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A Reflection of Sherman Kent

(U) The death of Sherman Kent on 11 March 1986 at the age of 82 brought on a rush of memories of an older, simpler time and of a towering figure who, perhaps as much as any single person, transformed a practice into a profession. We are all in his debt. This is a modest tribute to him from one who knew him but casually, yet could never forget him and his contributions.

(U) To call the Washington intelligence scene of the mid-1950s a "community" would be projecting backward a later concept. Emerging from the Korean War (or Police Action), the Central Intelligence Agency was a half dozen years old, and the distinction between CIA and the Intelligence Community role of its Director as Director of Central Intelligence was a nuance exploited in later years. Five years younger, sharing the heritage of being successor to several earlier organizational arrangements (but, it might be argued, having even earlier and deeper roots than CIA), was what local news media were later to delight in calling the Super Secret National Security Agency, occupying the "low profile" which kept it even from appearing in the official Government Organization Manual during its early years. Mr. Hoover's FBI maintained its arm's length involvement, partly reflecting bureaucratic turf fights of World War II, and each of the military services operated its own intelligence apparatus. NSA occupied the former girl's school at Arlington Hall, Virginia; CIA occupied a variety of buildings, but especially a group in the Foggy Bottom area of Georgetown clustered around a former brewery. Both of these sites had been in use since World War II. High rise, highly visible, clearly identified structures were in the future. The State Department maintained a small stable of experts, respected by their intelligence colleagues, perhaps more than by the diplomats they served through their distasteful business. This was an era in which secret intelligence was conducted in the traditional way, secretly. It was two decades before what one wit termed our period of indecent exposure.

(U) This was the scene for Sherman Kent. A Yale historian (who eschewed the title "doctor"), he was one of "Wild Bill" Donovan's recruits for the wartime Office of Strategic Services (OSS). After the war, he had served as acting director of the State Department's intelligence and research unit, taught for a stint at the National War College, and returned to Yale as a history professor. The Korean War brought him back to CIA, and for a decade and a half he served as director of the Office of National Estimates there, retiring in 1967 with honors from the Agency and the President.

(U) The mobilization of intellect in World War II was phenomenal, not unlike the extraordinary quality which characterized our national leadership during the Revolution and the formative years. In contrast to the demobilization which had always been the result of our earlier victories, the 1947 National Security Act was a departure. We tried to preserve and improve on the wartime experience of cooperation among our armed services and the intelligence capabilities we had developed. Among those who departed the ranks many returned during the Korean War. The era of the fifties thus saw many of

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the giants of the World War II period still active. The sense of dedication to the mission still prevailed. There was little consideration of career (or careerism) because intelligence was still a service to be performed. It was still an art or - in the later term used so appropriately by Allen Dulles - a craft. Since the first generation was still active, it was difficult to think of it as a profession, rather than an engaging, on-going activity. But the term "professional" was getting more attention: to do something "professionally" or "like a professional" was a mark of distinction, as standards of expectation began to develop in the performance of duty. To my thinking, Kent's seminal work, a small tome called *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy* (1949), was both catalyst and landmark, both chart and compass. The distillation of his knowledge and experience, expressed in concise but erudite wording (the first offering of professional vocabulary), it laid out a model for strategic intelligence production. Kent's "degrees of probability" shared with the newcomer his experience and the fruit of his deliberation over degrees of uncertainty and the need for a frame of reference for sharing this with the decision-maker recipient of an intelligence report.

(b)(3)-P.L. 86-36 (C) My introduction to Kent's *Strategic Intelligence* came from my section chief at the time, [redacted] whose husband was with CIA, as I recall. Carried over into our "product" (5 x 8 "bulletin card" translation) from the practices and discipline of cryptanalysis, we expressed uncertainty in terms of A (certain), B (less so), C, and D "val," short for "validity," or "percent." In that less centralized and standardized period there was little uniformity, much "local practice." Some units determined not to publish "D%" or to limit such speculative information to a footnote. We scrupulously preserved the distinction between the COMINT and our COMMENT, the latter being the informed view of the translator. (Some units at various times forbade the use of the carefully distinguished comment, fearing that we could be accused of stepping beyond our role of producing "intelligence information" - i.e., little more than processed grist for the intelligence analysts' mill - and appearing to be producing intelligence, "finished intelligence.") But already bulletin cards (convenient forms for reproducing and filing) were giving way to thinner sheets of paper - the "report" format - to meet the demands of increased production through compilations, gists, etc. Traffic intelligence (T/A results) did not lend itself to the bulletin card format, which was generally reserved for translations. Various factors led us toward more of a prose format report, generally patterned after the journalistic style with a title or headline and a lead paragraph containing the essentials - both forcing conclusions as to significance on the reporter. (This was echoed in later years with the adoption of titles for translations, even before bulletin cards yielded to paper.) And, through this period of a decade or so, "electrical transmission" (in contrast to "hard copy") became less the expensive (thus high priority) exception and more the rule for our output. To avoid the choppy, C/A-influenced conventions which characterized the translation, reports needed adjectives, qualifiers, modifiers. Per Kent's model, as we came to employ it, a statement of fact required no qualification (A% or A val) - but it had to be that: a statement based on fact, not speculation. "Probable" or "probably" replaced B val; "possible" or "possibly" replaced C val. A "tentative" identification or statement replaced D val when it was thought appropriate to share such "below the threshold" data with the reader. Source (T/A vice C/A), form (report instead of verbatim translation), and writing convention played their parts in the tug of war between ourselves and the officially designated producers of *finished intelligence*, as we sought to make our product more useful, meet the demand, and compensate for losses in C/A "readability." This was the general atmosphere in which I first met Sherman Kent.

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A REFLECTION OF SHERMAN KENT

(U) Kent was the National Intelligence Estimate – process, product, and principal. There was a Board of National Estimates (BNE) of grand old men, supported by the CIA office of that name. It heard and guided the deliberations of the various agencies concerned and shaped the “consensus,” if that term might be broadly applied for this period. Our very presence in the process was an offense to some of the hard liners, especially among the military intelligence analysts. As mere producers of “processed raw data,” who needed to hear our opinions? But the quality and expertise of our analysts became increasingly appreciated, even beyond “the facts” we produced, and we evolved from occasional invitees to participants and colleagues in the undertaking, still cautioned by our leaders, however, to distinguish our facts from our opinions.

~~(FOUO)~~ Such a deliberation was going on on a hot afternoon in the last half of the fifties. We were locked into our positions, meeting in the designated room of one of the “brewery cluster” structures. The hour was late. Tempers had flared and settled. We were tired, our originality exhausted. Reluctant to admit the deadlock, our BNE chairman withdrew to consult with Kent. A few minutes later the author of *Strategic Intelligence* came in. Coatless, red suspenders prominent, Kent had the ability to fill a room with his presence – easy to imagine as the classroom professor. Lest those red galluses conjure up the image of Clarence Darrow or the tobacco-chewing country lawyer, I must quickly add to the picture a properly tailored vest and trousers of excellent quality and taste, worn with accustomed ease. He scowled at us, irritated obviously at the delay, at our thickheadedness. After dressing us down he asked what our problem was. His questions were few and to the point. He was uninterested in what I, at least, thought were the pertinent, behind-the-scenes considerations. His conclusion (advice? direction?) was succinct and struck directly to the heart of our dilemma. His solution, it seemed to me, was “fuzzywording,” ambiguous, neither black nor white. As an “area specialist” I was offended. He didn’t even care about “the facts,” his concern was mechanics. He left us alone. Then I realized what he had done. Of course! How obvious the answer is after you see it! The work of a surgeon – clean, neat, precise. The reader would receive a clear representation of both our certainty and doubt, all conveyed through just the right choice of words, the words which had eluded us. The master’s touch.

~~(FOUO)~~ *Strategic Intelligence* continued to be my first suggestion of recommended reading to the newcomer. I was occasionally aware of Sherman Kent’s activity, but some years passed before my next formal encounter with him. Under circumstances similar to those of the fifties, I found myself again part of an especially contentious Estimate. Kent again intervened. He invited us to come down and meet with him, “just for a little chat.” Four of us went, office and division chiefs. The setting was conducive to a free exchange, Kent accompanied by several colleagues. No longer the invited country cousins, we shared Kent’s hospitality and obvious respect as partners. In less than a decade NSA had attained full acceptance in “the Community.” This was a different Kent, worried, seeking understanding of an area and situation strange to him. He listened more than he spoke, and when he spoke he showed how he had listened. He was gracious in his kind words back to our Director (General Carter).

(U) I don’t recall that I saw Sherman Kent, other than fleetingly, after that. He retired, as I said, in 1967. CIA’s *Studies in Intelligence* recalls him with its annual Sherman Kent Award for excellence in professional writing, established while he was alive to appreciate the gesture. *Strategic Intelligence* went through a later edition. But, when his name came up, I often wondered what Sherman Kent thought of us as we had become: the Agency, which meant so much to him; the circle of agencies called the Intelligence Community; our “indecent exposure” and the strange world of today in which we see public debate of “covert” action. Are we a profession? Certainly we are more

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professional, we have better tools, keen (if not keener) minds. We have grown. We at least worry about standards and standardization. The founding fathers have mostly passed from the scene, as have many of the "second generation." Around the Community we assimilate a new generation into our ranks, trying to absorb them into our "corporate culture" even as they by their presence change that culture. If we're fortunate, there will be another Sherman Kent among them. One thing we know: there was a Sherman Kent in our past. Now he is gone.

DAVID W. GADDY

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