Mind the Memory Gap: Lessons to Heed from British Intelligence History

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Identifying “lessons learned” is not new – the military has been doing it for decades. However, members of the worldwide intelligence community have been slow to extract wider lessons gathered from the past and apply them to contemporary challenges. Learning from the Secret Past is a collection of ten carefully selected cases from post-World War II British intelligence history. Some of the cases include the Malayan Emergency, the Cuban Missile Crisis, Northern Ireland, and the lead up to the Iraq War. Each case is accompanied by authentic documents and illuminates important lessons that today’s intelligence officers and policymakers – in Britain and elsewhere – should heed.

Written by former and current intelligence officers, high-ranking government officials, and scholars, the book details intelligence successes and failures, discusses effective structuring of the intelligence community, examines the effective use of intelligence in counterinsurgency, explores the ethical dilemmas and practical gains of interrogation, and highlights the value of human intelligence and the dangers of the politicization of intelligence.

The lessons learned from this book stress the value of past experience and point the way toward running effective intelligence agencies in a democratic society. Scholars and professionals worldwide who specialize in intelligence, defense and security studies, and international relations will find this book to be extremely valuable.

Former chief of the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), Sir John Scarlett, recommends Learning from the Past, calling it “thought-provoking.” Likewise, Keith Jeffery, of Queen’s University Belfast and author of MI6: The History of the Secret Intelligence Service, 1909-1949, describes it as “an admirably executed combination of important case studies, apt primary source material, and illuminating analysis. Each example studied has clear contemporary relevance and I commend the book to policymakers and scholars, as well as anyone interested in the myriad significant ways intelligence has impinged on modern British history and politics.”

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