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Leiden
The Netherlands

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Ikani, N.

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The COVID-19 Intelligence Failure: Why Warning Was Not Enough

Erik J. Dahl. Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Press, 2023. 232 pp. Paper, \$29.95.

For decades, public health experts and journalists worldwide warned about a viral pandemic capable of causing illness and loss of life. Previous outbreaks of SARS, Ebola, and MERS highlighted this threat, which occupied top positions in risk assessments globally. Yet even with knowledge and precedent, the COVID-19 pandemic caught the world off guard. It revealed a world inadequately prepared and plunged societies into a state of disruption, with over 7 million deaths reported to the World Health Organization by April 2024. How did this tragedy foretold take the world by such surprise? In *The COVID-19 Intelligence Failure: Why Warning Was Not Enough*, Erik J. Dahl explores this question from the vantage point of the United States.

In his book, Dahl, who is highly regarded for his expertise on intelligence failures, analyzes past and present intelligence efforts to underline the shortcomings and successes of the U.S. intelligence community's anticipation of the pandemic, comparing the anticipation and response to COVID-19 with historical failed warnings, such as those preceding 9/11 and Pearl Harbor.

Dahl's account consists of five chapters. In the first, Dahl frames the COVID-19 pandemic as a national security problem, in addition to a global health crisis. Its anticipation, consequently, he considers an intelligence failure of global proportions. Chapter two sets out the ways in which the U.S. intelligence community provides warning for health threats, separating long-term strategic warning about the danger from potential viral outbreaks from tactical warning about specific disease threats. Chapter three describes the global web of disease-surveillance and medical intelligence systems, which he criticizes for their lack of centralization and hierarchy, despite their pivotal role. Chapter four gets into the crux of the matter, as it reconstructs the events leading up to the outbreak and its early stages. In chapter five, Dahl examines lessons for the United States and the world for the next global health threat.

Dahl's central thesis is twofold: first, that we should see the botched warning process preceding COVID-19 as an intelligence failure. Second, that better warning mechanisms could have significantly reduced the damage it caused. He contends that repeated strategic warnings on outbreak risks proved almost completely ineffective, as they failed to prompt decision-makers to improve medical intelligence

surveillance or analytical capacity. Tactical warnings came either too late or lacked the necessary detail, hindering decision-makers' ability to act.

Dahl also argues decision-makers were not receptive to the warnings issued. Here, Dahl moves beyond Donald Trump's intransigence regarding COVID-19's impact to argue a different president would not have performed differently without better, earlier, and more specific warning. Importantly, he views it the job of the intelligence community to help decision-makers avoid disaster, and that the intelligence community "must be ready to push harder" if their warnings are ignored (86). When decision-makers do not listen, Dahl considers the result an intelligence failure. This is a contentious point within intelligence studies, with some peers wary of intelligence reporting becoming "politicized" into providing policy recommendations.

This debate over the extent of the duties of the intelligence community risks becoming a semantic one about whether COVID-19 should indeed be labelled an intelligence failure. Dahl clearly does not fall into this trap, as he comprehensively traces how systemic issues within the intelligence community and the decision-making processes contributed to the outcome, showing the many ways in which the warning process was flawed. He also helpfully includes tangible suggestions for improvement, such as upgrading the National Center for Medical intelligence (NCMI), reinstating the national intelligence officer for warning (NIO/W), and making greater use of open-source intelligence, given the changing nature of the threats we face.

In sum, by approaching the pandemic as a national security problem, *The COVID-19 Intelligence Failure* presents an empirically rich and compelling contribution to our understanding of how the intelligence community performed in the lead-up to the pandemic and the critical need for reform.

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Nikki Ikani[®]

Leiden University