

State Department Intelligence and Research Predicted 1973 Arab-Israeli War

Key INR Memo Published for the First Time A "Case of Wisdom Lost" Nearly Lost

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The fabled but previously secret State Department intelligence memorandum that predicted, five months in advance, the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, has now emerged from classified vaults that were so obscure that even State Department historians and CIA FOIA officers could not penetrate them. Published for the first time today by the National Security Archive the INR memo from May 1973 warned Acting Secretary of State Kenneth Rush that there was a "better than even bet" that war between Egypt and Israel would occur "by autumn."

According to the INR analysis, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat would initiate a war with Israel not for specific military objectives but to spur "big power" diplomatic intervention in the Arab-Israeli conflict so that Egypt could regain the Sinai Peninsula lost in the 1967 War. On 6 October 1973 war broke out in the region.

The existence of this example of INR acuity has been known for years, but the document itself was surprisingly elusive. State Department historians preparing the official *Foreign Relations of the United States* series could not find a copy, even with their security clearances and access to classified files, and neither could CIA FOIA offices as recently as 2011.

The author of the INR paper, Roger Merrick, anticipated that if war unfolded, U.S. "interests" in the region would come under attack because of the close American-Israeli relationship. He anticipated the possible nationalizations of petroleum facilities, "efforts to displace US oil companies with those from Europe and Japan," and "prolonged oil embargoes." The prescient analyst did not discuss the implications of such a conflict for U.S. relations with the Soviet Union, which had close ties to Egypt and Syria (U.S.-Soviet relations was not his field), but he might have anticipated that it could lead to increased tensions, possibly even a crisis. Other intelligence organizations in the U.S. government disagreed with the estimate of war and the conflict came as a surprise to the U.S. and Israeli governments. A post-mortem of the intelligence failure characterized the INR paper as a "case of wisdom lost."

A discussion of the INR memo was a highlight of a remarkable conference held at the Washington D.C. Cosmos Club in October 1998 on the war's 25th anniversary. Organized by the late ambassador Richard Parker, the conference included a wide range of senior and mid-level former officials from Egypt, Syria, Israel, the United States, and the former Soviet Union, all of whom played important roles at the time, including ambassadors and generals and a KGB station chief (resident). The October 1973 intelligence failure was an important

element of the discussion and a memorable moment was when INR's former desk officer for Egypt, Roger Merrick, spoke on how he developed the estimate with input from INR colleagues David Mark and Philip Stoddard.[1]

For Merrick, the possibility of an early conflict was inherent in the dynamics of the situation. Egyptian leaders had tried to use diplomacy to recover territory in the Sinai Peninsula lost to Israeli forces during the June 1967 Six Day War. But the Israelis were unresponsive and U.S. diplomacy had gone nowhere. National security adviser Henry Kissinger was conducting backchannels with Sadat's national security adviser but Kissinger had little to offer. By the spring of 1973, according to Merrick, Egyptian President Sadat had "established himself as a strong player, serious"; yet despite his push for a diplomatic resolution of the Sinai problem, he was "neglected, and in an intolerable position with his political alternatives exhausted." Yet, his "forces were in place to launch hostilities and had not raised any significant alarm; thus the estimate that there was a better than even chance of major hostilities within six months."

Analysts at the State Department's Office of Near Eastern Affairs [NEA] rejected the INR view and according to Merrick, Kissinger tried to get the two offices to reconcile their views. Yet, despite the INR view, senior officials such as Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Under Secretary of State Joseph Sisco felt no alarm because the Israelis kept assuring them that there was no danger. Kissinger did not tell anybody at the State Department that Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev had warned of war in the region during his visit to the United States in June 1973. The dispute between INR and NEA over the possibility of war, Merrick recounted, "continued throughout the summer and fall until hostilities erupted" and the estimate was vindicated. At the Cosmos Club meeting, Sisco recalled that when the war broke out U.S. government officials went back to their files and reread the prescient memorandum.



Taken in November 1973, this picture of the U.S. Intelligence Board, then chaired by Director of Central Intelligence William E. Colby, shows representatives of the organizations which collected and reviewed intelligence before and during the October 1973 War. INR Director, Ray Cline, who signed the memorandum predicting war by the autumn, sits fourth from left clockwise . (Photo, courtesy CIA History Staff)

INR analysts have often been on the money in significant decisions and inter-agency debates since the 1960s. In 1964, Allen Whiting predicted the strong likelihood of a Chinese atomic test which Secretary of State Dean Rusk announced to the world two weeks before the event. During the [Vietnam War INR](#) analysts beginning with Lewis Sarris critically assessed the Pentagon's evaluation of "progress" in South Vietnam. INR has not always been right and during the lead-up to the recent Iraq War apparently shared in the consensus that Saddam had been trying seriously to establish a biological and chemical warfare capability. Yet the Bureau was spectacularly right in its highly critical assessment of the most important claim in the Bush White House's case for war: that Saddam was "reconstituting" a nuclear weapons capability. For example, on a key issue-the Iraqi purchase of aluminum tubes-INR dissented from the assertions in the 2002 [National Intelligence Estimate](#) that the tubes were for gas centrifuge enrichment technology for a nuclear weapons program.

Hide and Seek

Some of the instances of INR's astuteness cited above are well documented but the estimate on the possibility of war in 1973 was difficult to locate. During the 1998 conference I spoke with Merrick and asked whether he had a copy of his INR paper or knew where it could be found. He assumed it would be in the Bureau's retired files at the State Department. This conversation set off a 15-year on-again-off-again quest through archival research and FOIA requests to the State Department and the CIA, all of which proved in vain.

One trace of the document was found, however, in the intelligence community's post-mortem of the October War intelligence failure, which the National Security Archive obtained from the Interagency Security Classification Appeals Panel (ISCAP) in 2009 after a final mandatory review appeal. ISCAP heavily excised the discussion of COMINT and other sensitive intelligence sources and methods, but the release included a detailed account of the INR report, characterizing it as a "remarkable memorandum" and a "case of wisdom lost," and quoting it at length. Plainly, the analysts of the "Intelligence Community Staff" that produced the post-mortem had access to the INR paper so I filed a new request to CIA to see if they could find a copy. Two years later, in 2011 the CIA reported that they could not find a copy.

In the meantime, State Department historians vainly tried to locate Merrick's report. Craig Daigle, then a Ph.D. student at George Washington University's history department, was working at the Department's Office of the Historian. While completing work on the *Foreign Relations of the United States* compilation of primary sources documents on the October war, he tried to locate the document. Yet it remained elusive even to a skilled researcher like Daigle who had access to all the relevant classified files of the Department of State. To compensate for the gap, he memorialized the INR memo in an [editorial note](#) where he quoted from the excerpts in the intelligence community post-mortem (number 68 at pages 193-194.[2])

This story ends well but weirdly. In January 2013 the Nixon Presidential Library had a conference on the Nixon administration and the October War. Staffers in the CIA's Historical Collections Division compiled a set of documents for the event, and the conference [booklet](#) includes a list of key documents. The present writer was astonished to see, on page 42, a capsule summary of the INR memorandum. On request, the CIA kindly provided the author a copy of the document, which is slated to appear in the on-line [compilation](#) at the CIA's Web site.

How and where the CIA editors found the INR report remains a mystery. The first page of it shows that the State Department reviewed it for declassification in 2002 but that the CIA refused to declassify it, which seems absurd. For some 10 years it sat in an obscure paper or electronic file where State Department historians could not find it and where even the CIA's FOIA researchers could not locate it. A perfect example of one hand not knowing what the other one was doing.

Somewhat shamelessly the CIA officials who reviewed this "case of wisdom lost" censored the names of its authors (see bottom of page 4). This is standard practice when CIA declassification reviewers scrutinize Agency intelligence reports-the names of the author/analyst are almost never declassified. But this is a State Department document and the names of the authors of INR reports are hardly even excised from records at the National Archives or in State Department FOIA releases. These are not CIA officials whose names are kept officially secret. But at least now we can be sure that Roger Merrick and his colleagues get full credit for their work.

THE DOCUMENTS

[Document 1](#): Ray Cline [Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research] to Acting Secretary [Kenneth Rush], "Growing Risk of Egyptian Resumption of Hostilities With Israel," 31 May 1973, Secret, excised copy

Source: Central Intelligence Agency

[Document 2](#): U.S. Intelligence Community Staff, "The Performance of the Intelligence Community Before the Arab-Israeli War of October 1973: A Preliminary Post-Mortem Report," December 1973, Top Secret, Excised copy

Source: release by Interagency Security Classification Appeal Panel in response to mandatory review request

The CIA has published the post-mortem in its October War on-line document collection <http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/1973-12-20-CM.pdf> but only the first 11 pages, leaving out the interesting retrospective on "The Analytic Effort" and the report's recommendations.

NOTES

[1] Richard Paker, ed., *The October War: A Retrospective* (University Press of Florida, 2001),

113-116.

[2] Craig Daigle reviews pre-October War diplomatic and intelligence issues in his extraordinary book, based on his Ph.D. dissertation at George Washington University, *The Limits of Détente : the United States, the Soviet Union, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1969-1973* (Yale University Press, 2012)

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