STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE - 1 : UNDERSTANDING THE HIDDEN SIDE OF GOVERNMENT

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THE CHALLENGES OF INTELLIGENCE ANALYSIS

John Hollister ***Hedley***

ANALYSIS FITS INTO THE NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE PICTURE as the finished portrait of an intelligence subject—perhaps a snapshot of a fast-breaking development, perhaps a product of collaborative, in-depth research. Reporting an event is one thing; answering the question "what does this mean?" is analysis. Analysis goes beyond what happened—as best we can discover what happened—to assess what to make of it. Analysts do both when they write: They report and they assess. What they write constitutes the intelligence product, or "finished intelligence." This product may take the form of a quick-reaction commentary, an assessment of an event's likely implications in the near term, or a study of long-term trends and their potential consequences. In every such instance, intelligence analysts every day are striving to make sense out of often ambiguous, inconsistent, incomplete, and sometimes contradictory data. And they do so not in a seminar but in the fast-breaking world of foreign and defense policy.

Richard Helms, whose long career in intelligence operations culminated in seven years as the Director of Central Intelligence, put it this way: "It is a long span from secret reports and photos to the conclusions reached by Washington intelligence analysts, men and women sitting at desks sorting, sifting, and patterning secret evidence into a matrix that carries conviction. This work—analysis—is the bottom line of intelligence work. This is where all the arcane techniques of intelligence come together. This is the unknown, the neglected side of the profession that has been caricatured into absurdity by writers of spy thrillers."[1] Helms, no writer of spy thrillers but himself a spy of the first order, knew that timely, objective analysis is the end result of all the activities that go into the acquisition of intelligence information.

Helms's observation, made decades ago in the midst of the Cold War, is equally true in the 21st century. The attacks of September 11, 2001, on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington underscored the growing challenges to intelligence in an era of international terrorism in which small groups of individuals can inflict destruction once wielded only by nation-states. Indeed, this look at the nature and challenges of intelligence analysis comes as the bureaucratic dust still is settling following the hasty, election-year enactment of the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004, which was an outgrowth of those attacks. That legislation created the position of Director of National Intelligence as an institutional corrective for the failure of the vast U.S. national intelligence apparatus to somehow prevent the terrible events of 9/11. The reorganization followed the completion of various inquiries and studies into what went wrong.[2] The general, overriding conclusion of these inquiries with respect to intelligence analysis was that there had been a failure of imagination—that analysis tended to be risk-averse and more concerned with avoiding mistakes than with imagining surprises—and that there was insufficient integration of analytic efforts across the now sixteen-member U.S. intelligence community. The Office of the National Director of Intelligence now is at pains to emphasize consultation and collaboration in intelligence analysis. The office is providing central direction aimed at rising above the bureaucratic fiefdoms that for years formed barriers to the sharing of sources and analytic perspectives. Mental roadblocks to more imaginative analysis, however, are persistent challenges discussed below.

The essence of analysis is information plus insight, derived from subject-matter knowledge. It should be clear from the outset that there is nothing nefarious about trying to know and understand as much as possible about what is going on in the world. And this is the purpose of analysis: to discern pertinent facts from a flood of information and apply judgments and insights that can inform those who must make decisions and direct actions to address developments on a global scale. Intelligence analysis informs decisions and actions in ways that can make a positive difference. Timely intelligence warns of looming crises, identifies threats, monitors fast-breaking situations, illuminates issues, and detects trends. Intelligence helps U.S. policy makers consider alternative options and outcomes.

Types of Intelligence

The grist for the analyst's mill is a mix of all the kinds of information the U.S. government is able to acquire. Much of the information is openly available in print or electronic form, including the Internet, newspapers, television, radio, journals, commercial databases, videos, graphics, maps, and drawings. A critical amount of intelligence information, however, is obtained from highly sensitive sources. These include:

> *Human-source intelligence,* acquired openly by civilian and military personnel assigned to U.S. diplomatic posts, through official liaison contacts with other intelligence services, by debriefing foreign nationals and U.S. citizens who travel abroad and have access to information of intelligence value; it is acquired clandestinely by recruiting foreign agents with unique access to the hardest targets of all: not just documents but the people who make policies and operational plans—and if possible, recruiting those people to be agents themselves.
> *Signals intelligence,* derived from intercepted communications, radar and telemetry.
> *Imagery intelligence,* whether obtained overhead from satellites or aircraft or from the ground.
> *Measurement and signature intelligence,* involving a range of disciplines including nuclear, optical, radio frequency, acoustic, seismic, and materials sciences that can locate, identify, or describe distinctive characteristics of intelligence targets.

Complicating the mix of these secret sources of intelligence reporting is its sheer volume, its rapid-fire receipt, the ever-present "noise" of contradictory and inaccurate information, and deliberate deception designed to mislead.

The fact that analysts do "all-source analysis" reflects the reality that rarely is one source from a single one of these collection categories sufficient. Sources need to be supplemented and complemented to be as complete as possible and to be verified to the greatest extent possible. Research and analysis in open sources may turn up information, for example, on the strategic perspective of *jihadist* movements. But because these groups attach highest priority to the security of their communications and operations, it is difficult to identify leaders and uncover decision making and attack planning. It is likely to require the full range of intelligence collection capabilities to penetrate operations by cells of a few isolated individuals whose fluid movements are "beneath the radar." In making analytic judgments, the analyst facing a deadline yearns for additional sourcing. But actually having multiple sources to corroborate each other is the ideal. It is by no means the rule, and multiple sources can in some instances still lead you astray. Indeed, one of the differences between intelligence writing and academic writing is having to write before you feel ready to do so, before you have marshaled the supporting evidence you want to have in order to craft your position. In this sense, writing current intelligence is very much like being a newspaper reporter or columnist: When it's time to go to press, you have to have your material ready to go.

Readying "Finished" Intelligence

Intelligence analysis is the culmination of the intelligence process, although the process actually is a never-ending cycle. Analysis drives collection by identifying information needs and gaps, which in turn call for more collection, which requires further analysis. What the key recipients of intelligence analysis —the president, the National Security Council, and senior officials in major departments and agencies— must be aware of, grapple with, or defend against in the world around us dictates collection requirements. They reflect the core concerns of national security policy makers and military commanders who need timely, reliable, and accurate foreign intelligence information—especially the kinds of information that are not readily available. As analysts address those needs from day to day, they identify and prompt the collection mission again and again.

Before the raw data that human or technical collectors acquire can be analyzed, however, some interim processing and exploitation may be required to convert "raw" data into a usable form for analysis. It may be necessary, for example, to decrypt or translate intercepts, or to interpret images through highly refined photographic and electronic processes. Although personnel involved in this processing sometimes are referred to within their organizations as analysts, their specialized work—involving judgments about relevance and priority within a single collection category—is not the production of "finished" intelligence.

Although producing intelligence is a dynamic, never-ending process, the term *finished intelligence* refers to any intelligence product—whether a one-paragraph bulletin or a lengthy study—that has completed the rigorous, all-source correlation, integration, evaluation, and assessment that enables it be disseminated. As we have noted, the intelligence analyst who is the author of such a product is expected to have checked it against intelligence information from all sources pertinent to his or her area of responsibility. The analyst will have assessed its validity and determined—with the substantive and editorial help of experienced managers and colleagues—that it can usefully advance its recipient's knowledge and understanding of a pertinent security policy issue.

Finished intelligence is made available in several forms, and analysts can expect to be called upon to produce in any or all of them:

> *Current intelligence* addresses day-to-day events—new developments and possible indicators of developments to come. Current intelligence not only reports intelligence information but assesses its significance, alerts readers to near-term consequences, and signals potentially dangerous situations. Current intelligence is disseminated daily. Sometimes it appears even more frequently, in the form of situation reports from a task force formed to deal with a crisis.

Often it takes the form of ad hoc written memoranda and oral briefings. The *President's Daily Brief* is the most elite example of current intelligence, but other highly sensitive publications for the most senior levels of government and the military appear daily, weekly, or on request.
Estimative intelligence takes stock of what is known and then delves into the unknown, even the unknowable. International issues rarely are conclusive, yet policy makers must address them with plans and decisions. Estimative intelligence provides strategic guidance for developing policies, usually looking three to five years ahead. It suggests alternative patterns that available facts might fit and provides informed assessments of the range and likelihood of possible outcomes. The most formal and authoritative form of estimative intelligence is a national intelligence estimate, which the pertinent organizations of the intelligence community prepare collaboratively and issue collectively.
Basic intelligence compiles reference data—biographic, geographic, military, economic, demographic, social, and political—presented in the form of monographs, in-depth studies, atlases, maps, order-of-battle summaries, and publications such as *Chiefs of State and Cabinet Members of Foreign Governments* and an annual *World Factbook* that is a comprehensive compilation of political, economic, and demographic data.[3]

Other types of finished intelligence include *warning intelligence* (which necessarily should be timely), designed to highlight threatening events that would require a potential policy response and that could cause the engagement of U.S. military forces, and *intelligence for operational support,* which, as the name indicates, is focused and tailored for the planning and conducting of a specific operation. *Scientific and technical intelligence* assesses technical developments and characteristics, and the capabilities and performance of foreign technologies including weapon systems. Technical analysis usually relates to defense planning, military operations, or arms-control negotiations.

None of these types of finished intelligence, however, brings the process to a conclusion. Whether a daily item or a national estimate, their production is part of a continuum that involves dissemination, feedback, and more questions that fuel a truly dynamic effort.

What's more, whether current or longer term, the analytic interpretation of intelligence reporting requires making judgments that go beyond the available information. Such a leap, from the information at hand into a meaningful analytic product, inevitably involves venturing from the known into the uncertain. Almost by definition, intelligence analysis involves confronting uncertainty. The analyst is commonly working with incomplete, ambiguous, and often contradictory data and must use his or her judgment—and subject-matter expertise—to transcend its limits.

The Work Environment

The climate in which analysts work has changed dramatically from the early decades of the U.S. intelligence community's existence. During the Cold War that dominated the second half of the 20th century, the analytic challenge was often one of having too little data. The Soviet Union and its allies were closed societies going to great lengths to deny information. They denied travel, controlled the press, and jammed radio broadcasts. E-mail and cell phones did not exist. U.S. intelligence agencies had a virtual monopoly on the information that was collected, essentially secret information obtained by agents, communication intercepts, or overhead photography, and there never seemed to be enough. In the 21st century, a principal analytic challenge lies in the sheer volume of information available. Although especially hard targets such as terrorist cells are no less difficult to penetrate, the explosion of open-source information from news services and the World Wide Web makes the speed and volume of reporting more difficult to sift through. Advances in information technology both help and hinder, as analysts strive to cope with the "noise," the chaff they must winnow through. Data multiplies with dizzying speed. Whereas collecting solid intelligence information was the overriding problem of the past, selecting and validating it loom ever larger as problems for analysts today.

To a degree perhaps surprising to someone new to the inner sanctum of a Washington intelligence organization, the working climate that does not change is that which walls off the workplace from the bluster of partisan politics. Analysts must check their personal political views at the door. Objectivity is the analyst's by-word, intellectual honesty the core value. The policy-making customers that analysts seek to inform—all the way to intelligence customer number one—need to get the straight scoop, unvarnished and politically neutral.

The author has been directly involved in producing intelligence for eight presidents—five Republicans and three Democrats. Whatever the partisan rhetoric or the legislative agenda, without exception they all have been serious and conscientious about their role in foreign policy and as commander in chief, and they take seriously the intelligence that can inform their efforts. They have the best of intentions, and although they obviously differ in style, approach, and effectiveness, they want and need the best intelligence they can get. (So, for that matter, does the Congress. And the congressional oversight committees—the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, and the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence—by and large score well on bipartisanship, especially behind closed doors and apart from public rhetoric.)

Accordingly, an analyst is much the wiser and more effective by not taking sides on the job. No matter how much one might personally wish to see expanded healthcare on the one hand or tax cuts on the other, when it comes to helping the government better understand what is going on in the world, the only rule to follow is to be scrupulously objective. As the umpire advised, "call 'em as you see 'em."

There is no room in intelligence analysis for partisan advocacy or opposition when providing actionable intelligence and identifying options. In short, you don't bend things to fit the way you'd like things to be. This will always catch up with you, and your credibility is what will suffer.

It's About Writing

What the analyst needs to bring to the job is an open mind and an ability to think and write clearly. Oral briefings are valued and often called for. But ultimately, writing is what the analyst's work is about—writing based on organizing material, conceptualizing, and thinking critically about it. Writing is always done with the audience—the reader—in mind. And the writing analysts do is different from that learned and practiced in the professorial ranks of graduate school, even though there are many similarities between the intelligence field and academia.

Like academicians, intelligence analysts attach the highest importance to knowledge and understanding, to objectivity in the search for truth, and to accuracy in the sources they use. Academics and analysts are interested in clear descriptions and explanations, though academics usually are describing past events and making sense of what happened, while analysts are addressing what an event means and projecting what might happen next. They tend to differ when it comes to the material they work with, and their likely audience. Academic authors organize their data, make it as comprehensive as possible, reflect on it, develop a theoretical construct, and perhaps formulate methodologies. For the analyst—especially one writing current intelligence—this approach is likely to be an impossible luxury. As Douglas MacEachin, former Deputy Director for Intelligence—the head of analysis—at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has put it, "one group gets to promote its reputations in journals, while the other works in a closed environment in which the main readers are members of the world's most challenging audience—the policymaking community."[4] The analyst may need to write for the next morning's publication, or contribute to this afternoon's situation report, on a development for which data is sorely lacking. There is not enough data to work into a meaningful methodology, and there is no waiting for more data: The deadline must be met with whatever can be said.

Whereas academics usually write—particularly in the case of journal articles—for other scholars with a shared expertise, analysts usually write for nonexperts who do not share their expertise and who do not have time for in-depth study or to follow an issue day in and day out to the degree the analyst does. Analysts therefore are called upon to bridge the gap between the specialist and the generalist. Getting the attention of senior officials—from the president to an under secretary—who, by the breadth of their responsibility, are forced to be generalists, may mean the analyst has one page, or two or three minutes, in which to make sense of a development. No matter that, ideally, putting this development into historical perspective and into its international context should require considerable background reading and careful study and reflection. There is no such option. However much the generalist reader might benefit from a scholarly tutorial, he or she simply will not sit still for one. Even if you write the kind of paper you would like the policy maker to have in order to get a more comprehensive exposition of what is at issue, it probably will not be read at the highest level. So to reach the reader at that level, the analyst must take the opportunity that is available: one page or nothing, three minutes or none.

Different audiences dictate a different style. And the first rule of persuasive writing is to know your audience. For busy readers, shorter is usually better. The analyst's policy-maker audience is unbelievably pressed for time, which may or may not be the case for the scholar reading the academic's work. The analyst's audience determines the writing style, and the one that is most effective for the generalist reader—whether the president, chairman of the joint chiefs, or a cabinet officer—is simple, crisp, readable prose. Good journalistic writing is a good example. (Read Tom Friedman columns in the op-ed section of the *New York Times*, and "What's News" on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*.) What is written must be easy to grasp in a quick reading. Editors, as a surrogate first reader, can provide indispensable help. But sometimes, finished intelligence must be done on the run and off the cuff. A friend who was an analyst in the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research remarked that the bureau's most effective analytic "product" often was a one- or two-sentence comment on a report in the secretary of state's morning briefing, perhaps followed by one or two short paragraphs the next day. The *President's Daily Brief* keeps items to a single page, sometimes less, with a lot of white space. Always, intelligence writing puts a premium on being able to state key points quickly, succinctly, and with clarity. Restrictions on time and space require an economy of words.

New Demands

Demands on the intelligence analyst—and the expectations—are increasing. Everyone is overwhelmed by information. Policy makers are looking to intelligence to help them know what they should be worrying about, what they should be addressing, and what their options and their likely consequences are. They have insufficient time to read or to contemplate, so helping them cope with the flood of information has become a major service analysts provide. Policy makers value the ability of the intelligence analyst to integrate data with no axe to grind.

All the while, the analyst's customers grow ever more numerous and more sophisticated. Recipients of intelligence analysis who have newspapers and press summaries on their desk and CNN on the air wherever they go have a high level of awareness. And no one ever wants less intelligence, in terms of products, briefings, or coverage—only more and better. Congress has an insatiable appetite for intelligence, as do the military services. Executive branch customers abound in the Departments of the Treasury, Energy, Justice, Homeland Security, Commerce, and Agriculture.

What the analyst writes must compete for attention with multiple sources of information and other intelligence producers. The trick is not to cheapen the currency by inundating the reader but to be timely, relevant, and to provide value added—even when addressing a much-reported issue of the day. Intelligence analysis needs to contribute uniquely, going beyond what's in the news media. And of course it is worthless if it doesn't arrive when it can be used.

Although policy makers—especially when a new administration takes office—insist that they want long-term projections that will help them plan wise policies, their attention invariably becomes riveted on the here and now. The fact that developments worldwide are reported in real time contributes to an atmosphere of perpetual crisis, of needing to respond instantly to anything and everything—an atmosphere in which current intelligence carries the day.

The fact is, decision makers want and need both strategic and current analysis. Critics and commissions of inquiry post-9/11 comprise a veritable chorus of conventional wisdom decrying an overemphasis on current intelligence working to the detriment of in-depth analysis. The appeal is being heard and acted upon. The National Intelligence Council, for example, already a center of strategic analysis that leads intelligence community projects and works with outside experts, has added a unit to lead interagency analysis on long-term and underexamined strategic issues that would be walled off from current demands.

Whether current or longer term, the desire on the part of the users of intelligence is for analysis that is opportunity-oriented, or actionable—in other words, intelligence they can apply and actually use. Analysis has become an integral part of planning and implementing policy, and of intelligence operations. This is a far cry from what might be termed the traditional, or "old school," conception of analysis, which held that, to be policy neutral, analysts literally had to keep their distance from those who were making the policy decisions. Traditional thinking also held that analysis, to be scrupulously objective, should be done independently of those who collect it.

Collaborating but Not Politicizing

For a number of years, the trend has led away from this traditional view for a variety of practical reasons. Working in isolation only increased the guesswork involved in discerning what policy makers needed to know and thus what collectors needed to collect. In contrast, working collaboratively enables analysts to get an invaluable "feel" for what information the policy maker is missing. Learning first-hand the information needs and priorities of the day helps analysts guide what the collectors must target. Collectors can have a real-time sense of what to collect and analysts can have a sharper awareness of what they have to work with and of the illumination and insights they must try to provide.

Today, analysts and policy makers meet together regularly and frequently from the highest levels—the deputies committee and principals committee meetings that prepare for national security council meetings with the president—to various gatherings at the working level. At the CIA, analysts sit side by side with HUMINT collectors in the operations directorate now known as the National Clandestine Service. They do so as well at the various centers where analysts and collectors can better focus and share their combined efforts—such as the National Counterterrorism Center, the National Counterproliferation Center, and the International Crime and Narcotics Center.

How analysis informs policy might be answered with "very carefully." Analysts must walk a fine line not to be prescriptive. They must illuminate alternatives but not suggest which one to take. Their collaboration with policy makers and collectors increases the risk of politicizing intelligence and, accordingly, raises the pressure on analysts to resist it. Tailoring intelligence by no means involves slanting its content to curry favor with its recipient; it means making it as relevant as possible by addressing as precisely as possible the policy maker's particular information needs. The analysts' highest calling is to speak truth to power. They must convey assessments that the policy makers surely will not want to hear.

In the process, analysts must resist the temptation to "cherry pick" intelligence items to provide, even though no one should be surprised that policy makers, for their part, "cherry pick" from the intelligence they receive. Policy makers may point publicly to that which seems to support their policy and disregard that which does not. But woe unto the analyst who would cherry pick intelligence likely to please the policy recipient and suppress that which would not. Such a practice would quickly come to light and would cost the analyst's credibility, which is the indispensable currency of the analyst's realm.

Bias may happen, but nobody instructs you to change your interpretation. This author can honestly say that, as a line analyst at CIA, as a manager of analysts, as managing editor of the *National Intelligence Daily,* and in editing the *President's Daily Brief*, he personally never experienced pressure from any superior officer to alter any analytic judgment to suit a policy line. He has, however, seen a very few instances in which analysts, convinced that their viewpoint was the embodiment of truth, became knee-jerk apologists or advocates for a position or outlook—to an extent that they were no longer seen as objective and open-minded, and whose analytic careers effectively ended as a result.

Today, analysts have to be ever mindful that they must somehow maintain an invisible firewall separating the informing of policy from prescribing policy, even as they work hand in glove with both policy makers and collectors in order to more effectively identify knowledge gaps and strive to fill them. The idea is to support the process of making policy by identifying options that help serve all players and

The idea is to support the process of making policy by identifying options that help serve all players and leave to the policy makers the responsibility for charting the course.

Pitfalls

The post-9/11 studies also emphasized anew what analysts have grappled with for years: the fact that, as human beings, we all have cognitive bias or preconceived notions that we must acknowledge and be wary of lest they color our perceptions and our judgment. We all are culture-bound in our outlook and must consciously strive to recognize this fact and rise above it.

Some of the particular pitfalls the analyst must constantly strive to avoid include:

> *"Clientitis,"* or the tendency to fall in love with your "client," the country you may be assigned to cover, is a sophomoric sin but one that is not unknown. Developing expertise obviously means knowing a great deal about a country, usually involving extensive travel and often some time in residence. Analysis involves discerning and explaining the motives and point of view of its leaders. But admiration for its language, customs, and culture must not lead the analyst to become the advocate and defender of its leaders and their policies. Objectivity must reign supreme.
> *Mirror-imaging* is the assumption that others would think just the way you do—that, being confronted with the facts of a certain situation, they would calculate the pros and cons and decide their course of action with the same reasoning, and thus reach the same conclusion. (Anthropologist Rob Johnston points out that this term actually is a misnomer, inasmuch as a mirror image is a reverse image. He uses *ethnocentrism* to describe the concept that we tend to perceive foreigners—friends or adversaries alike—as thinking the same way as Americans. He also notes that "trying to think like them" often results in applying the logic of one's own culture and experience to try to understand the actions of others, without knowing that one is using the logic of one's own culture.[5])
> *Mindset* is the tendency to evaluate newly acquired information through an existing hypothesis, rather than using new information to reassess the premises of the hypothesis itself. Douglas MacEachin, former head of CIA's analysis directorate, explains how this happened to analysts trying to determine if or when the Soviet Union would invade Afghanistan in early 1979. Once having judged what the Soviets would require for an invasion force and thus what military indicators would presage an invasion, analysts disregarded indicators that did not fit that judgment.[6]
> *Groupthink* is the inclination to have one's interpretation reinforced by others coming to the same conclusion. As other analysts arrive independently at the same hypothesis, or simply accept and thereby endorse yours, the analyst is tempted to consider the assessment confirmed. Groupthink thus helps form or reinforce mindset.
> *Linear analysis* presumes a straight-line, sequential projection in which one development appears to flow logically from that which preceded it. An oversimplified illustration is that if we know, for example, that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, we know that he tried in several ways to obtain more of them, and that he is successfully concealing what he has done subsequently, linear analysis would lead one to conclude that what he has done subsequently is acquire more weapons of mass destruction. Linear analysis does not allow for the unexpected outcome. As Princeton professor Robert L. Hutchings—former chairman of the National Intelligence Council—put it, "Linear analysis will get you a much-changed caterpillar, but it won't get you a butterfly. For that you need a leap of imagination."[7]

An old example is still one of the best examples of mirror-imaging. The most dangerous superpower confrontation of the Cold War posed the analytic question of whether or not the Soviet Union would send offensive missiles to Cuba. The judgment of analysts across the U.S. intelligence community was that a rational actor would not do this, that Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev would know better than to run such a risk. Yet he sent the missiles on their way. Ironically, the U.S. analysts ultimately were right and Khrushchev was wrong. Sending the missiles was a major error. His humiliating withdrawal of them contributed to his ouster. But the analysts' misjudgment points up the need to be skeptical of a "rational actor" model. The Soviet leader did not see the risk equation in the same way. In the end, it was our insufficient understanding of his psychology and world view that led us to believe the act of sending the missiles would be an irrational option.

Analysts have on a number of occasions been surprised by what seemed from the U.S. perspective to be irrational decisions by foreign leaders. Soviet tanks crushed the reformist government in Czechoslovakia in 1968 when it did not seem in Moscow's interest to do so. In 1973, U.S. (and Israeli) intelligence analysts concluded that it made little sense for Egypt and Syria to attack Israel, given the military inferiority of the Arab side as demonstrated in the 1967 war. It seemed irrational for Saddam Hussein to invade Kuwait in 1990, and for India to explode a nuclear bomb in 1998. But the decision maker who counted did not see these actions as irrational. (Who knows if Saddam's analysts concluded in 2003 that the United States was only bluffing and would not actually invade Iraq!) Getting out of one's Western mindset is always difficult, but it is critical if we are to assess correctly the motives and policies of foreign leaders.

The controversial analytic estimate in September 2002 concerning Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction contained a "perfect storm" of analytic pitfalls. Virtually all of them—mindset, groupthink,

and linear analysis—were in evidence to some degree, resulting in a warning for the ages to be wary and to question the conventional wisdom. As a British scholar describes it, the groupthink consensus that Saddam was stockpiling weapons of mass destruction was formed

> despite the intelligence community's own agreed assessments that the evidence didn't indicate that he was, or, for that matter, that he wasn't, since the information was too fragmentary to know with certainty and Saddam too mercurial to predict with confidence. The consensus at work had its roots not in raw intelligence or other substantive evidence but in unanswered questions and political assumptions.[8]

It is easy, of course, to cite instances in which U.S. intelligence assessments missed the mark. The news media do so rather gleefully. It is the nature of their business, just as missing the mark is in the nature of the intelligence business. More than twenty-five years ago, Columbia University scholar Richard Betts asserted that intelligence failures are not only inevitable, they are natural.[9] They still are, and will continue to be, because to do their job well, intelligence analysts must be willing to take risks. No matter how incomplete, inadequate, uncertain, or contradictory the information on which a judgment must be made, the judgment is nevertheless expected and must be made. And making it necessarily entails a recognition of the risk that the judgment can miss the mark.[10]

Sherman Kent, a former professor of European history who in a thirty-year career in intelligence earned a reputation as perhaps America's foremost practitioner of the analytic craft, was directly involved in the classic misjudgment at the outset of the Cuban missile crisis. Reflecting on it later, Kent asked rhetorically how it could have happened. "The short answer," he wrote, "is that, lacking direct evidence, we went to the next best thing, namely information which might indicate the true course of developments."[11] The reader should mentally underline "might." As Kent put it, if a national intelligence estimate "could be confined to statements of indisputable fact, the task would be safe and easy. Of course the result could not then be called an estimate."[12]

There is no bureaucratic reorganization that can solve once and for all the problem of preventing intelligence misjudgments, because uncertainty itself is the problem. The inevitability of intelligence failures—if this means not predicting exactly when and how something might catch the United States by surprise—virtually has the certainty of a law of physics. No one can predict the future, and no one person or organization can be right on all subjects at all times. Allegations of intelligence failure therefore are inevitable, in large part because, in intelligence, failures are inevitable. And failures are trumpeted whereas successes often are publicly unknown. Analysts have to accept this as the cost of doing business. But rest assured that intelligence often is on target. Presidents would not insist upon it as a daily diet and Congress would not demand and fund it if it were not of value. Much of the value is incremental and does not come in dramatic, bolt-from-the-blue revelations, but the value is there. And it is a safe bet that it is best produced by analysts who park their preconceptions at the door, constantly review indicators from all sources, question conventional wisdom and their own assumptions (especially if analytical consensus emerges quickly), and weigh alternative explanations.

Human nature being what it is, the various pitfalls discussed above will surely continue to challenge an objective perception and explanation of events. But there is help, both in preparing for the challenge and in meeting it on the job. It is unlikely that anyone will walk into an organization in the U.S. intelligence community without having to learn and practice the tradecraft. At CIA, home of the intelligence community's largest analytic component, the creation by the year 2000 of the Sherman Kent School of Intelligence Analysis testified to an intensive effort to teach the tradecraft of intelligence analysis. Experienced intelligence officers with extensive analytic experience run a Career Analyst Program for new analysts, who now spend their first five months with the Agency developing the specialized thinking, writing, and briefing skills of intelligence analysis. Interim assignments enable them to apply themselves in various jobs throughout the Agency and elsewhere in the intelligence community.[13] On-the-job training continues throughout an analyst's career. Supervisors provide mentoring. Peer review helps shape their research effort and critique their preliminary findings. The professionalizing of today's analysts emphasizes the use of multiple hypotheses and various alternative interpretations of trends and indications. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence promotes critical discussion among analysts throughout the intelligence community in addressing analytical challenges. Editorial reviews help ensure that analysts communicate their message clearly.

Personality and temperament also factor into what makes an effective analyst. Those who would work in current intelligence assignments, especially, must be able to work with short deadlines. Structure and predictability may be in short supply. What is guaranteed is a diet of long hours under pressure, and a need to be responsive and flexible. In-depth research requires sifting through mounds of data, and conceptualizing from that data calls for hard study, developing and bringing to bear one's substantive knowledge, and doing deep thinking for long stretches. But what also is guaranteed is an unparalleled opportunity to know more about what is happening around the globe. Excitement may not be constant, but a flow of adrenalin and a sense of satisfaction characteristically accompany the work of intelligence analysis. It opens a unique window on world affairs. It offers the prospect that one person's contribution can make a difference in American foreign policy. Analysts who write an item that runs in the *President's Daily Brief* know that their judgment is appearing in the publication with the smallest and most influential subscription list in the world. Joining forces throughout the U.S. intelligence community, analysts illuminate complex issues, detect patterns, identify targets, and increase the U.S. government's understanding of far-flung developments. It is a high calling, a fascinating profession, and

a pursuit that can contribute significantly to national security.

Notes

1. Foreword to Russell Jack Smith, *The Unknown CIA* (Washington, DC: Pergamon-Brasseys, 1989), pp. ix, x.
2. See, for example, *9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004), and *Report of the Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2005). Recommended as the best single assessment of the 9/11 Report and the consequent rapid congressional and White House response manifest in the Intelligence Reform Act is Richard Posner, *Preventing Surprise Attacks: Intelligence Reform in the Wake of 9/11* (Lanham, MD: Bowman and Littlefield, 2005).
3. *Chiefs of State and Cabinet Members* and the *World Factbook* are published both in classified and unclassified versions, the latter for public use and available on CIA's website.
4. Foreword to Richards J. Heuer Jr., *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1999), p. xi.
5. Rob Johnston, *Analytic Culture in the U.S. Intelligence Community* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2005), pp. 75–76.
6. Douglas J. MacEachin, *Predicting the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: The Intelligence Community's Record*, monograph published by the Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2002.
7. Robert F. Hutchings in the Preface to *Mapping the Global Future* (Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, 2004), p. 1.
8. Philip H. J. Davies, "Intelligence Culture and Intelligence Failure in Britain and the United States," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17 (October 2004), p. 517.
9. Richard K. Betts, "Analysis, War and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures Are Inevitable," *World Politics* XXXI (October 1978), reprinted with permission in *Studies in Intelligence* 23 (Fall 1979), p. 54.
10. John Hollister **Hedley** , "Learning From Intelligence Failures, *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 18 (Fall 2005), p. 437.
11. Sherman Kent, "A Crucial Estimate Relived," originally appearing in the classified Spring 1964 issue of CIA's internal journal, *Studies in Intelligence*, republished in *Studies in Intelligence* 35 (Winter 1991), p. 67.
12. Ibid., p. 65.
13. John Hollister **Hedley** , "The DI: A History of Service," in *Fifty Years of Informing Policy* (Washington, DC: Directorate of Intelligence, 2002), p. 17.

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