

Intelligence and Surprise Attack: Failure and Success from Pearl Harbor to 9/11 and Beyond

By Erik J. Dahl

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How can the United States avoid a future surprise attack on the scale of 9/11 or Pearl Harbor, in an era when such devastating attacks can come not only from nation states, but also from terrorist groups or cyber enemies?

Intelligence and Surprise Attack examines why surprise attacks often succeed even though, in most cases, warnings had been available beforehand. Erik J. Dahl challenges the conventional wisdom about intelligence failure, which holds that attacks succeed because important warnings get lost amid noise or because intelligence officials lack the imagination and collaboration to “connect the dots” of available information. Comparing cases of intelligence failure with intelligence success, Dahl finds that the key to success is not more imagination or better analysis, but better acquisition of precise, tactical-level intelligence combined with the presence of decision makers who are willing to listen to and act on the warnings they receive from their intelligence staff.

The book offers a new understanding of classic cases of conventional and terrorist attacks such as Pearl Harbor, the Battle of Midway, and the bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The book also presents a comprehensive analysis of the intelligence picture before the 9/11 attacks, making use of new information available since the publication of the 9/11 Commission Report and challenging some of that report’s findings.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Where this book breaks new ground is in the examination of warning of terrorist attack, an area where there is comparatively (and surprisingly) little in the way of scholarly research and publication . . . . Professor Dahl has produced a well-written and thought provoking book that provides well-researched analysis of what makes warning intelligence work. It is a worthy addition to the scholarly literature on indications and warning and 'Intelligence failure.'"?*Proceedings*

"A seminal work of original scholarship and should be a part of every community and academic library Security Studies & Intelligence collection."?*Midwest Book Review*

"It encourages the comparison of cases of intelligence failure and success and thus fills an important gap in existing literature on intelligence failures and paves way for future research. Furthermore, it provides a valuable dataset on unsuccessful terrorist attacks against Americans and American targets for future research . . . . It is an important book and in time will find its place among other classic and prominent works on the phenomenon of surprise attacks."?*Intelligence and National Security*

"A defining book in understanding intelligence failure. It deserves to be a text studied heavily by students of intelligence, practitioners and policymakers."?Kristian Gustafson, *International Studies Review*

"Too many assume failure is inevitable, but [the author] shows that it isn't and explains how to make intelligence far more reliable to avoid future surprise attacks."?*The Intelligencer*

Review

"Most scholars who have written about intelligence have concluded that failure is inevitable, but Erik Dahl has taken a different, ground-breaking approach. He outlines, in this very readable book, ways to make intelligence successful and avoid surprise. This is a work that many readers will find useful and should be on the bookshelf of every intelligence analyst."?Arthur Hulnick, Associate Professor of International Relations, Boston University

"Erik Dahl's *Intelligence and Surprise Attack* reflects the experience of a practitioner and the rigor of a scholar. It is a serious work that deserves attention in the world of ideas and the world of action."?Thomas G. Mahnken, Jerome Levy Chair of Economic Geography and National Security, US Naval War College

"In this important book, Dahl advances the study of surprise attack by looking at intelligence successes as well as failures, stressing the value of warnings that are precise enough to merit action, and reminding us that warnings will influence only those who are prepared to heed them. The theory is developed very well and the case-studies are exemplary."?Robert Jervis, Adlai E. Stevenson Professor of Political Science, Columbia University

"Building on in-depth historical studies of American intelligence failures and successes spanning seven decades, and on his own invaluable experience as a career intelligence officer, Erik Dahl provides a new answer to the old question of when and why intelligence fails. Emphasizing the importance of specific,

actionable intelligence, Dahl explains the mistakes of the past and suggests how they might be avoided in the future. *Intelligence and Surprise Attack* is a fascinating study of both conventional and terrorist surprise attack, and essential reading for all serious students of the theory and practice of intelligence."?Jack Levy, Board of Governors' Professor, Rutgers University

"Erik Dahl combines a practitioner's experience in the intelligence field with an academic's theoretical sensibility in an astute comparative analysis that places our inability to prevent the 9/11 surprise attacks in historical perspective. His book is a worthy addition to the literature on intelligence failures."?Martha Crenshaw, senior fellow, Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC), Stanford University

About the Author
Erik J. Dahl is an assistant professor of national security affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. He is also a faculty member of the Center for Homeland Defense and Security (CHDS) at the Naval Postgraduate School. Previously, he was a fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University, an instructor of joint military operations at the Naval War College, and served as an intelligence officer in the United States Navy.

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