The first decade of this century—particularly the months and years immediately following the September 11, 2001 terror attacks—was the most eventful and controversial for the U.S. intelligence community since its creation after World War II. Granted significant new authorities and resources, and ultimately given a new organizational structure, the IC was charged with detecting and preventing follow-on terror attacks; helping our military win ground wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; tracking the spread of unconventional weapons; and informing the foreign policies of the world’s only global power. U.S. intelligence, with notable (and well documented) exceptions, met these challenges—but in so doing, it tested the boundaries of the law, the capabilities of its Constitutional overseers, and our society’s understanding of the appropriate place for secret activities within an open, democratic government.

General Michael V. Hayden’s recently published memoir, *Playing to the Edge: American Intelligence in the Age of Terror*, is an engaging and important addition to accounts of this period and its controversies offered by other former government officials, outside investigators, and the media—both traditional and “new.” A career military intelligence officer who served as Director of the National Security Agency on 9/11, the first Principal Deputy Director of National Intelligence, and finally Director of the Central Intelligence Agency at the end of the George W. Bush administration, Hayden is uniquely qualified (arguably even obliged) to offer his perspective on these extraordinary events. The author’s name appears alone on the book’s cover and those who worked with him or are familiar with his frequent media appearances will recognize his forceful, declarative style. It’s a style brought to life by an inexhaustible supply of sports metaphors—beginning with the book’s
title, “playing to the edge,” a maxim that instructs intelligence officers to take every permissible opportunity to gain an advantage over America’s adversaries, and occasionally over our less reliable allies.

Not surprisingly, media reviews of Hayden’s memoir have not been overly charitable. For example: “a blunt defense of interrogations, targeted killings and domestic spying” (Washington Post), “Confessions from Bush’s NSA Spy Program” (Daily Beast), and “In Defense of Snooping” (Wall Street Journal). Hayden’s often unsparing assessment of the media’s performance in balancing the public’s right to know against the government’s need to maintain essential defense secrets made this reaction among journalists a predictable outcome.

Most reviews of Playing to the Edge have focused on Hayden’s description and forceful defense of NSA’s STELLARWIND program (a program conceived in the aftermath of 9/11 to intercept communications between foreign terrorists and confederates in the U.S.); his advocacy on behalf of continuing a modified version of CIA’s pre-existing program to hold and question captured terrorists using harsh techniques; and his recommendation to President Bush in 2008 to increase the tempo of lethal UAV strikes against a resurgent al Qaida and its local allies in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. Details from each of these programs reached the public through selective leaks, requiring Hayden and other IC (as well as White House) officials to act quickly to correct the most egregious inaccuracies, fortify congressional overseers, and compensate for lost collection capabilities. Playing to the Edge’s account of these events and controversies does not add many new facts to the public record, but learning the history, context, and original aims for these programs from a key player in their development and implementation helps complete and balance that record.

In explaining why he wrote the memoir, Hayden observes that “[c]ritics, observers and just average citizens don’t know as much about intelligence as they want or should.” An understatement, to be sure. Intelligence is an immensely complicated but relatively unstudied field. Intelligence educators, whose number now includes Distinguished Visiting Professor Hayden, reach only a small number of our future leaders each year. Hayden himself is a natural educator. Playing to the Edge engages the full range of difficult intelligence concepts and in each case explains the what, how, and why, using accessible language supported by timely footnotes that expand acronyms, offer historic examples, or provide essential context.

The author’s second promise was to examine “the long-term relationship between American espionage and the American people in an era of shrinking trust in government and expanding global threats.” Specific incidents cited throughout the memoir illustrate Hayden’s persistent interest in finding the right fit for secret intelligence work in our open society. My own specific recollections of policy deliberations at that time confirm that he was often the first principal to insist that aggressive intelligence programs could only be sustained through informed engagement with the legislative, and sometimes the
judicial, branch of government and that it was the responsibility solely of elected (and not appointed or career) officials to draw the fundamental lines between public safety and the protection of civil liberties.

If wrangling with CIA’s Publications Review Board over potentially classified references in the draft memoir had been resolved sooner, Playing to the Edge would have been assigned reading in my own graduate seminar on the “supervision and oversight” of US intelligence. For each of the major counterterrorism programs—indeed, intelligence operations of all kinds—covered in the book, Hayden describes carefully how the activity was proposed, reviewed, approved, and ultimately monitored within the IC and Executive Branch; as well as which congressional overseers were notified and when; whether and when approval from the FISA court was sought (as in the case of STELLARWIND); and ultimately how the government and media outlets interacted after classified details had been leaked.

Playing to the Edge persuasively illustrates how the primary responsibility for directing and regulating sensitive intelligence activities necessarily rests with the agency’s chain of command and its internal watchdogs (e.g., inspectors general and general counsels). Critics of the IC often misunderstand, or are too quick to discount, the integrity and effectiveness of internal controls at IC agencies. The “culture of compliance” that has prevailed at NSA for more than a generation proved scant defense against the blitz of inaccurate and hyperbolic charges leveled against that agency based on documents leaked by its former contractor, Edward Snowden.

For those who regard Congress as the primary locus of intelligence oversight in the U.S. constitutional system, Hayden’s account of its performance will be discouraging. He credits a small number of members of the select intelligence committees as being well informed, constructive, and reliable in publicly defending programs about which they had been briefed. But he notes that too frequently congressional leaders and overseers sought to avoid political damage when programs they had earlier supported turned out to be unpopular or controversial. He describes, for example, his approach to the House intelligence committee in 2006 seeking to build consensus for a program that would allow CIA to continue holding and questioning captured terrorists. He writes that the “serious discussion” he was seeking never happened because “[t]he members were too busy yelling at us and one another.” Because of this dysfunction in the oversight committees, Hayden notes, the “Congress of the United States had no impact on the shape of the CIA interrogation program going forward. Congress lacked the courage or the consensus to stop it, endorse it, or amend it.” (Emphasis in original.) He adds ironically that the CIA had more productive discussions on this topic with the International Committee of the Red Cross, which was “unenthusiastic” about CIA’s practices—but at least shared the Agency’s passion for secrecy.

In a chapter titled the “The Public’s Right to Know…and be Safe,” Hayden catalogues his frustrating and generally
fruitless efforts to convince journalists not to publish secret information they had acquired from leakers. He highlights the example of an (in)famous New York Times’ 2006 expose in which the paper made public the fact of U.S. government access to information on financial transactions, pursuant to a voluntary agreement with the Belgium-based SWIFT network. The administration and IC leaders argued in vain to the Times’ editors that the SWIFT program was lawful, consensual, and had provided valuable counterterrorism information.

The Times nonetheless published, embarrassing our European partners and diminishing the program’s effectiveness as a tool for tracking the financial activities of terrorists and their supporters. One of the article’s co-authors subsequently trivialized it as merely “an interesting yarn” about government efforts to prevent a second terror attack; nothing, in other words, that might have caused serious harm to public safety. But, of course, how would the reporter know? Hayden cites approvingly a concise summary of this conundrum by the Washington Post’s David Ignatius: “[w]e journalists usually try to argue that we have carefully weighed the pros and cons and believe that the public benefit of disclosure outweighs any potential harm. The problem is that we aren’t fully qualified to make those judgments.”

Playing to the Edge offers a comprehensive, if not exhaustive, survey of the current national security landscape. It does not simply recall and explain events from the past, but often looks forward to warn of future challenges. For example, the book describes the slow, uncertain, and often failed efforts to understand and organize the government to address the risks and opportunities presented by the digital revolution. In assessing reports of the Stuxnet attack on Iran’s nuclear infrastructure (something that took place after he left government), Hayden notes ominously that we have “unsheathed a new kind of weapon,” marking our entry into a “new military age.” There is, regrettably, little evidence that our national policies or military and intelligence doctrines regarding cyberspace are developing at a pace that matches the gravity of this warning.

Hayden also addresses the seemingly perpetual debate inside the Capital Beltway over the optimal organization and structure of our IC. After leading three different IC agencies and serving as the first PD/DNI, he knows whereof he speaks. The chapter title “Is This Really Necessary?” captures his ambivalence in 2004 (almost three years after the 9/11 attacks), over the impending prospect of IC reform. Above all, the book’s account of intelligence reform during the Bush years proves the old bureaucratic adage that “where you stand depends on where you sit.” As NSA Director, Hayden courageously contradicted the Secretary of Defense by supporting that agency’s possible transfer out of the Defense Department. Later, as PD/DNI, he experienced first-hand the mismatch between the ODNI’s (broad) responsibilities and its (limited) authorities—a situation arising from political compromises required to ensure passage of intelligence reform legislation. And as CIA Director,
Hayden came to appreciate CIA’s unique role in the IC and the need for its director to be afforded ample “running room.” The chapter concludes with a resoundingly tepid endorsement of the ODNI model “This structure,” he says, “can work. It will just depend on people and relationships rather than on formal structures or statute.” Perhaps most usefully, Hayden advises the next president to select carefully a highly skilled DNI, ensure that the CIA Director is “tight” with the DNI, and stand strongly behind the DNI even—or especially—when the DNI comes into conflict with the CIA Director.

Playing to the Edge is the memoir of a remarkable and consequential career intelligence officer. More important, the memoir contributes to, and balances, the existing public record of intelligence controversies during the Bush presidency. Neither the content nor the style of the memoir will appeal to all audiences, but Playing to the Edge should be required reading for current and aspiring intelligence leaders and non-professionals who are interested in having a glimpse into the executive suites of U.S. intelligence during one this community’s most stressful periods.

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* I had the privilege of working with, and indirectly for, General Hayden during certain periods described in his memoir.