prince Ordered Khashoggi Killed," *New York Times*, 16 November 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/16/us/politics/cia-saudi-crown-prince-khashoggi.html>; Shane Harris and Josh Dawsey, "Trump Speaks with CIA about Khashoggi Killing, Says There Will be a Report by Tuesday," *Washington Post*, 17 November 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-says-hell-speak-with-cia-about-khashoggi-killing/2018/11/17/f5150774-ca72-11e8-bd89-eeef3b178206\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-says-hell-speak-with-cia-about-khashoggi-killing/2018/11/17/f5150774-ca72-11e8-bd89-eeef3b178206_story.html); Aaron Blake, "Trump Won't Believe His own Intelligence Community — Again," *Washington Post*, 17 November 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/11/15/trump-administration-is-trying-hard-not-blame-saudi-crown-prince-khashoggis-death/>.

complicity, exacerbated by Haspel's refusal to divulge the whistleblower's name, was unforgivable. Maguire compounded his "crime" by confirming Russia's meddling in the 2016 election in a briefing to Congress. Trump fired Maguire and for good measure the IG as well.<sup>15</sup>

Disappointed by Coats and Maguire, and unleashed by his impeachment acquittal and "exoneration" by the Mueller report, Trump turned the director's office at DNI headquarters into a game of musical chairs as he sought to fill it with a loyalist.<sup>16</sup> Trump had appointed Maguire DNI only after his first choice to replace Coats, John Ratcliffe, had failed to meet the lowest qualifications standard. Radcliffe rose to the top of Trump's list because he was a rabid booster of the president and critic of the Mueller investigation. But Ratcliffe couldn't even pass muster with Republican senators, so Trump chose Maguire, who had already been confirmed as director of the National Center for Counterterrorism (NCTC). Maguire sacrificed his job, however, when Trump interpreted his refusal to block the whistleblower's complaint and endorsement of the IC assessment of the 2016 election as acts of betrayal.<sup>17</sup>

Trump next appointed as acting DNI Richard Grenell, which a commentator in the *New York Times* described as "a calculated insult to the integrity and professionalism of the U.S. intelligence community." As acting DNI, Grenell, who had less intelligence experience than Ratcliffe and retained his position as ambassador to Germany, did not require Senate confirmation. He could legally serve for only a limited time, however. So Trump turned back to Ratcliffe, whom this time the GOP-dominated Senate confirmed. Trump had politicized the ODNI beyond most observers' imaginations. What is more, both Grenell and Ratcliffe declassified documents and initiated "reforms" that gutted ODNI components such as the NCTC. Although these initiatives were to Trump's liking, to intelligence professionals they degraded America's intelligence capabilities and posed grave threats to U.S. security.<sup>18</sup>

Trump's last year in office was an evolving effort to wreak revenge for IC sins dating back to 2016. As if following the script of a Greek tragedy, this period coincided with the spread and intensification of the COVID-19 pandemic. A Washington adage holds that there are only policy successes and intelligence failures. Even as Trump used his considerable power to eviscerate as well as politicize the IC, he sought to spin the pandemic calamity to conform to that adage. The 2020 election showed that he had fooled too few voters.

The IC could not estimate when the coronavirus would reach the United States, how rapidly it would spread, or how virulent it would become. Much depended on the government response. Still, as early as January 2020, and with increasing frequency, multiple agencies produced classified and urgent warnings that the Chinese were playing down the severity and potential spread of the virus' outbreak. As president-elect, Trump had famously declared that he was too smart to need intelligence briefings. Yet largely because of his relationship with Pompeo, he began taking them regularly. Still, he resisted reading the President's Daily Brief (PDB), insisting instead on oral briefings accompanied by pictures and graphics. Briefers also learned that maintaining his attention required avoiding topics with which he was not comfortable.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Morell and David Kris, "How the DNI-Congress Feud puts Intelligence and Democracy in Danger," *Washington Post*, 19 September 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/09/20/how-dni-congress-feud-puts-intelligence-democracy-danger/>; Joshua Rovner, "An Attack on Inspector General Signals Something Much Bigger," *War on the Rocks*, 22 April 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/an-attack-on-inspector-general-signals-something-much-bigger/>.

<sup>16</sup> Trump claimed the Mueller report exonerated him and authorized Attorney General William Barr to investigate the IC's contribution to launching the investigation and to declassify all documents he judged incriminating.

<sup>17</sup> Shane Harris, Ellen Nakashima, and Josh Dawsey, "Responding to News of Russian Interference, Trump Sends Chilling Message to U.S. Intelligence Community," *Washington Post*, 22 February 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/responding-to-news-of-russian-interference-trump-sends-chilling-message-to-us-intelligence/2020/02/22/1c63faec-5502-11ea-929a-64cfa7482a77\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/responding-to-news-of-russian-interference-trump-sends-chilling-message-to-us-intelligence/2020/02/22/1c63faec-5502-11ea-929a-64cfa7482a77_story.html).

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Stevenson, "Will Richard Grenell Destroy the Intelligence Community?" *New York Times*, 21 February 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/21/opinion/richard-grenell-trump.html>; Michael Crowley, Julian E. Barnes, Nicholas Fandos, and Maggie Haberman, "Trump Taps John Ratcliffe for Director of National Intelligence," *New York Times*, 28 February 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/28/us/politics/john-ratcliffe-director-national-intelligence.html>; Robert Draper, "Unwanted Truths: Inside Trump's Battles with the U.S. Intelligence Agencies," *New York Times Magazine*, 8 August 2020 (updated August 25), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/08/magazine/us-russia-intelligence.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Louis Nelson, "Trump: I don't Need Daily Briefings," *Politico*, 11 December 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/12/trump-briefings-232479>; Carol D. Leonnig, Shane Harris, and Greg Jaffe, "Breaking with Tradition, Trump Skips President's Written Intelligence Report and Relies on Oral Briefings," *Washington Post*, 9 February 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/breaking-with-tradition-trump-skips-presidents-written-intelligence-report-for-oral-briefings/2018/02/09/b7ba569e-0c52-11e8-95a5-c396801049ef\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/breaking-with-tradition-trump-skips-presidents-written-intelligence-report-for-oral-briefings/2018/02/09/b7ba569e-0c52-11e8-95a5-c396801049ef_story.html); John Walcott, "Willful Ignorance."

Before deciding that his most effective strategy for managing the catastrophic impact of the pandemic was to ignore, minimize, mock, or think magically about it, Trump denied that he had received these warnings. Then, when evidence surfaced of the PDBs and other reports, he claimed that the intelligence was too ambiguous to be actionable. That explanation betrayed Trump's ignorance rather than proving persuasive. Intelligence is invariably ambiguous. So next, Trump threw his briefer under the bus by claiming that she excluded the warning from her oral briefing because the intelligence was "unverified." That allegation was no more convincing. The president's briefer was an experienced intelligence officer. That the primary function of the IC is to provide the president with the earliest warning possible was deeply ingrained. Likewise, she knew that no item would be included in the PDB if it were not credible, and early warning normatively precludes awaiting verification, the IC definition of which is broad. She surely briefed him. Yet Trump denied she did and subsequently took his briefings from John Ratcliffe.<sup>20</sup>

The same pattern repeated itself over and over during the four years of the Trump presidency. The IC did its job as well as possible within the limitations imposed by the president, who obstructed. IC estimates are not always right; intelligence analysis is an art, not a science. Nevertheless, from what we know from testimony and reporting, the IC was correct regarding Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, North Korea, the pandemic, and much more. In each case, Trump's rejection of the analysis contributed to policies that were weak or non-existent and an IC that was degraded and demoralized. It spoke truth to power but power did not listen. According to its own criteria, it failed.

Needing no introduction to the critical importance of intelligence, Joe Biden in the immediate aftermath of his election set about fixing what Trump had broken, even as the president denied him access to classified reporting. Biden announced in late November his choice of Avril Haines as DNI, an encouraging sign of his commitment to reversing Trump's politicization and evisceration of the intelligence community. Haines is a veteran professional with a background in law and on record as decrying the politicization of the IC. Biden doubled down on this commitment in January 2021 by designating the highly-respected career diplomat William Burns, trusted by both Republican and Democratic presidents for over three decades, to direct the CIA. The juxtaposition of Biden's announcements of Haines and Burns with Trump's exploitation of the IC to reward loyalists underscores the potential for a sea change. Epitomizing Trump's last-ditch effort, Ezra Cohen-Watnick, whom shortly after the 2020 election the president appointed undersecretary of defense for intelligence, is a partisan ideologue and acolyte of Steven Bannon who worked hand-in-glove with Devin Nunes to subvert the Russian investigation.<sup>21</sup>

Haines and Burns will help. Yet Biden and the IC confront a difficult path to recovery. The IC suffered numerous resignations of senior intelligence officers, and Trump's war on the community is likely to deter a rush of America's best and brightest to replenish its ranks. It may take years to attract recruits with critical language skills, many of whom are likely to come from immigrant groups that Trump banned. Recruiting reliable foreign assets may prove even more difficult.<sup>22</sup>

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Inside President Trump's Troubled Intelligence Briefings," *time.com*, February 5, 2019, <https://time.com/5518947/donald-trump-intelligence-briefings-national-security/>.

<sup>20</sup> Micah Zenko, "The Coronavirus Is the Worst Intelligence Failure in U.S. History," *foreignpolicy.com*, 25 March 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/25/coronavirus-worst-intelligence-failure-us-history-covid-19>; Aki Peritz, "The Intelligence Community got the Pandemic Right. Then Politicians Botched It," *Washington Post*, 11 September 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/09/11/intelligence-community-covid-success/>; Natasha Bertrand, "Trump's Intel Briefer Breaks Her Silence," *Politico*, 6 July 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/06/trump-intelligence-briefer-breaks-silence-349936>. Julian E. Barnes and Adam Goldman, "Trump Is Said to Set Aside Career Intelligence Briefer to Hear From Advisors Instead," *New York Times*, 30 October 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/30/us/politics/trump-intelligence-briefings.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Daniel Klaidman, "Avril Haines, the Least Likely Spy," *newsweek.com*, 26 June 2013, <https://www.newsweek.com/2013/06/26/avril-haines-least-likely-spy-237616.html>; Michael Morrell, Avril Haines, and David S. Cohen, "Trump's Politicization of U.S. Intelligence Agencies Could End in Disaster," *foreignpolicy.com*, 28 April 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/28/trump-cia-intimidation-politicization-us-intelligence-agencies-could-end-in-disaster/>; David E. Sanger and Eric Schmitt, "Trump Stacks the Pentagon and Intel Agencies With Loyalists. To What End?" *New York Times*, 11 November 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/11/us/politics/trump-pentagon-intelligence-iran.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Edward Price, "I Didn't Think I'd Ever Leave the CIA. But Because of Trump, I Quit." *Washington Post*, 20 February 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/i-didnt-think-id-ever-leave-the-cia-but-because-of-trump-i-quit/2017/02/20/fd7aac3e-f456-11e6-b9c9-e83fce42fb61\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/i-didnt-think-id-ever-leave-the-cia-but-because-of-trump-i-quit/2017/02/20/fd7aac3e-f456-11e6-b9c9-e83fce42fb61_story.html); John Sipher, "Trump's Conspiracy Theories about Intelligence Will Make the CIA's Job Harder," *Washington Post*, 11 June 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/06/11/trumps-conspiracy-theories-about-intelligence-will-make-cias-job-harder/>.

With the help of Republicans within and outside of his administration, moreover, Trump crippled congressional oversight, undermined the authority of the IC's inspectors general, and ravaged key IC elements such as NCTC. Even more serious, he shattered the bonds of trust on which the IC's vital liaison relations with its allies' intelligence services depend. Trump has given foreign officials reason to doubt the word of counterparts whom the president called liars or to risk sharing classified intelligence that could leak. So might the American public doubt the IC's estimates should Biden cite them to justify a policy. Accordingly, it is tragically appropriate that even as photographs of a mob desecrating the Capitol building because they believed the president's lies about the 2020 presidential election bathed front pages, those same newspapers reported the ODNI analytic ombudsman's judgment that the IC's political appointees politicized agencies' analysis of foreign interference in that very election "out of concern over policymaker reactions."<sup>23</sup>

Donald Trump has bequeathed to Joe Biden a profoundly fractured society that some adversary may perceive as a window of opportunity for aggression. The most imperative mission of the intelligence community is to provide early warning. Will it be prepared to do so? Will Biden have confidence in its estimates? These are not questions that American should need to ask; Trump has made them necessary.

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<sup>23</sup> Julian E. Barnes, Charlie Savage and Adam Goldman. "Trump Administration Politicized Some Intelligence on Foreign Election Influence, Report Finds," *New York Times*, 8 January 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/08/us/politics/trump-administration-politicized-election-intelligence.html?smid=em-share>; Ellen Nakashima, assessments of Russian, "Political Appointees, Career Analysts Clashed over Chinese Interference in 2020 Election," *Washington Post*, 6 January 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russia-china-election-interference-intelligence-assessment/2021/01/08/7dc844ce-5172-11eb-83e3-322644d82356\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russia-china-election-interference-intelligence-assessment/2021/01/08/7dc844ce-5172-11eb-83e3-322644d82356_story.html).