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The Politics and Psychology of Intelligence and Intelligence Reform

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Abstract

Policy-makers always say they want the best intelligence, but in fact they do not because good intelligence often raises doubts and challenges policy. They also always claim to be working to improve intelligence, but in fact do not understand the problems, and many "reforms," such as the recent establishment of a Director of National Intelligence, are useless if not harmful.

KEYWORDS: national security, intelligence

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If the US is to employ the tool of pre-emptive war, it "has to be used carefully. One would want to have very good intelligence." –National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, Sept. 25, 2002.[1]

"Many intelligence reports in war are contradictory; even more are false, and most are uncertain." --Carl von Clausewitz.[2]

"Policy making is like milking a fat cow. You see the milk coming out, you press more and the milk bubbles and flows, and just as the bucket is full, the cow with its tail whips the bucket and all is spilled. That's what CIA does to policy making." --Lyndon Johnson.[3]

I could almost stop here because these three quotations summarize the insoluble dilemmas of intelligence and policy-making quite well. Everything else is a gloss on them.

Policy-makers say they need and want very good intelligence. They do indeed need it, but often do not want it. They also believe that when intelligence is not out to get them, it is incompetent, and also think that the machinery can be fixed so that it will give them much better answers. Unfortunately, not only will even the best intelligence services be wrong very often, but when they are true to the available evidence their reports are likely to be inconclusive, and when they are right they will often bring disturbing news. Although many things are wrong with American intelligence, they are not likely to be fixed (and certainly will not be fixed by the latest "reforms"), and even if the system were optimally designed, it will still produce many errors. Decision-makers might be better off if they understood the limitations of intelligence but this would place them under intolerable psychological and political pressures. Similarly, decision-makers would be better off if they could design their actions with the knowledge that the information and inferences on which they are operating may be incorrect. But this again is extremely difficult. The absence of a Plan B in Iraq is unfortunate, but not atypical.

All students of intelligence realize that errors are unavoidable.[4] The reasons are many, but boil down to incomplete and misleading information and the difficulties in understanding our world. Even intelligence in the sense of our ability to understand our physical environment is limited when we deal with difficult questions. For example, even if all but a few experts believe that the climate is changing, and doing so at least in part because of human activities, an enormous number of puzzles remain. Any ecological experiment or alteration similarly reveals many unexpected connections and consequences. And anyone with an unusual illness knows the limitations of medical diagnoses. Foreign intelligence is of course more difficult still. The adversary is often engaged in

concealment and deception, and even when it is not the knowledge that these practices are common degrades much correct information. To give just one example, Stalin initially dismissed the reports of his atomic spies at Los Alamos on the grounds that the Americans could not have been so incompetent as to permit this penetration.

The other side of this coin is that the belief that the other side is deceiving you can account for almost all discrepant information. Thus Stalin rejected the enormous amount of information he received in the spring of 1941 that indicated that Germany was about to attack on the grounds that the British were trying to provoke a war between Germany and the USSR and that all this information was manufactured for this purpose. One reason for the intelligence errors about Iraq's WMD programs is that the US believed that Iraq had an extensive denial and deception program, and that this explained why we were seeing only scattered signs of the program.

Unless the other's behavior is determined by the situation it is in, and this situation (both internal and external) is readily ascertainable, the state has to understand what the other's goals are and how it sees the world. For reasons too numerous to discuss here, this is extremely difficult. The end of the Cold War has seen a number of conferences bringing together officials from several countries and it is striking how hard it is even in retrospect for them to grasp why the other side was acting as it was.

This is not to say, of course, that the situation is hopeless or that intelligence is always wrong. In fact, studying accuracy is difficult because of selection bias. That is, we are drawn to crises and policy failures, and these are likely to involve intelligence failures. If each side understands the other, they are much more likely to adjust their behavior in a way that minimizes mutually costly conflict, and these cases seem unremarkable and not worth studying. Nevertheless, even routine and successful interactions are often based on limited and faulty understandings. One obvious implication is that policies that are exquisitely sensitive to intelligence are likely to fail. There are many reasons why the policy of preventive war – mislabel "preemptive" by the Bush administration – is likely to be foolish, but if it will work only when intelligence is excellent, as Dr. Rice asserts, then it must be abandoned. We did not need the case of Iraq to show us this, but it is instructive. So is Bush's reply: The war was necessary even if Saddam Hussein did not have active WMD programs because he was a tyrant and eventually could cause great mischief if he was not stopped. This claim may be correct (although I think it is not), but notice that it does not rely on a large and capable intelligence service. The US would not require the sort of information and analysis that Dr. Rice implies we do because all that we would need to know is that Saddam is a tyrant.

Designing policies that are likely to succeed if the intelligence is good but that will not fail disastrously if it is not is difficult. Indeed, in some cases it may be impossible. So it is not surprising that decision-makers rarely try this or even think in these terms. It is hard enough to carry out a strong and active policy without constantly worrying that your premises may be faulty. It is also psychologically and politically difficult for a leader in a democracy to say that his policy does not rest on a firm foundation of intelligence. When Secretary of State Powell laid out the case against Iraq before the Security Council, he insisted that Director of Central Intelligence Tenet sit right behind him. It might be better if political leaders were able to say something like this: "I think Saddam is a terrible menace. This is a political judgment and I have been elected to make difficult calls like this. Information rarely can be definitive and while I have consulted widely and listened to our intelligence services and other experts, this is my decision, not theirs." This would leave them open to attacks both at home and abroad, however, and so will not be done.

The difficulty in coming to grips with the possibility that one's assumptions, information, and analysis are wrong also inhibits the development of fall-back positions. I will return to the case of Iraq in a minute, but it is worth nothing that the Clinton administration did not have a Plan B when it started bombing in Kosovo. Administration officials were quite clear that they thought such a plan was not needed because it was obvious that Milosevic would give in very quickly. In part they believe this because they thought it was the brief and minor bombing that had brought Milosevic to Dayton, an inference that is almost surely incorrect and, even if it were not, would not readily support the conclusion that he would give up Kosovo without a fight. The result was that the administration had to scramble both militarily and politically and was fortunate to be able to end the confrontation as well as it did. (It is worth noting that even in retrospect we do not understand Milosevic's behavior, and the US government has been remarkably incurious in exploring this and several other failures of American threats.)

The most obvious, consequential, and disgraceful recent case of a lack of Plan B of course is Iraq. Top administration officials believed that the political and economic reconstruction of Iraq would be easy, that they needed neither short-term plans to maintain order nor long-term plans to put down any insurgency and create a stable and peaceful polity. Furthermore, this negligence cannot be blamed on faulty intelligence. It has been asserted by intelligence officials and not denied by the Bush administration that the former gave ample warnings and good guidance here.[5] The reasons why intelligence was ignored speak volumes about the tensions and ambivalence in policy-makers' attitude towards intelligence. For reasons that mercifully lie beyond the scope of this paper, the Bush administration was set on overthrowing Saddam. This meant that it not only exaggerated intelligence in areas in which the latter did provide significant support for the

policy (Iraq's WMD programs) and ignored and twisted it in areas in which it conflicted with policy (the connections between Saddam and al Qaeda), but also that it simply put aside intelligence in areas in which it was raising inconvenient questions. Developing plans for the post-war situation would have been psychologically and politically costly. This kind of planning would have had to recognize that the US might not be greeted as a liberator, that the administration's faith in Ahmad Chalabi might have been misplaced, and that a long occupation might be needed, indeed one that had an uncertain outcome.

Recognizing these possibilities would not have meant that the war was not worth fighting: if Saddam did have WMD and was willing to provide them to terrorists, the threat was great enough to have merited the response. Alternatively, or additionally, if even after a number of years democracy could have been established in Iraq and if such a demonstration project could have had large benign effects throughout the Middle East, then this was an opportunity to be taken. But at minimum realizing that the occupation might be long and difficult would have added significant negative factors that would have made the decision more difficult. The examination of a large number of other cases indicates that people are prone to avoid painful value trade-offs if they possibly can.[6] Decision-makers talk about how they make hard decisions all the time. But, like the rest of us, they prefer easy ones and will use their great abilities of self-deception in order to turn the former into the latter. Intelligence, lacking the burden of making the decisions, is much more prone to present dilemmas. CIA found no contradiction in arguing that, on the one hand, Saddam did have active WMD programs but that, on the other hand, he did not have links to al Qaeda and that the aftermath of the overthrow was likely to be very difficult. Even for decision-makers more thoughtful and open than those in the current administration, being in charge and having responsibility means that they feel psychological pressures to avoid or minimize the costs associated with their behavior. They have to sleep at night, after all.

Their political incentives are similarly aligned. To have acknowledged that the post-war situation might be difficult would have been to give political ammunition to the war's opponents. It is much easier to sell a cheap war than an expensive one: thus the well-known shunting aside and humiliating of military and economic officials who said that the war could prove very costly and that a large occupation force would be needed. To have admitted the possibility that the Iraqi people and the region would be worse off after an American invasion than before it would have multiplied the administration's political problems.

Here as in many cases, policy decisions precede and drive intelligence rather than the other way around. Decision-makers often act on a combination of long-standing beliefs and intuition and come to cognitive if not political closure long before detailed intelligence estimates land on their desks. This was obviously the

case with Bush and Iraq, but characterizes successful as well as unsuccessful policies. Truman's decision to defy the Soviet blockade of Berlin in 1948 was a snap judgment that preceded any governmental analysis.[7]

Indeed, decision-makers may be correct not to heed the warnings of intelligence and end up being right for the wrong reasons. The classic case is Winston Churchill in the spring of 1940. He prevailed over a great deal of strong sentiment in his cabinet for a peace agreement with Germany in the wake of the fall of France by arguing that Britain could win because the German economy was badly over-stretched and could be broken by a combination of British bombing and guerilla warfare in the conquered territories. This was a complete fantasy; his Foreign Secretary was quite correct to say in his diary: "Winston talked the most frightful rot….It drives one to despair when he works himself up into a passion of emotion when he ought to make his brain think and reason."[8] Fortunately, Churchill's emotion and force of character carried the day, but intelligence can get no credit.

Of course intelligence sometimes can be helpful. It can indicate the adversary's vulnerabilities or point to courses of action that may succeed. The breaking of German codes in World War II opened the door to a range of successful military operations, to take an example of invaluable and specific intelligence. It is with good reason that Churchill referred to the code-breakers as his "hens" who brought him "golden eggs." Intelligence in a broader sense was crucial during the deliberations over Cuban missile crisis. Kennedy had in the room the Soviet expert Llewellyn Thompson, who persuaded him that Khrushchev would be willing to remove the missiles from Cuba without an American promise to remove its missiles from Turkey.[9]

But in all too many cases, intelligence will bring leaders bad news, conflicting interpretations, the specter of costs, the dangers of being deceived, and indications that a preferred policy is likely to fail. So it is not surprising that while most leaders, or at least American leaders, often praise intelligence in public and say how much they rely on it, in private they are often scornful. Their claims that intelligence is often wrong, if not incompetent, are correct, but are not the root of the matter. Intelligence, even (or especially) good intelligence, is often highly inconvenient. Johnson's remark quoted earlier was based in part on the propensity of CIA to tell him that his policy was failing, as it did during Vietnam (which led the military services to demand that CIA no longer produce estimates of the military situation, a demand that Secretary of Defense McNamara, who later bemoaned the lack of U.S. information about Vietnam, endorsed). At best intelligence will provide a complicated and nuanced picture. Even if it fundamentally supports policy, it is likely to imply hesitations, costs, and dangers along the way. Although decision-makers always say they want to be warned and to hear about all the risks and costs of their policy, they rarely do. Intelligence

also is likely to introduce or magnify uncertainty by bringing in hedges and qualifications. To heed intelligence often is to raise doubts and the multiple possibilities for alternative interpretations. But decision-makers have to act, and they probably will act more effectively if they feel confident, even if confidence, especially in the wisdom of a predetermined policy, comes at the price of understanding the environment. This means that while top government officials have at their disposal enormous amounts of information, they often are badly informed, having developed processes for creating and screening news and views that lead them to live in a fantasy world. The Bush administration represents only the most extreme case in which people within the inner circles of power knew less about the problems they were facing than did most informed citizens.

Despite their ambivalence about good intelligence, every president pledges to improve it. The long history is fascinating and dispiriting but will not be rehearsed here. Although the Israeli and British services are often held up as models, it is in fact unclear whether they really have performed any better. But it is clear that the desire to serve multiple political and bureaucratic objectives, combined with the fear of an excessively powerful intelligence service, has produced fragmentation, gaps, and inefficiencies.[10]

The attacks of September 11, 2001 revealed serious problems, of course. Aside from those within CIA, it highlighted what experts had long known: that the FBI was not effectively structured for intelligence work and that coordination and information sharing both within the FBI and between that organization and the CIA were woefully lacking. The mantra of greater sharing of information is an easy and over-simplified solution, however. In what seems like common sense, Pat Roberts, chair of Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, argues that "Key terrorism analysts...must be given access to every single piece of relevant intelligence data concerning threats to the homeland," and the WMD Commission remarks that the terminology we use may implicitly accept undesirable boundaries within the IC: "To say that we must encourage agencies to 'share' information implies that they have some ownership stake in it."[11] Anyone who has worked in or around CIA knows the proprietary attitude of the Directorates. But, as usual, there are problems with the prescription. Not only will it meet a great deal of resistance, but sharing all information would swamp the system, which like all organizations is built on a division of labor. Furthermore, the withholding of information reflects not only the fact that the information is power, but legitimate security concerns. Spies like CIA's Aldridge Ames and FBI's Robert Hanssen would have done even greater damage had there been less compartmentalization. While some barriers need to be broken down, there is no perfect way to balance the competing needs involved and I suspect that some number of years from now a distinguished panel will attribute a security debacle to the excessively free flow of information within the intelligence community.

The main change to come in the aftermath of 9/11 is the establishment of a Director of National Intelligence (DNI) with significant powers over the entire intelligence community. But despite the fact that a number of panels preceding the 9/11 Commission had called for this reform, it was not well thought through and is likely to do more harm than good, which is not surprising in light of the fact that the proposals grew out of the need to meet political pressures. There is no reason to believe that a DNI was needed to meet the problems uncovered by the 9/11 Commission, but an aroused public led by the relatives of the 9/11 victims had sufficient clout so that neither the Congress nor the president could resist. Although the latter had initially – and wisely – said that a DNI was not necessary, he changed his position during the presidential campaign, just as in 2002 he reversed his initial and correct opposition to the establishment of a Department of Homeland Security once the political pressures grew too great.

There is significant merit to the claim that we need a Director of National Intelligence, but the existing statutes provided for once – the title was Director of Central Intelligence (DCI). Most members of the attentive public and even any professionals think that the DCI was the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency. But he really was supposed to be the director of the entire community. Although in practice it did not work out that way, the reason was not so much a defective statute as it was the political power of other agencies, most obviously the FBI and, even more, the Department of Defense. Without a new law, the president could have given the DCI most of the missing powers by telling the Secretary of Defense that his budget requests in the intelligence area, especially the enormous sums for satellites, had to be approved by the DCI before they went to the White House. Whether the DNI will be able to enforce his will is yet to be seen, but if he can the reason is primarily a changed political climate, not the new law.

The law's proponents said that they did not want the DNI to be an additional layer of bureaucracy on top of all the existing ones. They realized this would degrade rather than improve intelligence. But it is hard to see how the outcome will be anything else. Like it or not, the DNI's office *is* a new layer.

Reforms indeed are possible, but are not likely to be forthcoming. They involve less the dramatic changes that political leaders like to take credit for and more the improvement of collection and analysis within the intelligence agencies, especially CIA. Let me just mention a few. First, unlike the military, CIA does little in the way of continuing education, and while it has some training courses, it lacks a serious focus on improving the skills and analytical abilities of its members. Second and relatedly, little attention is paid to basic methodological questions. I do not mean that intelligence analysts necessarily need to know the latest quantitative techniques, although indeed in some areas this is required. Rather what is needed to start with is a firm grasp of standard social science

methods that can move estimates beyond description into a disciplined consideration of alternative interpretations of what the other side is doing and why it is doing. More specifically, there is a lack of understanding of the significance of negative evidence, or "dogs that do not bark."[12] In the case of Iraq's WMD program, what this meant was the ignoring or downgrading of the numerous reports that people who were positions to know about these programs said that they had seen nothing of interest. Although the desire not to upset the administration which was set on going to war may have played a role here, I think at least as important was the fact that unless one keeps the methodological issue constantly in mind, negative reports will have little impact because they are so undramatic and seemingly without significance. Third, analysts and consumers of intelligence need to work harder to understand the extent to which conclusions are driven by their plausibility rather than by specific bits of evidence. It is not that plausibility is to be put aside, but that if people are unaware of the role it is playing they will fail to understand the grounds for their inferences and conclusions, overestimate the degree to which the evidence supports them, and not properly focus critical scrutiny where it is necessary.[13] Fourth, CIA and other agencies have to work harder to develop the critical habits of mind and supporting institutions to surface assumptions and explore alternative accounts. All post-mortems on intelligence failures stress this, and the difficulty of the task is indicated by the fact that relatively little progress has been made.

To do better, intelligence services need to learn from their past failures – and from their successes as well. In part, this could be an aspect of continuing education, as analysts learn by examining past cases and then bring their new knowledge back to their regular jobs. CIA has recently reconstituted its Product Evaluation Staff, but such offices have withered in the past because the lack of leadership from the top. It could succeed this time, but the odds against this and the other reforms mentioned in the previous paragraph are quite long. All would require the commitment of resources and attention from the top leadership. Resistance would be significant, the tasks are undramatic, and the effort would bear fruit only slowly. It follows that there is no reason to expect such attempts to be made.

[1] Online NewsHour, "Rice on Iraq. War and Politics," September 25, 2002, available at www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/international/july-dec02/rice_9-25.html
2. *On War*, ed. and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 117.
[3] Quoted in Henry Brandon, *The Retreat of American Power* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday 1973), p. 103.
[4] See, for example, Richard Betts, "Analysis, War, and Decisions: Why Intelligence Failures are Inevitable," *World Politics*, vol. 31, October 1978, pp. 61-89.
[5] See, for example, Paul Pillar, "Intelligence, Policy and the War in Iraq," Foreign Affairs, vol. 85, April 2006, pp. 15-28.
[6] See Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); also see Philip Tetlock, "Social-Functionalist Metaphors for Judgment and Choice: The Politician, Theologian and Prosecutor," *Psychological Review*, vol. 109, 2002, pp. 451-472, and Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good is it? How Can We Know?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
[7] For discussion of the role of institutions here and in other cases, see Deborah Larson, "Truman and the Berlin Blockade: The Role of Intuition and Experience in Good Foreign Policy Judgment," in Stanley Renshon and Deborah Larson, eds., *Good Judgment in Foreign Policy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), pp. 127-52. For a popular treatment, see Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking* (Boston: Little Brown, 2005).
[8] David Reynolds, "Churchill and the British 'Decision' to Fight on in 1940: Right Policy, Wrong Reasons," in Richard Langhorne, *Diplomacy and Intelligence During the Second World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 147-67; quoted in Harold Evans, "His Finest Hour," *New York Times Book Review*, November 11, 2001.
[9] Kennedy did make a private commitment to Khrushchev to remove the missiles in the near future, but not only was this a secret pledge, but news of it arrived in Moscow only after Khrushchev had decided to withdraw the missiles in return for Kennedy's pledge not to invade Cuba.
[10] For the rational political reasons or any seeming organizational irrationalities, see Amy Zegart, *Flawed by Design: The Evolution of the CIA, JCS and NSC* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).
11. Pat Roberts, "Comments & Responses: Intelligence Reform," *National Interest*, No. 81 (Fall 2005), p. 8; *Report to the President of the United States*, The Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction, March 31, 2005, p. 321.
[12] For more on this, see Jervis, "Reports, Politics, and Intelligence Failures: The Case of Iraq," *Journal of Stategic Studies*, vol. 29, Jan. 2006, pp. 3-52.
[13] For further discussion, see ibid.