

# Introduction

We live in the information age, as everyone now knows. Our increasing ability to collect, store, and manipulate information is revolutionizing everything we do, from how we shop to how we wage war, threatening both the power of the nation-state and the privacy of its citizens.<sup>1</sup> These claims may be true, but one of the most insightful accounts of our information age reminds us that there have been others, and ours perhaps less revolutionary than its predecessors. The advent of literacy, and then of printing, produced changes arguably more significant than any we are living through now.<sup>2</sup> Some question whether information technology will even transform economic life to the degree of previous technologies.<sup>3</sup> Of course, for such questions, we should probably reserve the answer Zhou Enlai supposedly gave two hundred years after the French Revolution when asked about its significance: it is too soon to say.

While we wait for answers to ripen in the bosom of time, we might address the issue of the information revolution in a narrower way. Espionage is a form of information collection. If we examine how the information revolution is affecting espionage and intelligence more broadly, we might come to understand something of that revolution's power and scope. Since information is a kind of intelligence, intelligence agencies are in some sense the paradigmatic government agencies of the information age and intelligence its paradigmatic activity. Of all government agencies, only intelligence agencies exist solely to collect and analyze information. And these agencies face particular challenges as the "tsunami of information" sweeps over the world, spreading access to information and the ability to analyze it and changing what is known and how it is known.<sup>4</sup>

Examining espionage is a way of testing claims made about the power of information to change not just one set of organizations but our lives as well. For example, it will reveal something about the fate of both secrecy and privacy, the former traditionally considered essential for government, the latter for liberal

citizenship. Espionage is a particularly good candidate for this task because it is reputed to be the world's second oldest profession. It thus seems to be somehow an elemental part of human life or to be a response to some basic human necessity. Espionage remains a pre-eminently human business in the midst of a sweeping technical revolution. We know that the information revolution has changed the oldest profession. What has it done to espionage? And what does the fate of espionage tell us about our own fate in the information revolution?

Although espionage is not just a state activity,<sup>5</sup> it has always been closely associated with that form of power. The state has been inseparable from the collection, storage, and manipulation of information. Espionage has long been a part of the state's information system. In discussing the fate of espionage in the information age, we are at the same time, to some degree, discussing the fate of state power.

The discussion that follows focuses on the experience of the United States. Many questions have been raised about the quality of America's intelligence services. In particular, the failures of its espionage have been examined and debated in detail. Prior to 9/11, the United States had few if any human sources that could report on al Qaeda, and before the invasion of Iraq, no human sources who could inform the United States on the status of Saddam Hussein's weapons programs. Both the attack on 9/11 and the misjudgments about Iraq, and all its consequences, are thought to be in no small measure the result of deficiencies in America's espionage capabilities. On the other hand, espionage played a decisive role in the killing of Osama bin Laden and in the killing or capturing of other notorious terrorists, as well as many less well known. So, American espionage has had its successes and failures. On balance, it seems representative of modern espionage, even if perhaps somewhat less effective than the operations of other countries. In any case, the discussion also draws on evidence from ancient China, Rome, and Greece, as well as modern Europe and the Middle East.

Most discussions of intelligence suggest that we need to be better at it, but they also suggest that we need more analysis, probably less espionage and certainly less covert action.<sup>6</sup> The analysis presented here reaches a somewhat different conclusion: we could do with much less analysis, at least as it has been institutionalized in American intelligence, but cannot do without espionage and covert action. Although problematic, the latter two instruments of statecraft are necessary. Understanding their problems may make their necessary use more effective. This study does not focus on the issue of intelligence re-

form, however. It considers, instead, the notion of reformative public policy analysis itself as an expression of the essential spirit of our information age. A recent book on the problems of American intelligence exemplifies the standard public policy approach. Although it pays lip service to the inevitable limitations and hence failures of intelligence, it argues repeatedly that past reforms have not succeeded or gone far enough because despite them, intelligence failed (for example, the 9/11 attacks or Iraq WMD).<sup>7</sup> The assumption is that policy analysis and resulting reforms must lead to an absence of failures; if there are failures, then the analysis was faulty or the reforms did not go far enough. Such an approach gives no serious consideration to the limits of information gathering and analysis, to the limits of human knowledge. Of course, not all public policy analysis is blind to the limits of such analysis or to the limits of intelligence itself.<sup>8</sup> But even these more clear sighted examples remain within the genre, analytical in method and ameliorative in intent, even if more prudent in their hopes. The following discussion of espionage and intelligence joins them by questioning such analysis and reform but aims also to question at least some of the assumptions behind such ameliorative analysis, assumptions that are central to the modern information age.

The argument unfolds as follows. Chapter One explains the connections between information, intelligence, and state power. It explains how espionage fits within this web of connections. It argues that there are differences between the ancient understanding of intelligence and the modern understanding, which emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In part, the chapter uses the work of Jean-Baptiste Colbert and Francis Bacon to explain the differences. Bacon is particularly important, since he was a philosopher, a statesman, and a spymaster. Using philosophy and history to illuminate espionage and the power of the state is not unprecedented.<sup>9</sup> The analysis offered here treats espionage and state power generally, however, rather than as practiced in one time and place, and therefore aims to address its subjects most broadly. From the historical and theoretical considerations of Chapter One, we turn in Chapter Two to an examination of espionage. This examination provides the first test of the claims made on behalf of modern information and knowledge. Espionage requires a thorough understanding of the wellsprings of human action, and, we argue, it is these that prove most recalcitrant to Bacon's program. The chapter also provides the understanding of espionage necessary to assess the claims of the information revolution considered in the rest of the book. Those claims are addressed by examining in successive chapters counterintelligence and covert

action; intelligence in warfare; intelligence in irregular warfare; and the power of information inside espionage organizations. The conclusion summarizes what these chapters reveal, emphasizing that the light with which we guide ourselves is dimmer than many suspect but that we are likely to make our way more steadily if we acknowledge the obscurity in which we move. In the end, it reaches the entirely ineffective conclusion that “a standard of goodness or badness beyond results,” rather than knowledge, is the key to power. Throughout, the analysis is undertaken in the hopeful spirit of the CIA’s motto, an ancient thought for a modern intelligence organization: “Know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.”

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