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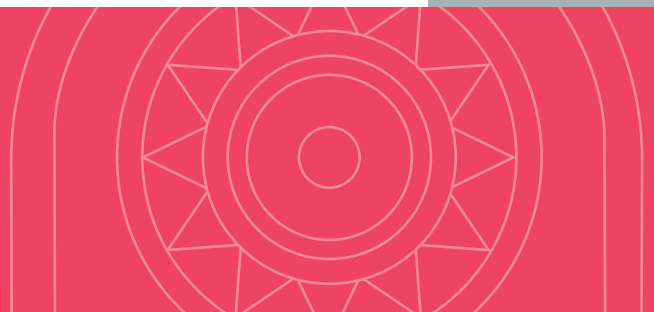


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Breaking the ONE: The Evolution of the National Intelligence Estimate Production Cycle from Johnson to Carter

By Giordana Pulcini
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Christian F. Ostermann and Leopoldo Nuti, Series Editors

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Breaking the ONE: The Evolution of the National Intelligence Estimate Production Cycle from Johnson to Carter

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In 1976, a panel of “outside experts,” known as Team B, was asked to prepare an alternative analysis of Soviet strategic forces that would compete with the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) written by the inside experts, known as Team A. In line with the hardline membership of Team B, this episode has generally been considered by both contemporary observers and subsequent generations of scholars as an effort by the Ford Administration to appease the mounting opposition toward SALT II negotiations.¹ It is also usually presented as an example of the politicization of US intelligence.² Hence, Team B’s hawkish and biased attitude superseded any merit the exercise might have had.³

Though perhaps the most controversial example, the Team A/Team B episode did not represent an isolated attempt to correct or change the National Intelligence Estimate production process. In fact, the long-standing debate, which began in 1960 and continued through 1973, had brought the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) William Colby to reorganize the whole NIE apparatus with the abolition of the Office of National Estimates. Colby’s reforms were the result of years of discussion inside and outside of the intelligence community. It was also the consequence of many policymakers’ demands, and in many cases pressures, to obtain estimate products that were more in line with their policy needs.

¹ See for example Representatives Ronald V. Dellums, Berkly Bedell, John Burton, William Clay, John Conyers, Don Edwards, Jim Johnson, Michael Harrington, Robert Kastenmeier, Robert Leggett, Parren Mitchell, Richard Ottinger, Henry Reuss to Jimmy Carter, letter, 7 January 1977, Ann Cahn Collection, box 1, National Security Archive (NSA), R. Pipes, “Team B: the Reality behind the Myth,” *Commentary* 82, no. 4 (October 1986): 36; and Ann Cahn, *Killing détente: The right attacks the CIA* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2007).

² Glenn Hastedt, “The Politics of Intelligence and the Politicization of Intelligence: The American Experience,” *Intelligence and National Security* 28, no. 1 (2013): 23-24.

³ According to Rovner, the benefits of the exercise were eventually lost to the politicization of the Team B membership. Joshua Rovner, *Fixing the Facts: National Security and the Politics of Intelligence* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2011), 129.

This article focuses on the debate surrounding the NIEs on Soviet nuclear forces, given their importance for the US policymakers as they became aware of the loss of the previously unchallenged strategic superiority of the United States. It will, therefore, reconstruct how this debate influenced the evolution of the NIE production process from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s. This article builds on the already existing scholarship on the political maneuvering surrounding the NIEs by utilizing a wide base of archival sources not previously incorporated into the discussion.⁴ The paper will also highlight the long and complex developments that brought profound changes to the National Estimate production and goals.

The article is divided into three parts: the first section focuses on the origin of the debate during the Johnson years; the second offers the background and context of Colby's 1973 reform; and the third part examines the Team B episode and its aftermath.⁵

Losing Superiority: The Johnson Years

During the 1960s, the production of the National Intelligence Estimates, the highest and most authoritative US intelligence analytical publication, was entrusted to the Board of the Office of National Estimates (ONE).⁶ The ONE was composed of a group of intelligence professionals, complemented by retired military officers, diplomats, and academics. It reported to the DCI and shared a working space with the CIA. Though officially outside of the Agency's umbrella, many ONE members came from Langley.

The NIEs produced during this period focused on a broad range of issues involving US national security, and their subjects could vary from one year to the next. Their topics and schedules were set by the ONE following inputs by several government agencies. Within the

⁴ John Prados, *The Soviet Estimate: U.S. Intelligence Analysis and Soviet Strategic Forces* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011) and Lawrence Freedman, *U.S. Intelligence and the Soviet Strategic Threat* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1986). On the politicization of the NIE production process see Cahn, *Killing détente* and Justine Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism: the biography of a movement* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2010).

⁵ Given its limited scope, this article will not discuss the several scandals that invested the CIA in the mid-1970s. Yet, the author is aware of the profound impact they had on the US intelligence community.

⁶ On the origins and early developments of ONE, in addition to Prados and Freedman's books see also Chester L. Cooper, "The CIA and Decision-Making," *Foreign Affairs* 50, no. 2 (Jan. 1972): 223-236; Donald P. Steury, ed., *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates: collected essays* (Washington, D.C.: History Staff, Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1994); J. Peter Scoblic, "Beacon and Warning: Sherman Kent, Scientific Hubris, and the CIA's Office of National Estimates," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 4 (2018).

annual, routine series, one dealt with different aspects related with the Soviet Union, including its strategic forces. NIEs were intended as a joint effort involving different intelligence agencies, but ONE enjoyed a well-established leading position among them. The Office collected several analytical inputs and incorporated them into an agreed-upon document. When dissenting judgments could not be reconciled, they were presented in the footnotes. However, ONE usually pushed for a final consensus, which was favored as the best possible output for policymakers' consumption.⁷

From the mid-1960s, NIE assessments of Soviet nuclear strategic forces started to be considered problematic both within the intelligence community and the Johnson administration. The downturn stemmed from several issues in the analysis: an unexpected increase in numbers and capabilities of the Soviet strategic arsenal; NIE's greater emphasis on R&D progress rather than quantitative growth; the need to develop, or delay, an Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) system; and the forthcoming arms control negotiations.

The 1966 and 1967 NIEs presented significant discrepancies in their estimates of the number of Soviet ICBMs that would be deployed by the mid-1970s, with the 1967 NIE projecting much higher figures than the year prior, but still concluding that, in the next decade, the US arsenal would continue to keep pace.⁸ These ambiguous assessments were becoming a source of controversy inside the administration. As Deputy Undersecretary of State Raymond Garthoff commented in 1967, available data could lead to conflicting understandings of the military balance, depending on what "one [chose] to stress."⁹ This growing uncertainty played a major role in a struggle inside the Pentagon between the Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. During a meeting with President Lyndon Johnson, the Undersecretary of Defense Paul Nitze and JCS members in December 1967, McNamara showed his trust in NIE assessments that asserted the adequacy of US forces against "Soviet capabilities as currently programmed." He also stated that "even in the event that...greater than expected

⁷ Prados, *The Soviet Estimates*. See also Lawrence Freedman, "The CIA and the soviet threat: The politicization of estimates, 1966–1977," *Intelligence and National Security* 12, no. 1 (1997): 123-124.

⁸ Draft Report by Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee on Status of US strategic power, April 1968, Box 13, Agency File, National Security File (NSF), Lyndon Baines Johnson Library (LBJ), 17.

⁹ Memo from Raymond Garthoff to Foy Kohler, 31 March 1967, box 1, NSF, Files of Nathaniel Davis, LBJ, 1.

threats develop, the United States still had means of coping” with the situation.¹⁰ McNamara opposed the development of possibly redundant systems, such as a new strategic bomber proposed by the JCS to replace the B-52 aircraft. The JCS, on the other hand, repeatedly stressed the incoherence of the latest NIEs, and pushed for new deployments.¹¹

At the same time, the policymakers’ need to understand the qualitative development of the Soviet arsenal posed an even greater challenge to US intelligence capabilities. Correctly understanding the direction of the Soviet R&D effort was extremely difficult, and US intelligence had failed to predict a number of USSR technological breakthroughs. The United States needed sufficient lead time to explore its R&D superiority options, but this “handicapped intelligence task” undermined the credibility of US strategic choices. Attempts to assess Soviet R&D only spawned further controversies. One such episode revolved around the SS-9, a new ICBM that the Soviet Union had been developing since the mid-1960s. American analysts were unsure if it could be equipped with the newly available MIRV warheads. The 1968 NIE on Soviet strategic forces determined it could not, a conclusion that went against the beliefs of the JCS and Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA).¹² Inside the Pentagon, many started to wonder whether it was time to break the tradition of consensus preferred by the NIE process and to give space for alternative assessments. Much was at stake, evidenced by the unexpected Soviet MIRV capability shaking the very foundations of US strategic policy and, at the same time, providing a strong justification for the deployment of an ABM system. The debate on the SS-9 lingered well into the next US administration, joined by the ABM deployment issue.

The US government had contemplated for years the opportunity of deploying an ABM system. During the Johnson Administration, it was discovered that the Soviets had already deployed their own system and that they enjoyed a temporary superiority in missile defense. However, the purpose and actual capabilities of the Soviet system were not clear, and the same

¹⁰ Notes of the President’s meeting with Secretary McNamara, Undersecretary Nitze, General Wheeler, General McConnell, General Johnson, General Greene, Admiral Moorer, 4 December 1967, box 1, Tom Johnston’s notes for meeting, LBJ, 1-2.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 3-4 and Summary of JCS Recommendations on the Draft Presidential Memoranda and Related Secretary of Defense Action, n.d., box 11, NSF, Agency File, LBJ, 5.

¹² Soviet Strategic Attack Forces (NIE 11-8-68 M/H), 1 May 1969, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000278487.pdf and John Prados, *The Soviet Estimates*, 193.

could be said for the proposed American ABM programs that had been considered since the Eisenhower Administration.¹³ McNamara was skeptical of their efficacy and cost-efficiency.¹⁴ Arms Control and Disarmament Agency officers resented the negative impact of ABM programs on the Nonproliferation Treaty negotiations and arms control in general.¹⁵ The ABM system, however, received support from the JCS and other State and DoD officers, such as Nitze, who believed the United States was losing ground against the rapid expansion of Soviet offensive and defensive capabilities.¹⁶ Intelligence ambiguity on the development of Soviet forces and uncertain analysis of the intentions of Soviet leadership marred the ABM dispute, and NIEs assessments often seemed inadequate to respond to the policymakers' demands.¹⁷

Critical choices on the future of arms control further challenged the credibility of the intelligence estimates of Soviet nuclear forces. US NIEs were now expected to offer reliable judgements not only on capabilities, but also on the "decisions, desires, intentions" of USSR decision-makers, and the impact of US moves on them.¹⁸ Far from just an argument between civilian and military officers inside the Pentagon, the debate on the adequacy of intelligence estimates rapidly became one of the crucial challenges facing US policymakers.¹⁹ Officers inside the Johnson administration asked themselves whether delving into the realm of intentions, superpower interaction, and uncertain technical developments might require a different approach, one that would go beyond hard data and raw numbers. Some forms of "alternative

¹³ On the history of the ABM system see James Cameron, *The Double Game the Demise of America's First Missile Defense System and the Rise of Strategic Arms Limitation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹⁴ Recording of Telephone Conversation Between President Johnson and Secretary McNamara, January 4, 1967, 6:40 p.m., Tape F67.01, Side A, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1964–1968, Volume X, National Security Policy*, doc. 167.

¹⁵ Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of Defense to the Secretary of Defense, subject: Foster Initiative, January 8th, 1966, box 11, NSF, Agency File, LBJ, Memorandum from the Acting Director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (Fisher) to Secretary of State Rusk, Secretary of Defense McNamara, and the President's Special Assistant (Rostow), August 28th, 1967, *FRUS, 1964–1968, Volume XI, Arms Control and Disarmament*, doc. 202.

¹⁶ Memorandum for the President from Paul Nitze, March 14th, 1968, box 9, NSF, National Security Action Memorandums, LBJ.

¹⁷ Memorandum from Alan Enthoven for the Deputy Secretary of Defense, May 14th, 1969, box 25, Papers of Clark Clifford, LBJ.

¹⁸ See for example Memo from R.N. Ginsburgh to Walter Rostow on "Effect of an ABM freeze on Strategic Balance," 2 September 1966, box 6, NSF, Agency File, LBJ and Draft Report by Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee on Status of US strategic power, cit., 26.

¹⁹ See for example letter from Dean Rusk to Robert McNamara, 1 December 1966, box 3, NSF, Files of Francis M. Bator, LBJ.

estimate” were considered both inside and outside the intelligence community. Yet, skepticism toward such experiments remained high. A competitive analysis on Soviet capabilities involving “outside experts” could lead to extremely controversial methodologies and results, and only create even more uncertainty. In 1966, for instance, the Director of the Policy Planning Staff, Henry Owen, suggested to Walt Rostow the appointment of a “Wise Man’s Group” with “outside and inside experts.” Its task would be to reconsider Soviet intentions, capabilities, and reactions before making a final decision on ABM deployment. Spurgeon Keeny, at that time an NSC staffer, dismissed the proposal as “another Gaither panel,” referring to the 1957 exercise that had greatly overestimated Soviet nuclear capabilities.²⁰

With support from several key figures, most notably by the Secretary of Defense, the NIE process was left unchanged for the remaining years of Johnson’s presidency. However, in 1968, with McNamara gone, a DoD report to Congress stated that, considering the status of US strategic forces, “uncertainty of the threat [was] high because of the inadequacy of intelligence information” and analysis.²¹ That same year the JCS and the DIA asked for a reassessment of the SS-9 issue, only for the intelligence estimate to confirm its previous finding: the newly deployed Soviet ICBM did not incorporate MIRV technology.²² During the last months of the Johnson Administration, the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB) added more fuel to the controversies surrounding NIEs. The Board was, in fact, showing increasing dissatisfaction with the state of intelligence analysis on the nuclear balance.²³

²⁰ Memo from Henry Owen to Walt Rostow, 27 September 1966 and Memo from Spurgeon Keeny to Walt Rostow, 11 October 1966, box 26, NSF, Subject File, LBJ. Hastedt, “The Politics of Intelligence and the Politicization of Intelligence,” 16-17. On the Gaither Report see David L. Snead, *The Gaither Committee, Eisenhower, and the Cold War* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999); McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988), 334-338; Stephen Ambrose, *Eisenhower, Volume Two: The President* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 434-435; Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 125 – 154.

²¹ Draft Report by Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee on Status of US strategic power, cit., 14

²² Prados, *The Soviet Estimates*, 193.

²³ On the history of PFIAB see Kenneth Absher, Michael Desch and Roman Popadiuk, *Privileged and Confidential: The Secret History of the President's Intelligence Advisory Board* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012).

Breaking the ONE: The Nixon Years

In 1969, both the ABM and the arms control negotiations entered a crucial phase. As in the past, they seemed to require a fresh approach to intelligence analysis that might incorporate more precise estimates of Soviet intentions and technological capabilities. The top leadership of the Nixon administration, which took office in January, was eager to show its dissatisfaction with the NIE methodology and practices. One of the most critical issues was the ongoing SS-9 controversy. It remained closely tangled with the fate of both the ABM system and the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT), which Nixon initiated soon after entering the White House.²⁴ After some initial hesitation, the President and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, embraced arms control and turned it into one of the central features of a policy of mutual concessions, linkages and oblique inducements that became the trademark of their détente strategy with the Soviet Union.²⁵

The Nixon Administration knew that Moscow was interested in arms control, now that its strategic nuclear arsenal was approaching a rough quantitative parity with the United States' arsenal. Nixon was therefore looking for the right advantages to encourage fruitful discussions with the Soviets that would, at the same time, leave the United States with the upper hand in the negotiations. The deployment of an ABM system to counterbalance Soviet superiority in the realm of missile defense was part of this game. When Nixon entered the White House, the destiny of the US ABM program was still uncertain. After years of hesitation, in 1967 the Johnson administration had eventually announced the deployment of a relatively limited system, *Sentinel*, which left many unanswered questions about its real purpose and actual efficiency. Nixon felt that a new approach, and a new name, were needed to gather enough support from the people and from Congress, which was beginning to restrict defense spending. In March 1969, Nixon announced a toned-down ABM deployment called Safeguard. Unlike its more ambitious, yet never-deployed predecessor, it was intended to protect the capital and a

²⁴ On the ABM and SALT negotiations see for examples Cameron, *The double Game*; Raymond Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington D.C.: Brooking Institution, 1994); and Matthew J. Ambrose, *The Control Agenda: a History of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2018).

²⁵ Raymond Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, 127-133.

limited number of US offensive strategic forces.²⁶ Yet, even the deployment of this limited Anti-Ballistic system was extremely controversial, and the actual effectiveness and benefits of the ABM, as well as its cost, remained highly contested on Capitol Hill. The administration had to provide evidence of an imminent threat to justify the expense.²⁷ A firm consensus on the MIRVed nature of the SS-9s could serve this purpose, but Helms and his analysts refused to confirm the claim.²⁸ Supported by the JCS, the DIA, and his Deputy David Packard, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird took the lead in trying to break this resistance. Laird was particularly critical of the consensus practice within the NIE process, which, he argued, could deprive policymakers of alternative views on Soviet nuclear forces and, therefore, negatively alter a correct perception of future developments.²⁹ Backed by the DIA analysts, he claimed before Congress that the SS-9s were, or would be in the near future, equipped with MIRVs.³⁰ The Nixon Administration was now ready to confront the intelligence community on the matter.

Helms and the Board of National Estimates refused to back down to outside pressure, but in the 1969 NIE on Soviet strategic forces, ONE did weaken its position. The report reaffirmed that the SS-9 was not intended to carry MIRVs, again contradicting the Pentagon assessment and Laird's public statements. As it had done before, the estimate raised the projected figures of USSR's ICBMs and, for the first time, refused to give its judgment on the "maximum size" of Soviet deployment. To avoid an open clash with the administration, Helms forced the ONE analysts to include compromise statements that took into account different views. Dissenting opinions by the DIA, the State Department, the NSA, and the USAF intelligence service made their ways into the document's footnotes. As a result, the NIE presented an analysis of Soviet forces that represented the full spectrum of opinions.³¹

²⁶ Nixon was aware that, because of the Vietnam War and the plunging state of US economy and finances, the Congress would have been reluctant to support a major increase of the defense budget. For a comprehensive account on the Sentinel and Safeguard saga, see James Cameron, *The Double Game*, 80-107.

²⁷ Freedman, "The CIA and the soviet threat," 133-134.

²⁸ Ray Locker, *Nixon's Gamble: How a President's Own Secret Government Destroyed His Administration* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 58-61.

²⁹ Memo from Richard Helms to Nixon, 26 May 1969, and Memorandum from Packard to Kissinger, 28 May 1969, *FRUS 1969-1976, Volume XXXIV*, document 30 – 31.

³⁰ Locker, *Nixon's Gamble*, 60.

³¹ NIE 11-8-69, Soviet Strategic Attack Forces, 9 September 1969, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000268007.pdf.

Laurence Lynn, an NSC staffer, commented to Kissinger that “the text” appeared to be “a strenuous exercise in avoiding meaningful conclusions” and that the intelligence community had “a murky and confused picture of Soviet strategic offensive forces and developments,” which constituted a “serious problem” for the administration.³²

The Safeguard was eventually approved by Congress that same year, but the relationship between the Nixon Administration and the Office of National Estimates was now on a shaky ground. Nixon and Kissinger had never disguised their contempt toward CIA personnel and associates, including ONE’s members. They were vocal about their mistrust for the Central Intelligence Agency’s analytical process and their dissatisfaction with its output.³³ CIA analysts often felt sidelined by the White House and lamented lack of access to both the President and his National Security Advisor.³⁴ To soothe the tensions of the previous months and smooth the criticism coming from the administration, in November 1969 the DCI submitted a questionnaire to the Secretary of State, William Rogers, as well as to Laird and Kissinger to assess “their views and suggestions as to how National Estimates on Soviet military subject might be made ‘most useful’ to them.”³⁵ Rogers gave a generally positive assessment of the NIEs but pointed out the need for supplementary efforts to evaluate “Soviet doctrine and strategy together with discussion of the fundamental differences of opinion within the intelligence community.” The latter concern was echoed by the more critical Secretary of Defense, who highlighted the need for comparison with previous NIEs to allow awareness among policymakers of over- and under-estimations. The following year, members of the Board of National Estimates and its staff were frequently summoned by Kissinger to discuss the “form and content of military estimates,” with a special focus on the NIE on Soviet nuclear forces.³⁶ These meetings clearly indicated the effort by the White House to exercise a tight, yet still informal, control over the NIE production process.

³² Memorandum from Laurence Lynn to Kissinger, 30 June 1969, *FRUS 1969-1976, Volume XXXIV*, document 40.

³³ Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes. The History of the CIA* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 343 – 344.

³⁴ Ray S. Cline, “Policy without Intelligence,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 17 (Winter 1974 – 1975): 121 – 135.

³⁵ Consumer Participation in the NIE/SNIE Program, 21 June 1972, Annex A, CREST, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80M01133A000900100010-8.pdf>, A 5-6.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, A 7.

In 1971, the President finally promoted a broad review of the intelligence community organization, and asked James Schlesinger, the future DCI who was then working for the Office of Management and Budget, to prepare a study on the subject. In March 1971, Schlesinger presented a lengthy report, highly critical of the state of US intelligence, which constituted the basis for a formal decision memorandum issued by Nixon in November 1971.³⁷ A wide-ranging document, the “Schlesinger report” addressed the estimating function, among other issues.³⁸ In line with previous assessments of the matter, he argued that “the national estimating machinery” could benefit from “increasing the competition in the interpretation of evidence” and “the addition of new estimating centers.”³⁹ In hindsight, the study clearly demonstrates how widespread the notion that the NIE production cycle was inadequate had become within the administration. The cure prescribed for the allegedly flawed estimating function was, again, the establishment of a more inclusive process that would consider a broader range of inputs, in order to obtain final products that were better suited to the consumers’ needs. Further steps in this direction were taken in the following months, with mixed results. A Working Group was formed inside the National Security Council Intelligence Committee (NSCIC), an NSC body chaired by Henry Kissinger that had been created as a result of Nixon’s memorandum.⁴⁰ During its first meeting, the Working Group considered ways to enhance the development of “some systematic method of arriving at consumer needs,” as suggested by one of its members, NSC staffer Andrew Marshall. Given their crucial, yet at that point controversial nature, NIEs were soon at the center of discussion, with Marshall reminding that much of the criticism toward the National Estimates “dealt with a lack in depth.”⁴¹ Significantly, he referred to the need to enhance the analysis of Soviet intentions and decision-making, confirming that the main bone of contention surrounding the NIEs revolved around the estimates on the Soviet Union. During

³⁷ Richard Nixon, Memorandum, Subject: Organization and Management of the U.S. Foreign Intelligence Community, November 5, 1971, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB144/index.htm>.

³⁸ James Schlesinger, “A Review of the Intelligence Community,” March 10, 1971, Top Secret, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB144/document%204.pdf>.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, 23.

⁴⁰ National Security Intelligence Committee (NSCIC), <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP84B00506R000100030001-1.pdf>.

⁴¹ Meeting Notes on the First Meeting of the NSCIC Working Group, 13 December 1971, CREST, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp84b00506r000100020027-4>, 3.

the meeting, the establishment of “consumer feedbacks” were, nevertheless, forcefully rejected by the chairmen of the Board of National Estimates John Huizenga.⁴²

The debate continued in the following months. Marshall pushed for the involvement of the NSCIC in overseeing the NIE schedule and insisted on eliciting “user comments.”⁴³ In June 1972, a lengthy memorandum prepared inside the Working Group reiterated the same point. The document suggested the opportunity to include “the input of the NSC, State Department, and Defense Department recommendations during the development of the annual and quarterly NIE production schedules” and to inaugurate a “formal mechanism for regular inputs from the policy making levels,” as well as the inclusion of non-USIB organization in the NIE drafting process, when this was deemed appropriate.⁴⁴ It also proposed the circulation among main users of a new questionnaire to assess their satisfaction regarding the NIEs. At the same time, Marshall suggested a review of the NIE-11 series to measure their responsiveness to “needs of high-level consumers.”⁴⁵ The ONE remained adamant against any formalization of consumers’ involvement in the NIE process that would go beyond the informal consultations and briefings with the NSC performed by Helms and other ONE officers in the previous years. Huizenga was mostly concerned with preserving the “principle of separateness and independence of intelligence components” against the policymakers’ “parochial self-interested reasons” and the risk of politicization of the NIE program.⁴⁶ ONE’s objections scored a temporary victory and the issue of formalizing consumers’ participation in the National Estimate process was dropped by the end of the year.

In December 1972, the Working Group agreed to limit its involvement to the evaluation of past National Intelligence Estimates, performed accordingly to the “inputs from...the

⁴² *Ibidem*, 2.

⁴³ Excerpt from MOR, “Meeting with Andrew Marshall,” 2 May 1972, attached to Consumer Participation in the NIE/SNIE Program, cit.

⁴⁴ Consumer Participation in the NIE/SNIE Program, cit., 2-3.

⁴⁵ History of NSCIC Working Group Activities- 1972 , Tab A: “Topics for Possible Consideration by the NSCIC Working Group,” 20 July 1973, CREST, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP84B00506R000100080025-0.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Memorandum for Bronson Tweedy from John Huizenga, “Involvement of NSCIC Working Group in the NIE Program,” 28 August 1972, CREST, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80M01133A000900100005-4.pdf>, 1.

users.”⁴⁷ In the following months, the lack of dynamism of the Working Group’s members, with the notable exception of Marshall, further reduced the role of the NSCIC. Major General Daniel Graham, the CIA Deputy Director and a member of the NSCIC Working Group (and later one of the most vocal and hawkish members of Team B), lamented its inactivity and stressed the need of “energiz[ing] the NSCIC apparatus” as a “serious problem facing the intelligence community.” According to Graham, the main reasons for this “lassitude” were to be found in the triviality of the matter brought to the attention of the NSCIC (as noted above, the NIE-11 series had been excluded from consideration), and the poor performance of the Working Group, which was “overloaded with intelligence types.”⁴⁸ Graham’s remarks show that the haste to break the intelligence community’s resistance to external pressures was increasing, and was now also coming from within the community itself.

The debate on the opportunity to include external inputs in the NIE production certainly did not vanish with the confrontation inside the NSCIC. Instead, it resurfaced in different contexts, turning into an increasingly politicized puzzle that was difficult to solve. The policymakers’ meddling into the NIE elaboration, especially when the Soviet Union nuclear forces were involved, fueled more tension into the already tense interaction between the administration and the intelligence community, as the case of the SS-9 had demonstrated. This problematic relationship worsened when Nixon dismissed Helms in the wake of his re-election in November 1972. After Schlesinger’s brief stint as DCI, the President nominated William Colby in September 1973. Colby resolved to respond to the criticism surrounding the NIE apparatus by restructuring the system. Even though Colby meant to present the reform as a CIA internal matter, he was aware of the past tensions and knew the position of the NSC and the Pentagon.⁴⁹ It could be argued that the DCI was actually trying to prevent a forceful reorganization imposed by the White House, and that his move aimed to preserve the independence of the intelligence community, while appeasing some of the administration’s

⁴⁷ Memorandum for the NSCIC Working Group, “Working Group Evaluation of NIEs,” 19 December 1972, CREST, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80M01133A000900100002-7.pdf>, 1-2.

⁴⁸ Memorandum from Daniel Graham to the DCI, “NSCIC and NSCIC working group,” 16 July 1973, CREST, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP84B00506R000100040088-5.pdf>, 1.

⁴⁹ John Prados, *Lost Crusader: The Secret Wars of CIA Director William Colby* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 276-278.

concerns. Against this background, ONE was disbanded and replaced by several National Intelligence Officers (NIOs).⁵⁰ Instead of one, cohesive office, NIEs were now entrusted to different officers individually reporting to the DCI. Colby established that the NIOs must formally “maintain” close personal contact with the NSC staff and other principal intelligence consumers and contributors.”⁵¹ These changes were aimed at breaking consensus practices, creating space for dissenting opinions, and establishing a better compliance to policymakers’ demands. Colby’s effort weakened the cohesion of the National Estimate community, but hardly hushed criticisms of the NIEs. At this juncture, the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board played an unexpectedly crucial role.

The Team A/Team B Experiment in Competitive Analysis

The PFIAB had been established with a different name, the President’s Board of Consultants on Foreign Intelligence Activities (PBCFIA), under President Dwight Eisenhower. Reporting directly to the President, its purpose was to provide him with impartial assessment of the performances of US intelligence.⁵² Renamed PFIAB under Kennedy, the Board remained active during the Johnson administration, but became increasingly disconnected from the work of the president. This trend continued with Nixon.⁵³ Despite the relative lack of access to the president, the PFIAB became the chief-gunner against the NIEs on Soviet strategic capabilities.⁵⁴ When Kissinger met with its members in August 1973, Marshall prepared a number of talking-points for the National Security Advisor. The purpose of the meeting was to define the future tasks of the PFIAB: “upgrade the intelligence community’s capability to supply analyses,” given the community’s “inability to provide intellectually respectable explanations of why the Soviets

⁵⁰ William Colby, *Honorable Men: My life in the CIA* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 351-353.

⁵¹ Memo from William Colby to USIB members, n.d., <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp86b00269r001300030006-8>.

⁵² Absher, Desch, Popadiuk, *Privileged and Confidential*, 15- 50

⁵³ Kenneth M. Absher, Michael C. Desch, and Roman Popadiuk, “The President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board,” in Loch K. Johnson, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010), 176-179.

⁵⁴ Absher, Desch, Popadiuk, *Privileged and Confidential*, 165-66.

are doing the things they are doing.”⁵⁵ In April 1974, the Board’s annual assessment of the Soviet strategic threat addressed the alleged shortcomings of the last estimates, and stated that the Soviets perceived themselves “as approaching the threshold of overall superiority.” The DIA concurred with this view, with director Vincent de Poix even arguing that the Board had “not gone far enough.”⁵⁶ Concurrent with his previous attitude, Colby championed the overall merits of the NIEs, but also expressed his agreement with the PFIAB “over the need to improve the substantive intelligence” to support US objectives.⁵⁷ A few months later, PFIAB’s concerns were reinforced by an article published by RAND analyst Albert Wohlstetter.⁵⁸ This publication raised a broad debate within the intelligence community, prompting some of the harshest critics of the estimating process, like the freshly nominated DIA director Graham, to formally ask the Administration to finally address the NIEs’ shortcomings.⁵⁹ The PFIAB attempted to convince the White House to authorize an alternative estimate on Soviet strategic forces.⁶⁰ In September 1975, Kissinger eventually agreed with the Board’s request; the new NIE, however, was already in progress and Colby persuaded President Ford, who had entered the White House after Nixon’s resignation in August 1974, that it would be inappropriate to organize any kind of external supervision at that stage.⁶¹

These pressures, however, had some impact on the 1975 NIE. The document included an assessment of Soviet intentions which manifestly departed from quantitative-based analysis of forces. It also contained interagency contributions aimed at giving more space to dissenting

⁵⁵ Memo for Henry Kissinger from A. W. Marshall, 1 Aug. 1973, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/LOC-HAK-453-1-11-5.pdf>.

⁵⁶ Memo for the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence from DIA Director, 15 May 1974, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP91M00696R000300110019-2.pdf>.

⁵⁷ Memo from Colby to the President, 14 May 1974, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80B01495R000600020021-4.pdf>.

⁵⁸ Albert Wohlstetter, “Is There a Strategic Arms Race?,” *Foreign Policy*, 15, 1974, 3-22

⁵⁹ See for example “The Wohlstetter Article and Reference: Memo For D/Sr Fr, Same Subject,” Dtd, 26 July 1974, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80M01082A000900100002-4.pdf>. Daniel O. Graham to DCI William Colby, “Wohlstetter Article in FOREIGN POLICY,” memo, 1 July 1974, NSA, ACC, Box 1. See also Lawrence Freedman, *US Intelligence*, 53.

⁶⁰ Edward Teller, “An alternative NIE,” 18 June 1975, NSA, ACC, Box 1, and “Dr. Edward Teller’s Meeting with NIO and CIA Personnel – 5 Dec., 1975,” memo, 11 December, 1975, NSA, ACC, box 1.

⁶¹ Memo from Kissinger to Colby, 8 September 1975 and William Colby to President Gerald Ford, 21 November 1975, NSA, ACC, box 1.

opinions.⁶² Results were mixed, and the effort did not meet the intelligence community's full approval.⁶³ For its part, the PFIAB claimed that the NIE gave the appearance of a comprehensive net assessment, but that its methodology remained essentially limited and inadequate.⁶⁴

Cornered by the challenges to his candidature from the hard-liners inside the Republican Party, the following year Ford eventually gave in to PFIAB's pressures. After strengthening the membership of the Board, the President instructed the new CIA director, George Bush, to establish a committee of outsiders to conduct an exercise in "competitive analysis" of Soviet nuclear capabilities.⁶⁵ The outcome of the exercise was supposed to be an "out of the box" assessment of Soviet capabilities and intentions. Bush requested the PFIAB to appoint a group of experts, called Team B, which would develop an alternative estimate of Soviet nuclear capabilities, based on the same information available to the NIOs (Team A).⁶⁶ Its membership eventually included a number of well-known critics of the SALT negotiations and détente, like long-time civil servant Nitze, Harvard professor Richard Pipes, Graham, and Paul Wolfowitz, who at the time worked for one of the staunchest critics of détente, Democratic Senator Henry Jackson.

The final document produced by Team B was delivered on December 21, 1976. It claimed that the Soviet Union had become superior to the US in many fields (for example in number and accuracy of its ICBMs) and that, in the near future, it would match the US in overall nuclear capabilities. Moreover, Team B claimed that the USSR was aiming at a first-strike capability, which would expose the US government to nuclear blackmail. Exceeding its mandate, the report harshly criticized the NIEs' methodology. Specifically, it argued that the National Estimates almost exclusively relied on "hard" data that inevitably led their authors to

⁶² "NIE 11-3/8-75," 17 November 1975, *FRUS, 1969–1976, Volume XXXV, National Security Policy, 1973–1976*, 706-13.

⁶³ "OSR post-mortem on NIE 11-3/8-75," 23 December 1975, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80B01495R000600030003-3.pdf>.

⁶⁴ "Memo to Admiral Turner from NIO for Strategic Programs," 7 March 1977, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP83M00171R001200160009-9.pdf>.

⁶⁵ Statement of the Presidential Press Office, 11 March 1976, box 236, Library of Congress, Clare Boothe Luce Papers.

⁶⁶ For a more detailed account of the Team A/Team B episode, see Cahn, *Killing détente*.

emphasize current capabilities over future intentions. Because of this flawed methodology, NIEs had systematically ignored the rejection in “Soviet doctrine and strategy of such concepts as assured destruction.”⁶⁷

Reactions to the Team B report were mixed. Some members of the Ford Administration, including the new Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, praised the methodological insights generated by the experiment.⁶⁸ Skepticism, however, persisted within the intelligence community. According to many, the biased position of the Team B members and their lack of long-term perspective on Soviet nuclear power, due to one-time access to raw data, had an adverse impact on the Team’s own methodology.⁶⁹ These shortcomings were confirmed by a study produced in 1977 by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, which prevented any attempt to repeat the exercise.⁷⁰ The episode nonetheless had an enduring impact on debates over the methodology of intelligence analysis and the NIEs in general. In January 1977, one of the last meetings of Ford’s National Security Council addressed the NIEs’ shortcomings highlighted by the Team B report.⁷¹ Moreover, to counterbalance the vast echo of the Team B charges inside the US Congress, the intelligence community considered the development of a new methodology which would address the Soviet “grand strategy” and include “soft data.”⁷²

The Carter Administration followed this trend and pushed the reforms of the NIE production even further. The PFIAB, regarded as having been prone to hawkish political pressures, was disbanded. The new administration believed that the same supervisory

⁶⁷ “Intelligence Community Experiment in Competitive Analysis – Soviet Strategic Objectives an Alternative View (Report of Team ‘B’),” n.d., Gerald Ford Presidential Library (GFL), box 1, Leo Cherne Papers, 5.

⁶⁸ Prados, *The Soviet estimates*, 254

⁶⁹ Memo from George Bush to Leo Cherne, 19 Jan. 1977, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80M00165A001100030011-8.pdf>. See also Rovner, *Fixing the Facts*, 134-137.

⁷⁰ Letter from Stansfield Turner to Adlai Stevenson, 20 June 1977, CREST, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79M00095A000200040006-3.pdf>.

⁷¹ Memo for the Deputy to the DCI for the Intelligence Community, “NSC meeting on Intelligence,” 6 January 1977, CIA-RDP83M00171R001200210015-5, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP83M00171R001200210015-5.pdf>.

⁷² “The National Intelligence Estimates – A – B Team Episode Concerning Soviet Strategic Capabilities and Objectives,” 16 February 1978, Paul Nitze Personal Papers, box 163, and “Trend analysis of ‘soft data,’ 1974-1975,” n.d., CIA-RDP83M00171R001200210001-0, CREST.

functions were already performed by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.⁷³ At the same time, the new DCI, Stansfield Turner, ordered the creation of a National Intelligence Council, which was entrusted with the coordination of the NIE production process. He nominated as its chairman Robert Bowie, the former Director of Harvard University's Center for International Affairs who had served under Eisenhower as the assistant Secretary of State for policy planning.⁷⁴ Bowie worked in close association with the NSC, which at that point would formally set the NIE schedule and topics, and initiated closer contacts with Congress.⁷⁵

Conclusion

Between the late 1960s and 1970s, the US National Intelligence production process underwent significant changes. This was mostly the consequence of the US policymakers' evolving requests to the intelligence community, elicited by the shifting strategic balance between the two superpowers. As the Soviet Union approached strategic, quantitative parity with the US in the late 1960s, the United States became concerned with preserving the credibility of its nuclear posture and preventing the establishment of Moscow's military advantage. With the loss of the overwhelming superiority enjoyed in previous years, understanding the qualitative evolution of the Soviet arsenal was, therefore, crucial for US government officials. Several officers inside the Johnson Administration, most notably members of the JCS, felt that the NIEs had not only underestimated the fast growth of the Soviet nuclear forces, but were also incapable of providing reliable assessments that could guide the policymakers on their future decisions on the US's own arsenal. The growing complexity of the

⁷³ Courtesy Call on Chairman Joseph Biden (D., Del.), Subcommittee on Secrecy and Disclosure, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, by Dr. Robert Bowie, 27 May 1977, Attachment, CREST, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP91M00696R000100090004-3.pdf>, 2.

⁷⁴ Athan Theoharis, Richard Immerman, Loch Johnson, Kathryn Olmsted and John Prados, *The Central Intelligence Agency: security under Scrutiny* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006), 53-54.

⁷⁵ Note for: Acting Deputy to the DCI for the Intelligence Community, 9 December 1977, CREST, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP83M00171R002300050002-6.pdf> and See for example "Courtesy Call on Chairman Adlai Stevenson (D., Ill.), Subcommittee on Collection, Production and Quality, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence," 26 May 1977, CREST, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79M00983A001500070003-3.pdf>. For more recent developments see Richard A. Best Jr., *The National Intelligence Council (NIC): Issues and Options for Congress* (Congress Research Service, 27 December 2011), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/intel/R40505.pdf>.

arms race, the increasing reluctance of Congress to fund weapon modernization, and the development of an ABM system, as well as the beginning of strategic arms control negotiations, increased the demand for National Estimates that were not only more complex and reliable, but also adhered to policymakers' needs. During the Nixon years, which were marked by the president's mistrust toward the CIA, the intelligence community assumed a mixed attitude of cooperation and resistance to the bureaucratic and political pressures coming from the Administration. This culminated with Colby's decision to dismantle the Office of National Estimates. The ONE had, in fact, shielded the NIEs from the risks of politicization, but had also come to be identified as an isolated body that was impermeable to outside input. Although the NIOs brought the flexibility that had been repeatedly advocated for in previous years, Colby's reform hardly silenced criticism against the NIEs. The discredit of the National Estimates prepared the ground for the overtly politicized Team A/Team B exercise in competitive analysis. The biased output by Team B prevented a reiteration of the experiment, but the adoption of some features of its methodology were seriously considered even within the intelligence community. The bureaucratic evolution of the NIE apparatus was completed during the Carter Administration with the creation of the National Intelligence Council, which contributed to the establishment of a formal cooperation between the government and the intelligence community on the production of the National Estimates.