Question 2 (Essay Worth 33 points)

As stated in “The U.S. Intelligence Community” (p. 531), “Although many have asserted that we need to expand our human intelligence capabilities; overwhelming evidence shows that that HUMINT can be very misleading.” With this thought in mind, what actions do you think the US Intelligence Community should take in order to increase the reliability and accuracy of HUMINT reporting? Your answer should address policies/procedures within the HUMINT tradecraft, the manner in which HUMINT derived intelligence is assessed, and how the capabilities of the other “INTs” can be leveraged to maximize HUMINTs effectiveness.

Improving HUMINT Reliability and Accuracy

HUMINT is simultaneously one of the most valuable intelligence-gathering disciplines and one of the most tenuous. In many cases the “boots on the ground” reporting from individuals directly involved with or in contact with crucial elements of a given situation – often termed “the ground truth” – cannot be substituted by any other means of collection. There are places where technology simply cannot reach and places where the limits of technology become obvious, such as extracting from the minds of terrorists what their next target may be. And yet, HUMINT is understandably also fraught with error, deception, denial, double-agents, doubling-crossing and naiveté – in short, it is affected by every human foible in existence. Reliability and HUMINT are terms that more often than not remain at opposite ends of the spectrum. And yet, there are ways to help improve the reliability of HUMINT collection and reporting.

For one thing, Richelson’s assessment in his book, “The U.S. Intelligence Community,” is entirely accurate where he states that you cannot replace HUMINT collection with technical collection or vice versa, but rather each should be utilized, wherever feasible, to augment and verify (or disprove) the other. [1]

HUMINT collection takes on a very broad range of methods and procedures and encompasses a variety of means to obtain information via friendly forces as well as adversaries. The most important issue at stake in any method of collection is trust. In the case of official-cover HUMINT collectors, generally the “handlers,” or those receiving the collected information and passing along collection requests and parameters, can trust the diplomats, emissaries and other personnel who have been placed in position to collect what information they can. However, the very fact that these agents are working under cover of diplomatic or other official personnel, makes them invariably suspect to the adversary government as collectors. Consequently, the information made “available” to such individuals, either overtly or subtly, may well be doctored or falsified in order to project whatever image the adversary government wishes to convey. It is necessary therefore to establish means by which all information can be verified through other sources. Although other HUMINT sources could be utilized, and when available may be consulted, ideally verification would be made by obtaining intelligence via other collection methods – IMINT, SIGINT, COMINT or whatever other means is available and applicable.
Intercepted diplomatic communiqueés (COMINT) could, for instance, be used to verify a country’s real stance on nuclear weapons against their public stance.

Collectors also need to be well trained in discretion and the ability to detect information that is truly of value, filtering out what they can that is not. These official-cover collectors, properly trained, should be able to use their eyes and ears and other powers of observation to maintain a constant awareness of their surroundings and times the adversary may inadvertently let valuable clues slip. The agent should also have enough awareness of his host country’s situation to detect when certain pieces of information do not fit and may thus be highly suspect. In other words, all information should be given the basic, “does this make sense?” evaluation.

In the case of HUMINT collection via adversary contacts, or via those who purport to no longer be adversarial but rather defectors or sympathizers to the U.S. cause – it becomes all the more necessary to handle all information gained through them as fully suspect until proven otherwise. The individual themselves should be under constant (albeit covert) monitoring to ensure their trustworthiness – at least until such can be established unquestionably, as in the case of Colonel Oleg Penkovsky, deputy head of the Soviet Military Intelligence Bureau, who during part of President Kennedy’s tenure, provided invaluable information to the United States on Soviet capabilities, intentions and views.[2]

This is in contrast to the way that CIA handlers treated a Jordanian doctor and “former” terrorist that Jordanian Intelligence had picked up and thought they converted. This contact was brought to a U.S. base in Afghanistan presumably to pass on valuable intelligence to CIA personnel regarding key leaders in Al Qaeda. Instead of being properly body searched or otherwise scanned before being allowed into the compound, he was escorted on base in the back seat of a vehicle, and driven to a building where he was to be interviewed. In light of his high value as an informant, almost a dozen CIA and other American personnel stood outside to greet him. As he prepared to exit the vehicle and avoid security personnel about to search him, he slipped out the opposite door, began speaking in Arabic and then reached under his robe to detonate the explosives he was wearing. Seven CIA personnel and his Jordanian handler were killed in the blast and several others sustained severe leg injuries.

CIA director, Leon E. Panetta, revealed in a later interview that 25 days prior to the meeting one of the CIA’s intelligence officers was informed by a Jordanian intelligence agent that they had suspicions about the “former” terrorist, indicating he might be trying to lead agents into an ambush.[3] The CIA officer put aside that warning on the basis of insufficient evidence. Although Panetta stated that in the circumstances the officer’s conclusion and subsequent failure to pass that information along was “reasonable,” clearly some of the most basic rules regarding the handling of double agents, and especially of contacts given by a foreign country, were ignored. Panetta also declared that widespread security and communication breakdowns led to the devastating attack. Most of these amounted to not following the official rules and guidelines for proper communication procedures so that key people did not receive critical information.
Apparently there were also too many personnel involved in the mission without a clear director to coordinate efforts – and threat warnings.[4]

From this example, it is evident that one of the primary ways to increase the reliability of HUMINT is very simply to start by actually following the rules and procedures already established in the tradecraft for handling potential informants that have dubious motives and backgrounds. Thorough searches of all their communications and of all their contacts must be carried out by U.S. intelligence personnel. As it turns out, the doctor had an active Islamist blog and was a regular contributor to al-Hesbah, an online forum run by extremists.[5] Interviews with his wife after his death revealed her knowledge of just how anti-American the doctor was and her incredulity that someone would think he might be an informant for the CIA or even Jordanian intelligence. She revealed to interviewers the great guilt her husband felt that he only wrote about Jihad and never had an opportunity to actively participate. That information alone, if obtained prior to the attack, could have set off sufficient alarm bells to warrant more careful analysis of the situation and cautious handling.

The almost desperate need the IC had for intelligence regarding some of Al Qaeda’s top leaders was cited as probable reason why the terrorist was treated to such reduced scrutiny and given far more credit than he should have been. Unfortunately, breaking some of the most basic rules cost eight lives and garnered no information.

If the value of intelligence is proportionate to the risk involved in obtaining it, then HUMINT is indeed a most valuable collection discipline. However, as with anything inherently dangerous, it must be handled with extreme care, continual proactive training of personnel and observation of safety guidelines already in place. It is no different than handling dynamite, one must follow the safety procedures as established or risk getting badly injured or killed. In this way, the United States can reap the benefits of HUMINT while minimizing the risks involved.

Endnotes:

2. Christopher Andrew, For the President’s Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush (New York: HarperPerennial, 1996), 267
4. Ibid
5. Joby Warrick and Peter Finn, “Suicide Bomber Who Attacked CIA Post in Afghanistan was Trusted Informant from Jordan,” Washington Post, Tuesday, January 5, 2011

Bibliography


