



The Imperative of Intelligence Services to Protect from Exposure the Sources and Methods of Intelligence Collection

by Gary B. Keeley
*CIA Staff Historian*¹

Acritically important property, intrinsic to all intelligence agencies, is the imperative to deny to intelligence services of other nations details about the sources from which information is obtained and the means employed to obtain information. The fact that a given intelligence service has obtained information, from where and how, needs to be protected from exposure and, arguably, is more important to protect than the substantive content of the information collected. If the details of collection cannot be kept from other intelligence services, collection cannot continue.

Typically, a target, whether an intelligence service or other national entity, will take steps to prevent further collection when it becomes aware of the fact that an intelligence operation is underway to collect its information and when it comprehends the specific vulnerabilities that allow it. To cite just a few simple examples, targets might arrest a human source, re-encrypt or reroute a signal or avoid activities when a satellite is known to be overhead. These actions can deny further collection from a specific source using a specific method.

The need to protect sources and methods to ensure continued collection is woven into all activities of every intelligence service. To understand the activities of any intelligence service, one must apprehend that the need to protect sources and methods is pres-

ent at all times, in all planning, all operations and all decisions. Protecting sources and methods dictates how and when operations are conducted, what is said or written and all information related to operations, liaison and analysis.

Protecting sources and methods from exposure, either by means of another service's human agents, communications intercepts, other technical or cyber collection methods or through leaks, is not a game. It is not intended to conceal corruption, incompetence or malfeasance. It is not scandalous and it is not an afterthought. It is central. This imperative shapes everything intelligence officers do every day and is the "air" that they breathe.

The need to protect how and from where information is collected creates the need for secrecy. Secrecy exists to ensure that the sources and methods of collection are protected from exposure to other intelligence services. Secrecy is the infrastructure and process employed to prevent the targets of collection from learning that an intelligence service has access to information from the targeted service or that service's nation.

Intelligence agencies do not hide their activities from their national populations but from foreign intelligence, security, investigative and police services. To achieve that goal, however, they must also deny the information to all who do not have a need to know the sources and methods to do their job. This denial of access to some sources and methods includes even those in the intelligence service itself who are not working a particular issue, as well as their families and everyone else in the national population. This is neither gratuitous nor suspicious, but necessary. Everyone knows that secrets can only be kept if few are aware of them. This is as true for intelligence as it is for surprise birthday parties. Journalists know this well: They guard the names of their anonymous sources as jealously as intelligence agencies protect their sources and methods.

If even those within a service are not allowed to know all of its sources and methods, it should come as no surprise that those not working in the intelligence profession at all should not know unless and until the service determines that declassification no longer poses a risk to continued collection. Only an intelligence service can know when that is. Nobody else has enough information or authority to make that decision, no matter the desire to learn more and know it sooner. Secrets are about maintaining the ability to collect. In democracies, taxpayers pay for

1. The author is a staff officer on the CIA History Staff within the Center for the Study of Intelligence. CIA has reviewed this column and found that it contains no classified information. All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretation.

this and intelligence professionals diligently protect that investment.

This practice is unfamiliar to many who observe it from “outside.” It may appear meaningless or dangerous, especially in democratic societies where many authors often and incorrectly assume that almost anything “secret” is likely to be illegal, corrupt, incompetent or anti-democratic and must be exposed. Students of intelligence would do better to abandon such familiar and comforting depictions of intelligence and instead realize that intelligence agencies routinely consider how best to their protect sources and methods of collection, and that their policies, regulations and practices are constructed to ensure that protection. Seeing intelligence as it is actually practiced has significant explanatory power for observers. Conversely, the omission or rejection of the need to protect sources and methods as motivating and explaining the behavior of intelligence agencies may distort the narratives, theories and modeling published by students of intelligence.

Inextricably linked to the suggestion that all publishing about intelligence include sources and methods discussions is the equally indigestible reality that accurate and detailed articles or books about intelligence often cannot be written if an author does not have at hand a much more complete collection of declassified records than is currently available. Until that day, caution should be the watchword for those who would make sweeping, and usually negative, conclusions about the role and value of intelligence.

Dispassionate scholars sometimes discuss sources and methods but it is too often absent from or mischaracterized in publications about intelligence, especially in those containing “leaked” information. Leaked information is classified intelligence stolen by someone with access and given to someone not authorized to possess it. Offering and receiving intelligence in this manner is similar at least in practice to traditional espionage except that, in democratic societies, the law protects or ignores this behavior despite the severe damage leaks cause to the ability of a nation’s intelligence service to continue to collect.

Democratic societies incline toward openness in the hope that democracy can be protected from potential autocrats by ensuring that truly dangerous secrets can make their way to the public. In reality, many leaked secrets reveal specific sources and methods of intelligence collection that have nothing to do with preventing the rise of an autocracy. Occasionally, leaks will reveal corruption and incompetence but often

they simply reduce the effectiveness of the nation’s intelligence services.

The usage of leaked information in publications read by those not authorized to know sources and methods details occurs because an author is unaware at a very fundamental level about how intelligence is practiced or knows that leaks harm the ability to collect but does not care. The reasons an author might be unconcerned about impairing the future ability to collect are many but the damage occurs nonetheless. Leaks waste tax dollars and, occasionally, result in a death.

Intelligence professionals have been dealing with these challenges for decades but their voices are rarely heard in public. The points made here have been common knowledge among US intelligence officers since the Second World War, and the services of other nations doubtless apprehended these fundamental realities about intelligence collection long ago.

The absence of recognition in any publication of an intelligence agency’s imperative to protect its sources and methods is a yellow flag. Similarly, in publications where leaks are discussed or are the source, omission of a discussion of the damage a leak does to intelligence operations is also a yellow flag. Alert readers should ask themselves why an author chose to ignore the elephant in the room.

Often, authors choose to avoid discussing the concept of sources and methods protection because it undercuts their arguments or reveals that they are willing to damage intelligence collection capabilities in order to tell their story. They often argue weakly that the public needs to know secrets, damage to their nation’s security notwithstanding.

It is not true that “everything leaks” but it has been demonstrated within intelligence services that much of what leaks about sources and methods reduces the volume and substance of what can be collected in the months and years after a leak. This, of course, degrades the effectiveness of intelligence. Degraded intelligence limits the ability of intelligence agencies to inform policymakers and military commanders at all levels. The result of having less information because collection was prevented due to a target’s awareness of the collection effort can be that mistaken policies are pursued that might not have been had more and better intelligence been available. At a minimum, policy goals may not be achieved or defense readiness may be weakened.

Probably, few who expose secrets in their writing or broadcasts recognize this cycle – or want to. Deeply-held but often incorrect assumptions about

the inherent dangers of “secrets” or incompetence of government blind many to the damage they do by revealing sources and methods. If the awareness of the centrality of the protection of intelligence sources and methods is too often vague or unwelcome to those outside of the profession of intelligence, it is clear to intelligence professionals.

Gary B. Keeley is a CIA Staff Historian with broad experience in the US intelligence community. Almost all of his work is classified but he has published an unclassified article about US foreknowledge that the Soviets would launch a satellite (Sputnik I) in 1957, has forthcoming unclassified articles about NSA’s warning of war ahead of the 1973 Egyptian attack, the “phases” through which declassified records travel, integration in the Intelligence Community after 9/11, and a shorter piece about human source intelligence during the Cuban Missile Crisis, as well as a number of unclassified book reviews. He has taught graduate intelligence courses at American University and Johns Hopkins University.



**YOUR MISSION:
TRANSLATION IN DEFENSE
OF THE NATION.**

**BECOME AN NCS
LANGUAGE
OFFICER**

National Clandestine Service

Make the most of your foreign language skills. Keep America safe as an NCS Language Officer at the Central Intelligence Agency.

It's not just about performing translations. It's about providing in-depth cultural insights and meaningful interpretations for vital clandestine service operations.

Most positions are based in Washington, DC, with possible opportunities for travel. Specialized training is provided, and hiring bonuses are available for highly qualified individuals.

Are you fluent in any of these languages?

Arabic	Dari	Pashto	Russian
Chinese	Korean	Persian	

Learn more about becoming an NCS Language Officer. It's about your nation. It's about your career. It's about making a difference.

Applicants must have US citizenship and the ability to successfully complete medical examinations and security procedures, including a polygraph interview. Equal Opportunity Employer.

 THE WORK OF A NATION.
THE CENTER OF INTELLIGENCE.

www.cia.gov