

GETTING TO KNOW THE PRESIDENT

Second Edition

INTELLIGENCE BRIEFINGS OF PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES,

1952–2004

John L. Helgerson

Center for the Study of Intelligence
Central Intelligence Agency
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*To Martha,
Katherine, and Paul*

JOHN L. HELGERSON

Mr. Helgerson was the Central Intelligence Agency's inspector general from 2002 until his retirement in 2009. Previously, he served as chairman of the Intelligence Community's National Intelligence Council and deputy director of the National Imagery and Mapping Agency.

Mr. Helgerson began his career in government as an analyst of African politics at the CIA. At varying points he headed units responsible for coverage of Africa, Latin America, and Europe. He served in a number of senior management posts, including deputy director for intelligence and director of congressional affairs.

Prior to his government service, Mr. Helgerson was an assistant professor of political science at the University of Cincinnati and a research affiliate of the University of Zambia in Lusaka. He specialized in international relations and African politics.

A native of South Dakota, Mr. Helgerson graduated from Saint Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, and received M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Duke University in Durham, North Carolina.

He is the author of *Getting To Know the President: CIA Briefings of Presidential Candidates, 1952–1992*.

Mr. Helgerson has received a number of awards and commendations, including the National Intelligence Distinguished Service Medal, CIA's Distinguished Career Intelligence Medal, and NIMA's Distinguished Civilian Service Award.

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FOREWORD

The Central Intelligence Agency is more of a presidential service organization than perhaps any other component of the US government. Since 1952, CIA, and now the Intelligence Community, have provided presidential candidates and presidents-elect with intelligence briefings during their campaigns and transitions. These briefings have helped presidents be as well informed as possible on international developments from the day they take office.

In addition to their central, substantive purpose, these briefings usually have also served as the IC's introduction to the "First Customer," the individual who, more than any other, determines what place intelligence will have in the national security hierarchy. They have been crucial in giving an early sense of the personalities of the candidates and presidents-elect, their knowledge of world affairs, and their views of how intelligence and the IC can best support national security decisionmaking.

Getting To Know the President by John Helgerson makes a singular contribution to the literature of intelligence by describing this important process of information sharing between the IC and the chief executive. First published in 1996 and now revised and updated to include accounts of intelligence support to candidates and presidents-elect in the three elections between then and 2004, Helgerson's study provides unique insights into the mechanics and content of the briefings, the interaction of the participants, and the briefings' effect on the relationships presidents have had with their intelligence services. His observations on how and what to brief during the campaign and transition periods are essential reading for members of the community charged with that responsibility in the future and seeking to learn from the best practices of their predecessors.

In his 1996 foreword to the first edition of this book, Christopher Andrew took note of the "simple but important fact that each president is different." From that point flows another explanation for this second edition. Prepared then, as now, under the sponsorship of the Center for the Study of Intelligence, this work reflects CSI's and the CIA's commitment to the examination, and continual reexamination, of the profession of intelligence in the United States. This effort has been manifest in products of many kinds, unclassified and clas-

FOREWORD

sified, with many of the latter eventually released wholly or in part to the public. As with other dimensions of the IC's and CIA's work, service to policymakers and presidents demands both the scrutiny of today's practitioners of intelligence and the perspective of historians to follow. While this book is primarily intended to serve those who must consider the IC's role in a presidential election year, it is also hoped that it will help illuminate as much as possible for others the nature of CIA and IC service to past presidents, while at the same time keeping faith with the essential confidentiality to which sitting presidents are entitled.

David Robarge
Chief Historian
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FOREWORD TO FIRST EDITION

GETTING TO KNOW THE PRESIDENT

This is an important and original book. How world leaders understand or misunderstand, use or fail to use, the intelligence available to them is an essential but still under-researched aspect both of modern government and of international relations. The making of the American intelligence community has transformed the presidency of the United States. Before the First World War, the idea that the United States might need a foreign intelligence service simply did not occur to most Americans or to their presidents. After the war, Woodrow Wilson publicly poked fun at his own pre-war innocence: “Let me testify to this, my fellow citizens, I not only did not know it until we got into this war, but I did not believe it when I was told that it was true, that Germany was not the only country that maintained a secret service!” Wilson could scarcely have imagined that, less than half a century later, the United States would be an intelligence superpower. Though the intelligence nowadays available to the president is, like all human knowledge, incomplete and fallible, it probably exceeds—at least in quantity—that available to any other world leader past or present.

The starting point for the study of relations between presidents and their intelligence communities since the Second World War are the briefings they receive from the CIA before their inauguration. John L. Helgerson is well equipped to write this path-breaking study of these briefings. A political scientist before joining the CIA, he served as the Agency’s deputy director for intelligence during the Bush administration and was head of the team that briefed Bill Clinton in Little Rock after the 1992 election. In addition to having access to classified files, Mr. Helgerson has interviewed previous Agency briefers and all surviving former presidents.

Both briefers and former presidents are agreed on the simple but important fact that each president is different. Presidents differ more widely in their previous knowledge and experience of intelligence than in their grasp of most other areas of government. Harry Truman entered the Oval Office in April 1945 almost wholly ignorant of intelligence matters. His determination that no future president should take office as uninformed as he had been is partly responsible for the intelligence briefing offered to all presidential candidates

since 1952. Unlike Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower did not need to be persuaded of the importance of intelligence. Ike was the first president since George Washington already experienced in the use of intelligence when he took the oath of office. He wrote after the Second World War that ‘intelligence had been of priceless value to me...and, in no small way, contributed to the speed with which the enemy was routed and eventually forced to surrender.’

Recent presidents have varied almost as greatly in their experience of intelligence as Truman and Eisenhower. Agency briefers found Presidents Reagan and Bush, in Mr. Helgerson’s words, “virtual polar opposites.” Despite Ronald Reagan’s membership in 1975 of the Rockefeller Commission on CIA activities within the United States, he had no previous experience as an intelligence consumer and felt the need for generality. Bush, by contrast, was the first former director of central intelligence, with the arguable exception of George Washington, to be elected president. He had a closer working relationship than any previous president with the CIA. Like Reagan, President Clinton had no previous experience as an intelligence consumer.

Mr. Helgerson provides the first detailed account of the way in which Agency briefers have attempted, with varying success, to adapt briefings to the differing experience, priorities, and working patterns of successive presidents. One of the earliest changes in the new administration is usually the format of the *President’s Daily Brief*, probably the world’s smallest circulation, most highly classified, and—in some respects—best informed daily newspaper. Some presidents, it appears, like it to include more humor than others. On average, about 60 percent of the items covered in the *President’s Daily Brief* do not appear in the press at all, even in unclassified form.

The most important lesson of this book is that, if the CIA is to provide effective intelligence support to policymakers, there is no substitute for direct access to the president. There is the implied lesson also that, if presidents are to make the best use of the CIA, they need to make clear to the Agency at regular intervals what intelligence they do and do not want. As a result of his own experience as DCI, Bush plainly took this lesson to heart. Some presidents, however, have provided little feedback.

Most good books leave the reader wanting more. *Getting To Know the President* is no exception. As well as holding the interest of his readers, Mr. Helgerson will also increase their curiosity. What, for example, were the exotic and closely-held methods or the sensitive human-source and technical collection programs on which DCI George Bush briefed President-elect Jimmy Carter? Just as it is reasonable for readers to ask questions such as these, so it is also reasonable on some occasions for intelligence agencies to avoid precise replies in order to protect their sources and methods.

There is an inevitable tension between the curiosity of readers and scholars on the one hand and the security-consciousness of intelligence agencies on the other. Historians and intelligence officers are unlikely ever to reach complete agreement on how much of the past record can be declassified without compromising current operations. In recent years, however, the CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence has gone further than most of the world's major intelligence agencies in opening up some of its records to historical research, publishing important volumes of documents on subjects such as the Truman administration, the Cuban missile crisis, Soviet estimates, and spy satellites. All historians will hope that these documents will be followed by many more.

It is also to be hoped that *Getting To Know the President* will set a precedent for intelligence agencies in other countries. Until similar volumes are available on the briefing of, among others, British prime ministers, German chancellors, French and Russian presidents, and leading Asian statesmen, the use made of intelligence by world leaders will continue to be a major gap in our understanding of both modern government and international relations.

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PREFACE

The first edition of this book, *Getting To Know the President: CIA Briefings of Presidential Candidates, 1952–1992*, was produced while I served a one-year assignment with the CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence in the mid-1990s. This updated and expanded second edition was made possible through a contract with the Center in 2011. I am grateful for these opportunities. The resulting study is my work alone; the opinions offered are not those of the Central Intelligence Agency, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), or the US government.

To the maximum extent feasible, contemporaneous written records have been used to construct the account of developments presented. For the earlier presidential transitions, it has proved possible to declassify all relevant documents. Among the numerous individuals who helped search for source materials, a few were especially helpful and deserve special thanks: ODNI officers John Moseman and Richard Fravel; CIA officers David Robarge, Peter Clement, Janet Platt, Becky Rant, Emma Sullivan, and Michael Warner; Andrea Mehrer at the Library of Congress; and Dwight D. Eisenhower Library archivist David Haight.

Interviews with former presidents, CIA directors, and numerous others involved in the 10 presidential transitions provided invaluable additional material with which to flesh out the sometimes sparse written record. I deeply appreciate the honor and time granted me by Presidents George H. W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, and Gerald Ford in agreeing to be interviewed. Similarly, I am grateful to the DCIs and DNIs who were most involved in the transitions—Richard Helms, William Colby, Stansfield Turner, Robert Gates, Michael Hayden, and Michael McConnell—for sharing their recollections. Former Agency officer Meredith Davidson provided invaluable assistance in reconstructing the events of the early 1950s.

The Intelligence Community (IC) protects carefully the confidentiality of comments made to its officers by serving presidents, and I have continued that tradition in this account. Readers will find neither exposés of our presidents' private moments nor specific descriptions of what they said during briefing sessions, especially regarding sensitive policy issues of continuing relevance

and importance. Similarly, it would not be appropriate to use this volume to offer judgments about how well the various presidents used the intelligence they were provided. Nevertheless, I have been able to recount in unclassified form the circumstances under which the Community established its relationships with successive presidents and to discuss, in general terms, the subjects about which they were briefed.

I thank David Robarge, Andres Vaart, Bruce Wells, David Peterson, Richard Kovar, Judith Van Roy, and Harriet Malone for their assistance in editing and producing the original study and this updated version.

John L. Helgerson