

# REVIEW ESSAY

## Facts and Fears

### Hard Truths from a Life in Intelligence

James R. Clapper,  
Viking Press, New York, 2018, 432 pages

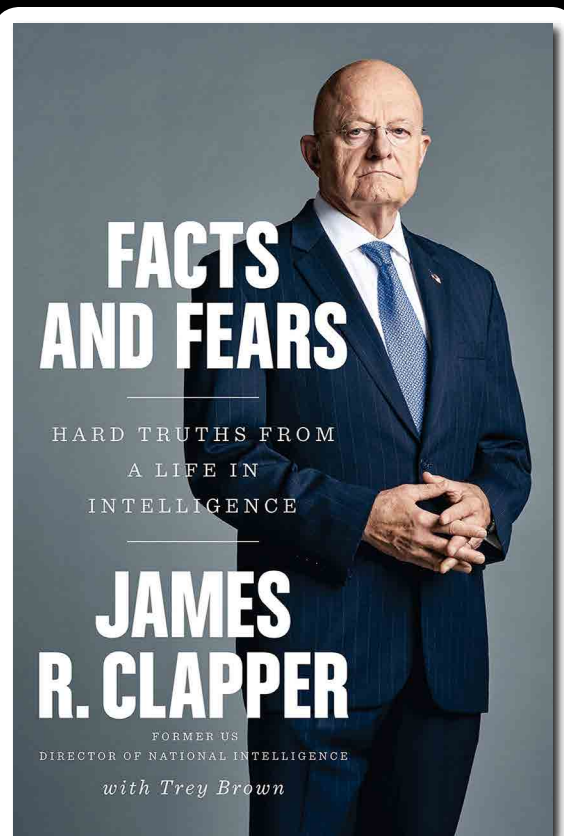
Kevin Rousseau

James Clapper says he never expected to write a book like *Facts and Fears: Hard Truths from a Life in Intelligence*. The publicity involved goes against all he believes about the intelligence business, where laboring unheralded is the norm. As he explains it, U.S. intelligence community (IC) service “means toiling in anonymity and not getting public recognition for achievements.”<sup>1</sup> He changed his mind for two reasons. First, Clapper wrote this book because his fifty plus years of experience gave him a front-row seat to the development of the IC, the history of which is itself a story worth telling. Second, and by far most importantly, Clapper wrote this book because of current threats he sees as effectively targeting the fundamental values underpinning the American political system. Now that he is a private citizen, Clapper considers it his duty to be as frank as he can about issues he finds deeply disturbing.

Clapper’s career as an intelligence officer in the U.S. Air Force and his service as a federal government official practically encompassed the entire IC. He worked in key intelligence and leadership positions at nearly every conceivable

level, which includes heading two intelligence agencies and culminating in serving as the director of national intelligence (DNI). Clapper simply explains that the objective of the IC is “to reduce uncertainty for decision makers as much as possible, whether they’re in the Oval Office, at the negotiating table, or on the battlefield.”<sup>2</sup> Clapper has first-hand experience in all those venues, and his knack for storytelling and trove of personal anecdotes describe in an interesting way how far the IC has progressed since his career began in the early 1960s. Despite its various high points and low points over the past five decades, Clapper’s experiences illuminate how the IC has gradually improved its tradecraft, collaboration, and interagency cooperation.

Looking back, an obvious high point for the IC in Clapper’s experience was the 2011 Abbottabad raid against Osama bin Laden. Here, the long years spent working to build an effective IC that helps our national-level leadership make better informed decisions paid off. The low point was Edward Snowden and his betrayal of his colleagues and fellow citizens. The Snowden incident not only seriously damaged important national security interests, but it



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also revealed remaining weaknesses in IC collaboration and information sharing. Clapper is clearly frustrated, in the wake of the incident, by some of the conflicting demands placed upon the IC. As he puts it, the “public continued to send mixed messages about its desires regarding the balance between safety and security on one hand, and civil liberties and privacy on the other.”<sup>3</sup> He frames the basic question as “to what extent are we as a society

strove to “live by the first, fundamental, unwritten law of intelligence work: Speak straight, unbiased intelligence truth to power, and leave the business of policy making to the policy makers.”<sup>6</sup> True to his apolitical code, Clapper also spares neither side of the aisle from his criticisms.

The most disturbing issue for Clapper emerges as he is preparing to end his tenure as DNI, and it continues to trouble him into retirement. With the benefit of hindsight, Clapper explains how the Russian troll army cut its teeth into Ukraine, sowing disunity and mistrust by effectively exploiting social media to spread disinformation and undermine Ukraine’s internal political stability. What bothers him deeply was intelligence he describes as showing Russia using these same skills to meddle in the U.S. presidential election. What troubled Clapper enough to compel him to write this book was his allegation that Russian influence operations against the United States continue unabated. Clapper leaves no doubt in his opinion, “The Russians are our primary existential threat.”<sup>7</sup> He adds bluntly that Russia has “been at war with us in the information realm for some time, and the apathy displayed by many Americans toward this profound menace is very disturbing.”<sup>8</sup> For Clapper, this is the hard truth that inspired this book, and he adds that “I believe we have to continue speaking truth to power, even—or especially—if the person in power doesn’t want to hear the truth we have to tell him.”<sup>9</sup>

willing to sacrifice personal liberties in the interests of common safety?”<sup>4</sup> Clapper laments that this question “would assert itself with increasing frequency in the years after I took off the uniform, and I believe the U.S. public has yet to reach a clear and consistent consensus.”<sup>5</sup>

One of the most interesting events Clapper describes is his 2014 diplomatic mission to bring back two detained U.S. citizens from North Korea, an accomplishment he takes evident and well-deserved pride in. Another proud moment was his award-winning speech (written, as was this book, with his speechwriter Trey Brown) he delivered on “why black lives matter to U.S. intelligence.” This is just one of the many examples he cites of his sincere life-long commitment to diversity and his convincing argument that inclusion has significantly strengthened the IC.

Clapper’s greatest frustrations derive from his experiences with Congress. It is here that Clapper claims to have endured most of his struggles to keep intelligence from being exploited for political purposes. In all his dealings with politicians and decision-makers, Clapper explains that he

Clapper’s stated intent is to “continue to speak ‘truth to power’—in this case to the American people.”<sup>10</sup> He explains that his “hope is that this book will, in some measure, help people regain awareness.”<sup>11</sup> Whether you agree with him or not—and many will find some of his statements on the current administration controversial—this is a book worth reading from the perspective of the art of intelligence. It summarizes the development of the IC over the past fifty years, provides insights into the intelligence profession itself, and bluntly describes what a former senior IC leader and seasoned practitioner of intelligence considers the biggest current threat to our national security. ■

## Notes

1. James R. Clapper, *Facts and Fears: Hard Truths from a Life in Intelligence* (New York: Viking Press), 232.

2. *Ibid.*, 48.

3. *Ibid.*, 82.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, 127.

7. *Ibid.*, 400.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 364.

10. *Ibid.*, 400.

11. *Ibid.*