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Trump doesn't understand even the basics of national intelligence

By GREGORY F. TREVERTON
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(FBI Director Christopher Wray, CIA Director Gina Haspel, Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats, and others await the start of a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing in Washington on Jan. 29. (Win McNamee / TNS))

Having worked inside the U.S. intelligence community over decades, I know all too well how much presidents dislike bad news. But when Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats, Central Intelligence Agency Director Gina Haspel and their colleagues presented the annual Worldwide Threat Assessment to an open session of Congress last week, they had to stand up to a president who wants *only* good news, and only about himself.

Delivering the report before the Senate Intelligence Committee, Coats and Haspel stressed the growing cyberthreat from Russia and China. They also concluded that North Korea is unlikely to give up its nuclear arsenal, while

Iran is not, for now, building a bomb. The latter assertions contradict two of President Trump's foreign policy initiatives.

For openly disagreeing with the president — a virtually unprecedented move among recent intelligence chiefs — Coats and Haspel received a by-now familiar response from Trump, delivered via Twitter: “They are wrong!”

The episode reveals an administration that doesn't understand even the basics of national intelligence and so risks stumbling into a dangerous crisis.

I oversaw the preparation of several threat assessments as chair of the National Intelligence Council during the Obama administration. In my time, we provided an advance copy to the president's national security advisor. (If presidents don't like bad news, they detest surprises.) But Trump isn't a reader, so perhaps he didn't know what was coming.

In any case, the advance copy was intended for informational purposes only. We weren't soliciting comments, let alone corrections. The annual assessment is made by the intelligence community. Policymakers, including presidents, can disagree with it, but they cannot change it. The fundamental distinction between intelligence and policy eludes Trump.

The closest modern parallel is Richard Nixon, who came into office deeply skeptical of intelligence. But Nixon simply ignored the intelligence information he received. He didn't publicly disparage it or seek to change it. And he surely didn't lecture intelligence leaders, much less suggest, as Trump did, that they needed to go back to school.

One president I served, Jimmy Carter, didn't like what we had to say about the effects of drawing down U.S. troops in Korea, a step he had wanted to take. In the end, Carter heeded our words and didn't act.

Similarly, President Obama didn't much like our rather dark forecasts of Afghanistan's future, but I think they played some role in his decision not to

reduce U.S. troops there as quickly as he wanted.

Intelligence officials hear from presidential administrations when their prognoses turn out to be wrong. Feedback comes with the turf. Obama's national security advisor, Susan Rice, and her colleagues were hardly silent when we failed to predict the collapse of the Iraqi army in 2014.

Later, we correctly anticipated that Russia would up the ante in Syria in 2015, but we had expected more weapons and training, not major combat units. We apologized to Obama, but he waved us off. Several weeks of warning wouldn't have mattered, Obama said, because he wasn't going to war with Russia over Syria.

Trump's ignorance on national intelligence and his administration's lack of process are deeply troubling. Perhaps there were too many meetings of the interagency policy committees during the Obama administration, but now there are way too few.

Policy meetings give the leaders of the various national security departments, and especially their deputies, the chance to argue through differences and consider options. It is at such meetings that intelligence is introduced into the process. The dearth of meetings under the Trump administration leaves too much to the ideological quirks of the national security advisor and personal quirks of the president.

Moreover, Trump's one-on-one meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin have broken another basic protocol: Always have your own translator and note-taker.

Translators aren't likely to go freestyle with their leader's words, but words often have several meanings in any language.

And because presidents seldom take the time to debrief their subordinates, a note-taker is imperative. When Carter spoke with German Chancellor Helmut

Schmidt, who was fluent in English, no staffers were present, and I had to phone my German counterparts later, hat in hand, to ask what had ensued.

All this disarray can only be emboldening our adversaries and disheartening our allies. Indeed, Britain, France and Germany last week introduced a financial mechanism that will allow European companies to do business with Iranian companies despite U.S. sanctions against Iran.

U.S. allies have sometimes disagreed with our policies, but generally they have remained silent or complained in private. The spectacle of our allies openly trying to subvert U.S. sanctions is practically unheard-of.

They are doing so, in part, because they know Coats was right when he told the Intelligence Committee: “Iran is not currently undertaking the key nuclear weapons-development activities we judge necessary to produce a nuclear device.”

Gregory F. Treverton stepped down as chair of the National Intelligence Council in January 2017. He is now a professor of international relations at USC's Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences. His latest book, “Telling Truth to Power: A History of the National Intelligence Council,” will be published this year.