

ONE

## WHY THIS? WHY NOW?

Two months into the Trump administration, Jim Comey, the head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Admiral Mike Rogers, the director of the National Security Agency, were asked in an open congressional hearing if the president they were serving was misleading the nation with his claims that they or their British friends had wiretapped him while he was president-elect.

They said that he was.

It was a remarkable moment. That question doesn't get asked very often in open parliamentary session in a democracy, let alone get answered—to say nothing of being answered in that way. It made me proud to have been associated with an intelligence community that felt free to do that.

But that was not the end of the matter, at least as far as the White House was concerned. The administration stuck to its alternate version—Obama wiretapped me—even after the FBI and

## THE ASSAULT ON INTELLIGENCE

NSA chiefs had confirmed that objective reality was clearly otherwise.

That had an effect on me, too. It reminded me of when I walked through the streets of war-ravaged Sarajevo as head of intelligence for American forces in Europe. It was 1994 and we were there to provide intelligence to badly stretched UN forces that were trying to police a nonexistent cease-fire among the warring Serb, Croat, and Muslim factions.

Former national security adviser Brent Scowcroft, who as a junior officer had been the assistant air attaché at the U.S. embassy in Belgrade, once told me there were no Boy Scouts in the Balkans. Enduring labels of good and bad were less useful as predictors of behavior than more transient measures of who was strong and who was weak. Still, Sarajevo had been a beautiful city, home to the Winter Olympics a scant ten years earlier. The fast-flowing Miljacka River cut through the center of town, with hills rising abruptly on either side. Sprinkled among Austrian-era government buildings were minarets, steeples, and onion domes.

But now I could also see artillery pointing down from those wooded hills and witness the destructive product of their work in the streets below. I wondered what manner of man could pull the lanyard to fire on his former neighbors, or shoot at unarmed civilians lined up for scarce water at a shuttered brewery.

What struck me most, though, as I walked about the city was not how much Sarajevans were different from the rest of us, but how much they weren't. This had obviously been a cultured, tolerant, even vibrant city. The veneer of civilization, I sadly concluded then, was quite thin—perhaps a natural thought for an intelligence officer, whose profession consistently trends pessimistic, whose work is consumed by threats and dangers, and who

routinely travels to some of the world's darkest, most troubled places.

Later I learned that intelligence officers were not so alone in their dark thoughts. Robin Wright, the American chronicler of the Middle East's woes, told me that Israel's Shimon Peres once despairingly lamented to her, "We're so primitive. We're so very primitive."

Over the years it became clear to me that the structures, processes, and attitudes that protect us from Thomas Hobbes's world of "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" lives are not naturally occurring things. They are inherently fragile and demand careful tending if they are to survive.

That brought me to the idea of this book, which is not that civil war or societal collapse is necessarily imminent or inevitable here in America, but that the structures, processes, and attitudes we rely on to prevent those kinds of occurrences are under stress, and that many of the premises on which we have based our governance, policy, and security are now challenged, eroded, or simply gone.

Deeply involved in this is the question of truth. It was no accident that the *Oxford English Dictionary's* word of the year in 2016 was "post-truth," a condition where objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. Liberal British academic and philosopher A. C. Grayling characterized the emerging post-truth world to me as "over-valuing opinion and preference at the expense of proof and data." Oxford Dictionaries president Casper Grathwohl predicted that the term could become "one of the defining words of our time."<sup>1</sup>

Grayling is a scholar of the Enlightenment, and he concedes

that this new dynamic challenges the mode of thought dominant in the West since that era, a mode that until recently valued experience and expertise, the centrality of fact, humility in the face of complexity, the need for study, and a respect for ideas.

At its best, the craft of intelligence, at least as practiced in the Western liberal tradition, pursues these Enlightenment values. Intelligence gathers, evaluates, and analyzes information and then disseminates its conclusions for use, study, or refutation. So the erosion of Enlightenment values would certainly devalue or even threaten the practice of good intelligence. For me that was reason enough to guard against it.

But intelligence may have responsibilities here beyond self-preservation. It may share a broader duty with other truth tellers—scholars, journalists, scientists, to name a few—to preserve the commitment and ability of our society to base important decisions on our best judgment of what constitutes objective reality.

There are fundamental changes—really fundamental changes—afoot in the world and in this country. This book is about those global and domestic developments and the role that American intelligence plays in identifying and responding to them. Today's strains on *all* truth tellers compel me to write about the relevance and sustainability of the work of *my* truth tellers—the modern intelligence enterprise. That enterprise—which I have defended as essential not just to American safety, but to American liberty—now seems at odds with important elements of American life. And the stress points are no longer the traditional issues of how intelligence *acquires* information: debates about surveillance, interrogations, privacy, secrecy, oversight, and the like. The new issues have to do with how intelli-

gence uses information, or, more accurately, how intelligence and other fact-based analysis will fare in a world in which even a sophisticated society like our own is trending toward decision making anchored on a priori, near-instinctive narratives—decision making based on that which can be made popular or widely held rather than on that which is objectively true.

And here intelligence is in the bunker with some unlikely mates: journalism, scholarship, the courts, law enforcement, and science. Many of these have been critics of aspects of intelligence in the past, but not so much now. Most practitioners of these other vocations now seem to recognize that intelligence professionals, like themselves, are evidence-based and pursue truth—ultimately their only safe haven—even if methodologies differ and even if *all* of us fall short of our ideals. Collectively these disciplines seem to recognize that it is not a coincidence that as a group they experience frequent and intense friction points with team Trump.

My personal lens, of course, is intelligence, and so the specifics that follow are anchored there, but the themes they represent are more universal and some of this narrative reflects an attempt to more fully appreciate current and historical commentary about our society and about who we are and who we want to be. My readings and especially my conversations have been fascinating, allowing me to test my own concepts, explore new ones, and in general be impressed by the seriousness of many American and international observers.

Of course, I have spent time talking with members of the intelligence and policy communities. Admittedly it was easier to gain access to those no longer in government, and that has required me to appreciate and synthesize (and occasionally discount) some observations and judgments accordingly.

## THE ASSAULT ON INTELLIGENCE

It should also be clear that I am no longer in government, so this in no way pretends to be a continuation of the memoir of my work there, the views of an internal eyewitness, so to speak. But I do remain a concerned *external* witness, so this should be seen as an application of my experience to current events as revealed by public accounts and available documents, enriched by conversations I have had with old and new friends.

There are some very good people out there, people with long and distinguished careers spent in the service of discovering and reporting objective reality, who now find themselves in some really tough spots—tough, and a little dangerous, too. People such as James Comey, the head of the FBI, fired and publicly humiliated by the president for—according to the president—looking into the president’s campaign and its alleged connections to the Russian Federation.

We’re really breaking new ground when, at the six-month point of the new administration, the former head of CIA, John Brennan, and the former director of national intelligence, Jim Clapper—with more than seven decades of experience between them and a record of service for both political parties—spend a rainy afternoon in Aspen telling hundreds that they harbor deep concerns about Russian election interference, openly criticize President Trump for refusing to face that reality, and warn that “in some respects we are a government in crisis.”

Indeed, although this is essentially a story about America, the Russians are never far from the main plotline—identifying, exploiting, and deepening American fissures for their own ends. That is a remarkable tale in its own right, a tale of new technologies harnessed to old purposes.

Equally remarkable is how many actions in America mani-

fested indifference to what the Russians were doing (“I love WikiLeaks!”), or echoed Russian themes (it’s a “rigged system”), or saw no issues with proffers of assistance (Trump Tower, June 9), or pushed back so long against the reality of Russian actions (“nobody really knows”).

There is no effort here to build a case for or against collusion. But whatever emerges from Robert Mueller’s investigation, it should not obscure the bigger story, which is still not adequately understood, and which is in a way this book’s climactic case study, namely that Russia has been actively seeking to damage the fabric of American democracy, and the Trump administration’s glandular aversion to even looking at this squarely, much less mounting a concerted response to it, is an appalling national security lapse.

Indeed, there is clear evidence of what I would call convergence, the convergence of a mutually reinforcing swirl of presidential tweets and statements, Russian-influenced social media, alt-right websites and talk radio, Russian press like RT, and even mainstream U.S. media like Fox News—all of whom do things for their own purposes, but all of which fits nicely with Russian purposes to sharpen and sustain divisions here.

And it continues. A quick look at articles pushed by Kremlin-oriented accounts on Twitter in early January shows that attacks on Democrats and liberals comprised more than a quarter, with discrediting Fusion GPS and the Steele dossier at 14 percent, and pushing “deep state” narratives and conspiracies constituting 13 percent. Sound familiar? When Trump speaks, the Russians amplify.

Early on in the Trump administration, never-Trumper Eliot Cohen, political scientist and historian, director of the Strategic

Studies Program at Johns Hopkins University, and formerly Condoleezza Rice's counselor at the Department of State, tweeted a note that has now become a memelike all-purpose observation of many administration actions: "This isn't normal. Its [*sic*] not humane, its not thought through, its not necessary, its not wise, its not decent and above all, its not American."

The accuracy and relevance of Cohen's words have not been confined to issues directly tied to the intelligence community. Last summer's tragic events in Charlottesville and the president's tone-deaf and ahistorical response come to mind.

There has been plenty of pushback against administration actions, and in the pages that follow I will often say that that is a good thing. But even that is not without dangers. Jack Goldsmith is now at Harvard Law School, but in 2003–2004 he was head of the Department of Justice's Office of Legal Counsel, where he ripped up and rewrote practically every legal opinion on which NSA and CIA were depending to underpin their most aggressive activities. Surprisingly, we became good friends. Jack doesn't like Donald Trump: he describes him as a "Frankenstein's monster of past presidents' worst attributes." But although he calls him "a norm-busting president without parallel," he also points out that institutions that have been pushing back have often defied their own norms in the process: leaks from the intelligence community; overly enthusiastic judicial opinions; new standards of negativity for the media. "The breakdown in institutions," he concludes, "mirrors the breakdown in social cohesion" that nurtured Trumpism in the first place. He identifies that as perhaps "the worst news of all for our democracy."<sup>2</sup>

Controversies come and go so fast in the Trump administration that it's all too easy to lose sight of the big picture, the major plotlines, the things that really matter. But even within intelligence and intelligence-related matters, I have to admit to a certain exhaustion in just trying to keep up. I have given myself the license here to choose those things that I think are particularly instructive of the larger questions. The way the president has publicly criticized and humiliated Attorney General Jeff Sessions will, for example, have deeper, broader, and longer effects on the American intelligence community than his pissy wintertime tweets comparing intelligence professionals to Nazis.

By way of a guide, the flow of the book is essentially chronological. The next chapter will be a quick attempt to describe the state of America and the intelligence community (not exactly paradise) as Donald Trump descended that escalator at Trump Tower. Following that come three chapters of the campaign (unlike any other), the transition (such as it was), and the first hundred days (chaos, often on steroids). Chapter 6 looks at the impact of the president on several core national security issues, chapter 7 explores the complex relationship between Trump, truth, and Russia, and the final chapter is my attempt to draw some conclusions—from an admittedly still evolving plot—about truth, intelligence, and America.

So there will be a lot here about Donald Trump. That's unavoidable. I have tried to be fair, although much of what I write will be judged as unfairly negative. I got that complaint in the summer of 2016 as I was engaged in a friendly debate on the *PBS NewsHour* with Kris Kobach, Kansas secretary of state and hard-liner on

immigration, voter fraud, and Barack Obama's birthplace. It was, as I said, a polite session and Kris suggested that I had to get to know the quite different, personal Donald Trump. I replied that all I had to go on was the public persona, the one running for president, and if there were a different Trump in hiding, the campaign might think about rolling *him* out. There wasn't and they didn't, of course.

All that said, though, a discussion of a post-truth world, alternative facts, fact-free decision making, and outright lying eclipses any one man or administration. In other words, this is not and cannot just be about the person of the president.

President Trump says that he is not alone, but rather heads a powerful grassroots movement. I agree. He is as much effect as he is cause of the post-truth world in which we find ourselves today. A lot went into getting us here.

Indeed, in the first week of the Trump administration, the *Economist's* prestigious Intelligence Unit's annual Democracy Index ranked the United States a "flawed democracy" in the company of states like Italy, France, Mongolia, South Korea, and Estonia and no longer a "full democracy" like Australia, Norway, Germany, and Canada. The report saw Mr. Trump not as the cause but rather the "beneficiary of the low esteem in which US voters hold their government, elected representatives and political parties." With or without Trump, the U.S. score would have slipped into the second tier. But the *Economist* added, "Populist parties and politicians are often not especially coherent and often do not have convincing answers."<sup>3</sup>

Will we emerge from this tested and stronger? Or will we be weaker and wounded—or even permanently altered? The founders of the Republic were disciples of the Enlightenment. The

documents they left us are infused with Enlightenment values. Jefferson writes of an informed citizenry being the heart of a democracy and that when well informed the people can be trusted with their own governance. But all of that is premised on an Enlightenment vision of truth—truth based on as perfect a view of objective reality as we can muster. It is the linchpin of the whole American experiment.

What becomes of the legitimacy of that vision—the legitimacy of that experiment—in a world that has redefined or is simply indifferent to truth? And are we about to find out? That's a question whose answer goes well beyond the craft of intelligence.