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Truth to Power? Rethinking Intelligence Analysis

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THE 9/11 COMMISSION'S final report has surprising little to say about the craft of intelligence analysis. Out of nearly five hundred pages, probably no more than a half dozen are directly concerned with analysis. Given the major overhauls in the intelligence community proposed by the Commission and then enacted into law, the absence of an extended discussion about analysis is striking. It is all the more conspicuous because so much of the literature on surprise attacks (and on surprises more generally) focuses on the analytic failures leading up to the events in question. Why weren't "the dots" connected? How was the enemy able to deceive and mislead its opponent? What was the character of the particular myopia or methodological flaws that kept people in the dark until too late?

The Commission's report does not provide answers to these questions.

Nevertheless, the Commission does make one very large point about intelligence analysis that is important to note—and to exam-

ine. According to the Commission, the core analytic failure was one of a lack of “imagination.”¹ As commissioner and former secretary of the Navy John Lehman remarked: When the Commission studied the government’s “documents, the internal papers, the recommendations of the top advisers to presidents, we were shocked at the failure to grasp the extent of [the] evil that was stalking us.”² Put simply, the government had not come to grips with the novelty and the gravity of the threat posed by Osama bin Laden. And it was the intelligence community’s analysts—distracted by, and pulled in the direction of providing current intelligence for, an ever-expanding array of priorities—who failed to undertake the kind of strategic big-think assessment of al Qaeda that might have shaken the government from its bureaucratic and political lethargy.³

According to the Commission, prior to 9/11, the U.S. intelligence community had not issued a new national intelligence estimate (NIE)—the most prestigious and most authoritative analytic product of the whole intelligence community—on terrorism since 1995. And though the 1995 NIE had predicted future terrorist attacks against the United States, including in the United States, other than a perfunctory 1997 “update,” the intelligence community did not produce any authoritative accounts of bin Laden, his organization, or the threat he posed to the country. In some measure, the Commission argued this was part and parcel of “the conventional wisdom before 9/11” with respect to the threat posed by bin Laden: He was undoubtedly dangerous, but he was nothing “radically new, posing a threat beyond any yet experienced.” For those inside government who thought differently, they needed some way

1. See *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 339–44.

2. Lehman, “America After 9/11.” Remarks given at the Foreign Policy Research Institute Annual Dinner, November 9, 2004, www.fpri.org/fpriwire/1203.200412.lehman.americaafter911.html.

3. See *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 90–91.

to “at least spotlight the areas of dispute” and, potentially, generate new policies. In the past, according to the report, an NIE “has often played this role, and is sometimes controversial for this very reason.” Indeed, “such assessments, which provoke widespread thought and debate, have a major impact on their recipients, often in a wider circle of decisionmakers.” Yet, as already noted, there were no new NIEs, and, hence, by the Commission’s lights, the intelligence community missed a critical opportunity to challenge the prevailing perception of the security problem posed by bin Laden and al Qaeda.⁴

The opportunity was missed, the report suggests, because with the end of the Cold War, the lack of clarity about who America’s real long-term enemies were, and what our long-term policy goals would be, undermined the intelligence community’s ability to plow resources into “long-term accumulation of intellectual capital” on any given topic. Whatever else the Cold War had brought, it “had at least one positive effect: [I]t created an environment in which managers and analysts could safely invest time and resources in basic research, detailed and reflective.” Within the analytic community, “a university culture with its version of books and articles was giving way to the culture of the newsroom.”⁵

Complaints about this trend in intelligence analysis are long standing, as is the implicit suggestion that the gold standard when it comes to analysis is the dispassionate approach of the university scholar.⁶ What the government needs, in this view, is less its own

4. Ibid., 343.

5. Ibid., 90–91.

6. From the “Church Committee” (1975–1976) investigation of the U.S. intelligence community:

The task of producing current intelligence—analyzing day-to-day events for quick dissemination—today occupies much of the resources of the DI [Directorate of Intelligence]. Responding to the growing demands for information of current concerns by policy makers for more coverage of more topics [sic], the DI has of necessity

in-house CNN than, in the words of one former House intelligence committee chair, an analytic arm that is the equivalent of “a world-class ‘think tank.’”⁷

Of course, the notion that intelligence analysis, at its best, is removed from the day-to-day work of government, that it requires distance from policy making and policy makers, has deep roots in the American intelligence tradition. In perhaps the most influential book ever written on intelligence analysis—*Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy* (1949)—Sherman Kent spelled out a very specific approach to guide analytic practice in the post-World War II intelligence community. Kent, a Yale historian, former mem-

resorted to a “current events” approach to much of its research. There is less interest in and fewer resources have been devoted to in-depth analysis of problems with long-range importance to policy makers. . . . The “current events” approach has fostered the problem of “incremental analysis,” the tendency to focus myopically on the latest piece of information without systematic consideration of an accumulated body of integrated evidence. Analysts in their haste to compile the day’s traffic, tend to lose sight of underlying factors and relationships.” (U.S. Senate, Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, *Final Report*, book 1: *Foreign and Military Intelligence*, 94th Cong., 2d sess., 1976, S. Rep. 94-755, 272–273).

And, more recently, as *The 9/11 Commission Report* noted, the weakness in all-source and strategic analysis were [sic] highlighted by a panel, chaired by Admiral David Jeremiah, that critiqued the intelligence community’s failure to foresee the nuclear weapons tests by India and Pakistan in 1998, as well as by the 1999 panel, chaired by Donald Rumsfeld, that discussed the community’s limited ability to assess the ballistic missile threat to the United States (91).

7. Following the end of the Cold War, the House and Senate Intelligence Committees proposed legislation to reorganize American intelligence. One major element of their proposal was to create a centralized analytic center, divorced from any operational intelligence entities or policy departments; the intent was to create something of an academic setting for analysts. According to then House committee chairman Representative Dave McCurdy, the goal was to “create in one place, a world class ‘think tank’” (“Intelligence Committee Chairmen Introduce Sweeping Reorganization Plan,” Press Release, U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, February 5, 1992).

ber of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), and, later, the de facto “founding father” of the NIE process as director of the Office of National Estimates, argued that the key to avoiding future surprises along the lines of Pearl Harbor was for analysts to become modern social scientists:

Research is the only process which we of the liberal tradition are willing to admit is capable of giving us the truth, or a closer approximation to truth, than we now enjoy. . . . We insist, and have insisted for generations, that truth is to be approached, if not attained, through research guided by a systematic method. In the social sciences which very largely constitute the subject matter of strategic intelligence, there is such a method. It is much like the method of physical sciences.⁸

The great promise of the positivist approach to political and social matters was to predict future human behavior, be it of individual leaders or whole countries. Indeed, so great was this promise that Kent argued it might be possible to predict the likely action of a state even when that state had not yet made up its mind on a specific course of action. One didn’t need access to a file drawer of secrets; to the contrary, such access might even be misleading. In 1950, for example, Stalin’s spies could have searched high and low

8. Sherman Kent, *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949; reprint with new preface, 1966), 155. To this day, Kent’s book is the most widely read text on intelligence analysis ever written. Following the surprise invasion of South Korea by North Korea in 1950, Kent was asked to come back to Washington to help organize the Office of National Estimates (ONE), the new analytic unit tasked with producing comprehensive, forward-looking assessments. Kent was soon put in charge of ONE and held that post for more than fifteen years. Not surprisingly, as two long-time observers of American intelligence noted: “ONE and the process of developing NIEs bore a strong resemblance to the principles for analysis Kent described in *Strategic Intelligence*” (Bruce Berkowitz and Allan Goodman, *Strategic Intelligence for American National Security* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989], 5). Even today, decades later, Kent’s shadow hangs over the Directorate of Intelligence, with the DI’s school for basic and specialized analytic training named “The Sherman Kent School for Intelligence Analysis.”

inside the U.S. government for a document pertaining to the defense of South Korea by American forces if North Korea attacked—and they would have found nothing. The Truman administration had made no decision about defending South Korea and, to the extent it had thought about it at all, had downplayed Korea's strategic relevance. Hence, as Kent pointed out, “[I]f knowledge of the other man's intentions is to be divined through the reading of his intimate papers and one's own policy is to be set on the basis of what one discovers, here is a case where policy was on the rocks almost by definition.”⁹

This approach to intelligence analysis was to be reinforced by the institutional arrangements for carrying it out. Even before the CIA was up and running, analysts in the research and analysis branch of the OSS were employing “the invisible mantle of social science objectivity” to argue for a unique position within the national security system. By their lights, “the antinomies of fact and value, scholarship and partisanship with which Max Weber had struggled so heroically had been largely resolved” and necessitated a break from the traditional intelligence–policy maker nexus.¹⁰ In the past, both in the United States and elsewhere, intelligence analysis had been located in government agencies or departments directly involved in policy making and execution. Under the new paradigm, scholarly objectivity required separation from value-laden or interest-driven decision makers.¹¹ Creating a central

9. Kent, “Preface to the 1966 Edition,” *Strategic Intelligence*, xxiv.

10. Barry M. Katz, *Foreign Intelligence: Research and Analysis in the Office of Strategic Services, 1942–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 14–15.

11. In 1968, Kent published a then-classified essay “Estimates and Influence” in *Studies in Intelligence*, an in-house CIA journal. Kent opens the essay with the following warning to intelligence analysts about the potential irrationalities and biases of the policy maker as a consumer of the intelligence product:

There are a number of things about policymaking which the professional intelligence officer will not want to hear. For example, not all policy makers can be guaranteed to be free of policy predilections prior

repository for intelligence information followed from the problems identified in having separate intelligence bureaus prior to Pearl Harbor. But creating a centralized *and* independent agency was justified on broader ground. Accordingly, no policy making department should control the CIA, and, appropriately enough, its headquarters would be located in suburban Virginia—some distance from the Pentagon, the State Department, and even the White House.

Independence from policy making or budgetary preferences, of course, does not guarantee objectivity. For much of the Cold War, for example, the CIA had an institutional interest in acting as “the corrective” to Pentagon and military service estimates regarding Soviet military matters. Putting aside whether the CIA’s own judgments were any more correct, the CIA definitely saw its prestige within the national security system as very much tied to this role. Moreover, over time, intelligence analysts, whether independent of

to the time they begin to be exposed to the product of the intelligence calling. Indeed, there will be some policy makers who could not pass a rudimentary test on the “facts of the matter” but who have the strongest views on what the policy should be and how to put it into effect. We do not need to inquire as to how these men got that way or why they stay that way, we need only realize that this kind of person is a fact of life.

Nor should we be surprised to realize that in any policy decision there are a number of issues which we who devote ourselves solely to foreign positive intelligence may almost by definition be innocent of. The bulk of them are, of course, purely domestic ones. . . . Our wish is, of course, to have our knowledge and wisdom about the foreign trouble spot show itself so deep and so complete that it will perforce determine the decision. The nature of our calling requires that we pretend as hard as we are able that the wish is indeed the fact and that the policy maker will invariably defer to our findings as opposed to the cries of some domestic lobby.

The essay is now available in a collection of essays (*Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates: Collected Essays*) published by the CIA’s Center for the Study of Intelligence. It can be found at www.odci.gov/csi/books/shermankent/toc.html.

a department or not, will develop a set of views about particular issues, publish those assessments, defend them, and, in turn, have a vested interest in seeing those judgments upheld.¹² Finally, independence cannot really guarantee that analytic books are not being cooked because, ultimately, even the CIA must admit that it works at least for, and is subordinate to, the president. Rather, the underlying problem is that, with rare exceptions, most national estimates cannot help but be, in crucial respects, speculative in nature. “Hard facts” are few and far between and, more often than not, still need to be given a context by analysts for their meaning to become clear. As a former senior intelligence analyst admits:

As intelligence grows broader, more strategic in nature, its susceptibility to interpretation . . . grows. . . . [I]n the end, judgment is required to attempt answers . . . [and] draw upon an individual’s general sense of “the way the world works” . . . a coherent view of international politics. . . . This kind of understanding is inherently ideological . . . because it imposes an order . . . on a highly diffuse body of data and events. . . . Nothing else can overcome the modern curse of information glut. . . . Yet to lack this construct is to bring an immense shallowness of understanding to human affairs.¹³

12. An example of this phenomenon occurred early in the Reagan administration on the question of whether Moscow was supporting international terrorism. During the 1970s, CIA analysts had taken the view that Soviet support was minimal or nonexistent. As former director of Central Intelligence Robert Gates reported, “When Secretary of State Alexander Haig asserted that the Soviets were behind international terrorism, intelligence analysts initially set out, not to address the issue in all its aspects, but rather to prove the secretary wrong—to prove simply that the Soviets did not orchestrate all international terrorism. But in so doing they went too far themselves and failed in early drafts to describe extensive and well-documented indirect Soviet support for terrorist groups and their sponsors” (Robert M. Gates, “The CIA and Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* [Winter 1987–88]: 221).

13. Graham Fuller, “Intelligence, Immaculately Conceived,” *National Interest* (Winter 1991–92): 96–97. Fuller is a former national intelligence officer for the Near East and former vice chair of the National Intelligence Council.

But given this description of the analytic process, why is it that when an analytic finding by the intelligence community that calls into question a policy decision by an administration is leaked and reported by the media, virtually everyone in Washington still acts as though the president and his advisors have turned their back on the analyst's sound, unbiased opinion? Of course, the analyst's opinion may well be sound and the president's decision not. With rare exception, however, the opinion will be precisely that, an opinion—not indisputable fact.

Nor, more important, has the institutional independence mandated by Kent's social science positivism paid off with its promise of being able to make contingent predictions with any confidence. The literature on intelligence failures vastly outstrips case studies of successes.¹⁴ Time and again, American intelligence has been surprised—and with them, American policy makers. From North Korea's invasion of South Korea in 1950 to Saddam's overrunning of Kuwait in 1990, more often than not, U.S. intelligence has missed the mark when it comes to predicting major events. It didn't see the Sino-Soviet split coming; it didn't understand the nature of Castro's Cuban revolution until it was too late; it rejected the idea that the Soviets would put nuclear-tipped missiles in Cuba; it was surprised by the Tet Offensive in Vietnam; it didn't see the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan coming; and, until it was virtually a done deal, it failed to call the collapse of the Soviet Union. Indeed, so prevalent is "surprise"—both here and with other intelligence services around the world—that the scholarly norm is captured by Richard K. Bett's classic article on the topic, "Why Intelligence Failures Are Inevitable."¹⁵

14. For a brief overview of the issue, see Abram N. Shulsky and Gary J. Schmitt, *Silent Warfare: Understanding the World of Intelligence*, 3rd ed. (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 2002), 62–69.

15. Betts, "Analysis, War and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures Are Inevitable," *World Politics* (October 1978): 61–89. See also Ernest R. May, ed., *Know-*

Despite this record, the notion that intelligence analysts provide “superior wisdom” on any given topic retains a strong hold on our understanding of the political-intelligence nexus. At times, the defense of this “wisdom” has approached incongruous levels. Following the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, Sherman Kent wrote a lengthy analysis of the Special National Intelligence Estimate (“The Military Buildup in Cuba”) that had, just weeks before the crisis, predicted that Moscow would not send strategic offensive weapons to the island. According to Kent, what the estimate thought would be sound judgment on the part of the Politburo turned out to be precisely that. “In a way,” Kent said, “our misestimate of Soviet intentions got an *ex post facto* validation.”¹⁶ As Ray Cline, longtime senior CIA official, remarked: “Kent often said his estimate of what was reasonable for the Soviet Union to do was a lot better than Khrushchev’s, and therefore, he was correct in analyzing the situation *as it should have been seen by the Soviets*.”¹⁷

ing One’s Enemies: Intelligence Assessment Before the Two World Wars (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984) for an even broader account of why expectations regarding intelligence analysis should be tempered. As Robert Jervis, in a review essay of the May volume, noted: “If the historical record is a guide to the future . . . errors will be common. Indeed, it is hard to find cases in which two states, even if allies, perceived each other accurately. The debates over the origins of World War I remind us that even after the fact, we usually argue about the causes of states’ behavior and the alternative paths they would have followed if others had acted differently” (“Intelligence and Foreign Policy,” *International Security* [Winter 1986–87]: 161).

16. See Kent, “A Crucial Estimate Relived,” *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates: Collected Essays*, published by the CIA’s Center for the Study of Intelligence. The essay, first published in *Studies in Intelligence* in 1964, was classified “Secret.” It can be found at www.odci.gov/csi/books/shermankent/toc.html.

17. Discussant remarks of Ray S. Cline in Roy Godson, ed., *Intelligence Requirements for the 1980s: Analysis and Estimates* (Washington, DC: National Strategy Information Center, 1980), 77. Emphasis added.

I. SHAPING THE FUTURE, NOT PREDICTING IT

Presuming that this kind of Zeus-like judgment is not what we want from intelligence analysts, what then are the implications for the tradecraft of analysis and the relationship between policy and intelligence if we rethink the existing paradigm?¹⁸

The first thing, perhaps, is to stop thinking of current intelligence analysis as the ugly stepsister to the more edifying work of producing long-range estimates. But such thinking has a strong hold on Washington's mind. From the Church Committee of the 1970s to the panel investigating the intelligence community's failure to foresee the nuclear weapons tests by Pakistan in 1998 to the 9/11 Commission, the complaint has been that the job of providing current intelligence keeps getting in the way of providing high-quality estimates that give policy makers the kind of warning necessary to avoid strategic surprises. But is the trade-off between the resources and attention devoted to current intelligence versus those given to producing longer-term analysis really the problem? Or is the actual problem the unrealistic expectations about what predictive capacities estimates can have? If so, should the failures of the latter really be laid at the feet of the former? And, if not, shouldn't

18. Although Kent's view of the intelligence analyst-policy maker relationship has been the prevailing paradigm for viewing that relationship in the United States for nearly a half-century, it has not gone unchallenged. Early critiques included Willmoore Kendall's review of Kent's book, "The Function of Intelligence," *World Politics* (July 1949), and Roger Hilsman Jr.'s *Strategic Intelligence and National Decisions* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1956). As Arthur Hulnick noted, Kent himself "was one of the first of the early writers to suggest a need for a conceptual re-evaluation of the Traditionalist theory, because he thought the producer-consumer relationship was becoming unbalanced, and Intelligence was moving away from its relevance to policy-making." However, as Hulnick also points out, Kent's reevaluation only went so far and "could be considered as an attempt to fit Traditionalist theory to practice" (Arthur S. Hulnick, "The Intelligence Producer-Policy Consumer Linkage: A Theoretical Approach," *Intelligence and National Security* [May 1986]: 214).

we accept the fact that policy makers have always wanted, and will continue to want, to be kept abreast of the latest information? Hence, isn't it the analytic community's job to make sure policy makers get the information they want, need, and, at times, have not asked for?

That said, the intelligence community also has to avoid falling into the trap of trying to become the government's CNN. If it is unrealistic for policy makers to expect analysts to predict the future reliably, it is equally unrealistic for policy makers to expect the intelligence community not to get "scooped" by the CNNs of the world. Policy makers might not like seeing events on their office television first or reading about them initially on the Internet, but the fact is, the intelligence community is not really equipped, in terms of global coverage and instantaneous reporting, to compete with the news media. Nor is it clear that it should be.

The intelligence community has a comparative advantage over the media in the area of current intelligence. The intelligence community is able to comment on the reporting as it is received—placing it in context and assessing the reliability of initial reports—and, in turn, to target collection assets to collect additional information that rounds out (or contradicts) the picture being conveyed by the international media. However, neither of these functions can be done instantaneously; during the interim, the CNNs of the world and the Internet will be the principal game in town.

One practical step the intelligence community could take in the face of these realities is to provide senior policy makers with "information specialists." The information specialist would sort through the avalanche of information, spot important items for the policy maker, and be the day-to-day conduit to the intelligence agencies, asking for and receiving from them the required additional data necessary to help fill out a particular picture. Precisely because such specialists come from the intelligence community, they will have better access to specialized intelligence sources and methods, and

hence, they will be in a better position to fuse intelligence information with other sources.

To carry out this function effectively, the intelligence officer assigned to this role will inevitably be knee-deep in the workings of the policy shop. He or she will have to know what the government's policies are, what policy options are under consideration, what the adversary is like, and, to some degree, what our own diplomatic and military capabilities might be. Like a scout who goes to watch next week's opponent and reports back to the head coach, the best scouts will have in the back of their mind what their own team's plans and capabilities are so they can properly assess the particular strengths and weaknesses of the other team. The "matchups" are as important as an abstract description of what plays and defenses the other team tends to run. But this means tearing down the "sacred curtain" between intelligence and policy making that still defines so much of our discussions about the relationship. It also requires returning to an older conception of the relationship found, for example, in the role of the G-2 on a military commander's staff. Here, an officer, trained as an intelligence official but under the commander's charge, is charged with collating, analyzing, and briefing all the information coming in to the staff. And precisely because he works on the staff, he will be more familiar with operational plans and his commander's priorities. This, in turn, should give him a better idea of both what to ask for from intelligence and what new intelligence is most likely to have a significant impact on the plans themselves.¹⁹

19. As noted by Robert Gates, one-time head of the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence and later DCI: "Unless intelligence officers are down in the trenches with the policy makers, understand the issues, and know what the U.S. objectives are, how the process works, and who the people are, they cannot possibly provide either relevant or timely intelligence that will contribute to better informed decisions" (Quoted in Roy Godson, ed., *Intelligence Requirements for the 1990s: Collection, Analysis, Counterintelligence and Covert Action* [Lexington, MA.: Heath, Lexington, 1989], 111).

A second implication of this rethinking about the analytic function and its relationship to policy relates to the intelligence community's indications and warning (I&W) function. Put simply, during the Cold War, U.S. intelligence—fearing a nuclear Pearl Harbor—fashioned an extensive and expensive I&W system. This was one surprise no one wanted to face. As best can be seen from publicly available literature, the system seems to have worked well enough when it came to that one issue. Of course, no one knows for sure, because we don't know of one instance where planning for a strategic intercontinental exchange was actually in the works. But what we do know is that we have been surprised sufficiently often enough that the desire to avoid it appears to be more a hope than something to be counted on.

However, precisely because avoiding surprise was, first, so important and, second, an implicit promise of the Kent school of analysis, the tendency has been to look at this issue as though one were a college professor grading an exam consisting of only one true/false question. Were we surprised? If the answer is "yes," then the intelligence community has failed. If the answer is "no," then it has passed. Naturally enough, the bureaucratic response to such a grading system has often been to hide warnings about potential adverse events in a sea of qualifiers or behind obscure language. If nothing happens, senior policy makers will not likely have noticed or cared enough to revisit what they were told; if something does happen, the intelligence bureaucracy will quickly point to that sentence or two—abstracted from the rest of the analysis—that shows they were on top of things.

To end this self-defeating cycle, the analysts and their policy customers have to lower their sights. While the intelligence community should, when it can, tip off policy makers to unexpected events, its principal focus should be less avoiding surprises and more conveying warnings. The goal should be to give policy makers a head's up about those things they should worry about and should

possibly take action to head off. Preoccupied senior officials will also need to be given some idea of whether they will likely get any further notice of what might take place before it happens. Again, the measure of effectiveness should not be “Were we surprised?” but “Were we at the appropriate level of readiness?” Policy makers, of course, will complain that this approach might lead to an equally daunting set of problems brought about by a “Chicken Little” syndrome on the part of analysts. Perhaps. But anything that makes policy makers more deliberative is to be preferred to a system that creates incentives for just the opposite.

Finally, if the goal of the I&W system is not to avoid surprise but to warn policy makers of potential dangers in order to spur policy deliberation, it follows that analysts should also consider part of the I&W function to include alerting policy makers of potential opportunities for taking advantageous action. This would require, of course, that analysts be sufficiently close to the policy process to understand policy objectives. As will be explained in the discussion of national intelligence estimates, this could be accomplished by closer contacts through the creation of joint policy-intelligence working groups on specific topics.

A national intelligence estimate is customarily thought to be the most prestigious, most authoritative, most comprehensive, most fully “processed” product of the American intelligence community. It is considered to be the “peak” of the analytic function. NIEs seek nothing less than to explain to policy makers some particular situation of importance by analyzing all the relevant dimensions, assessing the forces at work, and providing some forecast as to how the situation will evolve.

To do so, NIEs must be based on all available relevant data—whether it comes from open sources, clandestine collection, or diplomatic channels—and should be as objective as possible. In other words, an estimate should not reach conclusions designed to promote a given policy or to serve some bureaucratic interest of either

its consumers or, for that matter, its producers. Traditionally, this has meant estimates as products of a centralized effort, working under the aegis of the Director of Central Intelligence, who, as the head of the intelligence community, is beholden neither to a policy-making department nor to a particular agency within the intelligence community.

However, these traditional rationales are not nearly as persuasive as they once were. Initially, a centralized effort was thought necessary to solve the so-called Pearl Harbor problem. Without a centralized effort to bring together all incoming intelligence, the likelihood of being surprised would go way up. Yet, in this day and age of computer-supported data banks and networked systems, it is no longer clear that “all-source” analysis for estimates need be done by one entity—be it one team or one agency. And, as already noted, the current estimating system cannot guarantee objectivity. Although objectivity should remain a goal for analysts, there is, unfortunately, no institutional arrangement that can guarantee it.

Moreover, objectivity is not something to be valued in and of itself. The reason we want objective analysis is to provide policy makers with the best information possible upon which they can base their decisions. Thus, the goal should be to make policy makers more deliberative and not give them the pseudocomfort (or, at times, discomfort) that comes from an estimate that typically reflects the conventional wisdom on a given topic. Because every intelligence agency has to work for somebody ultimately, an alternative approach is an increased use of competitive analysis for estimates—that is, a system through which various analytic centers, working for different bosses, develop their own views on the same topic. At a minimum, the resulting debate should make it more difficult for agencies to “cook” their assessments and would alert policy makers to a range of possibilities, which would, it is hoped, sharpen their own thinking.

The downside usually tied to this suggestion is that a policy

maker will pick the analysis that fits his or her existing predilections. Yet given the speculative nature of many estimates in any case, there is no reason an experienced senior policy maker will not feel justified in trusting his or her own judgment, regardless of whether he or she is faced with one consensus-driven assessment or multiple competing ones. In short, having one “authoritative” estimate will not fix that problem. What competing estimates can do, if written with rigor and lucidity in the handling of evidence, is force both analysts and policy makers to confront the hidden assumptions driving their own judgments. It doesn’t guarantee a wise decision, but it may make the decision more informed. As one longtime senior policy maker remarked: “Policy makers are like surgeons. They don’t last long if they ignore what they see when they cut an issue open.”²⁰

Quite often one hears from senior intelligence analysts that they “owe” policy makers estimates containing their best judgment about a particular issue, even if it is ultimately not founded on hard fact. As Kent wrote in his review of the Office of National Estimate’s own misestimate of Soviet intentions with respect to arming Cuba in 1962, given the uncertainties, “[T]here is a strong temptation to make no estimate at all. In the absence of directly guiding evidence, why not say the Soviets might do this, they might do that, or yet again they might do the other—and leave it at that? . . . This sort of thing has the attraction of judicious caution and an unexposed neck, but it can scarcely be of use to the policy man and planner who must prepare for future contingencies.” But, of course, it is. As Kent himself pointed out earlier in his essay, there were a number of other factors—U.S. setbacks in Cuba (Bay of Pigs), the Berlin Wall, and Laos—that could have signaled to Moscow “a softening of U.S. resolve” and led the Soviets to believe that putting nuclear-

20. Quoted in Jack Davis, “The Challenge of Managing Uncertainty: Paul Wolfowitz on Intelligence-Policy Relations,” 7. The article can be found at www.odci.gov/csi/studies/96unclass/davis.htm.

armed missiles in Cuba was a risk worth taking. Certainly, any serious policy maker would have wanted to see the possible implications of those factors spelled out in an alternative analysis, especially given the ramifications for American security.²¹

On the whole, the old “Sherman Kent” model for producing estimates, in which intelligence provides input to the policy process from afar, appears too simplistic. Moreover, by aping the natural sciences—that is, by passively looking at the world as though under some microscope—the approach taken by the intelligence community ignores a critical fact of international life today: U.S. behavior. If an estimate is to take into account all relevant aspects of a given issue or situation, what Washington does or doesn’t do in any given situation will bear substantially on forecasts of what to expect. To take one old example, the question of whether the regime of the Shah of Iran would fall in the 1970s did not simply depend on what was going on inside Iran. Of no small importance was what the United States might do (or not do) in reaction to the political challenge the Shah faced. Yet, given the wall that is designed to separate intelligence from policy making, factoring in possible various U.S. policy decisions was not thought to be part of the intelligence community’s writ. Given the unique superpower status the United States enjoys today, one might expect this problem to have grown more salient, not less.

Addressing this problem probably requires modifying the estimating process so that it becomes an interactive one between the intelligence and the policy-making communities. (In this regard, the estimate process would more closely resemble the British assessment system, in which intelligence analysts are teamed with officials from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defense.)²² Estimates could, when appropriate, more fully con-

21. Kent, “A Crucial Estimate Relived,” 6–7.

22. As Loch K. Johnson noted, “The American end product is an *intelligence* estimate, while the British end product is a much broader assessment that blends

sider U.S. capabilities and options. This would highlight the importance of making the estimators aware of what Washington might be doing overtly or covertly with respect to any given situation and taking that into account. In this connection, estimates could make use of new formats and methods: for example, “net assessments,” which explicitly compare American and competitors’ capabilities and strategies, or “red teaming,” which would analyze potential strategies that might be used by an adversary to thwart U.S. policies.

Finally, adopting this perspective would bring a healthy dose of reality to what estimates, in fact, involve—that is, a great deal of speculative judgment that cannot be reduced to professional, non-political expertise. Intelligence analysts would retain certain advantages, not the least of which is the time to pull together all available information on a particular issue and examine it with rigor. But as important as this advantage may be, it is not a compelling reason to believe that the expertise and insights of policy makers, diplomats, or defense officials should be excluded when it comes to producing a national assessment on some topic. Indeed, one of the little-noted findings of the recent Senate Intelligence Committee, in its report on prewar assessments of Iraq’s WMD programs and its ties to terrorism, was that “probing questions” on the part of Bush administration officials with respect to the issue of Iraq’s ties to terrorism “actually improved the Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA) products.”²³

the judgments of policy *and* intelligence officers. . . . [T]he British culture actually encourages commingling, in the belief that the best policy decisions are likely to result from a pooling of knowledge from among the country’s international affairs experts” (*Secret Agencies: U.S. Intelligence in a Hostile World* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996], 129).

23. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report on U.S. Intelligence Community’s Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq* (July 7, 2004), 34. The report noted, “Several of the allegations of pressure on Intelligence Community analysts involved repeated questioning. . . . Though these allegations appeared repeatedly

II. A QUESTION OF IMAGINATION

This essay began by noting how little *The 9/11 Commission Report* had to say about the analytic effort of the intelligence community. Although this is somewhat unusual when it comes to the typical “Monday-morning quarterbacking” that follows most surprise events or attacks, it is not much of a surprise in this instance. The failure to forecast the specific attack that occurred on September 11, 2001, was hardly, or even principally, the fault of the U.S. intelligence analytic community. With no CIA assets inside al Qaeda’s leadership to report on its activities and only a smattering of technical collection tidbits of overheard conversations, there were way too few “dots” to connect. Certainly there was enough foreign intelligence reporting over the summer of 2001 to indicate that something was afoot, but probably too little to allow analysts to draw a convincing or even plausible outline of the plot as it existed and unfolded.

Nevertheless, the Commission’s implicit argument was that this lack of data might have—perhaps should have—been overcome if a more imaginative analytic effort had been employed to galvanize both the policy-making and the intelligence communities to take seriously the threat we were facing. Whatever the merits of this argument, the Commission’s solution treads the traditional path when it comes to understanding intelligence analysis and the estimating process, and it is not a path that will likely arrive at the kind of imaginative analysis they want. To the contrary, one reason the intelligence community had not produced a new NIE on al Qaeda was because, in all likelihood, its own judgment was that things

in the press and other public reporting on the lead-up to the war, no analyst questioned by the Committee stated that the questions were unreasonable. . . . In some cases, those interviewed stated that the questions had forced them to go back and review the intelligence reporting, and that during that exercise they came across information they had overlooked in initial readings.”

had not significantly changed since the mid-1990s. A request for a new NIE might have raised new issues, but, bureaucracies being what they are, those new points probably would have been buried under a sea of existing views. Breaking paradigms are not what the normal workings of analytic institutions do, nor should we expect them to. Unless they are specifically asked to be a “devil’s advocate” or the system is designed to create debate, imaginative products will not be the norm.

Of course, no one system for providing intelligence analysis to policy makers will be perfect. Each has its virtues and its flaws. Over time, any system will be “gamed” by its participants to protect personal and bureaucratic prerogatives. But that prospect is not our current problem. Today’s problem is a model of analysis that promises more than it can deliver and is reluctant to come to terms with that fact because such a concession would suggest a less sacrosanct position within the national security system for intelligence analysis.²⁴ Changing that model is admittedly no small task, as it has been with us for a half-century now. And while concessions have been made here and there to modify the Kent model in practice, a

24. Over the years, intelligence analysts themselves have attempted to come to grips with the gap between the promise of analysis and its actual performance, adjusting the methodologies to reflect a more realistic approach. See, e.g., Douglas J. MacEachin, “The Tradecraft of Analysis,” in *U.S. Intelligence at the Crossroads: Agendas for Reform*, Roy Godson, Ernest R. May and Gary Schmitt, eds. (Washington, DC: Brassey’s, 1995). (MacEachin was deputy director for intelligence at CIA from 1993 to 1995 and served on the staff of the 9/11 Commission.) Indeed, the training goals of the CIA’s Kent school of analysis apparently include efforts to ensure that analysts provide a more nuanced product. Yet, as the Senate Intelligence Committee report on prewar intelligence on Iraq made clear, the basic goal of “clearly conveying to policymakers the difference between what intelligence analysts know, what they don’t know, what they think” was never met in practice. (Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report on U.S. Intelligence Community’s Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq*, 4–6, 15–18.) Discussions with current officials and members of Congress and senior staff suggest that this remains a problem for much of the analytic product produced by the intelligence community.

new paradigm has yet to take its place, let alone be implemented organizationally.

On December 17, 2004, President Bush signed in to law the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004, a measure whose genesis arose from recommendations put forward by the 9/11 Commission and whose aim, its supporters claim, is nothing less than a fundamental reordering of the American intelligence community. Whatever else one can say about the act, when it comes to the practice of intelligence analysis, it does no such thing.

The Intelligence Reform Act does, however, contain a number of items that will have an impact on intelligence analysis.²⁵ What the exact character of that impact will be over the long term is uncertain. For example, the law requires that the new head of the U.S. intelligence community, the Director of National Intelligence (DNI), ensure both that elements within the community “regularly conduct competitive analysis” and that “differences in analytic judgment are fully considered and brought to the attention of policy makers.” In addition, the DNI is also required to create analytic “red teams” to challenge existing analytic products. At the same time, the DNI must assign an individual to serve as the analysts’ *de facto* ombudsman, safeguarding objectivity by monitoring possible politicization pressures from policy makers. In theory, these mandates are compatible with each other. But, historically, efforts to create red teams or engage in competitive analysis have been interpreted by the analytic community as a strategy policy makers use to pressure the intelligence community to change its own views on some topic.

One is tempted to say that much will depend on the character and the political courage of the particular DNI—and that certainly will be the case. But, as always, institutions and institutional

25. Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004, PL 108-458, 108th Cong., 2d Sess., Jan. 20, 2004.

arrangements matter as well. They can't help but influence and shape behavior.

Here again, the effects of the changes made by the new reform bill are hard to predict. On the one hand, creating the position of DNI—which, for the first time since the start of the Cold War, will separate the head of the intelligence community and the head of the Central Intelligence Agency—can't help but reduce the agency's dominant sway within the analytic community. As the Senate Intelligence Committee discovered in its review of the intelligence community's performance on Iraq before the war, the CIA and its director "abused" their "unique" positions within the intelligence community to the detriment of the intelligence provided to senior policy makers. While the Director of Central Intelligence is supposed to act as the head of both the CIA and the intelligence community as a whole, the committee found that "in many instances he only acted as head of the CIA." Similarly, the CIA's position as the central repository of all-source intelligence and as the agency that directly supports the director in his role as the president's principal intelligence adviser allowed "CIA analysts and officials to provide the agency's intelligence analysis to senior policy makers without having to explain dissenting views or defend their analysis from potential challenges from other Intelligence Community agencies." In short, centralized intelligence, instead of providing the most accurate and objective analysis to policy makers, "actually undermined" that goal.²⁶

On the other hand, creating a DNI—an intelligence czar with real authority over budget, personnel, and intelligence policy priorities—can create a bureaucratic environment that reduces the chances of alternative voices. As Reuel Gerecht noted: "Differing opinions within America's intelligence community would tend to

26. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report on U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq*, 27–29.

become fewer, not more, as a new bureaucratic spirit radiated downward from the man who controlled all the purse strings and wrote the performance reports of the most important players in the intelligence community.”²⁷ Moreover, charged with being the president’s “principal adviser” on intelligence matters, being the head of the National Intelligence Center (the body that produces the NIEs), and creating new “national intelligence centers” to address particular priority issues, the DNI is being handed tools and tasked with responsibilities that appear likely to reinforce analytic consensus and that will do little to enhance analysts’ interaction with the full range of consumers within the policy-making community.

In fine, it’s possible that the 9/11 Commission’s legacy when it comes to intelligence analysis will be much different from what the Commission intends. Rather than promoting the kind of imaginative analysis that it saw lacking within the intelligence community prior to the attacks of that day, the increased centralization of authority with American intelligence they have promoted and lobbied for will actually decrease the chances of it occurring. What may look cleaner organizationally on paper may well be less effective in giving the president and his senior advisors the most accurate picture of not only what is known but also what is not.

27. “Not Worth a Blue Ribbon: The Conventional (and Unhelpful) Wisdom of the 9/11 Commission,” *Weekly Standard*, August 16, 2004.