

THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY HAS CLEANED UP ITS ATTRIBUTION PROBLEM ... HAS THE PRESS?

James Risen has another article on the evolution of intelligence analysis, this time describing how screwing up the Iraq intelligence so badly now weighs on Iran analysts (for the better, IMO).

I was struck by the description of one way the intelligence community has improved its analysis.

The intelligence community also now requires that analysts be told much more about the sources of the information they receive from the United States' human and technological spies. Analysts were left in the dark on such basic issues in the past, which helps explain why bogus information from fabricators was included in some prewar intelligence reports on Iraq. And, when they write their reports, they must include better attribution and sourcing for each major assertion.

While I'm skeptical the IC has improved sufficiently on this front (I suspect, for example, that attribution problems are one reason the IC was looking for an AQAP attack in 2009 in Yemen and not on a plane bound for Detroit), I am heartened that at least the IC is trying to give analysts more information on where information comes from and what biases might come with that information. At the very least, it should help avoid the stovepiping of information from people like Curveball.

But reading that passage got me wondering

whether the press has gotten any better on this front. This article was published in the NYT, a newspaper that rather famously promised to clean up its anonymous sourcing after the Judy Miller fiasco, but which routinely fails to meet its own guidelines.

Don't get me wrong—Risen himself meets these guidelines in the story, explaining why around 3 anonymous sources had to remain anonymous.

one former senior intelligence official, who like several others quoted in this article would speak only on the condition of anonymity about internal agency matters

He also includes on-the-record quotes from sources that appear identical to the named anonymous sources he quotes from; leaving little doubt as to who and where his story came from.

one former official who worked with the [CIA] analyst [who had a breakdown after the Iraq intelligence debacle]

Greg Thielmann, a former State Department intelligence analyst who resigned to protest what he considered the Bush administration's politicization of the prewar Iraq intelligence

Paul Pillar, a former senior C.I.A. analyst on the Middle East

according to the former officials [who worked on the 2007 Iran NIE]

one official [who worked on the 2007 NIE] recalled

Thomas Fingar, who was chairman of the National Intelligence Council at the time of the 2007 assessment on Iran

He even describes John Bolton in such a way as to downplay Bolton's own role in intelligence as Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and

International Security, presumably making it clear (as if there were any doubt) that Bolton was not among his sources describing the problems with intelligence under Bush.

John R. Bolton, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and a former ambassador to the United Nations in the Bush administration

So this is not a commentary on Risen. Rather, it's an observation that while the intelligence community has made efforts to fix a problem common to both the intelligence and journalistic communities leading up to the Iraq War, the efforts of the press to do so have been poorly enforced. Some of the same newspapers are allowing anonymous sources to again drive their coverage, without providing casual readers with the clues to understand who is making the belligerent claims.

Which is another way of saying that while the intelligence community seems to be trying to avoid pushing the US into another trumped up war, a number of people in the press aren't making the same effort.

Though maybe letting Risen writing repeated articles on the difficulty of Iran intelligence is Jill Abramson's way of trying to change the NYT's ways post-Bill Keller.