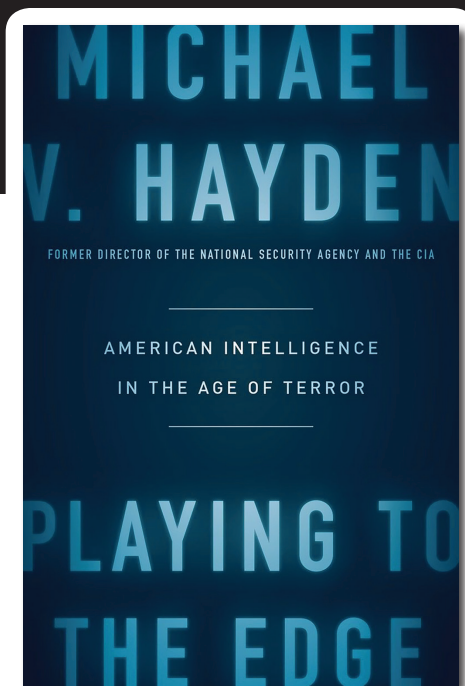


## Playing to the Edge

American Intelligence in the Age of Terror  
Michael V. Hayden, Penguin, New York, 2016, 452 pages



Maj. Charles J. Scheck, U.S. Army

Support for the intelligence community swings like a pendulum. Michael V. Hayden, in his book *Playing to the Edge: American Intelligence in the Age of Terror*, reflects such swings by openly describing the ups and downs of his career in that community with candor and splendid prose. The memoir is detailed enough to engross a Beltway insider and is engaging enough to invite in the average American. The title, *Playing to the Edge*, references athletes playing so close to the line they get chalk dust on their cleats. This is a metaphor Hayden uses to demonstrate and defend his use of every tool and authority within legitimate bounds, including this book. A retired four-star general, Hayden retells stories with the utmost competence and humility. He gives clarity to the extremely complex issues he faced in his career. Focusing on his impact at the National Security Agency (NSA) and on his leadership at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) during a tumultuous time allows for a brief review of his career, including how his intelligence affected the fight against al-Qaida and what landmark decisions were made during his tenure.

Beginning in 1999, Hayden's mission as he took over the NSA was to "shake things up"; he certainly accomplished that goal. The NSA, the primary objective of which is to track electronic data during transmission, lost 30 percent of its operating budget in the 1990s. During that same period, Hayden reports that the global telecommunications revolution was in full swing: the number of mobile cell

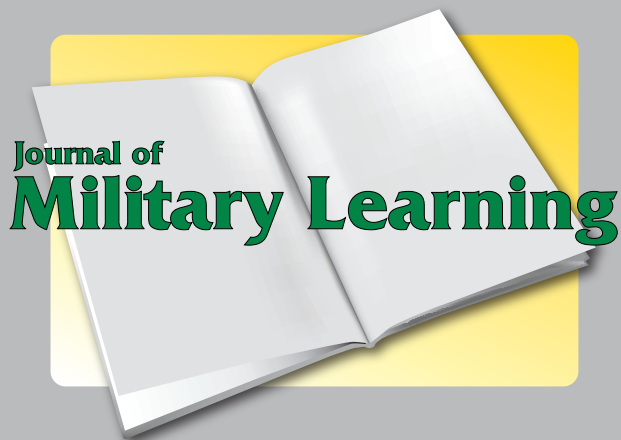
phones increased from 16 million to 741 million, Internet users increased from 4 million to 361 million, and international telephone traffic grew from 38 billion minutes to over 100 billion minutes. Upon taking the reins, Hayden was confronted with two conflicting challenges: the first was antiquated technology that threatened operational deafness in less than a decade, and the second was the leaden bureaucracy that was driven by the fear of omnipotence within the organization itself. Hayden took on both issues with strength and poise, but his role in history was solidified on the fateful day of 11 September 2001.

The NSA admitted it had no prior knowledge of the attacks, but, under Hayden, the pendulum started to swing. As Hayden states, it is easy to judge intelligence agencies for not doing enough in times of crisis and for overstepping their bounds when we as a nation feel safe. In a telling moment two days after 9/11, while speaking to an anxious workforce, he issued several reminders. The first was that the balance between security and liberty was fragile, but that our country was formed on the notion that liberty demands priority. The second was that in that moment of America's call for justice, "more than three hundred million Americans wish they had your job."

In the weeks, months, and years to follow, Hayden

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would push the envelope to get every last bit of intelligence the letter of the law would allow. He spoke clearly on Stellarwind—the push to gather intelligence inside the United States originating from or heading to foreign sources—an effort fully supported and encouraged by President George W. Bush. That intelligence was a powerful tool, and hopefully, history will allow a far more definitive look at how much that single action leveraged our intelligence community once more information is eventually declassified and released.

In a war where the enemy was extremely hard to find yet relatively easy to eliminate, Hayden made another, but less public, contribution at the NSA to bring intelligence to the front lines. He made clear to his teams that they were not a supporting element but rather a dynamic fighting force. Their intelligence became real time, and the NSA built systems based on customer needs and individual rules of engagement. Retelling a conversation with the commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, where he was being asked for more intelligence, Hayden said, “Charlie, let me give you another way of thinking about this. You give me a little action, and I’ll give you a lot more intelligence.” In other words, operational moves force the enemy to move and communicate, allowing for intelligence that is much more complete, and making for a successful working arrangement with organizations such as U.S. Special Operations Command.

While Hayden’s goal was to shake up the NSA, in contrast, he asserts, his mission at the CIA was to settle things down. The CIA was in shambles after failing to uncover the 9/11 plot, fumbling over the lack of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq, and folding under the public pressure due to its use of enhanced interrogation techniques. Hayden very humbly admits failure in the lack of information regarding the 9/11 plot and in simply “getting it wrong” in terms of WMD. He did not accept the passing of the blame to the White House on that issue and was very eager to take responsibility first at the NSA and again at the CIA. Interrogation techniques, however, proved to be a challenge, where public opinion and the ever-critical press once again stunted his efforts.

Hayden worked to build consensus on the CIA’s new program by laying out ground rules for who was held, where and for how long they were held, and what techniques were used for their interrogations. With the utmost respect for the decisions that were made just after 9/11, Hayden admits that it was easier for him at that time to take tactics off the table because the American people had forgotten the fear they felt in the days following 9/11. He also was quick to defend his interrogators, whom he described as performing their jobs out

of a “sense of duty, not enthusiasm.” Eventually, new guidelines were set, leaving six of the thirteen enhanced interrogation techniques in place. Hayden candidly gave his opinion to summarize this decision: “America (not just CIA) was largely out of the detention and interrogation business. We had finally succeeded in making it so legally difficult and so politically dangerous to grab and hold someone that we would simply default to the kill switch to take terrorists off the battlefield.”

The unfortunate truth is that most of Hayden’s decisions had little to do with keeping America safe and much to do with keeping Americans appeased. Handling the press and the politics associated with these huge issues was a never-ending task. His opinion of the press, which was often unfavorable, is delivered respectfully but honestly. In reference to the battle between the government’s responsibility to keep secrets and the public’s right to know, Hayden offers up a quote from David Ignatius: “We journalists usually try to argue that we have carefully weighed the pros and cons and believe that the public benefits of disclosure outweigh potential harm. The problem is that we aren’t fully qualified to make those judgments.”

Hayden’s career was littered with such decisions. The months in 2006 leading up to “The Surge” in Iraq were no different. Hayden declared that “we had created tactical successes but without strategic effect,” and he admittedly wrestled with which action would cause the least harm, pulling troops out or keeping them in. He spoke at great length about the struggles in the Maliki government and the reasons it ultimately failed despite Bush’s dedication to its cause. Ironically, as in most of his recounts, the declaration of success or failure was not as important as defining the circumstances surrounding the decision and the intentions of the decision makers.

Overall, *Playing to the Edge* provides the consumer with an excellent background on the intelligence community and a candid version of some of the toughest decisions made post-9/11. The book does not boast about the accomplishments of the CIA, the NSA, or of Michael Hayden but rather aims to generate public support by authoritatively informing readers. It was unfortunate that this book had to be written, but in general, the intelligence community should be able to protect their agents and fellow residents under a veil of secrecy and not divulge information that is potentially harmful to future endeavors. Hayden states in the book, “Secrecy in a democracy is not a grant of power, but a grant of trust.” In my opinion, Hayden goes a great distance to earn that trust—perhaps even too far. ■



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