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## INTELLIGENCE ANALYSTS AND POLICY MAKERS

### Benefits and Dangers of Tensions in the Relationship

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THIS CHAPTER IS OCCASIONED BY PUBLIC INTEREST in reported tensions between Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) analysts and policy-making officials of the administration of President George W. Bush regarding the significance of ties between the Saddam Hussein regime and Al Qaeda terrorists, an important factor in the U.S. decision to invade Iraq in 2003. No evaluation of the latter case is provided. The chapter addresses, instead, general patterns of tensions between intelligence analysts and policy officials, in order to provide a context for public assessment of the Iraq-Al Qaeda incident when the public record is more complete as well as provide enhanced understanding of similar future instances of tension.

Over the years, most of the tens of thousands of written and oral assessments produced by CIA analysts in an effort to support the policy-making process have been received by policy officials with either appreciation or silence. Many of the assessments are in response to policy-maker tasking, usually a sign of expectation of useful insights. Many consist of briefings and exchanges via telephone or teleconferencing, where the fact that policy officials invest the time to elicit and discuss analysts' assessment of an important national security issue is testimony to the value the officials expect to receive. Many assessments, as to be expected considering the volume of production, miss the mark for the targetted officials in terms of relevancy, timing, or fresh insights, and thus evoke no reaction.

That said, tensions in the relationship between CIA intelligence analysts and administration policy makers are a common occurrence—an essentially normal by-product of the two camps' distinctive professional missions. The analyst's professional commitment is to assess national security issues without bias for or against the outcomes sought by the incumbent presidential administration; the policy maker's professional commitment is to articulate, advocate, and advance the administration's national security agenda.

Often, the resultant tension in the relationship helps both camps to deal more effectively with the challenges of analytic and policy-making uncertainty that usually attend complex national security issues. Under policy-maker criticism or questioning of judgments, analysts tend to revisit their initial views of the soundness of assumptions about what drives the issue and the implications of incomplete, ambiguous, and contradictory evidence. In response, policy officials often are moved to recalculate the elements of their own assessments of

threats to and opportunities for advancing U.S. interests.

At times, though, tensions take a turn that does not serve well sound analysis, effective policy making, or the national interest; charges of *politicization*, or analytic distortion to support or undermine a policy initiative, issue forth from one or both camps. These cases usually arise when policy officials repeatedly reject the analysts' studied interpretative judgments on the status of or outlook for a complex national security issue, especially when such judgments are seen to complicate policy initiatives that are politically important to an administration.

If tensions are a normal occurrence, and their elimination both impractical and unwise, recommendations of ground rules to enhance benefits and curb dangers would seem called for. But first one should make a closer assessment of the roots and branches of the tensions.

Tensions in analyst–policy maker relations in the United States can be traced back at least to the establishment in 1941, under the auspices of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), of the first bureaucratically independent cadre of intelligence analysts. Sherman Kent, who later played a major role in setting professional standards for CIA analysis, came away from his World War II experience in the OSS with the conviction that relations between producers and consumers of intelligence assessments are not naturally harmonious, despite the common goal of advancing U.S. national security interests. Kent did not much change his views about inherent strains in the relationship during his years of analytic service with the CIA (1951–67).

Why not harmonious? The character of the policy issue at stake, personalities in both camps, the degree of contention about policy direction among administration leaders, and the role of Congress as a third party to the policy-making process from time to time have contributed to the onset and intensity of analyst–policy maker tensions. The underlying constant, though, is the aforementioned difference in perspective on professional mission between the producers of intelligence analysis and their policy-making clients.

## The Analyst's Perspective

CIA analysts are concentrated in the Directorate of Intelligence (DI), which takes pride in its organizational independence from the President, the Secretaries of State and Defense, and the other policy makers its intelligence assessments are intended to serve. The conceit that DI assessments are free of policy and political influence or bias comes across in the slogans by which the analysts and their leaders usually define their professional mission: *objective analysis, carrying truth to power, telling it like it is*.

Over the decades, on many critical and controversial national security issues—for example, Soviet strategic arms, the Vietnam War, Central American insurgencies—considerable substantive expertise, much sweat equity, and tough-minded assessment of assumptions and evidence have gone into the analysts' interpretation of past and ongoing events. The usual bureaucratic result was and is a readiness among analysts to defend key judgments against

criticism, even though they are aware of gaps and other flaws in their information.

Regarding prediction of future developments, where unexpected intermediate events can throw seemingly sound forecasts off course, analysts also have confidence in their expertise and work ethic, and they take pride in their belief in the independence of their judgments from policy and political influences.

Concerted public criticism of flawed analytic performance on major national security issues spawns intervals of analytic humility for the DI as an organization, its leaders, and usually the analysts directly involved. But for the most part, confidence, even overconfidence, in substantive judgments is a staple of the analyst's environment. Especially the more experienced DI analysts tend to see themselves as the best informed on the issues they follow as well as the most objective national security professionals in the U.S. government. Over the decades, on many issues they probably have been.

Analysts vary in their experiences with and attitudes toward policy officials. That said, a common first reaction to criticism of their assessments by policy officials is to suspect that either politics or the critics' lack of requisite substantive expertise is at work. Digging in at the heels in defense of the original assessment at times follows. Probably more often, the analysts undertake a reappraisal of their assumptions, evidence, and argumentation, though a substantial change in judgments does not necessarily result.

## **The Policy Maker's Perspective**

Policy officials, for their part, also vary in their experiences with and attitudes toward CIA analysts. A good number of career policy officials over the decades have considered the DI analysts on their accounts not only the best informed among the governmental community of intelligence analysts, but also the quickest to respond to requests for analytic assistance. This subset of policy officials also appreciates that CIA assessments, unlike those issued by analysts in policy-making departments, are rarely skewed to support a party to the bureaucratic politics that usually colors the policy-analysis process on national security issues.

The tendency among officials closest to the president runs differently. These essentially political appointees, because of their own partisan cast, can be quick to attribute partisan motivation to CIA analysts. Especially when a political party has been out of power for some years, newly appointed Republican officials tend to see the Agency as dominated by holdover liberal Democrats, whereas new Democratic officials tend to see the strong influence of Republican conservatives. Many top-level appointees have served in previous presidential administrations and have requisite confidence in their own analytic skills and substantive knowledge of the issues. Some carry over from previous service critical views of the competence of Agency analysts as well as of their perceived propensity to an antiadministration bias.

Regarding professional mission, both career officials and political appointees see themselves as action officers as well as policy analysts. Their job is to get

accomplished their vision of the president's national security agenda—the goals, strategies, and tactics that emerge from policy analysis.

Unlike intelligence professionals, policy officials are little pained by a merger of an administration's interests in domestic U.S. politics and foreign policy goals. As a rule, to policy officials, especially presidential appointees, government is politics as well as policy. The merger of policy and political advocacy at times requires building a “yes case” or a “no case” amidst inconclusive evidence of the soundness of a policy initiative and the uncertain implications for policy success of daily developments involving, for example, U.S. diplomatic or military campaigns.

This does not mean administration officials are ready to ignore CIA assessments that, say, would give political opponents in Congress ammunition to criticize policy. Often policy officials will ask analysts to “unpack” their assessment, revealing what is fact and what is opinion, or they will call for a briefing and an exchange of views either to enlighten or to leverage analysts.

In sum, at root, tensions, when they occur, represent a collision between the analyst's mission-driven belief that policy-maker criticism of carefully crafted assessments reflects politics or limited substantive command of issues and the policy official's mission-driven belief that CIA assessments that complicate a well-deliberated initiative reflect antiadministration bias or poor analysis.

## **The Analytic Branches of Tension: Opinions, Facts, Evidence**

Though difficult to untangle in actual cases of analyst–policy maker tensions, separating the varieties of analytic production into three branches—opinions, facts, and evidence—serves to clarify both the character of strains in the relationship and potential ground rules for managing tensions.

Regarding estimative judgments or opinions on issues of high uncertainty (for example, multiyear projections of political developments in unstable foreign countries, or prediction of the outcome of protracted U.S. military and diplomatic engagements in violence-prone regions), even well-informed policy makers at times gain insights from intelligence analysts' well-argued estimative judgments.

But when analysts' bottom-line judgments are seen as implicit criticism of and potentially harmful to policy agendas, administration officials are prone to dismiss them as “opinions.”

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, in an October 24, 2002, press briefing, went to great lengths to define the limits of the analysts' opinions in such circumstances: “If you think about it, what comes out of intelligence is not fixed, firm conclusions. What comes out are a speculation, an analysis, probabilities, possibilities, estimates. Best guesses.”<sup>1</sup> Further, policy officials claim, often with justification, that the opinions regarding future developments spawned by policy analysis are sounder than analysts' opinions, if only because they are able to take fuller account of the weight of carrots and sticks the

United States may be ready to deploy.

More than once, policy officials have let it be known, in particular, that they are little interested in whether analysts think U.S. initiatives will succeed. The analyst's main job, according to critics, is to provide assessments that enable policy analysts to reach sound judgments about what actions to take to implement policy, despite the uncertainty that fogs complex world events. The analyst's focus should be on strengths and weaknesses of foreign players, their tendencies, motivations, and risk calculations that would help policy officials identify potential dangers and U.S. leverage points.

Regarding facts, tensions are infrequent and usually involve competing methods of determining facts. Here a fact is defined as something concrete and reliably detected and measured: what a foreign adversary said in a recorded speech or intercepted conversation, as opposed to what he or she meant or actually intends to do.

A prominent official once observed, regarding facts, that policy makers are like surgeons. "They don't last long if they ignore what they see once they cut the patient open."<sup>2</sup>

When policy officials are hesitant to accept as fact a condition or development reported by analysts that could complicate political goals or policy implementation, they tend to challenge the sources and methods the analysts relied on in their determination of facts. During military engagements, for example, military officials have preferred to determine battlefield damage to the enemy as recorded in post-flight reports by U.S. pilots, and to dismiss the analyst's usually more modest calculations of damage that were based on, say, overhead imagery.

The most noteworthy tensions between CIA analysts and policy officials usually are over differences about the meaning of available evidence—that is, differences over what to conclude about something knowable but not conclusively known to either intelligence or policy professionals.

On the issues that give rise to major tensions, first, there are gaps in information because of secrecy and collection limitations. Second, the available evidence reflects a body of reporting parts of which are of questionable reliability and are contradictory and ambiguous. Concerning, for example, the dispute between CIA analysts and prominent administration officials over Saddam Hussein regime's connection to the U.S. war on terror: What will history show the burden of the evidence to have been regarding the nature of Iraq's prewar ties to Al Qaeda terrorists—a minor or major threat to U.S. interests?

Regarding the meaning of inconclusive evidence, former CIA Director and Cabinet member William Casey (1981–87), in a dispute with analysts over the Soviet role in International terrorism, set forth his standard for keeping a policy-sensitive issue on the table: "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence."<sup>3</sup> In effect, if a development or relationship is plausible, analysts cannot prove a negative to the satisfaction of officials with minds and agendas of their own.

In disputes with analysts about the meaning of inconclusive evidence, policy makers can insist on raising as well as lowering the bar of proof regarding judgments that could have a negative impact on their agendas. Once, when an analyst averred that reliable evidence had become available that indicated a suspected development that undermined an administration policy initiative was "almost certainly taking place," a policy critic retorted that the analyst "couldn't get a murder-one conviction in an American court with [his] evidence."<sup>4</sup>

## **The Critic's Challenges to DI Tradecraft**

Policy officials have been generous in spelling out the elements of their criticism of Agency analysis. In doing so, the officials at times were motivated principally to improve the quality of support they receive for the demanding task of policy analysis and implementation. At times, the motivation also included an effort to defang or discredit politically unhelpful assessments. And at times the objective was to shape an intelligence deliverable into a tool that would lend political support to administration policy.

It is worth noting that policy officials who have been generally complimentary of the analyst's performance as well as those long dissatisfied with performance table similar criticisms.

Part of the analyst-policy maker tension in evaluating evidence reflects a difference in professional attitude toward odds. To an analyst, the judgment that the evidence indicates that a development favorable to U.S. interests is unlikely usually means the odds against the existence or emergence of the development at issue are roughly 4 to 1. Given such odds, the busy analyst as a rule is ready to go forward with his or her assessment and move on to the next assignment.

In contrast to a policy maker with an agenda to advance, the same starting odds of roughly 1 in 5 can make it promising as well as politically necessary to stay on the case. Moreover, on politically important issues the official will not overlook the prospect that the analyst's pessimistic judgment could be off base because, first, they are insufficiently informed about the current state and potential fluidity of foreign forces at play, and, second, because they do not appreciate the impact on developments of U.S. carrots and sticks, if a policy initiative gathers backing.

The reluctance of critical policy officials to rely on what they see as unhelpful assessments on issues important to an administration goes beyond professionally necessary "positive thinking" on their part. Critics also point out what they see as systemic weaknesses in the analyst's tradecraft (i.e., analytic methodologies).

First, since cognitive bias is pervasive, analysts, like all observers, tend to see more quickly and vividly what they expect to see and, conversely, tend not to see and properly credit information that would undermine their prior judgments. Critics contend that analysts delude themselves if they think they are exempt from this so-called confirmation bias because of their claims to "objectivity."

Critics have made this point over the decades in defending requests that analysts take another look at their interpretation of the evidence regarding the rate of success of the strategic hamlet program in Vietnam (1960s), the seriousness of Soviet plans for winning a nuclear war (1970s), the battlefield successes of U.S.-backed insurgents in Nicaragua (1980s), and after September 11, 2001, the significance of Iraqi-Al Qaeda connections to the war on terror.

The analyst's phrase "we have no evidence that *X* exists" is judged particularly unhelpful by those officials dedicated to either blunting the threat or seizing the policy opportunity in question. The critics note that analysts rarely admit they have no evidence that *X* does not exist. Besides, one critic averred, "policymaking is not [done] in a court of law."<sup>5</sup> A similar criticism is that analysts are too tied to the specific reports that reach their "inbox" and do not take sufficient account of the inherent aggressiveness, ruthlessness, and duplicity of U.S. adversaries.

Policy-making critics also complain that analyst training and incentives place too much emphasis on "straight line, single outcome" analysis on complex and uncertain issues. Critics say this "make the call" approach is both unhelpful to sound decision making and prone to error.

Former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, long a critic of Agency analysts, observed in an interview conducted in 1994 that analysts' assertiveness in the face of uncertainty can turn an Agency assessment on complex issues into a weapon for one policy-making camp to use against another. In contrast, by tabling alternative interpretations, analysts would provide a tool useful to all participants in policy debates and decision making.

Further, the critics aver that, especially when policy stakes are high, analysts should expend much more effort evaluating what they don't know and why they don't know it before issuing estimative judgments downplaying dangers on which policy officials are focused. For example, could gaps in information that lead analysts to discount the likelihood of potentially harmful developments of concern to U.S. officials be caused by denial and deception (D&D) operations, or inadequate U.S. collection, or flawed assumptions about which pathways and relationships an adversary is pursuing to effect the feared development?

The 1999 report of a commission chaired by the current Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, after noting past intelligence failures on timely detection of foreign ballistic missile developments, cautioned analysts not to be quick to conclude that absence of evidence indicated absence of vigorous weapons programs by potentially hostile countries. The report, instead, charged analysts with pursuing alternative plausible explanations for "particular gaps in a list of [program] indicators."<sup>6</sup>

In truth, policy officials may prize the analyst who can come quickly to a crisp conclusion on issues surrounded by uncertainty that supports their agenda. But policy officials who see CIA judgments as obstacles to their agenda are themselves quick to connect the make-the-call culture to the analyst's record of analytic failures from the Cuban missile crisis to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

Perhaps most important, according to the critics, it is the duty of responsible policy officials to ask probing questions; to insist on critical review of the evidence; to send analysts back to the drawing board for another look; in effect, to pull any loose thread in an unhelpful intelligence assessment.

Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld in his October 24, 2002, press briefing referred to the importance of engagement and criticism: "to the extent there's no feedback coming from ... a user of intelligence, then one ought not expect that the level of competence ... on the part of people supplying the intelligence will be as good ... as if there's an effective interaction."<sup>7</sup> Granted, political overtones often color these criticisms. But in tradecraft terms they represent reasonable standards for policy officials to levy on analysts charged with providing distinctive value added to U.S. policy-making efforts.

## Defining Professional and Unprofessional Analysis

The doctrinal basis for a response to criticism by administration officials should reflect definitions of professional and unprofessional standards for intelligence analysts as agents both of the national interest and of the policy-making process. Thus, a definition of analytic professionalism should posit as equally important standards both *objectivity* (defined as tough-minded evaluation of evidence and other sound analytic practices) and *utility* (defined as distinctive data and insights policy officials find useful for managing threats to and opportunities for advancing U.S. interests).

Neither objectivity without utility, nor utility without objectivity, would meet the test of the author's following definition: The mission of intelligence analysts is to apply in-depth substantive expertise, all-source information, and tough-minded tradecraft to produce assessments that provide distinctive value-added to policy clients' efforts to protect and advance U.S. security interests. The analyst's long-held standard of analytic objectivity has helped to promote an institutional ethic of pursuing independence from all biases, including policy and political influences, in making judgments in the face of substantive uncertainty. But studies, including those commissioned by the Agency, indicate that *substantive biases* (experience-based mindsets) are all but essential for effectiveness in an environment of high-volume production and tight deadlines. In such circumstances, the effect on production of an "open mind" is akin to the burden of an "empty mind." In addition, *cognitive biases* (especially seeking confirmation for experience-based assumptions amidst inconclusive evidence) in effect are hardwired mental traits.

Pursuit of the defined mission regarding objectivity, then, comes down to an effort to minimize bias by critical review of the assumptions driving the analyst's mindset and of the adequacy of the available evidence to draw any meaningful judgment, and, if so, the content of the judgment.

Also to fulfill the defined professional mission, analytic deliverables must be seen by policy officials to have utility as they define their professional agenda, which, as previously indicated, is to posit and enact an administration's politically colored policy agenda. The analysts who would produce an assessment with high potential for utility to the policy-making process can no

more ignore the political context in which their clients operate than they can ignore where the latter are on their learning curves (e.g., how much background information is needed) and decision-making cycles (e.g., planning stage or implementation stage).

To take account of the politics of policy making is not a license for intelligence professionals, as analysts, to become policy makers, or their speechwriters or spear carriers. But if an analyst is not close enough to the process to feel the political pressures affecting policy making, he or she probably is not close enough to produce professionally crafted deliverables that provide distinctive value added.

Thus, there will always be a danger that analysts, in constructing their written assessments and oral commentary, will introduce a policy or political slant—either deliberately or through disregard of analytic standards. Analysts have done so in the past, and likely will do so from time to time in the future.

A politicized and therefore unprofessional assessment can be defined as an analytic deliverable that reflects either (1) the analyst's motivated effort to skew building-block assumptions, evaluation of the evidence, and bottom-line judgments to support—or oppose—a specific policy, political entity, or general ideology, or (2) a conspicuous disregard for analytic standards that produces unmotivated but similarly distorted outputs that could affect the policy-making process.

From the policy makers' agenda-oriented perspective it makes little difference whether what they see as analytic bias is motivated or unmotivated. One senior official, for example, complained that every assessment that indicated or implied that an administration initiative was flawed constituted analytic policy making, because it provided ammunition for Congress to oppose funding the initiative.

As long as policy-makers' criticism of the objectivity, soundness, or utility of analysis reflects a legitimate tradecraft concern, they are not necessarily putting pressure on analysts to engage in unprofessional behavior. Policy officials have the license to change the intelligence question in search of insights in addition to those embedded in the analyst's initial assessment, to ask that assumptions and evidence be examined more thoroughly, and to request customized follow-on assessments. That is part of their job description, whether they are seeking fresh insights or analytic support for their established views.

Thus, it is not unprofessional behavior for analysts, on their own or when requested, to provide assessments that set out to make the case for an alternative view to their unit's agreed interpretations of ambiguous evidence of ongoing developments and estimative projections of complex trends. The only professional requirements are that such efforts at, say, devil's advocacy, be clearly labeled and vested with appropriate analytic standards for crafting a challenge to the mainline views on an issue embedded with substantive uncertainty.

Additionally, it is not unprofessional behavior for an analyst, when requested, to

address matters clarifying tactical policy options for dealing with specific threats to and opportunities for an established general policy. The key to sound “action” or “implementation” analysis is for the analyst to identify plausible initiatives and evaluate them in cost-benefit terms, and for the policy makers to choose what course to pursue and bear responsibility for their decisions.

Finally, for a manager to tighten tradecraft standards on a politically sensitive policy issue before an analyst's assessment goes forward under a corporate DI seal is not necessarily a signal of unprofessional behavior. Painful to the analyst, yes. Politicization of his assessment, no.

Analysts and their managers and leaders must be vigilant in identifying, deterring, and decrying unprofessional assessments as herein defined; when engaged in analysis, they are and must remain intelligence professionals, not policy or political aides—or critics. If an analytic cadre is to deserve its vaunted organizational independence, it must be ready to hold its ground, in the name of the national interest, against pressures for politicization, no matter the source, the intensity, or the circumstances.

But analysts must also take seriously the “cry wolf” danger of levying charges of politicization whenever their authority to control the key judgments of an assessment is abridged.

More to the point, if ever teamwork must prevail over turf warfare and over the individual analyst's sense of entitlement to determine what “call” to make on a matter of substantive uncertainty, it is when the analytic corps is constructing assessments on politically contentious policy issues. Over the decades, many analysts who have made adjustments to initial assessments that maintained objectivity while enhancing utility have felt the sting of colleagues' unreasonable charges of politicization.

## **The Analyst's Response to Policy-Maker Criticism: Best Practices**

The challenge for analysts, then, is to turn tensions to professional advantage by maintaining rigorous analytic tradecraft standards while enhancing the utility of their assessments to policy makers. Despite a popular reputation for flawed performance, CIA analysts regularly meet this demanding standard. To turn on its head an observation on policy success and failure attributed to President Kennedy after the 1961 Bay of Pigs debacle: Analytic failures draw a thousand critics; analytic successes are orphans.<sup>8</sup>

Call them “ground rules,” call them “best practices,” lessons can be learned from both failures and successes, and recommendations made for how analysts should respond to policy-maker criticism. The underlying concept behind the recommendations that follow is that analysts carry the heavier burden of managing tensions in policy-maker relations in a manner that advances the national interest.

The main reason is that the policy-making camp is the more powerful of the two. Policy officials have many alternative sources to Agency analysts for

information and insight, including their own staffs and departmental analytic organizations; the academic, research, and business communities; the media and the Internet. In contrast, Agency analysts have no comparable alternative market that would justify the large size of their cadre and high volume of production of assessments. Congress demands and receives a steady stream of oral briefings from Agency analysts but is rarely seen as an equal to administration officials as a client for written assessments.

The central theme of the recommendations is that analysts are professionally required to take the tradecraft elements of policy-maker criticism seriously, no matter how much they may perceive that the politics of policy advocacy also are at play. Analysts, thus, should respond to criticism with a reassessment not only of the argumentation and judgments of the original assessment but also of whether it provided utility or distinctive value for the policy-making community. The goal is to take tradecraft issues off the table, so to speak, in an effort to isolate and then defuse any politically motivated elements of policy-maker criticism.

*First, become expert on the policy maker's world.* Analysts should commit to learning as much about the U.S. policy-making process and their key policy-making clients as, say, a national security correspondent for a major newspaper or other media outlet is expected to command. Analysts, starting from year one, have to spend quality time analyzing how Washington works, warts and all, even if this slows down the pace of grasping how Baghdad, Beijing, or Buenos Aires work. In particular, analysts should understand their client's role as action officer as well as policy analyst. This investment will enable analysts to role-play the policy clients who have criticized an assessment, not to mortgage analytic integrity but to evaluate tradecraft performance through a different set of eyes.

*Second, become accomplished at understanding and managing substantive uncertainty.* Analysts are taught and are generally aware that their judgments on complex issues are based on thoughtful but fallible assumptions that in turn color their evaluation of fragmentary, contradictory, ambiguous, and otherwise inconclusive evidence. They have been cautioned about mindset and confirmation bias. Yet the norm is to rely on these powerful but vulnerable mental processes to get their assessments out under tight deadlines, and with a confident judgment.

Usually the resultant assessment holds up well against both the expectations of policy-making clients and the subsequent course of events. Usually. But what to do when a policy official conveys doubts or outright criticism?

Here, without being too quick to jettison original argumentation and judgment, the analysts should move from passive to active awareness of the limitations of their analytic craft. More active attention to the perils of analysis amidst substantive uncertainty entails taking a more thorough accounting of plausible alternative explanations and outcomes that were discarded or downplayed during the crafting of the assessment that drew criticism.

Casual re-examination of an assessment by its author and production unit to take the measure of alternatives at times is helpful, but the process of "talking

about alternatives" is prone toward defense rather than critical evaluation of the original argumentation. More structured and externalized challenges to the assessment hold greater promise of fresh insights that either strengthen confidence in, or point to useful modifications of, the assessment that drew criticism.

Tested approaches to alternative or challenge analysis include devil's advocacy, key assumptions check, quality of information review, and argument mapping. A more experimental technique, known as analysis of competing hypotheses, tests which of several plausible explanations for a complex event or trend stands up best against a battery of relevant information.

*Third, become adept at role-playing.* At times, as indicated, analysts will be well positioned to prepare a professional response to criticism by undertaking an open-minded assessment of the *policy critic's paradigm* (i.e., mental model) on a contentious issue. However colored by political considerations it may at first seem to the analysts, deconstruction will help identify the critic's assumptions, evaluation of evidence, and calculations of likelihood. Once this information is at hand, the analysts may see a path toward revision of their own assessment that both protects objectivity and enhances utility.

*Fourth, lean forward professionally with action analysis.* Analysts should not hesitate to respond to criticism about unhelpful analysis by changing the question from the one they initially believed should be addressed to one policy critics call for—again a possible path to both objectivity and utility. Often the shift, as previously indicated, is from what is the most likely interpretation of an event or relationship or the most likely future path of development, to depiction of the direct and indirect leverage the United States has to reduce dangers and seize opportunities.

In most cases, analysts can be professionally comforted by assuming savvy administration officials, despite a politically required public optimism, know their policy initiative is facing heavy obstacles, even before the CIA assessment elaborated the point. What is now in demand are intelligence insights for doing something about the obstacles.

An analyst once tabled an assessment that placed emphasis on the general political dynamics in country Z, including both domestic reform tendencies promoted by the United States and a deliberate show of independence from Washington on certain international issues. The word came back that the high-level U.S. official who had asked for the assessment "wanted to leverage the president of country Z, not love him."<sup>9</sup>

*Fifth, master techniques for evaluating inconclusive evidence.* More deliberate analyst attention to evaluating evidence on contentious policy issues is another promising avenue for stripping tradecraft complaints from policy-maker criticism of analytic performance. Careful consideration of alternative meanings of gaps in information, especially regarding suspected programs to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD), can help build credibility with critics.

Analysts can organize and assess what is known and unknown to determine,

for existence, whether the gaps in expected indicators more likely represent limited U.S. collection and substantial D&D, an innovative approach to WMD development, or nonexistence of a concerted development effort. The aforementioned analysis of competing hypotheses is well suited to provide an externally structured (that is, minimally subjective) competition to see which explanation is the most and least compatible with available related information.

*Sixth, use estimative terminology carefully.* Analysts have a professional obligation in maintaining integrity while supporting the policy-making process to avoid compounding substantive uncertainty with linguistic confusion. This is essential to managing tensions on sensitive issues. To deter both misunderstanding and manipulation of judgments, analysts should avoid vague estimative phrases such as “real possibility” and “good chance.” Though not without risk of an exaggerated precision, analysts should aim to set boundaries to key judgments (e.g., “we judge the likelihood of *development Z* to be low—on the order of 10 to 20 percent”). On controversial issues analysts should also avoid nonfalsifiable judgments such as “it is possible,” “suggests that,” and “according to reports.” They should provide instead an evaluation of the authenticity, adequacy in terms of completeness and consistency, and significance of the evidence. And when no confident judgment can be made, analysts should say so directly.

As previously indicated, policy officials tend to stick to initiatives even against long odds. An assessment that calculates an estimated probability of a development at, say, roughly 80 percent is making transparent a roughly 1-in-5 prospect of being wrong. An assessment that develops the longshot case using plausible alternative assumptions and evaluations of the evidence, as well as the analyst's preferred 4-in-5 prospect can serve professionally to provide distinctive value added to policy-maker critics without sacrifice of analytic integrity.

*Seventh, be responsive to criticism but not at the cost of objectivity.* As long as an analytic unit believes it has done its homework in evaluating evidence and in considering alternative explanations and projections, it should stand by its estimative judgments even if policy-maker criticism persists or intensifies. But the unit should also work to ensure continued access to and credibility with critical clients by varying the focus and perceived utility of its deliverables. Analysts should consider the following “1-3-1” approach to an issue of critical policy import on which they are engaged in producing nearly daily assessments.

- Once a week, issue an assessment that features a net judgment, whether or not the one favored by policy officials. Include a credible accounting of the impact of recent developments and reports.
- Several times a week, put the net judgment approach aside and employ action analysis to address tactical dangers and policy opportunities on which direct and indirect U.S. leverage could be applied.
- Once a week, change the question via the tradecraft of alternative analysis, in order for both analysts and policy makers to examine the issue from another angle, for example: *what-if analysis* (what policy makers would see, if the likelihood of development *X* increased), *risk-benefit analysis* (the adversary's estimated calculations affecting its motivation for

and ability to engage in development  $X$ ), and *if-then analysis* (implications of the advent of a high-impact, low-probability development regarding  $X$ ).

Finally, what of the danger that analysts' efforts to curb their own substantive and cognitive biases will generate deliverables that provide unwarranted support to the clients' biases and political agenda while weakening respect for the production unit's professional judgment?

There may be no win-win answer to the vulnerability of unintended consequences of attempts at professional accommodation of the tensions attending policy-maker criticism of analysis. Policy makers, for example, have been known to tear off the cover page (literally and figuratively) explaining the main view of the analysts and the context for presenting an alternative view—and then citing the latter as the Agency's judgment.

But avoidance of the initiatives recommended above for professional accommodation of criticism and instead countering policy-maker exaggeration of certitude with analyst exaggeration will help neither camp. As a rule, a blending of deliverables that indicates an openness toward alternative interpretations with regular affirmation of what analysts believe to be sound, if vulnerable, judgments will protect analytic professionalism, maintain credibility with and access to the policy clients, and best serve the national interest.

Analysts and production units unsure of how to proceed when confronted with policy-maker criticism with political overtones should engage the Agency's Ombudsman for Politicization and other detached veteran practitioners for help in identifying the best professional response. Agency training courses that include case studies on managing tensions would also help prepare analysts and managers for their initial exposure to friction with their policy-maker clients.

Largely as a result of internal as well as external reviews of flawed analytic performance regarding judgments about Iraqi WMD arsenals and programs under the Saddam Hussein regime, many recommendations for dealing with criticism of analysis by policy officials similar to those outlined above have been adopted or reinforced as tradecraft doctrine by CIA's senior leadership. As this chapter was written (March 2006) the difficult transformation from doctrine to practice was under way.

## **Policy Maker Prerogatives—And Their Limits**

The preceding two sections of the chapter addressed: (1) analysts' professional prerogative to stick to their best judgment after testing it for soundness, no matter the intensity of policy-maker criticism; (2) their obligation to mitigate tensions via alternative means of support to policy clients, such as action analysis; and (3) the breach of professionalism entailed in both deliberate and unintentional politicization of analysis.

*What about the rights and wrongs of the admittedly more powerful policy-making camp?* The national interest is best served when the two camps work together to combine sound intelligence analysis with sound policy analysis. That said, when the two camps clash, what are the prerogatives of policy officials and

what actions should be considered a breach of their professional obligations?

The questions and answers that follow are an attempt by the author, long an observer of the relationship but a member of the analytic camp, to set ground rules for policy officials that would enhance the benefits and temper the dangers of tensions in analyst–policy maker relations.

1. *Are policy makers entitled professionally to reach, publicize, and act upon estimative judgments that diverge from intelligence assessments on a national security issue?*

Yes. As indicated throughout this chapter, intelligence analysis, especially inherently fallible interpretative and predictive analysis, is an input to and not a substitute for policy analysis. Policy makers as analysts take account of other providers of information and judgment, and also bring their own, often considerable, experience, insights, and biases to the difficult tasks of policy formulation and implementation, for which they must take ultimate responsibility.

2. *Are policy officials professionally entitled to ask intelligence analysts to take another look at their estimative judgments (e.g., to review assumptions, evidence, and argumentation)?*

Yes. Policy makers are commissioned to devise, promote, and enact the president's national security agenda. They know when a policy consensus is taking shape and the time for action is approaching on issues, despite intelligence assessments that sound a caution. Yet officials, especially those with an appreciation for the distinctive role of intelligence analysis, hesitate to ignore intelligence findings and estimative judgments that call into question the underpinnings for U.S. initiatives. One response in these circumstances is to ask analysts to go back to the drawing board. Furthermore, from the point of view of the national interest, well-articulated criticism of analysis is much preferable to inadequate guidance for the execution of intelligence deliverables and scant attention to the assessments once delivered.

3. *Are policy makers professionally entitled to urge analysts to review and revise their confidence levels in analytic judgments?*

Yes. For the same, usually healthy, reasons, one analyst or intelligence agency challenges another's conclusions on whether a shrouded current relationship or indeterminate future development is *nearly certain, probable, or unlikely*, policy makers may ask analysts to rethink their degree of confidence in a judgment. Once again, the answer assumes estimative judgments are inherently subject to error and that policy makers' criticism of analysis is more useful to sound performance than their ignoring of analysis. Needless to say, intelligence analysts are professionally bound to stick to judgments on probability that survive their critical review; and intelligence professionals must take care not to allow the pressure of a process of repeated requests for revision to move the bottom line further toward one supportive of policy than the analysts' tradecraft would justify.

4. *Are policy makers professionally entitled to ask analysts to provide well-argued alternatives to their studied bottom-line judgments (e.g., devil's advocacy)?*

Yes. Policy officials are at least as wary of the consequences of policy failure as analysts are of intelligence failure. They are professionally entitled to task analysts to use their skills and resources to present for consideration alternative or multiple views of a complex and uncertain issue. At times a call for, say, devil's advocacy may be a caution against the perils of groupthink, especially in cases in which policy makers agree with the analysts' judgments. At times the policy maker's motive will be to move Agency analysis to closer alignment with his or her own thinking. As long as rigorous analytic tradecraft norms are adhered to for whatever form of alternative analysis is solicited, and the analyst's preferred bottom-line judgment is firmly attached to the deliverable, intelligence professionals should welcome the opportunity for customized service to their policy-making counterparts.

5. *Are policy makers professionally entitled to ask analysts to change the question they address (say, from whether a development is likely, to how it might occur)?*

Yes. Once an administration adopts an initiative, policy makers tend to move forcefully into their action-officer mode and have limited interest in analysts' views, based on the latter's reading of the evidence, on whether the policy is likely to succeed, much less whether the policy was wise to undertake. Policy officials have a job to do—to make the policy work. They are professionally entitled to ask intelligence analysts to provide action or implementation analysis—that is, expert assessment of opportunities for moving the policy forward and of specific dangers to be avoided, taking account of insights into the adversary's strengths, weaknesses, and “game plan.”

6. *Are policy makers professionally entitled to seek analytic judgments from sources other than CIA and other U.S. professional intelligence organizations?*

Yes. No matter how strongly intelligence professionals would prefer otherwise, policy officials, in pursuit of their policy-making and political goals, have a right to rely on whatever sources of information and insight they choose, either to supplement or to substitute for the support they get from intelligence professionals. This includes use of business, academic, and other nongovernmental sources; their own staffs, whether configured as a policy-making or intelligence unit; and also, as has happened, foreign intelligence services. Policy makers, in short, are entitled to reap the benefits of as complete and varied a set of substantive inputs as they can command as they undertake the arduous task of managing an uncertain and often perilous national security issue. If policy makers use different sources of analytic support simply because they want more cordial answers than those provided by intelligence professionals, then the policy officials must bear the burdens of self-deception, policy failure, and political censure when such outcomes prove to be the case.

7. *Are policy makers professionally entitled to attribute to intelligence analysts judgments that overstate or understate analysts' confidence levels?*

No. Once a studied, clear, and (if challenged) revisited statement of likelihood regarding a development, relationship, threat, or opportunity is established by Agency analysts, policy officials can attribute it to intelligence in order to buttress their own views, or reject it in favor of their own alternative statement

of likelihood. But they do not have the authority to attribute to intelligence professionals an estimative judgment the latter do not hold.

8. *Are policy makers professionally entitled to force analysts to alter their best estimative judgments?*

No. As already acknowledged, policy officials are entitled professionally to reject intelligence assessments and reach and promote their own estimative judgments (Question 1, above), and are also entitled to urge analysts to rethink and recast Agency intelligence judgments (Question 3, above). That clarified, under no circumstances are policy officials professionally entitled to force intelligence analysts to change estimative judgments. Obviously, there are risks to treating as inviolate intelligence judgments that are contrary to policy preferences. Events may prove the analysts to be wrong. Congressmen may complicate the funding and execution of an administration's strategy and tactics by using intelligence findings and estimative judgments to block or modify policy initiatives. Unauthorized leaks to the media of intelligence positions may create an untimely public debate over policy. These circumstances can cause a run-up in immediate costs ranging from embarrassment of the administration to the thwarting of what history may judge to have been a sound policy initiative. But the long-term costs to the integrity and morale of intelligence professionals of forcing them to change their judgments will likely cause much greater harm to the national interest by weakening a vital arm of the national security establishment.

9. *Are policy officials professionally entitled to use the media to criticize intelligence analysts' competence, in an effort to protect an administration from congressional and public criticism of a policy initiative?*

No. As argued in this chapter, policy officials are entitled, indeed encouraged, to criticize through government channels either a specific body of analysis or intelligence tradecraft generally. Furthermore, as policy professionals, they are entitled to raise publicly their criticism of analysis as long as it is couched in analytic terms and is not, in effect, a politically motivated *ad hominem* attack. That is, as policy professionals, they are not entitled to criticize publicly a careful body of intelligence work and the credentials of the analysts who produced it merely to relieve themselves of the burden of credible defense of their own contrary judgments. In principle, nearly all parties to the uniquely American system for making national security policy proclaim the value of maintaining the integrity of intelligence analysis. A practice of trying to leverage a congressional vote or public debate on a policy initiative by criticizing the credentials of analysts who produce uncongenial analysis undermines the principle.

10. *Are policy officials professionally entitled to apply pressure on Agency leaders to remove from a production unit a manager or analyst responsible for assessments with judgments policy makers see as biased, wrong, or otherwise unhelpful?*

No. Analysts and their managers should be judged by Agency leaders solely in terms of professional credentials and adherence to analytic tradecraft norms, including good-faith efforts to respond to tradecraft criticisms by policy officials through the various means outlined earlier in this chapter (e.g., key assumptions check, devil's advocacy). The challenge of reaching sound analytic

judgments amidst the perils generated by substantive complexity and uncertainty should not be compounded by a requirement for “political correctness” or fears about job security.

11. *Are policy officials professionally entitled to request Agency analysts to engage in policy advocacy, for example, to produce a “white paper” that is released as an intelligence product?*

No. Agency analysts may assist by providing information for the production of a white paper, but this and other formats of policy advocacy must be issued under the seal of a policy-making department or staff. The role of Agency analysts is to provide analytic support to policy planning and implementation by administration officials—and not to make, advocate, or criticize policy. Again, the long-term importance to the national interest for Agency analysis to be and be seen as a source of substantive objectivity as well as policy utility far outweighs any short-term political advantage gained from using an adulterated form of intelligence analysis to gain public or congressional support for a policy initiative.

## Concluding Thoughts

What about enforcement of these or any other set of ground rules aimed at moderating tensions in analyst–policy maker relations? U.S. experience has shown that presidents and their inner circles from time to time will play by their own rules. Agreed prerogatives and constraints and authoritative calls of “foul” might nonetheless serve well over the long haul, if only to evoke second thoughts about ignoring a transparent set of rules for improving both intelligence analysis and national security policy making.

Presidential administrations already have an instrument in place for monitoring the adequacy and quality of intelligence analysis, along with all other intelligence functions. The President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB) is well situated, both to help shape the ground rules and to monitor for analyst compliance. Over the decades, PFIAB members—former administration officials, members of Congress, and military and business leaders—collectively have commanded formidable knowledge about analysts and policy makers. And as a rule, PFIAB staff reports on analytic performance have been noted for both independence and insight.

For the Agency, the Ombudsman for Politicization has served since the early 1990s to educate new analysts about professional standards, to monitor for politicization, and to counsel analysts about the concerns they raise on the issue. Over the years, the Ombudsman, selected by and serving at the pleasure of the Director for Intelligence, has been a highly qualified former intelligence manager serving part-time as an independent contractor.

The following recommended changes relating to the Ombudsman are intended to strengthen both the educational and protection functions, including by participation in shaping ground rules and more active monitoring for compliance on the part of policy officials as well as intelligence professionals.

- Change the position name to Ombudsman for Analytic Professionalism

(OAP). The professional obligations for analysts in the management of tensions involve more than the avoidance of policy or political bias.

- Provide the OAP with a small staff. The rise in importance to U.S. national security of countering weapons proliferation and terrorism—issues on which conclusive evidence will be a rarity—is likely to increase tensions over the meaning of available information and thus the demands on the OAP.
- To ensure the independence of and enhance analyst confidence in the OAP, have the newly instituted Director of National Intelligence nominate and Congress confirm the title holder to serve a fixed term of five years.
- To help hold policy makers as well as analysts accountable in their management of tensions, require the OAP to provide the intelligence oversight committees of Congress with periodic reports on the compliance of both camps with agreed ground rules.

This chapter, by design, has mentioned Congress only briefly, although it is the third side of the triangle that constitutes the U.S. system for making and implementing national security policy. Yet for any set of ground rules for governing analyst–policy maker relations to have a lasting impact, Congress, on its own or in response to public demand, must take action to promote and monitor such an initiative. The goal, one last time, would be to ensure that the inevitable tensions between Agency analysts and administration officials are managed to the benefit of the national interest.

## Notes

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official positions or views of the CIA or any other U.S. government agency. Nothing in the contents should be construed as asserting or implying U.S. government authentication of information or Agency endorsement of the author's views. The material has been reviewed by the CIA to prevent the disclosure of classified information.

1. Quoted in "Rumsfeld on New DoD Intelligence Team," *Early Bird* (newsletter), Department of Defense (October 25, 2002), available at [http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Oct2002/t10242002\\_t1024sd.htm](http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Oct2002/t10242002_t1024sd.htm)
2. Author's interview with Paul Wolfowitz, "Paul Wolfowitz on Intelligence-Policy Relations," *Studies in Intelligence* 39 (Langley, VA: Central Intelligence Agency, 1996).
3. Author's interview with CIA analysts present when the remark was made at CIA Headquarters, Langley, VA, in 1982, cited in Jack Davis, *Tensions in Analyst-Policymaker Relations: Opinions, Facts, and Evidence*, Occasional Papers, CIA, Kent Center 2 (2003), p. 3.
4. Comment made to the author in April 1980, CIA Headquarters, Langley, VA, cited in Davis, "Tensions," p. 3.
5. Author's interview with Paul Wolfowitz, "Paul Wolfowitz."
6. Intelligence Side Letter [to Congress and the Director of Central Intelligence], Report of the Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States (March 18, 1999).

7. Quoted in "Rumsfeld on New DoD Intelligence Team," *Early Bird*.
8. *Editor's note*: After the Bay of Pigs failure in 1961, President Kennedy observed, "There is an old saying that victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan," cited in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 289.
9. Author's recollection of a 1973 incident, cited in Davis, "Tensions," p. 6.

## Note on Sources

The views on and of policy officials are based on remarks made at press conferences and in unclassified statements in reports by governmental commissions, media interviews, and discussion forums. Note, for example, the following publications that are available on the CIA website (<http://www.cia.gov>). Note also, the unclassified source cited for the evaluation of and recommendations for analysts by the Missile Commission, chaired by Donald Rumsfeld.

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