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The Days of JFK

Huntington D. Sheldon has provided an account of the current intelligence relationship with the White House during the first year and a half of the administration of John F. Kennedy. Within two weeks of the inauguration in 1961, Allen Dulles invited the new President to come to the Agency and listen to its officials explain how they thought they could help him. All the members of the Director's executive group were called upon to prepare brief statements of their functions and the practical uses thereof from the standpoint of the White House. Sheldon was present to outline the situation with respect to current intelligence. He explained what the publications were and, in general, what the strengths and weaknesses of substantive intelligence were in various areas. He asked how the President wished the Agency to serve him in this particular field.

Kennedy responded that he would like to have the publications available to him. He designated his military aide, Brig. Gen. Chester V. Clifton, who was present at the meeting, to be the contact for current intelligence, and said that Clifton would let the Agency know in a few days just how he

would like things handled on a daily basis. It developed that the best method would be for Sheldon to take the publications and other papers directly to the White House every day and maintain close contact with the President's aides.

Consequently, every day at 8:30 Sheldon would present his pass at the White House and proceed to the office of Bromley Smith, who had succeeded Jimmy Lay as Executive Secretary of the NSC. Smith's office ^{on the bottom floor of the West Wing} was the central point to which intelligence from all sources was directed. Gen. Clifton's office, as is usually the case with military aides, was in the East wing of the White House, but Clifton did not keep highly classified material there. Instead he had a safe in Bromley Smith's office, where Sheldon would meet him whether Smith was there or not.

Each day Sheldon and Clifton would go over the Central Intelligence Bulletin, usually marking the most important items with a red pencil, and Sheldon would deal with any questions Clifton had. Clifton would usually hand back the previous day's CIB with any comments he felt appropriate. Sheldon also brought ~~to~~ Clifton sensitive cables and other documents he thought the President might want to see, as well as photographs, charts, and maps in some cases. This

turned out to be the sort of service Kennedy wanted. Normally, it was Gen. Clifton who took CIA's material to the President.

Next to his office Smith had established an International Situation Room, equipped with press services tickers. It was the responsibility of the OCI Watch Office, under a Senior Intelligence Duty Officer, to call the White House Situation Room to make sure it was aware of major news developments, and to alert the White House to important classified information that might have to be passed to the President.

The President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, McGeorge Bundy, also had his office next to Bromley Smith's. Frequently Gen. Maxwell Taylor, the President's special advisor on military affairs, would be in Smith's or Bundy's office. Sheldon used to take at least four copies of OCI's publications so that all those interested in intelligence would be taken care of. Gen. Taylor was also a member of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board.

Because Kennedy did not place as much emphasis on the NSC machinery as Eisenhower had, Allen Dulles had few opportunities to present intelligence briefings to the Council. However, when he felt that there were items of particular significance that the President should see, Dulles would prepare memoranda and take them personally to the President. He would operate in this way also when he wanted to bring certain estimates to the President's attention.

Then came the Bay of Pigs in April. Two or three days after the fiasco, Sheldon was at the White House delivering the publications when Gen. Clifton suggested that they go back to his office in the East wing and have a private discussion. He advised Sheldon of the President's reluctance to carry on receiving intelligence in the normal way. Clifton hinted that there was deep-seated resentment, not necessarily against the Agency as a whole, but against certain elements in the Agency as a result of the Bay of Pigs.

Clifton said in effect that it would be necessary to come up with some entirely different ways of operating if he and CIA were to rekindle the President's interest and remain useful in bringing intelligence to him every day. He suggested that there would have to be a publication with a completely new format for the President only. It could be more broadly based than the groundrules had permitted in the past. The implication was that the publication could carry not only intelligence, strictly defined, but things the President might like to be reminded of and wish to take action on.

Clifton stressed that whatever OCI came up with would have to be short and punchy, and written in a sophisticated way. Sheldon said he would go back to the office, mull this

over, and see what could be done. Clifton added he wanted this matter kept on a confidential basis. There was no point at this stage in the DCI's getting into any discussions with the President; that would be counterproductive. Sheldon said he would continue to bring down the regular publications for the benefit of those, other than the President, who had been seeing them; Gen. Clifton assented.

Sheldon was obviously in a peculiar position vis a vis the Director and other senior officers in the Agency. He asked for, and obtained, a private session with Dulles and told him how things stood. Dulles reacted in a calm and helpful manner. "I think he appreciated that at least some lifeline to the White House was highly desirable from the point of view of the Agency." Dulles did not say that he wanted to review whatever Sheldon might take to the White House. In effect, he gave Sheldon a free hand to do what he could to be helpful. Sheldon expressed appreciation for the Director's confidence in him and said that he would report, any problems the Director should be aware of.

With Dulles's blessing, Sheldon set out to develop a mechanism that would put the Agency back in the graces of the White House. He and a few senior officers in OCI put

their heads together and began to plan a paper which would be marked "For The President Only." Although formally labelled Top Secret, it would have no restriction as to classification. They worked out a format for a publication that could be read in a few minutes and they hit upon a title--the President's Intelligence Check List, or PICL. They wanted to include attention-getting material, such as summaries of cables on which it was incumbent for some executive department to take action. This was to some extent a return to the practice under Truman of reporting operations the US Government was involved in. As Sheldon remarks: "Unless one's reader is aware of these kinds of cables, he will never properly understand the intelligence that we would be presenting him."

Richard Lehman worked up a dry run issue of the PICL, and when Sheldon thought he had a reasonable facsimile of what Clifton had outlined, Sheldon took him a copy just for his personal perusal. Clifton's reaction to the title was favorable, and, although he made a few suggestions, he liked the format because the items were short and snappy and the English was not ponderous. Moreover, while the publication carried material of a higher classification than any previous OCI periodical, it was not littered with classification labels.

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Before Gen. Clifton sought the President's approval, Sheldon set up a special operation to be sure OCI wouldn't stub its toe if it got the green light. Although knowledge of the new daily had to be kept to as few people as possible, the production could not be carried out by just two or three because of the work-load and the range of expertise required. Therefore, Sheldon set up a roster of particularly qualified persons who would be charged on a rotating basis with coming to the office at 3 or 4 in the morning to go over the intelligence take. They would draft items which Sheldon would review when he came in about 5:30. He would edit some, scrub others as not meeting the criteria, and sometimes ask for additional items. In getting the completed book out on time, he had to have "a very rapid and understanding typist." As with the writers, there had to be several typists on a rotating basis because the hours were difficult.

When Sheldon felt he had a workable production technique, he had an issue turned out that could be passed to the President. It was Saturday, 17 June 1961, when Sheldon and Richard Lehman checked with Allen Dulles, then delivered the first issue of the PICL to Gen. Clifton at 1130, later than would ordinarily be the case in the future. President Kennedy was spending the week-end at his Glen Ora country house near Middleburg, Va., and Clifton took the PICL to him there.

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The PICL was a small book of seven pages, size 8 1/2 x 8 inches. It contained 14 items of about two sentences each, six notes, and two maps. At the end it was attributed to "The Director of Central Intelligence." The gist of the items was:

1. We believe a special meeting of the Soviet Party Central Committee opened today.
2. After a meeting of Laotian princes in Zurich, Phoumi announced agreement to form a "government of national unity." But the Communists renewed pressure on government forces. (Map)
3. Dominican President Balaguer has eased OAS investigators out of the country.
4. The Philippine Foreign Minister is worried over what he feels is a softening of US policy on Laos.
5. A Soviet ship arrived in Cuba with 18 crates of a kind usually used for shipping MIG-15s and 17s.
6. The French found the Algerians uncompromising at the Evian talks.
7. A Soviet ICBM test at Tyura Tam was aborted.
8. We expect the Soviets to show new types of aircraft and missiles at the Moscow air show next month.
9. Leftist students will try to block Ikeda's departure from Tokyo for the US.
10. The Soviets will deliver two TU-16s to Indonesia.
11. The Egyptian Ambassador reported home that Sen. Fulbright would help to supply Egypt with grain and tobacco.

12. The Brazilians reported home on Congressman Cooley's complaints about US wheat policy.
13. Because of concern from Commonwealth countries, the British bid for Common Market membership may be delayed.
14. In the Congo, Gizenga is lowering his price for coming to a parliament meeting in Leopoldville. He is having trouble with tribes in the provinces. (Map)

The first PICL had been delivered.

As Sheldon remarks, "A good deal hung on what the response was going to be." When Sheldon and Lehman delivered the second issue to the White House on the following Monday morning, Clifton said, "Go ahead--so far, so good."

Sheldon then advised Dulles of the developments. The DCI understood that in view of the PICL's production schedule, he could not play a substantive role, but Sheldon asked him to pass on any ideas he had. And, in fact, Dulles did from time to time call to inquire whether certain subjects or incoming reports had been covered. "His whole attitude on this was very helpful."

In a fairly short time, McGeorge Bundy, Bromley Smith and Gen. Taylor, in addition to Gen. Clifton, began to read the PICL. Sheldon took an extra copy for them to read and pass around while he was at the White House.

Sheldon would give the President's copy to Clifton, who would return the previous issue, or sometimes several, if they had backlogged.

There was immediately great interest in the publication. The President read it, and frequently, as a result, issued instructions to various officials. He also asked for source materials, estimates bearing on items that attracted his attention, texts of speeches, and OCI memoranda giving fuller details and explanations.

Sheldon recalls, "It became apparent from occasional hints that Ted (Gen. Clifton) would let drop that the President had actually used some of our action data to tickle the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense." Inevitably, then, these secretaries asked the White House for copies of what the President was reading. By December Gen. Clifton passed the word to OCI to put the secretaries on the subscriber list.

For the Secretaries of State and Defense, OCI adopted the scheme of having two pouches, which were hand-carried every morning to the designated senior assistant of each secretary. Each day the pouch containing the previous day's PICL was exchanged for the pouch containing the new issue.

Sheldon's feeling is that OCI's performance with the PICL was accepted by the White House with approbation.

I don't remember any criticisms at any time, nor do I recall anybody saying "My word, I didn't

know you could get this kind of information," because the individuals were quite sophisticated in terms of intelligence capabilities. They had a pretty good knowledge of what could be obtained by intercept, they knew, of course, the quality of photography from overhead vehicles, they knew how difficult it was to get important information by clandestine means, so they were pretty well on the ball in terms of what they might expect to get, and what they actually got matched up pretty well. I don't think we ever bowled them over by producing something about which they would say, "My heavens, this is really a coup. *Sheldon* Where the dickens did you get this from?"

Occasionally OCI put a little humor into the PICL, a difficult thing to do.

The PICL was supposed to inform and stimulate, and it served those purposes well. In Sheldon's view, the PICL has been the best channel OCI ever had to the President.

In the early months of the PICL enterprise, Sheldon himself went to the White House for the meeting with the President's aides, usually at 8:30. He was accompanied by the analyst who had come in very early in the morning to write the PICL. Eventually the analyst went alone. From the beginning he would put a brief account of the morning's transactions into the log kept by the staff. A typical entry is the following under the date of 20 July 1961:

Sheldon and Lehman to WH at 0830 (seven minutes late because of Bizerte item and general confusion). Clifton and Taylor read book. Much interest in Brown cable. Delivered also Djakarta 111 (Pope case). JFK greatly concerned over ECM note, charged

Taylor with looking into it. Taylor called Sheldon, who arranged for Taylor to get same USAF briefing as Watch Committee. 39/

Perusal of the log turns up points of particular interest. The 27 June issue was "fully read, generated much policy action." For the Fourth of July holiday, the President was at his home in Hyannis Port. On the 3rd, Lehman went there to bring Gen. Clifton the PICL as well as a couple of memoranda, including a Joint Chiefs of Staff report on Kuwait. A follow-up cable arrived from Washington. The President read the material and had no further requests. Thereafter, when the President went to Hyannis Port the PICL was transmitted by cable from the White House Situation Room.

The move of the Agency in September 1961 from its downtown temporary buildings to the new building in Langley, Va., naturally made operations difficult and gave rise to various improvisations. OCI used the Agency's offices at 1717 H St. to turn out the PICL during this period of confusion. For the most part the usual deadlines were met.

OCI soon discovered that it had to be flexible in producing the PICL. At one point it learned that President Kennedy had not had an intelligence briefing for four days, so it put together a combined edition of the PICL, winnowing

out the items that had faded a bit. In fact, it became the practice for the PICL to repeat important items when it was known that the President had missed an issue.

Before 1961 was out, Gen. Clifton said that the President enjoyed reading the PICL, even when it was longer than usual. Early the next year, Clifton said the President had asked when and how the PICL was produced. Clifton had been instructed to turn up in CCI early one morning to observe the production process. He did this, and was satisfied and impressed.

On 9 January 1962, when W. Osborne Webb was at the White House for OCI, Clifton said the President had registered a mild protest that the PICL writers were the purveyors of gloom, implying that they should make an effort to mix in a little more good news. Mr. Kennedy also thought that the DCI should find a way to provide an occasional summary of operational successes. However, John A. McCone, who had succeeded Allen Dulles as Director in November 1961, apparently never chose to use the PICL for operational reporting.

In January 1962, the Laotian struggle was temporarily halted by the agreement of the three princes on a coalition government. It was not long, however, before the truce was broken and Washington was again worried over the situation.

President Kennedy held a series of conferences on Laos in the White House, some of them officially NSC meetings. Edward A. Hauck, chief of OCI's Southeast Asia Branch, wrote one of the NSC briefings and attended the meeting himself. In the absence of Mr. McCone, the briefing was delivered by Lt. Gen. Marshall Carter, who had just become DDCI. This was one of the rare occasions on which an OCI analyst was present at an NSC meeting. 42/

Gen. Clifton gave OCI advice and guidance whenever he was aware of anything that would make the PICL more pleasing to the President, and also reported on the President's workload and activities to indicate how much intelligence he might want or have time for. Early in April 1962, Clifton reported that

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things were "scrambled" in the White House and that the President's preoccupation with the steel crisis made it almost impossible to get his attention, even "with a full-scale nuclear war." Nonetheless, Mr. Kennedy had taken policy actions on the basis of some PICL pieces. For one thing, he had moved to head off a visit to Cuba by Algerian leader Ben Bella.

Some weeks later Clifton made several suggestions to OCI. The PICL had been using "talking captions," i.e., extremely brief headlines under the country name for each item. Clifton asked that these captions be dropped in favor of simply making the point of the piece in the opening sentence. On another occasion OCI was asked to put a summary of the Watch Committee report in the PICL each week.

In June Clifton "reminded" James Featherstone of OCI that actions taken by US Government departments in foreign situations should be reflected in PICL items. This philosophy harked back to President Truman's desire to have the whole picture.

The PICL Established

In reviewing support for the White House after the PICL had been in operation for a year, Richard Lehman, Assistant for Special Projects in OCI, noted that though the publication

was a more satisfactory vehicle for serving the President than anything previously attempted, it still had shortcomings. One of them was that OCI received later than the White House, or did not receive at all, ^{some material} of which the President ~~was~~ ^{needed to} be aware. It was therefore necessary for the President's staff to supplement the PICL with intelligence from other sources. 33/

Gen. Clifton said that if he found that the CIB's coverage of a story had useful details not in the PICL, he would add them into the President's report. Clifton, Bromley Smith, and McGeorge Bundy also made use of OCI's Current Intelligence Weekly Review, as well as State's Diplomatic Summary and Staff Summary. Bromley Smith said that he regularly looked over the Weekly for good reading for the President. ~~Occasionally~~ Occasionally, he and other staff members highly commended pieces in the CIB and the Weekly.

Notwithstanding these various sources of intelligence, Clifton remarked toward the end of August 1962 that the President, the Secretary of State, and the Secretary of Defense were coming to rely more heavily on the PICL as the sum of available intelligence. ~~It~~ (In October 1963 Secretary Rusk told Gen. Clifton that he found the Checklist a "damned useful" document.)

September

Following a suggestion by Clifton, the PICL in 1962 made an innovation by running a review of events over the past month. In this case it was a summary of what had been happening in Berlin, which was still under the cloud of Khrushchev's threats to sign a peace treaty with East Germany that would allegedly nullify Allied rights. Clifton liked the way this feature came out.

One issue of the PICL, that of 14 September 1962, ~~was~~ just right with Gen. Clifton. It had half a dozen items plus some notes and a map. It also recorded at the end that OCI, as had been its habit, had taken to the White House several Documents of Interest, material that OCI thought Clifton and the President would want to read in its pristine state. Clifton said this issue (copy will be attached) was full of "good poop" and was in exactly the style he likes best (obviously reflecting JFK's preferences).

Clifton took a great interest in the kind of language OCI used and frequently nudged the PICL writers towards the style that would be most agreeable to the President. On one occasion he chided James Featherstone on the slangy way a Soviet item was written. It said that the Rostov area, where there was rioting recently, "has been giving Moscow fits."

Another time, he said the President was "delighted with the racy language" of ^{the} 24 September book and had remarked, "They must have got some new men on." What gave this issue its flavor were these passages:

"Souvanna laid it on the line to Souphannouvong last week..."

Phoumi, rumored to be planning a coup, "may put the chestnuts in the fire."

In Argentina, Guido "will have to balance things carefully, and any scissors and paste arrangement he comes up with in the next few weeks can easily come unstuck."

In Nepal, King Mahendra said he had replaced his foreign minister to give the council of ministers more uniformity and solidarity. Correct, said the PICL: "The Council will now be uniformly incompetent and solidly anti-Indian."

In Ecuador, "Arosmena, breathing 100-proof fire from his stronghold in Guayaquil," may have rallied some popular support with a public harangue.

Regarding Brezhnev's trip to Belgrade: "The Chinese, with Albanian accompaniment, are playing it fortissimo."

Gen. Clifton told Phil Kennedy that he hoped this kind of thing would continue. Kennedy assured him that it would but added that OCI tried hard to avoid appearing flip. Clifton recalled that he had once admonished OCI for flippancy, whereupon he had noticed immediately that the writing had started flattening out. He didn't mean for OCI to roll things too flat.

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For a month in 1962 the PICL carefully followed the buildup of Soviet personnel and military equipment in Cuba. However, it did not carry clandestine and refugee reports of the presence of offensive missiles in Cuba because these reports lacked confirmation from photo intelligence.

On 15 October, the National Photo Interpretation Center (NPIC) analyzed the pictures taken by Major Heyser on his mission over Cuba the day before. It found deployment of offensive missiles. After that, the facts about the missiles did not have to be conveyed in the PICL because the photography was interpreted every night at NPIC, which sent reports to USIB and the Executive Committee of the NSC (EXCOMM). The Committee was briefed each day during the crisis by DOI McCone.

The CIB, the Cuban Daily Summary and other OCI publications except the PICL were barred from 6 September from reporting anything concerning offensive missiles in Cuba. They maintained intensive reporting on all other aspects of the Cuban situation, however.

Gen. Clifton and Bromley Smith commented to OCI's Philip Kennedy that the 22 October PICL was a "really hairy" book. It led off with a run-down of the Cuban situation, confirming the presence of the most effective radar for SAM guidance and putting the number of confirmed SAM sites at 24. (Nothing was said about offensive missiles, however.) It

also reported the arrival in Havana of a Soviet transport plane with 140 passengers, some of them probably important. This development elicited great interest and concern.

That night, using maps prepared by OCI, President Kennedy made a TV address, announcing the discovery of offensive missiles and the establishment of a quarantine on shipping to Cuba. OCI set up a 24-hour task force to cover the ensuing international crisis. Besides maintaining the regular publications, the task force turned out special memoranda for the White House every few hours.

On 23 October, William Colligan took the PICL and four memos to the White House. While Gen. Clifton was reading, McGeorge Bundy came into the room asking if the PICL was there. Clifton said yes, and commented that it had a lot of good material, whereupon he and Bundy headed for the President's office. President Kennedy called down asking for them and the PICL while they were on their way.

In a memorandum of 5 November to R. Jack Smith, who had succeeded Huntington Sheldon as AD/CI in April, DCI McCone commended OCI for the "outstanding work" it had been performing.

Three days before that, the President commented that the day's PICL was the first "cheerful" one he had read "in months."

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The cheer is not difficult to identify. The issue reported that photography showed that the offensive missile sites were being closed down and the equipment removed, that Castro was nervous and hesitant in his public speech on the crisis, and that Soviet and Cuban prestige were continuing their decline among Latin American and pro-Castro groups as a result of the recent events.

Aerial hijacking had not begun during the Kennedy administration but in February 1963 Communists hijacked the Venezuelan freighter Anzoategui and presumably headed for Cuba. The US Navy was asked to help in the search for the ship, but the PICL on 15 February had to report "There is no current fix." OCI's Thomas Patton took the book to the White House and recorded that there was "much amusement over the Navy's discomfiture at not finding the Venezuelan ship." Arthur Schlesinger writes that "The President was vastly, if somewhat amusedly, annoyed by the incapacity of his government to help Caracas cope with the situation."⁴⁰ (The ship was captured in Brazil and returned to Venezuela.)

Clifton steadily tried to keep OCI off the reefs not only regarding the style of the PICL but also its substance. He did not want to worry Mr. Kennedy unnecessarily or provoke strong reactions by treading on some sensitivities, which

might be unknown to the PICL staff. On Saturday, 1 June 1963, after the Checklist had been delivered to the White House, the Deputy DCI, Gen. Marshall Carter, called OCI's Waldo Dubberstein to report that Gen. Clifton felt that the lead item on Cuba in that day's PICL was too alarming and that the President would be immediately disturbed by it. Therefore Clifton was not calling it to his attention. Carter asked that a better rundown on Cuba be done. The alarming item expressed the "feeling" of "our people in Miami" that Soviet activity in Cuba had increased. Some of this feeling could have come from exaggerated accounts of military equipment off-loaded from a Soviet ship and from descriptions of a cruise missile site. At the same time, an exile leader was reported to be planning military operations against Cuba within the next six weeks. A memorandum dealing with these reports in perspective was sent to the White House after the weekend.

Some months earlier, the PICL reported that an Italian freighter, the Cannaregio, then in Havana under charter to the USSR, would leave with a cargo of arms for Venezuela. Clifton said this item "would stand the President's hair on end." The situation was not helped by the fact that the ship eluded tracking at the beginning of its voyage. However, in a few days the PICL said it doubted that the ship was carrying arms, and soon it arrived in Venezuela, where it was boarded by marines. Another "hot" episode was over.

