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Review Essay 69

Jennifer E. Sims, *Decision Advantage: Intelligence in International Politics from the Spanish Armada to Cyberwar*. New York. Oxford University Press, 2022. ISBN: 9780197508046 (hardcover, \$49.95).

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In *Decision Advantage*, political scientist and former intelligence practitioner Jennifer E. Sims argues that intelligence activities have played a greater role in history than is generally acknowledged. Rather than adopting standard definitions of intelligence as stealing secrets or simply “what intelligence agencies do,” Sims defines it as competitive purposeful learning and an outgrowth of normal human curiosity.¹ Intelligence is, she argues, a measurable form of power that is available to decisionmakers who are engaged in competitive enterprise. It is an active search for opportunity, learning more than one’s competitor, and using that information to shape outcomes. The goal of intelligence, she argues, is to give a policymaker a *decision advantage*—the information and insights needed to understand an issue and better navigate through uncertainty. The leader with this decision advantage has more options than her rivals, allowing her to reshape the gameboard in her nation’s favor.

Sims’s study builds on a body of research exploring the value of intelligence to improving policymakers’ decisions. Prior works on the topic include Richard Betts’s *Enemies of Intelligence*, John Keegan’s *Intelligence and War*, and Robert Jervis’s *Why Intelligence Fails*.² What differentiates *Decision Advantage* from these earlier volumes is the breadth of Sims’s case studies as well as her focus on building theory. Sims conducted comparatively little archival and other primary source research. Instead, she draws heavily on secondary sources such as Russel F. Weigley’s *History of the United States Army*, Stephen Budiansky’s *Her Majesty’s Spymaster*, and Ernest May’s *Knowing One’s Enemies: Intelligence Assessment Before the Two World Wars*.³ What is new and interesting is Sims’s portrayal of well-known historical events as intelligence contests. Her framing provides new insights into well-known historical events and builds a strong case that intelligence activities were not only more prevalent than previously credited but were critical to determining historical outcomes.

¹ Mark Stout and Michael Warner, “Intelligence Is as Intelligence Does,” *Intelligence and National Security* 33, No. 4 (2018): 517–526.

² Richard Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence: Knowledge and Power in American National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); John Keegan, *Intelligence in War: Knowledge of the Enemy from Napoleon to Al-Qaeda* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003); and Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2010).

³ Russel F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977). Stephen Budiansky, *Her Majesty’s Spymaster* (London: Penguin Books, 2005); Ernest May, ed. *Knowing One’s Enemies: Intelligence Assessment before the Two World Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

Sims defines two broad arenas for exploring how intelligence impacts on decisionmaking: military and diplomatic. The categories are broad and eclectic. Sims's military cases range from Civil War battlefields and England's 1588 defense against the Spanish Armada to the manhunt for President Abraham Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth. Her diplomatic case studies include the use of information by European states before the First World War and British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's 1938 negotiations with German Chancellor Adolph Hitler. Sims concludes the volume with two chapters that assess the lessons her findings offer for intelligence theory and exploring how intelligence may support policymaking on contemporary issues, such as cyber threats, the opening of the Arctic, and the rise of artificial intelligence.

Sims's treatment of the 1588 English victory over the Spanish Armada illustrates how she expands the definition of intelligence beyond the usual focus on "secret spying and counterspying" (59). She frames the demise of the Spanish Armada as the denouement of a decades-long intelligence contest between Philip II of Spain and the English Queen Elizabeth I. Intelligence activities, she argues, played an important, if not crucial, role of determining England's victory. In doing so, she moves beyond the traditional definition of intelligence activity. English intelligence actors included not only Queen Elizabeth I and her spymasters William Cecil and Francis Walsingham, but the shipbuilders who studied captured Spanish vessels to build faster ships and the navigators who learned the shoals and currents of the English Channel.⁴

Elizabeth and her court collected information not only from spies with access to the Spanish king and court but from pirates, merchants, and fishermen who knew the Channel's winds and tides. Intelligence here represents not merely what intelligence agencies do but a mindset that drives continual learning. This framework favors the scrappy upstart who knows the odds are against her over the dominant actor, such as Philip II, who believed that he had the upper hand. The tradecraft of both Elizabeth and Phillip, which was politicized and often driven by wishful thinking, was wanting by modern standards. What matters, Sims argues, is not whether these efforts seem professional to modern eyes but how they gave one side or the other a relative informational advantage.

Sims's focus on the learning and adaptation of leaders shapes her narrative throughout her subsequent case studies. Neither Union nor Confederate leaders knew how to use intelligence to counter the many unknowns of terrain, popular sentiment, and new technologies at the start of the US Civil War. Victory went not to the generals who first created intelligence organizations or ran the most spies, she argues, but to those who could best adapt collection to identify opportunities. Union general Joseph Hooker relied on his newly created Bureau of Military Intelligence (BMI) to provide critical information about Confederate movements in the run-up to the 1863 Battle of Chancellorsville. When the BMI was unable to adapt to battlefield conditions, especially the pace of events, Hooker's decisionmaking was blinded.⁵

Sims finds a similar mismatch of capabilities and understanding among European powers in the days following the 1914 assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Policymakers didn't 'sleepwalk' into war,⁶ she

⁴ For more traditional accounts of the Spanish defeat, please see Colin Martin and Geoffrey Parker, *The Spanish Armada*, revised ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); Neil Hanson, *The Confident Hope of a Miracle: The True History of the Spanish Armada* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006); and Geoffrey Parker, *Success Is Never Final: Empire, War, and Faith in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

⁵ Previous scholarship on the role of intelligence in the Civil War includes: William B. Feis, *Grant's Secret Service: The Intelligence War from Belmont to Appomattox* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002); Edwin C. Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996); and David Hepburn Milton, *Lincoln's Spymaster: Thomas Haines Dudley and the Liverpool Network* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2003).

⁶ Christopher M. Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014); Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, 3 vols., trans. Isabella M. Massey (New York: Enigma Books, 2005); James Joll and Gordon Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 3rd ed. (New York: Pearson-Longman, 2007); Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Random House, 1962).

argues, but relied on outdated and insufficient sources of intelligence. Traditional intelligence networks centered around the doings of kings and their courts no longer delivered useful information. New intelligence organizations confused, rather than improved, decisionmaking as they struggled to understand who had influence in foreign governments and how to reach their own government's leaders. Decisionmakers dismissed intelligence reports that challenged their mindsets while presuming that their own intent would be transparent to other nations' leaders. The lesson Sims draws, that poor intelligence increases the risk of war, dates back to Sun Tzu. Her insights are valuable, though, in showing *how* intelligence collectors struggle in times of rapid change as well as the critical importance of leaders' understanding the gaps in what they know.

Decision Advantage adds complexity to our understanding of both historical events and the role of intelligence in making policy. Sims's cases are well-known, yet her interpretations open the door to new discussions of how learning and adaptation determine historical outcomes. How many other world events might be reassessed as intelligence contests using Sims's expanded definition of intelligence? Sims makes a strong case, too, for a greater focus on how leaders task their intelligence collectors as well as how they use the resulting intelligence. Intelligence collection, analysis, and dissemination are helpful, Sims suggests, only when they allow the policymaker to gain a relative advantage vis-à-vis her rivals. This is a two-sided equation, where even the best intelligence service will be of marginal use if leaders lack the vision to exploit their advantage. Sims's examples suggest that the difference is critical and that competitive learning represents an important and understudied factor in international relations.

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