
GETTING TO KNOW THE PRESIDENT

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INTELLIGENCE BRIEFINGS OF PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES AND PRESIDENTS-ELECT, 1952–2016

CHAPTER 9: DONALD J. TRUMP—A UNIQUE CHALLENGE

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To
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CHAPTER 9

DONALD J. TRUMP—A UNIQUE CHALLENGE

Briefing Donald Trump as a presidential candidate, president-elect, and president during his first few weeks in office presented the Intelligence Community (IC) with greater challenges than it had faced since the Central Intelligence Agency attempted to provide similar support to President-elect Richard Nixon 48 years before. Trump was unique among the dozen presidents who took office since President Harry Truman began the briefing process in 1952 in that he had never served in the military or any branch of government. As a result, he had no experience handling classified information or working with military, diplomatic, or intelligence programs and operations. Trump had traveled abroad but, by his own account, did not often read. Like Nixon, he doubted the competence of intelligence professionals and felt no need for regular intelligence support. Trump declared that he intended to shake up the executive branch, publicly criticized the outgoing directors of national intelligence and the CIA, and disparaged the substantive work and integrity of the intelligence agencies. From the outset, it was clear that the IC was in for a difficult time.

The outgoing Obama administration was very supportive of the IC as it prepared to provide briefings to the presidential and vice-presidential candidates in 2016. In fact, the administration was determined to arrange a smooth transition involving all government departments. President Barack Obama told cabinet officers that he appreciated the cooperative attitude and helpfulness of his predecessor, George W. Bush. Obama stressed that he wanted to do everything Bush had done,

and more, to facilitate the transition to his successor.¹ On 6 May, six months before the election, Obama signed an executive order entitled “Facilitation of a Successful Presidential Transition,” which created the White House Transition Coordinating Council. DNI James Clapper was a member.

After the political party conventions, White House Chief of Staff Denis McDonough chaired a meeting of senior administration officials, including Clapper, with the transition teams for Trump and his Democratic opponent, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Clapper recalled that he “was struck by how sober and professional and courteous and civil the conversation was. That showed me that there are people on all sides of the election who care about—and are serious about—national security.”² On the day following the election, McDonough convened the cabinet again to discuss the transition process. On that occasion, he invited CIA Director John Brennan to participate and praised the Agency and Intelligence Community for being well-positioned to support the president- and vice president-elect, citing the deployment of *President’s Daily Brief* (PDB) briefers to New York that morning as an example for the entire government.³

For its part, the Intelligence Community had learned from experience the advantages of starting early in making preparations for the transition. More than a year before the election, in October 2015, the PDB staff, headed by Isabel Patelunas, formed a transition working group. This team prepared a written plan of actions to be taken in preparation for the transition and during each stage of it, including possible pitfalls and mitigations. Probably the most concrete issue they addressed was the need to be ready to present the PDB in hard copy or on a tablet computer, depending on the preferences of whomever was elected.⁴

In February 2016, Clapper established an IC transition team, led by Assistant Director for Policy and Strategy Dawn Eilenberger. This multiagency group served as a forum for communicating about the

1. James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, interview with author, 22 February 2017.

2. James Clapper, speech to the National Security Forum, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, University of Texas, Austin, 22 September 2016.

3. John O. Brennan, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, message to CIA employees, “CIA and the Presidential Transition,” 9 November 2016.

4. Isabel Patelunas, interview with author, 23 February 2017.

transition, ensuring that all agencies received accurate information about transition developments and DNI guidance about their role in providing coordinated support to the process. Clapper created a separate ODNI team, also chaired by Eilenberger, to coordinate transition-related activities within the Office of the DNI (ODNI).

By early spring, the DNI was receiving inquiries about the anticipated intelligence briefings from the press and Congress.⁵

In June, Clapper sent a memorandum to McDonough describing how the IC, beginning with the elections of 1952, had provided analytic intelligence briefings to the candidates for president and vice president. He noted that the White House chief of staff normally extended the offer of briefings to the candidates following the nominating conventions and the DNI, or DCI before him, dealt with representatives of the candidates concerning the modalities. ODNI would propose a list of subjects for the briefings.

The ground rules the DNI proposed to McDonough were designed to emphasize the nonpartisan nature of the process. For example, either candidate was free to request a briefing on a subject not included on the list provided by the IC, but if this was done, the candidate of the other party would be informed of the request and offered the same briefing. As was customary, briefings of the candidates in the preelection period would not include intelligence operational matters or discussions of policy. If policy questions did arise, the candidates would be referred to the assistant to the president for national security affairs. Questions or reactions from the candidates during the briefings would be held in confidence by the briefers. The IC would not comment to the press about the briefings, except to acknowledge that they occurred, if asked. The campaigns would be encouraged to adopt the same approach.

McDonough approved Clapper's ground rules within a week, and both major-party candidates accepted them without objection soon after. The administration did not offer intelligence briefings to Jill Stein of the Green Party or Gary Johnson of the Libertarian Party, and neither candidate requested one. In 2016, according to Clapper, there was simply no consideration of providing briefings to third-party candidates. There was precedent for providing such briefings, but it had not

5. Dawn Eilenberger, interview with author, 16 February 2017.

been done for some years. Third-party candidates George Wallace and Lester Maddox were briefed in 1968, and John Anderson was briefed in 1980.

When he discussed the process of briefing the candidates with his own staff or in his public appearances, Clapper went even further than the written ground rules in attempting to avoid any hint of politicization. In particular, he stressed that the briefings would be delivered by career intelligence officers rather than political appointees (ruling out, principally, himself and Brennan). This removed an awkwardness that had arisen periodically since the beginning of the process, when Truman offered a briefing to Eisenhower. When DCIs or DNIs were slated to give the briefings, candidates from the opposition party were often uneasy that political agendas were involved or the briefer was lobbying to hold onto his position. Clapper also stressed publicly that one team produced and delivered the PDB to the sitting administration, while “a completely separate team produces and coordinates the cross-agency effort to brief the candidates...the candidate briefing team does NOT coordinate with the White House.”⁶

Clapper’s most important single action related to the briefings of 2016 probably was his selection of the lead briefer. The DNI believed it was important for the individual who had been briefing President Obama to continue in that role, undistracted, throughout the transition process until the inauguration of Obama’s successor. Clapper also believed—in the interest of continuity—that a different, single individual should brief the two candidates for president and then continue, postelection, with the one who became president-elect and president.

For the critical task of briefing the candidates, Clapper chose Assistant Deputy Director of National Intelligence for Intelligence Integration Ted Gistaro, a career CIA analyst. Reflecting his determination to stay out of the process, Clapper turned over to Gistaro complete responsibility for choosing the subjects about which the candidates would be briefed, selecting the expert analysts who would assist him with the briefings, and preparing for anticipated briefings of new appointees below the presidential level at the transition headquarters provided by the Government Services Administration (GSA) in downtown Washington.

6. Clapper, speech to National Security Forum, 22 September 2016.



Ted Gistaro (standing) addresses President Trump in the Oval Office in 2017. Others present include DNI Dan Coats and then-DDCIA Gina Haspel. Photo courtesy of ODNI.

With input from the various intelligence agencies, Gistaro chose eight topics. Three had been priority subjects for briefings during every transition since the process began more than 60 years before—developments in Russia, China, and North Korea. In 2016, Russia was still in the news for its seizure of Crimea in 2014, continuing actions to foment insurrection in eastern Ukraine, and, above all, reported interference in the US election campaign. For China, the focus was on economic and trade issues and China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea. Regarding North Korea, the big challenges were its missile and nuclear programs.

From the volatile Middle East, Gistaro selected two currently critical subjects: Iraq/Syria and Iran. In Iraq, US-backed forces were in the midst of a months-long effort to drive fighters of the radical Islamic organization, ISIS, out of the city of Mosul; in Syria, the multiyear civil war dragged on, with government forces backed by Russia and Iran gradually gaining the upper hand. In Iran, focus was on the international diplomatic agreement that constrained that country's nuclear program, as well as on Tehran's growing influence throughout the Middle East. There were three transnational issues—weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, and cyber threats. In addition to these eight subjects, President Obama requested that the candidates be briefed on counterintelligence issues.

Gistaro (with the agreement of other senior ODNI managers) was determined to identify experts representing the whole of the IC to assist him with the briefings, so he sought nominations from all agencies. In the end, he selected 14 substantive experts. Seven came from the ODNI: three national intelligence officers (from the group of senior analysts who make up the National Intelligence Council, the NIC); two from the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC); and two national intelligence managers (the senior IC officers who coordinate IC-wide programs related to a single issue or country). Those drawn directly from the individual agencies included three from CIA and one each from DIA, the FBI, and the Department of State. This was the largest and most organizationally diverse group of experts ever deployed for transition briefings of candidates and presidents-elect. Normally, six experts accompanied Gistaro to each briefing, although for one meeting (a second session with vice-presidential candidate Mike Pence, where there was a limited, specific agenda) there were only three.⁷

Preelection Briefings

Candidate Trump received his first briefing from the Intelligence Community at the FBI field office in the Federal Plaza Building in New York City on 17 August 2016, roughly one month after he secured the Republican Party nomination. Trump was accompanied by two advisors, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie and Lt. Gen. (ret.) Michael Flynn. The briefing team, led by Gistaro, included six of the substantive experts and a colleague from the ODNI Transition Team who was available to record and take follow-up action related to any questions that might arise and not be answered on the spot.

Gistaro led off with a substantive overview of the highest priority issues the IC was following, then turned to his colleagues to elaborate on developments in their areas of specialization. They briefed on terrorism, cyber security, counterterrorism, ISIS, the civil war in Syria, the security situation in Iraq, and the Iranian nuclear program. Gistaro recalled that he was careful to watch the clock and intervene as necessary so that the briefers each had an opportunity to say their piece but did not run over their allotted time. Nevertheless, the briefing went on

7. Ted Gistaro, interview with author, 2 March 2017.

for two and a half hours, longer than scheduled, and even then could not cover all the planned subjects. It was agreed that a second session was necessary.

In this first session, Trump was primarily a listener. He did ask some “big picture” questions, reflecting the fact that the material was new to him. Because several of the issues related to matters Flynn had dealt with in the military, he was the most active questioner. In Gistaro’s words, “He was on his home turf.” Most of Flynn’s questions were on the Middle East and were quite tactical. However, a few of his questions, especially on Iran, raised policy issues and had to be turned aside for referral, if he wished, to the national security advisor. Trump’s verdict on the session was a “thumbs-up” to IC officers as he departed. Christie later described the briefing as outstanding.

Trump received a second preelection briefing roughly two weeks later, on 2 September, also at the FBI office in Manhattan. Again, Trump was accompanied by Christie and Flynn. This one-and-a-half-hour briefing rounded out the agreed list of topics, focusing on cyber security, Russia, China, and North Korea. On this occasion, Trump had numerous questions, some of which raised policy issues. Most, however, reflected his interest in financial and trade matters and in press reports about Russia’s reported interference in the US election campaign.

At the briefing of 2 September, Trump told the briefers that he valued the first session in August and their expertise. They were surprised when he assured them that “the nasty things he was saying” publicly about the Intelligence Community “don’t apply to you.” Afterward, Flynn complimented the briefers in remarks to the press.

Governor Pence also received two intelligence briefings in the preelection period. He was briefed on 9 September at the headquarters of the Indiana National Guard in Indianapolis, and on 29 September at the FBI field office in Manhattan. On both occasions, Pence was accompanied by staff members Josh Pitcock and Nick Ayers. To ensure consistency, the briefing team, again led by Gistaro, comprised the same individuals who had briefed Trump.

The first briefing to Pence covered all eight of the subjects that had been agreed in advance, plus the counterintelligence briefing by an FBI official. The second briefing went into more detail on ISIS, China,

North Korea, and terrorism in Africa and Europe. Pence was interested and cordial, asking a number of questions and complimenting the briefers for their thoroughness, professionalism, and commitment. After the first briefing, Pence made brief remarks to the press expressing his respect and gratitude for intelligence and national security professionals, particularly with the anniversary of 9/11 approaching. It was clear from the beginning that he would be a serious and avid recipient of intelligence information once in office.

The Democratic nominees for president and vice president, Clinton and Sen. Tim Kaine of Virginia, each chose to receive one preelection intelligence briefing. Clinton, although feeling under the weather and unavoidably delayed 20 minutes, joined the briefers in a small secure room (SCIF, in intelligence argot) at the FBI field office in White Plains, New York, on 27 August. Given all that Clinton was going through related to her handling of personal emails during the campaign, Gistaro regretted that the first question the security officer asked Clinton as she approached the room was whether she had any cell phones with her. The Secretary very professionally assured the questioner that she had left her cell phones at home. For his part, Kaine was briefed at the FBI office in Manhattan on 8 September. Neither Clinton nor Kaine had any staff members accompany them.

With the Democratic candidates, Gistaro and his team covered the same array of subjects that they had discussed with the Republicans. Iraq, Syria, and Iran took up most of the time. Russia, China, and North Korea were handled more expeditiously. Neither candidate had many questions, although Kaine raised some related to regional issues or disputes worldwide. The candidates both took the briefings seriously, but the briefers felt that these sessions were more of a formality, “a box to be checked,” for the Democratic candidates than they were for the Republicans. In Clinton’s case, particularly, this presumably resulted from the fact that she was steeped in the substantive issues from her four years’ service as secretary of state.

Presidential Debates

Officials of the Intelligence Community learned over the years to watch the formal presidential debates very carefully. Experience had shown that any mention of the IC meant trouble—in this context, it

was not true that any publicity was good publicity. This phenomenon started with the first televised debate between candidates of the major parties in the election of 1960, Vice President Richard Nixon and Senator John Kennedy. The candidates—both of whom had access to classified intelligence by virtue of their positions—cited findings of the Intelligence Community and statements by DCI Allen Dulles related to the economic strength and strategic military capabilities of the Soviet Union. Their statements were general and did not disclose specific classified information. Nevertheless, Kennedy was able to draw on the material to register effective debating points, charging, in particular, that the Eisenhower-Nixon administration had allowed the Soviets to best the United States by creating a critical “bomber gap” and “missile gap.” Nixon felt the IC contributed to his losing the election and carried a grudge against the Community even when he finally won the presidency eight years later, in 1968.

Debates during the several most recent electoral campaigns had also raised awkward issues for the Intelligence Community. In 2004, candidates George W. Bush and John Kerry both criticized the IC for faulty intelligence that overstated Iraq’s holdings of weapons of mass destruction. In 2008, Barack Obama and John McCain both condemned CIA’s practices of rendering, detaining, and interrogating suspected terrorists. In the debate between Obama and challenger Mitt Romney in 2012, the IC was on the defensive for its reporting and actions related to the terrorist attack on US diplomatic posts in Benghazi, Libya that killed US Chargé Chris Stevens and others. These issues seemed never to go away. To the continuing chagrin of the Intelligence Community, the candidates in 2016—primarily Trump—were still talking about the IC’s assessment of Iraq’s WMD holdings, the use of “extraordinary interrogation techniques,” and whether the executive branch had misrepresented events in Benghazi.

With this background, officials were anxious to see what issues related to intelligence would arise during the debates in 2016, including whether the candidates would make direct or indirect reference to information they had received in their preelection briefings. This anxiousness was reinforced before the formal candidate debates during a quasi debate on 7 September, when Trump and Clinton were questioned, separately, by NBC newsman Matt Lauer. On this occasion, Trump made reference to intelligence briefers’ “body language” in sug-

gesting that they were “not happy” with policies of the Obama administration. These comments caused outrage in the following days among news commentators and former intelligence officers and prompted reporters to dig for information about what had transpired during Trump’s briefings.

The first formal debate, between Trump and Clinton, was held on 26 September at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. The second, between Pence and Kaine, was held on 4 October at Longwood University in Farmville, Virginia. The third and fourth debates, both involving the presidential candidates, were held on 9 and 19 October. The earlier of these was a townhall-type discussion at Washington University in St. Louis; the latter a conventional debate at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas.

The debates of 2016 were notable for the very limited attention the candidates paid directly to the Intelligence Community and its programs. There was some discussion of national security issues. For example, the moderator of the first debate opened a segment on “Securing America” by raising the issue of cyber security. That, in turn, led to discussion of Russia, the radical Islamic ISIS group, terrorist attacks in the United States, as well as Libya, Iraq, and Iran. Beyond the Middle East, the candidates discussed NATO and America’s other alliances, chiefly its bilateral defense agreements with Japan, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia. The common theme on all these issues, however, was the competence and readiness of the candidates to grapple with them. There was no explicit mention of the Intelligence Community or the quality of its performance on the issues discussed.

The Intelligence Community was mentioned, briefly, in the debates that followed. In discussing cyber threats, Kaine promoted an idea of Clinton’s to create an “intelligence surge,” using the “best intelligence and cyber employees in the world.” He spoke positively about the past experience of the IC in working with the US private sector and foreign liaison services and the potential for “better skill, capacity, and alliances” in combating growing cyber threats.

In the third and fourth debates, Clinton developed the same theme about using the Intelligence Community to combat cyber threats. In the town hall in St. Louis, she noted the IC had, in the previous few days, released publicly its conclusion that the Russian government was respon-

sible for hacking the computers of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) to influence the outcome of the US election. She elaborated the point, more forcefully, in the final debate in Las Vegas: “We have 17 intelligence agencies, civilian and military, who have all concluded that these espionage attacks, these cyber attacks, come from the highest levels of the Kremlin and they are designed to influence our election. I find that deeply disturbing.” Clinton projected that her planned “intelligence surge” would not only strengthen US defenses against Russian hacking but would be a central part of the effort to protect the US homeland against ISIS “from the air, on the ground and online.”

Trump countered Clinton’s charges that the Russians had engaged in cyber attacks and attempted to influence the election by suggesting, “It could be Russia, but it could also be China. It could also be lots of other people. It also could be somebody sitting on their bed that weighs 400 pounds, OK?” While he sought to raise doubt about the responsibility of the Russians, he did not—in the debates—refer explicitly to the role of the Intelligence Community in investigating the matter or the conclusions the Community had reached. Outside the formal debates, he was not so restrained.

Briefings during the Transition

President-elect Trump chose not to begin receiving intelligence briefings immediately after the election. The Trump team was not fully prepared to launch transition operations, apparently having not expected to win the election. Once the sessions began, however, Trump received 14 briefings during the 10-week transition period. Because of his hectic schedule, the briefings were provided in a conference room in Trump Tower in Midtown Manhattan rather than having him travel downtown to the FBI offices where he had received his two preelection briefings. During the holiday period, Trump received three briefings at his Mar-a-Lago Resort in Florida, which he quickly dubbed the “Southern White House” or the “Winter White House.”

The first postelection briefing was held on 15 November, a week after the election. Before the briefing began, Gistaro delivered a hand-written note to the president-elect from DNI Clapper in which Clapper congratulated Trump on his election and pledged on behalf of the IC

“to provide the best intelligence we can muster.”⁸ Gistaro explained to the president-elect that he would be receiving exactly the same *President’s Daily Brief* as President Obama. He informed Trump that as president-elect, he could designate those among his own national security team whom he wanted to receive the PDB; once they were officially designated and received clearances, they would receive the book every day if they wished.⁹ Gistaro also explained that the PDB was sometimes created—whether in hard copy or on an iPad tablet—in multiple versions in order to limit dissemination of the most sensitive information and analysis. Trump was interested in these details. He elected to receive a printed version.

Gistaro then highlighted the key points from several items in that day’s PDB. The first related to Peru, as President Obama would be traveling there later in the week for the APEC Summit (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, the 21-member group of Pacific Rim nations dedicated to promoting free trade and cooperation). Other articles addressed Turkey, Syria, China, the Middle East, and South Asia. The president-elect had questions or comments on five pieces, including a question about why information or analysis on one of the subjects had not appeared in the press. Trump was interested in Gistaro’s explanation that even if some international developments seem obscure, it is the job of the IC to put them into a strategic context and point out how they can have significant implications for US interests.

Gistaro recounted that the president-elect, during this first session, was engaged, attentive, and appreciative. He asked that information on three specific subjects be addressed in future sessions. Trump said that he would like to receive the book every day, even while traveling, but probably would schedule only one formal briefing session per week. In

8. James Clapper, *Facts and Fears* (Viking, 2018), 358.

9. The transition following the election of 2016 was the first in which the White House formally approved, in writing, the provision of the PDB to the president-elect’s cabinet-level designees prior to their confirmation. The White House had always formally approved the PDB for the president- and vice president-elect, but the practice of sharing it also with the designees had rested on tradition and informal approvals. In October 2016, Clapper sent to McDonough, who approved, a PDB briefing proposal that identified specific officials, by position, to receive the PDB. This memorandum also addressed who would be allowed to attend the PDB briefings for the president- and vice president-elect. DNI Clapper wanted to avoid the awkward situation that had arisen in 2008 at the first briefing of President-elect Obama, when his predecessor as DNI, Adm. Michael McConnell, was not authorized to permit some of Obama’s key officials into the briefing.

fact, he received at least one briefing every week, usually on Tuesdays. The sessions normally lasted between 30 and 50 minutes.

Asked how closely Trump read the PDB itself, Gistaro replied, "He touched it. He doesn't really read anything." Clapper agreed, saying "Trump doesn't read much; he likes bullets." Trump's style was to listen to the key points, discuss them with some care, then lead the discussion to related issues and others further afield. This turned out to be the general model for PDB sessions.

The Middle East was the region discussed most frequently during the transition briefings, particularly the ISIS terrorist group and efforts to destroy it; security and political issues in Syria and Iraq; the health of Iran's leaders and that country's strategic goals with Syria and other nearby states; the civil war in Yemen, including its humanitarian crisis and the role of outside powers in that struggle; continuing instability and its impact on oil production in Libya; the attitudes and military capabilities of pro-Western governments in the Middle East; and oil production throughout the region. The PDB during this period also focused on states on the periphery of, or adjacent to, the Middle East, especially Turkey and security threats it faced from the PKK's terrorist arm; tensions between Pakistan and India in South Asia were also covered.

Other subjects receiving treatment in the PDB and the press during the period included China's activities in Southeast Asia, weapons programs, and economic challenges; North Korea's missile and nuclear programs; South Korea's political turmoil, with the multistage impeachment of its president; and Russia's deliberations on investments in its military and advanced weapon systems amid economic stresses. For these and all issues, it emerged that the president-elect was very interested in graphics, maps, and satellite imagery that helped tell the story quickly and clearly.

In addition to discussions of the topics in the PDB, Trump during the transition also received his first expert briefing. In these sessions, a substantive specialist from the IC provides a detailed analysis of a particular issue in a setting where there is usually more extended discussion. Known at the time as "deep dives," these were a regular part of the intelligence support provided George W. Bush and were continued, as "expert briefs," with somewhat less frequency for Obama.

Trump's first expert brief, which he received following a PDB briefing on 30 November, was on North Korea. The NIO led a briefing team of IC officers. Gistaro later recounted that Trump and Flynn, who joined the president-elect for the briefing, were both very engaged and appreciated the discussion. They asked a wide variety of technical, political, and intelligence questions. The clearest evidence that they believed the briefing to be valuable was that they requested a second session on North Korea, which was provided a week later.

In a significant departure from the way briefings were handled during the previous two transitions—to Bush and Obama—Trump during his transition received no briefings from CIA on covert action programs. The Agency's deputy director for operations had provided Bush a comprehensive overview of all covert action programs while he was staying at Blair House, in Washington, 10 days before he was sworn in. Obama, Vice President-elect Joe Biden, and a half-dozen senior national security officials-designate had received a similar overview briefing in early December of the Obama transition, and senior officials (less Obama and Biden) received more in-depth covert action briefings in late December and early January. This combination of briefings was believed necessary because of the political tension surrounding CIA's practices in interrogating detained suspect terrorists. As CIA Director Michael Hayden recalled, "We needed to clear the air about what was under way."¹⁰

In 2016, two covert action briefings were provided to the Trump team. CIA Deputy Director David Cohen on 7 December briefed Pence and Flynn on all covert action programs. In a separate, later session, Cohen briefed DNI-designate Dan Coats and incoming Deputy National Security Advisor K. T. McFarland. Mike Pompeo, the member of HPSCI who was nominated by Trump to become director of the CIA, was knowledgeable of the covert programs from his service on the oversight committee, but during the transition and in his early weeks in office, he reviewed more comprehensive material and was provided additional briefings discussing the programs in greater detail. Trump himself was not briefed prior to being sworn in, nor in the first several weeks of his administration.

10. Michael Hayden, interview with author, 27 October 2011.

The most politically charged topic that Trump and Gistaro discussed during the transition was the matter of Russian interference in the US election. Reacting to press accounts of such meddling, Trump throughout the transition would periodically raise the subject with Gistaro. It became apparent that the subject was sufficiently broad and important that it required high-level attention in addition to the PDB briefing channel.

Tensions between the IC and Trump on Russia

The most problematic aspect of the 2016 transition for the Intelligence Community—one that carried over into the Trump presidency—was the emergence of the Trump team’s contacts with Russian officials as a domestic political issue in the United States. Historically, political imbroglios involving the Intelligence Community during transition periods had usually arisen because one or another of the agencies had done something controversial or ill-advised. In 2016, by contrast, the intelligence agencies were drawn into political quagmires initiated by others that were, nevertheless, important for the Community because they badly strained its relationship with the new president and his party.

Basically, there were three separate issues, alike in that Russia was central to each, and each unfolded within the larger context of Trump’s very positive view and repeated public defenses of Russian President Vladimir Putin. The first of these issues to surface publicly was Russia’s hacking the computers of the Democratic National Committee and using stolen emails, along with Russian propaganda, in an effort to influence the outcome of the US election. The second was the creation by a former British intelligence officer of a “dossier” of purported compromising personal information on Trump, allegedly at the behest of his political opponents, which, according to the press, related in large part to his actions in and with Russia. The third involved improper contacts between Trump campaign aide (later to be Trump’s first national security advisor) General Flynn and the Russian ambassador to the United States. Flynn’s misleading statements to the vice president led to Flynn’s resignation after less than a month in office.

Interference with the US election. The first of these matters, the fallout from Russia’s hacking the computers of the DNC, became a front-

page issue in the period leading up to the Republican and Democratic nominating conventions. WikiLeaks, for years a well-known international purveyor of leaked materials from many sources, in mid-July posted thousands of emails hacked from the DNC. Many of these were messages sent or received by associates of Clinton; in the aggregate, their release obviously was intended to embarrass her and undercut her candidacy by demonstrating, among other things, that she did not protect classified information. Commenting on the releases and press reporting that Russia was responsible for providing the material to WikiLeaks, then-candidate Trump, at a news conference on 27 July, said “Russia, if you’re listening, I hope you’re able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing.” This comment referred to emails Clinton had deleted as personal while serving as secretary of state. Clinton, including in the presidential debates, attacked Trump for “publicly inviting Putin to hack into Americans.” Trump repeatedly sought to cast doubt on whether Russia was responsible for providing the emails to WikiLeaks, suggesting China or private individuals might be culpable.

The IC had been drawn into the long-running politics of Clinton’s handling of emails and use of a private server even earlier, when Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, who had been the Republican candidate for vice president in 2012, called on Clapper—publicly and in a letter to the DNI—to withhold classified intelligence information from Clinton. Ryan cited a public statement by FBI Director James Comey that Clinton and her staff had been “extremely careless in their handling of very sensitive, highly classified information.”¹¹ Chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence (HPSCI) Devin Nunes and committee member Pompeo, who within months would be nominated by Trump to become CIA director, sent similar letters to Clapper. Pompeo asserted that Clinton’s mishandling of classified material was not a political issue, but a national security issue: “There is no doubt that American lives are at risk today because of her actions.”¹²

Clapper responded with a letter to Ryan, copies of which were sent also to Nunes and Pompeo. He declined their request that he withhold briefings from Clinton. Clapper pointed out, “Nominees for president and vice president receive these classified briefings by virtue of their status as candidates, and do not require separate security clearances

11. Paul D. Ryan, letter to James R. Clapper, 6 July 2016.

12. Mike Pompeo, letter to James R. Clapper, 7 July 2016.

before the briefings. Briefings for the candidates will be provided on an even-handed, non-partisan basis. Candidates are advised of the classified nature of the material, and operational policy matters are not addressed. Accordingly, I do not intend to withhold briefings from any officially nominated, eligible candidate.”¹³ Looking back on these exchanges, Clapper remarked, with some exasperation, “It is not my call who gets briefed. The American electorate decides.”¹⁴

In early December, the press reported that CIA, in the weeks immediately following the election, had determined that Russia had intervened in the election by hacking computers and by other means, not simply to meddle, but specifically to boost Trump’s candidacy (the IC had said publicly as early as the first week in October that Russia intended to interfere with the election). In response, Trump sought to discredit the competence of the Agency. “I don’t believe it. These are the same people that said Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction.”¹⁵ In a press interview, he also stated that, as president, he would not take the intelligence briefing on a daily basis, as his predecessors had. He said he would take it when he needed it, adding, “I don’t have to be told the same thing in the same words every single day for the next eight years.... If something should change...I’m available on a one-minute’s notice.”¹⁶ These comments foreshadowed a difficult relationship between the new president and the IC.

The issue of Russia’s influencing a US presidential election took on such importance that President Obama directed the IC, not just the CIA, to find the facts of the matter and present their findings to him before he left office. Several agencies—the CIA, FBI, and National Security Agency (NSA)—contributed to the resulting report. Appearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee at a hearing on foreign cyber security threats, Clapper anticipated the findings of the report by confirming that Russia was responsible for hacking the DNC com-

13. James R. Clapper, letter to Paul D. Ryan, 11 July 2016.

14. Clapper interview. For the record, it should be noted that there were also calls from some of Trump’s political opponents and columnists that Trump should not be briefed, on the grounds that his intemperate remarks and tweets during the campaign showed that he would not properly safeguard classified information.

15. David Nakamura and Greg Miller, “Trump, CIA on Collision Course over Russia’s Role in U.S. Election,” *Washington Post*, 11 December 2016.

16. Nicholas Fandos, “Trump Links CIA Reports on Russia to Democrats’ Shame Over Election,” *New York Times*, 12 December 2016.

puters and that the Kremlin's seniormost officials had orchestrated the campaign of interference in the US election. He said that Russia used the purloined emails, fake news promoted on social media, and other propaganda distributed by Russian-controlled media to try to influence the voting.¹⁷ In response to these Russian actions, President Obama on 29 December announced that 35 Russian embassy officials suspected as being intelligence officers would be expelled from the United States.

On 6 January 2017, Clapper, along with NSA Director Mike Rogers, Comey, Brennan, and Gistaro, met with President-elect Trump to discuss the IC report's findings related to Russian interference with the US election. The fact of this meeting was a relief to Gistaro, who had been hard pressed to satisfy Trump's questions on the matter during their briefing sessions. In particular, the two had an awkward meeting three days earlier, on 3 January, when—owing to a scheduling misunderstanding—Trump had thought IC seniors were going to brief him and was surprised to find that only Gistaro came to the session. Gistaro was able to foreshadow for Trump what he would be hearing later in the week, but he did not have all the detailed evidence. Trump's frustration with the way this series of events unfolded led him to speculate publicly, in a social media tweet, that perhaps the IC needed a few additional days to make their case concerning Russian involvement because they did not know what they were talking about.

Despite the president-elect's frustration in the days leading up to it, the IC principals' meeting with Trump lasted an hour and a half and went well. The vice president-elect and the designees for chief of staff, national security advisor, deputy national security advisor, CIA director, homeland security advisor, and White House communications director joined Trump. Trump expressed his thanks for the letter Clapper had sent with the first PDB briefing and was pleasant and courteous throughout the session. Clapper opened the meeting by explaining how the report was produced, emphasizing the quality and sensitivity of the reporting and the sound tradecraft that was used. The briefing was conversational, with both the president- and vice president-elect asking questions about the evidence.¹⁸ Clapper said that the IC did not

17. Ellen Nakashima, Karoun Demirjian, and Philip Rucker, "Top US Intelligence Official: Russia Meddled in Election [...]," *Washington Post*, 6 January 2017.

18. Clapper, *Facts and Fears*, 374–75.

have information or insight into whether the election outcome was affected by the Russian activity as that was not the purview of the IC; the IC had focused only on what Russia had done.¹⁹

Following Clapper's introductory remarks, Rogers discussed the investigatory actions NSA had undertaken, making the point that the United States had a very complete picture of who had hacked the DNC computers, as well as when and how they had done it. This prompted several questions from Trump, Pence, and others to ensure they understood the technical reporting. Comey and Brennan described how various human sources and other technical collection programs established the direct role of Russian intelligence services in the hacking, as they performed both an intelligence collection and influence operation. They discussed the role of very senior Russian officials, including President Putin, in authorizing and managing the operations. The group reviewed the history of Russian efforts to influence elections abroad and discussed Russia's efforts in 2016 to propagandize the international media to magnify the importance of what they had stolen from the DNC and to promote the Trump organization and campaign.

According to Clapper, the evidence that was presented at the meeting—to the effect that Russia had interfered in the election and that very senior Russian officials were involved—was so solid that no one on the Trump team disputed the findings or conclusions of the report. Gistaro recalled that Trump listened respectfully, especially while Rogers described how NSA had identified and confirmed the particulars of Russia's actions. Trump was less impressed with information that came from human sources, believing that such intelligence assets were “sleazeballs” and by definition less reliable, although here, too, he and the others did not question the evidence.

Unfortunately, the entirety and specifics of the evidence could be displayed only in the most highly classified version of the report, which was provided to Obama, Trump, and the most senior leadership of the Congress (the “Gang of Eight”—the speaker and minority leader of the House, their equivalents in the Senate, and the chairman and ranking member of each body's intelligence oversight committee).

19. The key judgments and some of the background information on which Clapper and the others drew in making their presentations to Trump can be found in the declassified version of the coordinated, multiagency report, “Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections,” ICA 2017-01D, 6 January 2017.

All members of Congress, if they wished, were permitted to read a second, less highly classified version. The third, a declassified version, contained the same key judgments as the other two versions, but displayed much less evidence. This version was released to the public on 6 January 2017, the date of the meeting with Trump.

In public comments after the briefing, the president-elect did not attack the fundamental conclusions about Russia's actions; in fact, he acknowledged that Russia probably was responsible for the hacking. On the other hand, he did not acknowledge that Russia's aim was to assist his campaign, and he and his team asserted that the report had found the cyber attacks and other actions had "absolutely no effect on the outcome of the election." In reality, as Clapper had specifically noted in the briefing, the report stated that the IC could not and would not make a determination as to the impact of Russia's actions. Trump stated that his meeting with the IC chiefs had been constructive and that he had "tremendous respect for the work and service done by the men and women of this community to our great nation."

Congressional interest in Russia's interference with the US election was so high that Clapper was called on to provide four briefings on the Hill. He briefed the House and Senate intelligence oversight committees in separate, closed sessions. Likewise, he conducted separate, closed briefings that were open to all members of the House and Senate. At the highest level, the IC was enmeshed in what may have been the most politically charged issue in the history of presidential transitions.

The dossier. At the conclusion of the meeting about Russia and the election—in a brief exchange after the other participants from the larger meeting were excused—Comey informed the president-elect about the existence and contents of a private "dossier" containing negative information about the president-elect. According to press reports, the dossier—prepared by a former British intelligence officer working for Trump's political opponents—contained unsubstantiated claims that the Kremlin possessed compromising salacious and financial information about the president-elect and that some Trump supporters had colluded with Russians during the campaign. The dossier had been circulating widely among the media, members of Congress, and congressional staff before the IC became aware of it. Comey believed he

should bring the document's existence to Trump's attention because it created a potential vulnerability for the president-elect. At the meeting, Comey explained to Trump that he wasn't saying that the FBI believed the allegations but that Trump needed to know that this material was being circulated.²⁰

Within days, the IC became embroiled in this second Russia issue as well, when the dossier and the fact that the IC had discussed it with Trump leaked to the press. Gistaro recalled that when they met for their next PDB briefing session, Trump "vented for 10 minutes about how we [the IC] were out to destroy him." Gistaro did not believe that Trump ever accepted subsequent IC disavowals of responsibility for the dossier.

In his first postelection news conference, Trump denounced the dossier as "false and fake." He said the work of US intelligence officials was vital to American interests but accused them of releasing the document, saying that was something Nazi Germany would have done and did do.²¹ Separately, in a social media tweet, Trump wrote, "Intelligence agencies should never have allowed this fake news to 'leak' into the public. One last shot at me. Are we living in Nazi Germany?"²²

After the news conference, Clapper promptly telephoned Trump to explain that the offending document was not a product of US Intelligence and that he did not think the leak came from the IC. He said the IC had not made any judgment about the reliability of the information contained in the dossier and did not rely on it in any way in reaching its own conclusions about Russia's actions.²³ Clapper said he and Trump agreed that leaks were extremely corrosive and damaging to national security and that he had "assured him that the IC stands ready to serve his Administration and the American people." For his part, Trump offered a quite different account of their meeting, tweeting the next morning, "James Clapper called me yesterday to denounce the false and fictitious report that was illegally circulated."

20. James Comey, *A Higher Loyalty* (Flatiron Books, 2018), 224.

21. Shane Harris, "National Intelligence Director James Clapper Says Agencies Didn't Leak Trump Dossier," *Wall Street Journal*, 12 January 2017.

22. Damian Paletta and Carol E. Lee, "Donald Trump Blasts Media and Intelligence Agencies," *Wall Street Journal*, 15 February 2017.

23. The dossier was attached as an annex to the IC's classified assessment of Russia's actions.

A few days later, shortly before his inauguration, Trump returned to the issue, tweeting on social media a reference to CIA Director Brennan: “Was [he] the leaker of Fake News?” This apparently was the last straw for Brennan, then in the last few days of his service as director (and, in the previous few years, a close confidant of Obama). In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* the next day, Brennan charged that Trump, with his allegations of the IC’s leaking, dishonesty, and lack of integrity, had crossed a line. “Tell the families of those 117 CIA officers who are forever memorialized on our wall of honor that their loved ones who gave their lives were akin to Nazis. I found that to be very repugnant, and I will forever stand up for the integrity and patriotism of my officers.”²⁴

Brennan’s frustration clearly had been building for some time. Earlier in the transition, in an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), he had warned the president-elect publicly that his announced intent to tear up the Iran nuclear deal would be the “height of folly” and “disastrous.”²⁵ This foray into public policy advocacy by the director of the CIA presumably did not sit well with the president-elect. Even the director’s supporters in the Agency found it perplexing.

Contact with Russian officials. The third separate but related issue involving Russia grew directly out of the matter of Russia attempting to influence the outcome of the US election. The same day that Obama announced the expulsion of 35 suspected Russian intelligence officers (29 December), Trump’s national security advisor-designate, Michael Flynn, received a telephone call from Russian Ambassador to the US Sergey Kislyak—according to the press, one of a series of calls between them. They discussed the sanctions Obama had announced (expulsions and additional economic measures), with Flynn apparently conveying to Kislyak the idea that Russia should refrain from retaliatory action because the sanctions could be revisited after Trump’s inauguration. Whatever was said, the Russians—to the amazement of long-time observers of Russian-American behavior in such circumstances—announced that they would not declare Americans in Moscow persona

24. Shane Harris, “CIA Director John Brennan Rejects Donald Trump’s Criticism,” *Wall Street Journal*, 17 January 2017.

25. John Brennan, interview with the BBC, 30 November 2016, quoted by Dan Bilefsky, “CIA Chief Warns Donald Trump against Tearing up Iran Nuclear Deal,” *New York Times*, 1 December 2016.

non grata. This led Trump to praise Putin in a social media tweet, “I always knew he was very smart.”

Two weeks later (one week before the inauguration), the press revealed the fact of Flynn’s telephone calls with Kislyak. Flynn assured his White House colleagues, including Vice President-elect Pence, that he and Kislyak did not discuss the sanctions. Appearing on a news talk show the following Sunday, Pence, in turn, assured the public that Flynn and Kislyak did not speak of sanctions or the expulsion of diplomats. However, shortly after the inauguration, Acting Attorney General Sally Yates informed White House Counsel Donald McGahn that Flynn’s accounts of the telephone calls were misleading and that, because he had misled Pence, Flynn might be vulnerable to blackmail by Moscow. The White House spokesperson later confirmed that President Trump was informed immediately. Under pressure to do so, Flynn resigned on 13 February, after 24 days on the job.

The Intelligence Community was enmeshed in this issue because of the universal presumption that the Department of Justice based its approach to the White House counsel on information acquired through the interception of the ambassador’s telephone calls and allegations from the new Trump administration that the Intelligence Community had leaked information about the Flynn-Kislyak telephone calls to the press. While the president reportedly had sought Flynn’s resignation, he defended him publicly and sought to turn the issue into a narrative of a good man wronged by the IC and the media. For example, during a press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Trump charged, “I think it’s very, very unfair what’s happened to General Flynn, the way he was treated, and documents and papers that were illegally, I stress that, illegally leaked.... From intelligence, papers are being leaked.”²⁶

For months after Trump’s inauguration, congressional committees undertaking investigations of the array of Russia issues were substantially preoccupied with wrangling over what to focus on—Russian interference with the US election, the private dossier’s assertions that Trump campaign aides were in contact with Russians, a then-private citizen (Flynn) possibly in violation of a federal statute prohibiting un-

26. Guy Taylor, “Trump Spy Clash Spooks Intelligence Allies Abroad,” *Washington Times*, 15 February 2017.

authorized individuals from negotiating with foreign governments, or the alleged leaks of classified information by the IC.²⁷ Agencies of the Intelligence Community were, or were alleged to be, involved in all of these issues. The IC investigated Russia's interference in the election; the Trump administration charged that the IC leaked information related to the dossier and Flynn's misrepresentation of his contacts with Russians; and the FBI director confirmed his agency was investigating contacts between Trump's team and Russians during the election.²⁸

The Interrogation Issue

In addition to the array of issues related to Russia, one other politically sensitive issue regarding the Intelligence Community arose during the 2016 campaign and transition. This was the matter of the utility and legality of using "enhanced interrogation techniques" to question suspected terrorists—techniques that had been developed and used during the early Bush administration. CIA's use of these techniques, primarily waterboarding, was criticized during the campaign of 2008 by the candidates of both parties. More recently, in 2015, the SSCI drew heightened attention to the issue with its publication of a lengthy inquiry and generally negative verdict regarding the utility and propriety of the Agency's rendition, detention, and interrogation program. Also in 2015, the *US Army Field Manual* guidelines for interrogations, which excluded such harsh techniques, were written into law.

This momentum carried over into the campaign of 2016. Clinton said little about the issue but, when it arose, reiterated her position that the proper course was to use only those interrogation techniques approved in the *Army Field Manual*, which since 2009 had been the

27. The matter was further complicated by ongoing press allegations that the IC was aware of contacts between other Trump campaign aides and the Russians; gradual revelations that some Trump campaign operatives had, in fact, been in contact with Russians; and the fact that six weeks into the new administration, Attorney General Jeff Sessions was revealed to have had two contacts with Russian officials during the 2016 campaign, despite denying at his confirmation hearing that he had had any contacts with the Russians. This revelation immediately led to calls from Democrats for Sessions to recuse himself from any involvement with DOJ's investigation of the Flynn matter, the appointment of a special prosecutor, and the attorney general's resignation. Sessions's spokesperson asserted that the attorney general's contacts with Russian officials were undertaken in his capacity as a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee rather than as a campaign supporter of candidate Trump. Nevertheless, Sessions quickly recused himself from the DOJ investigation.

28. Matt Apuzzo, Matthew Rosenberg, and Emmarie Huetteman, "Comey Confirms Inquiry on Russia and Trump Allies," *New York Times*, 21 March 2017.

directive of the Obama administration. Several of the Republican candidates adopted more nuanced positions on the use of harsh interrogation techniques in order to appear tough on terrorism. Of the candidates, Trump distinguished himself by unreservedly approving the CIA's former enhanced techniques, arguing that "torture works." Trump said he would resume waterboarding "immediately" and, in fact, would be open to using unspecified techniques that were "a hell of a lot worse" than waterboarding.

This was another of the issues that pitted Trump against Brennan. Although the CIA director never updated CIA's internal regulations to flatly forbid waterboarding (or other enhanced interrogation techniques), he repeatedly made clear his personal aversion to waterboarding and ensured that the Agency followed White House guidance regarding adherence to the *Army Field Manual*. In his interview with the BBC three weeks after the election, Brennan took a strong public stand against waterboarding, saying that use of it had undermined the Agency. "Without a doubt, the CIA really took some body blows as a result of its experiences. I think the overwhelming majority of CIA officers would not want to get back into that business."

Senate committees holding confirmation hearings for Trump's nominees for senior national security posts asked the designees if they would follow orders from President Trump if he wanted to resume using the enhanced interrogation techniques. "Absolutely not," replied Pompeo, who had been nominated to be CIA director. "I can't imagine I would be asked to do so. You have my assurance we will not engage in unlawful activity."²⁹

Similarly, Gen. John Kelly, nominated to head the Department of Homeland Security, disavowed torture, saying, "I don't think we should ever come close to crossing a line that is beyond what we as America would expect to follow in terms of interrogation techniques." Gen. James Mattis, nominee to be secretary of defense, had earlier told Trump, in response to the president-elect's question, that he did not favor harsh interrogation techniques. Mattis argued that "a pack of cigarettes and a couple of beers" were more effective than waterboarding

29. Karoun Demirjian and Joby Warrick, "Trump's Pick for CIA Leader Says He Would Refuse to Restart Enhanced Interrogation Techniques," *Washington Post*, 13 January 2017.

in getting information from terrorism suspects. Trump replied, “I was very impressed by that answer.”³⁰

Trump’s national security team had an impact. In the week after his inauguration, President Trump told reporters that he would ultimately rely on the judgment of Mattis and Pompeo regarding whether to use techniques like waterboarding. “If they don’t want to do it, it’s 100 per cent okay with me.” But did he think it works? “Absolutely.”³¹

Briefing Other Officials

The Intelligence Community in 2016 made preparations to provide substantive briefings to incoming officials below the level of the president- and vice president-elect, once the newly designated officials had been granted security clearances. This effort was modeled after the process that was implemented successfully in 2008, when IC experts during the transition provided two dozen briefings to more than 50 incoming officials of the Obama administration. These were conducted in the governmentwide transition offices in Washington.

Similar briefings were provided in 2016, although to many fewer individuals, as the Trump administration by Inauguration Day had selected relatively few nominees. With few exceptions, only cabinet-level officials were in place by the end of the transition. As late as two months after the inauguration, no officials at the levels of deputy secretary, under-secretary, or assistant secretary had been confirmed for the departments and agencies with national security responsibilities.

The IC Transition Cell coordinated the briefing sessions that did occur. These were PDB briefings for the highest level appointees, as well as a range of classified and unclassified overview briefings and deep dive discussions of particular topics. The 15 to 20 available briefers included some who had briefed Trump and Clinton in the summer, as well as a number of others from the NIC, CIA, DIA, and the Department of State. Most of these briefings took place in a SCIF in the basement of GSA-provided transition quarters at 18th and E Streets in Washington. ODNI assigned a seasoned officer to the GSA office to

30. Karen Tumulty, “Trump’s Cabinet Nominees Keep Contradicting Him,” *Washington Post*, 13 January 2017.

31. Dana Priest, “Investigations: CIA Would Face Hurdles to Reopen ‘Black Site’ Prisons [...],” *Washington Post*, 27 January 2017.

interface with the incoming national security team and coordinate the briefings, which was of considerable help in supporting the transition effort.

Flynn received more than a dozen PDB briefings in the SCIF. Others who received PDB briefings there included Mattis, McFarland, incoming Chief of Staff Reince Priebus, and Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Thomas Bossert. The IC also arranged for Mattis to receive a detailed briefing from DIA and CIA experts on ISIS, Iraq, and Syria and a separate briefing from DIA on Russia and China. Incoming Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and UN Ambassador Nikki Haley received unclassified briefings on the Middle East. Secretary of Commerce-designate Wilbur Ross was briefed on international finance and trade issues. Classified deep dive briefings were provided to a half dozen of these individuals, including Pompeo. All of these briefings occurred between early December and early January, as the various officials were designated and cleared.

Support of the Briefing Process

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence was created during the administration of George W. Bush. The ODNI's first experience managing IC briefings of presidential candidates and supporting a president-elect during a transition was for the transfer of power from Bush to Obama following the election of 2008. On that occasion, the ODNI asked CIA—given its long experience with the process—to serve as the ODNI's executive agent to provide all necessary logistics, communications, security, and other support necessary to enable the briefings and other transition activities. That arrangement worked well in 2008 and in 2012, when there were briefings of challengers Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan, but no transition. Given this experience, the DNI in 2016 followed the same practice, asking CIA to handle all support operations.

CIA Director Brennan created the Presidential Transition Team (PTT), a half-dozen officers to support the candidate briefings and organize all aspects of the Agency's involvement with the transition (which in 2016 was certain to occur, with Obama having been in office for eight years). The most conspicuous early task was to make arrangements for briefings of the four candidates following their nomination by the major

parties. This job was simplified somewhat by the fact that Trump and Clinton were both New Yorkers, suggesting that they, and perhaps their running mates, would want to be briefed in New York City.

Among their first steps, CIA officers established liaison contacts with the Secret Service and the FBI to coordinate their respective activities. The Secret Service was helpful—indeed, invaluable—in arranging physical access by IC briefers to the candidates, wherever they might be, and the FBI was able to provide secure conference rooms. As events worked out, the two preelection briefings for Trump, as well as one each for Pence and Kaine—who were often in New York consulting with their running mates—were held in the FBI field office in Manhattan, which had a very large SCIF. While in the city for these sessions, IC briefers stayed at the Duane Street Hotel, only two blocks away from the Federal Plaza Building, where the FBI offices were located.

Clinton was briefed on one occasion at the FBI field office in White Plains, New York, where the SCIF was much smaller but capable of accommodating the briefers. Pence's first briefing was also held away from New York, at the headquarters of the Indiana National Guard in Indianapolis. The Guard commander was most cooperative in sharing secure space for the briefing and storage of the briefing materials.

For the first postelection briefings, CIA had to prepare to brief the winning presidential and vice presidential candidates of either party. This required arranging hotel accommodations in the four home cities of the candidates and involved working with prospective hotels to ensure that they could provide dedicated internet lines with the speed and bandwidth necessary for secure communications between an improvised office in a hotel suite and CIA Headquarters. In New York, the Agency chose to use Loews Regency Hotel on Park Avenue, within easy walking distance of Trump Tower. Realistically, if Trump were to win and be briefed regularly, it made more sense to establish a secure briefing location within Trump Tower, where all other New York-based transition activities were being conducted, than to expect him, as president-elect, to make numerous trips downtown to the Federal Plaza Building. Once again, the Secret Service came through, providing a room on the 26th floor of Trump Tower, where most of the transition briefings occurred.

The Agency rented a two-bedroom suite in the hotel and turned it into a communications center and office space for the briefing operation. Two communicators were assigned to New York to man the equipment and help ensure that there was 24-hour coverage of the rooms, as the classified equipment and documents could not be left unattended. The lead briefer, Gistaro, was the primary user of the facility. He was assisted by a presidential support analyst, who was primarily responsible for receiving the PDB and processing the various additional materials that were sent each day from Washington. From this body of material, Gistaro selected those items that, in addition to the PDB, he would share with the president-elect.

Trump received only three PDB briefings outside New York City during the transition. These were conducted over a two-week period encompassing the Christmas and New Year's holidays in West Palm Beach, Florida, at Trump's resort, Mar-a-Lago. Because there were so few of these sessions, it was not necessary to set up a support operation like the one in New York. Instead, the briefer received his information at a secure US government facility and drove to West Palm Beach on each occasion.

Pence elected to receive briefings almost every weekday during the transition (impressing the briefers with his seriousness by requesting a session even on the day of his son's wedding). With the exception of the single briefing at the National Guard headquarters, he was briefed at the Governor's Mansion whenever he was in Indianapolis. The very comfortable sitting room that was originally offered for the briefings was vetoed by the Agency's electronic communications specialists who "sweep" all locations to ensure they are secure. The fallback location was a windowless "safe room" in the basement of the mansion. Pence received many briefings there, at the GSA facility in Washington, and in New York when he was in the city to consult with Trump.

In addition to arranging for physical facilities, communications, security, and the travel of briefers, those providing support to the process—both the transition team and the many IC officers in Washington who backed them up—published a great deal of substantive material for use by the briefers, the Trump team, and other new senior officials in Washington, including the CIA director and the DNI as they were appointed. In previous transitions, one of the most concretely useful

of these products was a compendium of information compiled by CIA analysts about the several dozen foreign leaders with whom the president-elect would soon be speaking—biographic information as well as a summary of issues important to the foreign counterparts that they might raise with the American president-elect.

Books with this biographic and other material were prepared well in advance for all four candidates and pre-positioned with their respective briefers so that the information would be available immediately after the election. Some awkwardness developed at Trump Tower where, because of the general lack of preparedness and the churn of personnel in the days following the election, no one felt they were in a position to receive the classified book and be responsible for its secure storage. CIA personnel acquired a safe and installed it in Trump Tower. The material was protected and available. It was never clear exactly how much use Trump made of this information, but its authors were heartened to learn that the president-elect definitely had the relevant material in front of him for his telephone conversation with Chinese President Xi Jinping, which may have been his most important exchange with a foreign leader during the transition.

President Trump in Office

Trump announced on 18 November his choice of Kansas congressman Mike Pompeo to head the CIA, and on 7 January his selection of former Indiana senator Dan Coats to be DNI. Pompeo graduated first in his class at the US Military Academy and had served in the Army as a tank commander and on the House intelligence oversight committee. Coats had served in both houses of Congress, including on the Senate intelligence oversight and Armed Services committees, and as US ambassador to Germany. He was a longtime friend and home state colleague of Mike Pence. Clearly, the new appointees had first-hand familiarity with the programs and operations of the IC and the military, as well as a knowledge of foreign affairs and Washington politics.

In a White House announcement two weeks after the inauguration, President Trump said that Coats and Pompeo would both be members of his cabinet. This was a relatively rare honor. DCI William Casey was the first leader of the IC to be made a cabinet member, by President Ronald Reagan in 1981. DCIs John Deutch and George Tenet were



A typical briefing session in mid-2019 with President Trump. Seated around the Resolute Desk (from left to right) are National Security Advisor John Bolton, CIA Director Haspel, Deputy DDNI for Intelligence Integration Beth Sanner, DNI Coats, Secretary of State Pompeo, and Vice President Pence. Photo courtesy of ODNI.

cabinet members under President Bill Clinton. In 2017, intelligence officials appreciated the sign of confidence the new president seemed to have in their new leaders, but were mindful that cabinet status could be a mixed blessing. The job of the IC is to fearlessly provide objective information and operational support to the president, not to involve the Community or its senior leaders in policy deliberations. Despite his historic accomplishments, Bill Casey proved a memorable example of how wholesale involvement in the latter could contaminate and discredit the former.

The roles of the IC leaders differed initially insofar as their membership on the National Security Council (NSC) was concerned. Trump named Pompeo to be a member of the Principals Committee of the NSC. He did not accord the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff or DNI Coats similar status, although a White House spokesperson indicated that Coats would attend most meetings. At his confirmation hearing, Coats said, “I have been reassured time and time and time again by the president and his advisers that I am welcome and needed and expected to be part of the Principals Committee.”³² The president specifically named White House Chief Policy Advisor Stephen Ban-

32. DNI-designate Dan Coats, quoted by Jordain Carney, TheHill.com, 15 March 2017.

non to the NSC—a most unusual and highly political appointment. For most of its history, the NSC had been chaired by the president with a core membership limited to the vice president, national security advisor, and the secretaries of state and defense. The DNI (previously the DCI) and the JCS chairman normally were advisers to the NSC, although they attended all meetings. Trump's unusual construction of the Principals Committee lasted less than three months; in April 2017, the White House announced that the DNI and chairman of the JCS would become members of the Principals Committee, and the chief policy advisor was removed from the NSC.

On his first full day in office, Trump visited CIA Headquarters in an effort to improve his relationship with the Intelligence Community. Speaking in front of the Agency's marble Memorial Wall, into which stars are chiseled to represent those killed while carrying out CIA's mission, the president denied that he was in a feud with the IC. He told the assembled group of Agency officers, "I just want to let you know, the reason you're the No. 1 stop is exactly the opposite—exactly. Very, very few people could do the job you people do." Trump vowed to provide greater support for the 16 agencies that make up the IC than any other president had provided. "I know maybe sometimes you haven't gotten the backing that you've wanted, and you're going to get so much backing. Maybe you're going to say, 'Please don't give us so much backing.'"

Trump received a warm welcome from the few hundred employees who gathered on that Saturday morning to greet and hear him. However, while his gesture to improve relations and introduction of his nominee for CIA director (who was confirmed and sworn in the following Monday) were for the most part judged positively, his largely extemporaneous remarks backfired. The president made no mention of the sacrifices of those whose stars were on the wall. Rather, he devoted most of his speech to attacking the media for allegedly creating the myth of his feud with the IC. Trump also dwelled on the size of the crowd at his inauguration the previous day and said, incorrectly, that he had been on the cover of *Time* magazine more often than anyone else. Those in attendance were puzzled by these remarks and, according to one senior officer, returned to their offices shaking their heads.³³ What may have

33. Former Agency employees were not so charitable. Many retired senior officers were quoted in news reports the following day as being angry about Trump's behavior at the Agency. The most outspoken of them was former director John Brennan, who had retired the day before. Brennan called Trump's appearance a "despicable display of self-aggrandizement

been of highest interest to the president was an unpublicized visit he paid to the counterterrorist unit responsible for strikes on terrorists.

On a much more positive note, President Trump requested a PDB briefing the following Monday morning. This session—the first of his presidency—ran for a full 60 minutes and was held in the private dining room just off the Oval Office. The president was joined by Pence, Bossert, and Pence’s national security aide Josh Peacock. Trump led off by reiterating how much he enjoyed his visit to CIA. The president seemed particularly interested in three pieces in the PDB. These related to Russian concerns about US military capabilities and a possible early telephone conversation with President Putin; manpower available to the ISIS terrorist group; and oil prices. Trump had comments or questions about these and some previous PDB items that he had been pondering. For example, he asked that the IC use the name ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) rather than ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), on the basis that the group operated more widely than the name “Levant” implied. The piece on oil prices led to an extended discussion about shale oil dynamics, the politics of some Middle Eastern producing states, and terrorist threats to the oil infrastructure in the region. The president recalled the key points of an earlier piece on oil production in Libya and wanted to be sure the secretary of state saw the current item. Trump finished the session by recounting the key points of another earlier piece on Afghanistan and asked that his “policy folks” incorporate its findings into their thinking on the way forward with that country.

Using his first five weeks in office as a sample, President Trump took the PDB briefings seriously—he averaged 2.5 sessions per week, with each typically lasting 40 to 60 minutes. In addition to the president and the briefer, eight or more other individuals—including the vice president, national security advisor, and other White House staff with national security responsibilities—usually participated in these meetings. During these early weeks, Pompeo was the senior IC official in attendance, as Coats was not confirmed by the Senate and sworn in until mid-March.

in front of CIA’s Memorial Wall of Agency heroes.” In a statement released through a former aide, Brennan said he thought Trump “should be ashamed of himself.” Quoted by Robin Wright, *NewYorker.com*, 22 January 2017.

Substantively, the briefings focused more on the Middle East than any other region. Saudi Arabia and Iran featured prominently, as those two states were relevant to stories on oil prices, terrorism, regional political and security trends, and the civil wars in Syria and Yemen. Discussion of the aftermath of a US raid against terrorists in Yemen presented an opportunity to provide the president some insight into the practical challenges of the intelligence business. The briefer described how the IC was prioritizing the search for threat information as analysts went through huge quantities of information that had been seized from the terrorists' computers, a difficult task as the data was damaged, encrypted, and in Arabic. Other Middle East issues included Iran's nuclear and missile programs and developments in Afghanistan, Egypt, and Iraq.

The single country that occasioned the most discussion with the president during this period was China. The focus was on economic and trade issues, as well as an array of other political and security matters, including the telephone conversation between Trump and President Xi. As was the case during the transition period, North Korea's missile and nuclear programs were priority subjects, and Japan was featured, owing to Prime Minister Abe's visit to Washington. Similarly, coverage continued of developments in Ukraine and Russia; Trump followed both closely.

During these early weeks, the president was provided two expert briefs. In early February, in advance of Abe's visit, the national issue manager for East Asia and a CIA analyst briefed on Japan. Later in the month, a senior CIA analyst and a CIA operations officer briefed the president on Putin and developments in Russia. Oval Office participants asked a number of questions. In all of these sessions, both the regular PDB sessions and the more in-depth expert briefs, graphics of all kinds were used and clearly appreciated by all participants. From the beginning of his briefings, for example, Pence told the briefers to "lean forward on maps."

A few subjects and areas of the world were notable by their relative absence. Regarding Europe, only NATO budget issues, Turkey, and approaching elections in France and Germany stimulated much discussion. Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia received almost no attention.

The PDB itself underwent significant change with the transition from Obama to Trump. Primarily, this reflected the new president's operating style. At the end of the Obama administration, PDB content was being produced in three versions each day and being provided to more than 50 people. The most highly restricted version, given to the president and 10 others, included highly sensitive operational information. The second version was provided to a somewhat larger number of readers; it contained some categories of especially sensitive intelligence reports, but did not discuss CIA covert action programs or compartmented programs of the Department of Defense. The third version—still at the Top Secret level, but containing no operationally sensitive information—was delivered and briefed to all other recipients.

Obama and almost all other recipients read the PDB on a tablet computer, which facilitated the creation of multiple versions, the provision of additional background material, and the display of graphics. Typically, a day's book included four articles, each 1½ to 2 pages, plus, perhaps for half the items, an additional text box or graphic. Normally, the book would also include two pages of updates on the various ongoing crises in the Middle East. On Saturdays, there was also an additional, longer piece, usually addressing a humanitarian or other big-picture, thematic issue. A hard-copy version of this book—at the time, still Obama's book—was the one to which Trump was introduced as president-elect.

With President Trump, the process reverted to what it had been with President George W. Bush, only more so. Bush liked to read some but would quickly get the point and launch into questions and discussion; he absorbed the material best when engaging with the briefer. Trump preferred that the briefer take the lead and summarize the key points and important items from the days since they had last had a session. The PDB was published every day, but because Trump received a briefing only two or three times a week, he relied on the briefer to orally summarize the significance of the most important issues.

On most days, Trump's PDB comprised three one-page items describing new developments abroad, plus brief updates of ongoing crises in the Middle East. Later in Trump's tenure, the guidelines were eased and most items ran on to a second page. The book was published in only one version. The goal was to make the PDB shorter and tight-

er, with declarative sentences and no feature-length pieces. Additional material that previously might have been included in the PDB was added to background notes for the briefer to use in discussion in the Oval Office. Particularly in his first weeks, Trump continued to appreciate material CIA produced on foreign leaders with whom he would be dealing. While Trump (and Pence) did not choose to use the tablet computer, most of the 40-plus officials who received the PDB early in his administration did.

Beth Sanner, a career CIA analyst, replaced Gistaro as head of Mission Integration at ODNI and as President Trump's briefer midway through Trump's term in office. By then, the PDB schedule had settled in at two sessions a week with each session averaging 45 minutes. Gistaro had adopted the practice of providing the president with a one-page outline of the topics he would cover at the session along with a set of graphics. Sanner continued that practice and found that the twice-a-week schedule provided the time to script a briefing with graphics that anchored what Sanner called "story-telling" about the topics. Sanner noted that while Trump did not read the PDB, he read or had seen other things that he would bring into the conversation. Trump continued to receive occasional deep dives and interagency briefings and he enjoyed hearing from the "guest analysts." The arrival of National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien also increased the interest of the White House staff in the PDB session, as it provided an opportunity to discuss foreign policy with the president. White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows, O'Brien, and others requested that Sanner cover topics that their briefers had shared with them.

Even during times when President Trump publicly expressed great irritation with the IC—most notably in 2019 when an IC employee filed a whistle-blower complaint concerning the president's efforts to have Ukraine investigate a political opponent, Joe Biden—briefings continued as usual and Trump's demeanor during the sessions remained the same.³⁴ After the 2020 election, PDB briefings also continued for a period of time. When Sanner briefed the president before he went to Mar-a-Lago for the holidays, he commented that he would see her later. The briefings were to resume on 6 January but none were

34. In August 2019, an IC officer assigned to the NSC staff filed a whistle-blower complaint about a 25 July 2019 telephone call between Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in which Trump pressured Zelenskyy to investigate Joe Biden and his son. The complaint led to Trump's first impeachment.



Vice President Pence was a regular reader of the PDB. He invited his PDB briefers to his home near the end of the Trump administration and presented commemorative medallions to them. The team, in turn, offered the vice president a certificate of appreciation of his own. Photo courtesy of ODNI.

scheduled after the attack on the Capitol.³⁵

In office, Vice President Pence was an assiduous, six-day-a-week reader who was provided several additional items with his PDB. After Pence had been briefed, he would often join the president for his briefing and discussion. This ensured that the two shared the same information and, perhaps most important, were both aware of, and had input into, any guidance they provided senior subordinates for policy formulation and operational purposes. Pence was not averse to questioning his PDB briefer about the basis of an analytic conclusion and would sometimes ask leading questions during the president's PDB session so the president would hear his concerns. Pence showed his appreciation for his briefers by inviting all seven of the analysts who had briefed him during the four years of the administration to his house for a farewell gathering shortly before he left office.³⁶

For the Intelligence Community, the Trump transition was far and away the most difficult in its historical experience with briefing new presidents. The only (and imperfect) analogue was the Nixon transition, when the president-elect effectively declined to work with the IC, electing, instead, to receive intelligence information through an inter-

35. Beth Sanner, interview with Dawn Eilenberger, CSI, 27 January 2021.

36. *Ibid.*

mediary, National Security Advisor-designate Henry Kissinger. Trump was like Nixon, suspicious and insecure about the intelligence process, but unlike Nixon in the way he reacted. Rather than shut the IC out, Trump engaged with it, but attacked it publicly.

On some occasions, Trump praised the IC and its personnel, thanking them for their service to the nation. DNI Clapper found that Trump could be courteous, affable, and complimentary of the IC—he praised the briefers and twice thanked Clapper for a handwritten note the DNI had sent congratulating the president-elect on his election victory and offering the continued services of the IC. At the same time, Clapper recalled, Trump was prone to “fly off on tangents; there might be eight or nine minutes of real intelligence in an hour’s discussion.” The irreconcilable difference, in Clapper’s view, was that the IC worked with evidence. Trump “was ‘fact-free’—evidence doesn’t cut it with him.”

The IC’s analysis and collection activities were caught up in partisan political disputes during the campaign, the transition, and after Trump took office. In this awkward atmosphere, Trump nevertheless received 40- to 60-minute intelligence briefings from IC personnel roughly twice a week throughout his transition and in the weeks following his inauguration. While most new presidents received daily briefings, few devoted this much time to a given briefing, and some elected to receive the briefings not from the IC but from the national security advisor, or simply to read intelligence reports on their own. Trump had his own way of receiving intelligence information—and a uniquely rough way of dealing publicly with the IC—but it was a system in which he digested the key points offered by the briefers, asked questions, engaged in discussion, made his own priority interests known, and used the information as a basis for discussions with his policy advisers.

Looking back at the Trump transition, one must conclude that the IC achieved only limited success with what had always been its two fundamental goals with the briefing process: to assist the president-elect in becoming familiar with foreign developments and threats affecting US interests with which he would have to deal once in office; and to establish a relationship with the new president and his team in which they understood how they could draw on the Intelligence Community to assist them in discharging their responsibilities. The system worked, but it struggled.

