The CIA's February 2026 Order to Retract Nineteen Assessments

When a spy agency edits its own past, who decides what counts as bias?

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ABSTRACT

When an intelligence agency pulls nineteen of its own analytic reports from circulation, the natural assumption is housekeeping: outdated products being tidied up. The actual story is sharper and more contested. On February 20, 2026, CIA Director John Ratcliffe ordered 19 analytic assessments from the prior decade withdrawn or substantively revised, citing failures of tradecraft and political independence, after a review by the President's Intelligence Advisory Board flagged them and an internal review concurred. The agency frames this as restoring objectivity. What makes the episode genuinely contested is that former career officials who examined the released redacted versions saw no obvious bias or tradecraft failure, reading the reports instead as the legitimate human-rights and public-health priorities of prior administrations. Because the scoring criteria and most of the underlying texts remain secret, the central factual claim, that these reports were genuinely substandard, cannot be independently verified, leaving a dispute that turns less on facts than on who is trusted to define "objectivity."

Keywords: CIA; analytic tradecraft; intelligence politicization; John Ratcliffe; PIAB; declassification; analytic objectivity

1. Introduction

You may have seen headlines that the CIA "retracted" or "deleted" old intelligence reports, with screenshots of provocative-sounding titles. Here is the anchoring fact. On February 20, 2026, Director John Ratcliffe ordered 19 CIA intelligence products from the previous decade either withdrawn from distribution or recalled for substantive revision. The agency's stated reason was that the products "did not meet CIA and IC analytic tradecraft standards and failed to be independent of political consideration," where *tradecraft* simply means the agency's internal rules for how analysis should be sourced, reasoned, and stated. The right way to think about this is not as a routine cleanup but as a fight over who gets to define what counts as biased intelligence.

The deeper stakes sit above any single set of reports. Intelligence agencies depend on a fragile bargain: presidents accept analysis they dislike because they believe it was produced independently of politics. Once a sitting administration can reach back a decade and pull or rewrite assessments it judges ideologically tainted, that bargain shifts. The leverage point moves from *producing* good analysis to *adjudicating* old analysis, and the power to adjudicate becomes the power that matters.

Over the next few years, watch whether this becomes a precedent each new administration invokes. If retroactive review is normalized, career analysts face an incentive to write blandly and avoid politically sensitive subjects, knowing their work could be relabeled "biased" under a future director. That reshapes who is advantaged: control over the review machinery, not over the underlying expertise, becomes the prize. It also invites Congress and the courts into questions, like what "analytic independence" legally requires, that were previously settled inside the agency by professional norm rather than public rule.

2. The Big Idea and How It Works

Think of the CIA's body of analysis as a published scientific literature, and this action as a journal issuing nineteen retractions at once, declaring the original papers methodologically flawed. The crucial difference is who signs the retraction. In a journal, peers do it; here the agency's leadership and a presidentially appointed board did. In the old world, analysts wrote assessments, and disagreement over them happened forward, through rebuttal and new reporting. In the new world, leadership can reach backward and remove or rewrite the record itself. The same act reads two ways: quality control, or rewriting history. Which interpretation you accept depends almost entirely on whether you trust the people holding the eraser.

The process moved through a clear sequence, which is worth laying out in order because each step shifts authority.

- **The outside flag.** The President's Intelligence Advisory Board (PIAB), a panel that advises the president on intelligence matters, reviewed hundreds of CIA reports and flagged 19 as problematic. The "hundreds" figure and the "independent" character of this review are the CIA's own description, not externally verified facts.
- **The internal concurrence.** A CIA internal review then examined the flagged products and agreed with the board's judgment. Deputy Director Michael Ellis has been identified in secondary reporting as leading this concurring review, though the agency's own release does not name him in that role.
- **The director's order.** On the strength of both reviews, Ratcliffe ordered the 19 products withdrawn or sent back for substantive revision, stating that they "fall short of the high standards of impartiality that CIA must uphold," that there is "no room for bias," and that the agency has "a responsibility to correct the record."
- **The public release.** To illustrate, the CIA posted three redacted example reports. From the outside reader's perspective, this is the only window into the underlying material: you see three documents, not the reasoning that condemned them, and not the 16 other titles, which remain undisclosed.

3. Implications and Tensions

The most concrete change is already visible in the three released examples. The CIA published redacted versions of "Women Advancing White Racially and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremist Radicalization and Recruitment" (October 6, 2021); "Middle East–North Africa: LGBT Activists Under Pressure" (January 14, 2015); and "Worldwide: Pandemic-Related Contraceptive Shortfalls Threaten Economic Development" (July 8, 2020). These three span 2015 to 2021, falling across the Obama, first Trump, and Biden administrations. And here is the twist that makes the story contested: former career officials who read the released redacted versions reported seeing no obvious bias or tradecraft failure, describing them instead as consistent with the human-rights and public-health priorities of the administrations under which they were written. So the products the agency now characterizes as having failed its standards are also, to outside readers, hard to distinguish from ordinary analysis.

For the workforce, the near-term effect is a chilling signal. Analysts working on socially or politically charged topics now have a live example of assessments being pulled years later, which changes the calculus of what is safe to write and how forcefully to write it. For policymakers and the broader record, the medium-term and more directional risk is institutional memory loss. Withdrawn assessments no longer circulate to the officials who use them, so if a future administration wants to understand, say, the 2020 state of pandemic-related contraceptive supply in developing countries, the agency's formal assessment of that question may simply be gone. If the precedent holds, the intelligence record develops gaps that line up with political transitions, pruned to taste with each change of administration.

Correction vs. revisionism. The agency calls this restoring objectivity. Former and career intelligence officials publicly contested both the decision and the premise, arguing the reports reflected legitimate policy priorities of prior administrations and that declassifying them set a "dangerous precedent." Both sides are sourced, and the record does not settle which is right.

Verifiable vs. unverifiable. The judgment that these products failed tradecraft cannot be independently checked, because the board's scoring criteria, the internal review memos, and the texts of the 16 unreleased products are not public. Reasonable people disagree partly because almost no one outside the agency can actually inspect the evidence.

Independence vs. alignment. The CIA describes the board's review as independent. Separate reporting notes the board was populated with close political allies of the administration, which is precisely why good-faith observers split on whether a presidentially appointed panel can be treated as independent when judging an administration's political adversaries.

Deletion vs. revision. One account reports that 17 of the 19 were permanently deleted from agency databases and 2 were recalled for revision. The CIA's primary statement gives no such breakdown, describing only that the products were "withdrawn or substantively revised." Permanent deletion and reversible revision are very different things for the historical record, and the available sources do not settle which occurred, or whether any analysts or managers faced discipline or retraining.

4. Hooks, Takeaways, and For the Nerds

A handful of lines that travel well in conversation:

- "The fight isn't really about these nineteen reports. It's about who gets to decide what 'biased intelligence' means, and whether that power should reach backward a decade."
- "The strange part is that the three reports they actually released don't obviously look biased. Former officials who read them said they looked like normal policy-priority analysis."
- "We've only seen three of the nineteen, in redacted form. Branding the other sixteen without showing them is a lot to take on trust."
- "Notice the examples span three administrations. That doesn't prove neutrality, but it complicates a simple partisan read."
- "We don't even know if the documents were deleted or just revised, and those are very different things."

If you remember three things. On February 20, 2026, the CIA director ordered 19 decade-old assessments withdrawn or revised for allegedly failing tradecraft and political-independence standards; Its legitimacy hinges on a review whose criteria, board composition, and sixteen of nineteen documents remain classified, so the central bias claim cannot be checked, and former officials who saw the released examples saw no obvious flaw; Watch whether this becomes a precedent invoked by future directors, and whether the underlying criteria are ever made public.

For the nerds. The substance hinges on Intelligence Community analytic standards, codified as tradecraft norms: properly characterizing sources, distinguishing assumptions from judgments, expressing calibrated uncertainty, and remaining independent of policy preference. The hard problem is that "independence from political consideration" is partly subjective. A report on, say, pandemic-related contraceptive shortfalls can be sound analysis responding to a real policymaker question, or an artifact of an administration's priorities, and the same text supports both readings depending on the evaluator's priors. That ambiguity is exactly why the unreleased scoring methodology matters so much: without the board's criteria and the internal review memos, there is no falsifiable test of the bias claim. There is also a structural question lurking underneath: PIAB is designed as an advisory check on intelligence quality, and using it as the trigger for retroactive product recall is a novel application of the body's role. The frontier question is therefore institutional rather than technical: can

an intelligence service build a *durable*, transparent standard for adjudicating analytic bias that survives changes of administration, or does any retroactive review inevitably inherit the politics of whoever commissions it?

WHERE SOURCES DISAGREE

Were the 19 assessments genuinely substandard?
The CIA, PIAB, and internal review assert they failed tradecraft standards and lacked political independence. Former officials who reviewed the released redacted versions reported seeing no obvious bias or tradecraft failure, viewing them instead as consistent with prior administrations' human-rights and public-health priorities
Unresolved: the PIAB scoring criteria, review memos, and the texts of the 16 unreleased products are not public, making the tradecraft judgment impossible to verify independently

Was the action a neutral correction or a political act?
The agency's framing presents it as restoring analytic objectivity, endorsed by the Senate Intelligence Committee's Republican chair. Other accounts—including the committee's ranking Democrat and outside legal analysis—characterize it as politicization that sidelines career judgment
Unresolved: both readings are sourced and irreconcilable on the available record, and no neutral documentation adjudicates intent

Was the PIAB review genuinely "independent"?
The CIA describes PIAB's review as independent. Separate reporting notes the board was populated with close political allies of the administration, which critics say undercuts an unqualified claim of independence
Unresolved: no public documentation of the board's methodology or safeguards against political influence exists

Did most of the 16 unreleased reports concern diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)?
A senior administration official, speaking anonymously to the press, characterized most of the remaining reports as DEI-related. No public list of the 16 titles exists to verify this, and the released examples' actual subjects (human-rights crackdowns, extremist recruitment, public health) sit awkwardly with a flat "DEI" label
Unresolved: the characterization rests entirely on one anonymous official and cannot be checked against the underlying documents

How were the 19 products disposed of?
One account reports that 17 were permanently deleted from agency databases and 2 were recalled for substantive revision. The primary CIA statement gives no such split, describing only that the 19 were "withdrawn or substantively revised."
Unresolved: the numerical breakdown appears solely in secondary reporting and is silent in the primary source

Were any personnel disciplined?
The available reporting does not establish whether any analysts or managers faced reprimand, retraining, or other consequences
Unresolved: the sources explicitly note this is unknown