

Lessons for Intelligence Support to Policymaking during Crises

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In the spring of 2007, President George W. Bush named Army Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute to serve as his assistant and deputy national security advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan to bring greater attention and coherence to US policymaking in those areas. Lute, who would be popularly referred to as the “war advisor” or the “war czar,” served through the end of the Bush administration, and like Secretary of Defense Bob Gates, he continued working in the Obama administration, although with some changes to his title and portfolio.

I worked for General Lute from September 2007 through September 2009 as director for Afghanistan on the National Security Council staff. I was detailed from the Central Intelligence Agency’s Directorate for Intelligence (DI), where I served as a political analyst on the Afghanistan Branch from 2003 to 2007. Prior to that, in 2002, I served as an intelligence analyst in the US Army, deployed to the Combined Joint Task Force-180 Intelligence Support Element in Bagram, Afghanistan.

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strengths and weaknesses in Intelligence Community (IC) support to policymaking. In this article, after an overview of the NSC and my role in it, I will offer what I consider to be the lessons of my experience and suggest ways in which the IC might be able to improve its support to the NSC, especially in high-profile crisis situations.

The National Security Council: Background and Development

The NSC’s core purposes are to advise the president and foster interagency cooperation. According to the National Security Act of 1947 (Section 101(a)), the NSC exists to

advise the President with respect to the integration of domestic, foreign, and



Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute during his confirmation hearing, June 2007. Photo © Matthew Cavanaugh/epa/Corbis

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military policies relating to the national security so as to enable the military services and the other departments and agencies of the Government to cooperate more effectively in matters involving the national security.

The council itself only consists of the president, vice president, the secretaries of state and defense, and other officials at the president's discretion. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and the director of national intelligence (DNI) are statutory advisers on military and intelligence issues, respectively.

The NSC gradually acquired a permanent staff to help prepare for NSC meetings, ensure decisions and guidance from the president were communicated to all levels of the bureaucracy (not just to the cabinet secretaries), and make certain the president's guidance was reflected in departmental and agency programs. Gradually, presidents began to rely on the principal officer of the NSC staff for policy advice and high-level bureaucratic umpiring. This official became known as the national security advisor (a job that is nowhere mentioned in the National Security Act of 1947). The evolution of the national security advisor enhanced the role of the NSC staff in the policymaking process, which sometimes supplanted the State Department as the principal foreign policy-

making body in the US government.

The NSC system was reorganized in the 1990s, when President George H.W. Bush developed a series of lower-level meetings through which policy issues passed before submission to the president. Bush's reorganization endures today. Below the full NSC, cabinet-level officials meet without the president in a Principals Committee (PC) meeting. Beneath them is the Deputies Committee (DC) meeting, which is supposed to be a meeting at the deputy secretary level. (In practice, attendance varies widely and often includes assistant secretaries and sometimes deputy assistant secretaries).

Beneath the deputies is a range of meetings at the assistant secretary level and below, variously called Interagency Policy Committees (IPCs) or Policy Coordination Committees (PCCs)—depending on the administration—supported by staff-level working-group meetings. The purpose of the lower-level groups is to vet issues, conduct research, explore and flesh out policy options, and ensure policy papers are ready for higher-level consideration. Just as the DNI is an adviser to NSC meetings, IC officials play advisory roles at meetings at every level of the interagency policy process.

The National Security Council Today: An NSC Director's View

When I took the job of NSC director in late 2007, I was told that I would have three principal tasks:

Provide staff support to the president, the national security advisor, and other administration officials. We prepared memorandums, background papers, and talking points for the president to prepare him for meetings, phone calls, and video teleconferences with US and foreign officials about Afghanistan.

The IC supported our work principally by providing assessments of foreign leaders and officials with whom the president, the national security advisor, or General Lute were scheduled to meet. These assessments were among the most popular and widely disseminated intelligence products at the White House because they provided unique intelligence, generally unavailable elsewhere, which senior US officials found helpful. On occasion, the IC would also produce papers to be published in time for an event or meeting, such as an NSC meeting or a bilateral head-of-state meeting.

Participate in Policy Development. We brainstormed policy initiatives and circulated our best ideas in the interagency community to get feedback and generate interest. In

the other direction, we acted as a first check on ideas coming from agencies and departments, ensuring that their initiatives were consistent with the president's intent and with the programs of other agencies. During the 2008 and 2009 strategic reviews on Afghanistan and Pakistan (see below) we wrote think pieces, policy proposals, discussion papers, and options memorandums.

The IC supported policy development indirectly by feeding the policymakers a steady stream of analysis. Of particular use were analyses of the long-term strategic outlook of Afghanistan or of the region, pieces that incorporated sophisticated opportunity analyses, and work that identified new and emerging trends. The IC cannot recommend policy, but it can provoke thought, present scenarios, and explore implications for US interests under different assumptions. While some methods of unconventional analysis approach the line of recommending policy, I never heard a White House official complain that intelligence had crossed the line. If anything, White House officials tended to want more of such analysis from the community, not less.

Oversee Policy Implementation. This was the most difficult aspect of the job. Officially, NSC officers, from Lute down to the directors were supposed to chair or cochair interagency meetings, including DCs, IPCs, and staff-level

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working group meetings. In these meetings, and more broadly in all of our interactions with counterparts in the departments and agencies, we were supposed to determine if departments and agencies were implementing the president's policies, foster interagency cooperation, and hold agencies accountable for their performance.

In practice, the NSC had few formal tools with which to influence the behavior of government agencies. The State and Defense Departments, with the greatest bureaucratic and budgetary stakes in the region, were the biggest challenges. USAID—in some ways more important than the State Department because of its large role in funding reconstruction projects—was unaccustomed to interagency coordination. Many staff-level workers in the agencies and departments were simply unaware of the president's policy and strategy in Afghanistan and sometimes seemed uninterested in what other agencies and departments were doing. Nonetheless, we were able to positively influence interagency work on Afghanistan.

The War Czar

General Lute's newly created position involved several innovations in the NSC structure

and changed the working dynamic between the NSC's Directorate for Iraq and Afghanistan and the other agencies and departments.

Lute's clout derived from his direct access to the president and his authority to chair DC meetings, assets that no other NSC directorate head had. Lute attended a morning staff meeting with the president, the national security advisor, and other senior officials. He interacted with the president directly, often without the mediation of National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley. He chaired DC meetings on Iraq and Afghanistan, a role reserved for Deputy National Security Advisor James Jeffrey for every other country in the world. Lute acted almost as a co-national security advisor, but with a narrower portfolio.

Because of the prominence of Iraq and Afghanistan in the White House, Lute headed the largest directorate of the NSC—about 20 people, counting directors, senior directors, and administrative staff—and by far the busiest. The directorate regularly produced more papers, more quickly, for the president and the national security advisor than any other directorate in 2008.

Lute's unique position had several effects on the policy-

The Intelligence Community gave regular and direct support to General Lute and his staff.

making process, on dynamics within the NSC and among agencies, and on the US-Afghan relationship. First, Lute demonstrably increased the pace of interagency work on Afghanistan. The table to the right shows the number of NSC, PC and DC meetings held on Afghanistan from 2004 to 2008, with a sharp increase in NSC and DC meetings beginning in the fall of 2007, shortly after Lute assumed his duties.

In addition to the regular policy meetings, an increasing number of Afghan officials visited the White House during 2007–08, including at different times the ministers of finance, defense, foreign affairs, water and power, and reconstruction and rural development, the director of the Independent Directorate for Local Governance, the speaker of the National Assembly, the vice president, and President Karzai. This represented a significant increase in direct high-level contact between the White House and the Afghan government.

Second, Lute’s position had the unintended effect of reducing the relative position of other NSC staff members working on war issues. Brought in to bring the president closer to the policymaking and implementation process involving two wars, Lute occupied a more senior position than the senior NSC

director for Afghanistan, who became relatively less important. As a result, the senior director and several directors below him had comparatively less clout within the interagency policy community than NSC directors covering other countries. This may have made interagency coordination at lower levels more cumbersome.

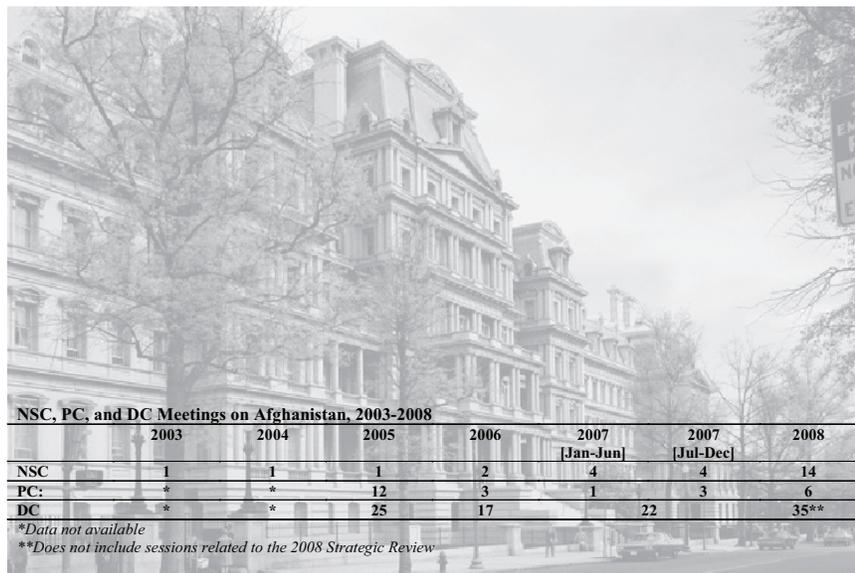
Third—on the plus side—the prominence of Iraq and Afghanistan gave the directors for these countries unparalleled opportunities to see the policy-making process in action, particularly during the Afghanistan-Pakistan strategic reviews of 2008 and 2009—as we will describe below.

The IC gave regular and direct support to General Lute and his staff. The CIA compiled a book—later an e-mail—three times a week containing the

most important pieces of raw intelligence and latest analytical production on Afghanistan and South Asia. An NSA officer in the White House Situation Room compiled a digest of relevant signals intelligence. DIA sent a representative to the office each week to drop hardcopies of its latest analytical products on our desks. We set up a regular weekly briefing at which representatives from CIA, DIA, and INR could discuss either their latest analysis or a topic of our choosing.

Challenges and Intelligence Community Support

From 2007 through 2009, we faced three major challenges: refocusing policymaker attention on Afghanistan, conducting a complete review of US policy there, and dealing with the arrival of a new administration.



NSC, PC, and DC Meetings on Afghanistan, 2003-2008

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007 [Jan-Jun]	2007 [Jul-Dec]	2008
NSC	1	1	1	2	4	4	14
PC:	*	*	12	3	1	3	6
DC	*	*	25	17		22	35**

*Data not available
**Does not include sessions related to the 2008 Strategic Review

Getting Attention

The first problem we had to grapple with was the relative lack of attention then being paid to Afghanistan. Some policymakers were not aware of the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. Others were aware, but chose to give more attention and resources to Iraq because they judged it to be a higher strategic priority or in greater danger of outright failure—which likely was indeed the case through mid-2007.

In late 2007 and early 2008 the NSC staff saw the decline of violence in Iraq and the rapidly worsening violence in Afghanistan. We tried to refocus attention and resources on Afghanistan because we judged that our policy there would soon be in greater danger of failure—if it wasn't already—than it was in Iraq. (In January 2008 I made a bet with a colleague that by the end of 2009 the incidence of violence in Afghanistan would be greater than in Iraq. We were both surprised when I won the bet in August of 2008).

The IC's regular production on Afghanistan's political and military situation was invaluable to our efforts to increase the policy focus on Afghanistan. Because the IC provided an impartial, nonpartisan voice, its warnings and its opportunities analysis were more credible than many of the other opinions that were circulating in Washington, particularly during the 2008 presidential elec-

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tion campaign. Policymakers especially appreciated papers that did not simply describe failure or warn of impending danger, but highlighted opportunities for improvement.

Strategic Review

We succeeded in winning the spotlight in the waning months of the Bush administration, which ushered in our second principal challenge: the 2008 Afghanistan-Pakistan Strategic Review. The security gains in Iraq made in 2007 were sustained well into 2008, while the situation in Afghanistan was markedly worse. It was clear that Afghanistan required a rethink; it was also the first time in years that even the officials who believed Iraq was the strategic priority felt they could afford the time and attention to focus on Afghanistan. The Principals Committee decided on 12 September 2008 to recommend a comprehensive review of US policy and strategy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan. President Bush ordered the review a few days later.

Over the next several weeks and months, Lute chaired 16 two- to four-hour meetings of the deputies. In addition to the normal attendees, he included in different sessions US Ambassador to Afghanistan Bill Wood, ISAF Commander David McKiernan, Commander of Central Command Gen. David Petraeus,

outside experts, academics, Afghan officials, CIA briefers, and former US military and diplomatic personnel who had served in Afghanistan. It was the most comprehensive and thoughtful exercise in policy development on Afghanistan since 2001.¹

The NSC staff produced a deluge of discussion papers and options memorandums to support the review and helped produce the final paper, which was presented to the principals and the president in November and December. The paper recommended that the president adopt a fully resourced counter-insurgency campaign to defeat the Taliban, stabilize Afghanistan, and prevent al-Qa'ida's return to the country. "Fully resourcing" the effort was the most important recommendation.

IC support for the strategic review was robust. The national intelligence officer for South Asia or one of his deputies participated in every session of the review. They provided an advance copy of a National Intelligence Estimate on Afghanistan to establish a com-

¹ Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad led an effort called "Accelerating Success" in 2003 to increase attention and resources for Afghanistan, and State and NSC conducted a strategic review in 2006 that was less wide-ranging and smaller in scale than the 2008 review.

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mon reference point for the participants. General Lute invited specialists from the community to brief on high-profile topics. Intelligence assessments on strategic issues—sometimes written months and even years before—were recirculated to the deputies so they could reestablish their knowledge base. We hung graphical products from the community—e.g., on the Afghan economy, the cabinet, and violence trends—on the walls for easy reference.

The review's recommendations begged the question: What could be accomplished with the president leaving office in a matter of weeks? There was little he could do to order implementation of all of the review's recommendations, many of which required additional congressional appropriations, years of work by the State Department and USAID, or troops who would not be available until after the drawdown from Iraq had begun. The strategic review became, in effect, our principal transition document for the incoming Obama administration.

Presidential Transition

By law, the papers and records of the National Security Council—and all the other offices within the Executive Office of the President—belong to the president. At the end of an administration, they are archived in a presidential

library—in our case, the Bush Library that was to be opened at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. Shortly after the election on 4 November 2008—while we were still finishing the strategic review—the NSC Legal Affairs Directorate sent word around that we should begin archiving.

By 15 January 2009, our offices were literally empty of all paper. On the 16th, we handed in our Blackberries. During the 17th through the 20th, the White House computer systems were shut down, and our hard drives removed and handed over to the Bush Library. We came back to work on the 21st with almost no record of anything we had worked on or done for the past year and a half. We were allowed to make copies of a small number of “continuity files” on ongoing projects, but we had no depth in our files. The IC helped smooth the transition by making its older products available after the transition and by resending some of the more important pieces published in the weeks before.

Our challenges did not end there. President Obama called for another strategic review of Afghanistan and Pakistan, this one chaired by CIA veteran Bruce Riedel, then at the Brookings Institute. Riedel's work echoed many of the rec-

ommendations from the 2008 review in a paper that the new administration could embrace as its own. The president also appointed Richard Holbrooke as the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) at the State Department. Holbrooke's position helped increase the bureaucratic focus on Afghanistan, but it complicated the interagency coordination process. However, these and other challenges belong to the Obama administration, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Lessons Learned²

Could the Intelligence Community have done better in supporting the NSC on Afghanistan during this period? I believe the experience did offer lessons IC leaders should consider in providing support to policymaking during crises.

IC components must be capable of responding rapidly to policymakers' needs.

Perfect analysis delivered on the morning of a PC or DC meeting is too late and will have limited influence because there will be no time to allow analytic conclusions, warning, or opportunity analysis to be worked into an agenda or to be shaped into policy options. IC

² I am especially indebted to DI analyst Christopher C., who also served an NSC director, for his contributions to this section.

managers should aim to get products to key PC and DC attendees the week before a meeting.

During my tour in the NSC, the IC missed many opportunities to inform policy discussions because it took the time to put forward highly polished products in response to every question. IC producers should consider accepting a tradeoff: give up polish for faster dissemination and more direct policymaker support. We should not let the perfect be the enemy of the good in these situations.

Delays caused by multiple layers of review, or anticipation of new information, or a sluggish clearance process risk causing a product to be irrelevant and wasted.

Policymakers need the ability to reach out for basic fact-checking, rapid analysis, and short “gut-check” pieces. The IC as a whole moves too slowly to support policymakers’ everyday needs, leaving them to rely on the media, their staff, and their gut, all of which can be wildly inaccurate.

Senior analysts and managers should be allowed to e-mail quick replies and analyses directly to their policy counterparts. This may not be appropriate for every account but in crisis policymaking, it is indispensable.

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IC producers must avoid “duh” reports and analysis

Some of the intelligence we received repeated conventional wisdom or duplicated news media. Such analysis is worse than harmless: it desensitizes policymakers to quality intelligence products, causing them to develop a habit of glancing over intelligence quickly with little thought or critical engagement. If policymakers begin asking “Why did I need the IC to tell me this?” we have hurt our credibility and our future access to the policymaker.

The exception is when policymakers look to the IC for the facts of some high-profile or contested event, like an insurgent attack that received heavy media coverage, reports of civilian casualties, or a national election. In these cases, IC components can serve as a sort of classified news media outlet and give policymakers exactly what they need. A spot report or situation report—or a simple email—is the most appropriate way to fill this need. This may not be a function IC components want to regularize, but it should be a key part of IC support to crisis policymaking.

IC managers need to stay better informed about the policymaking process.

IC representatives are members of each DC and PC, and schedules of meetings for the coming two to three weeks are

disseminated to members of the interagency community, including the IC, every business day. While schedules may change, the calendar is a clear roadmap for meeting specific policymaker interests and should serve as a guide to the substance, and more importantly, the timing of analytic production.

In addition, intelligence analysts can and should participate in regular working group meetings and form ties to their NSC director counterparts. These directors typically are the focal points for setting up PC or DC meetings. With most portfolios, a vigorous interagency process, always involving NSC directors, functions at all levels to implement the president’s policy objectives. In some cases, NSC directors will use working groups to formulate and vet options for senior policymakers. Intelligence analysts with deep knowledge and strong briefing skills are valued members of these teams and usually learn early on the issues that will surface in DC and PC sessions.

Analytic components should provide more opportunities analysis.

Analysis intended to support the policymaking process should highlight “opportunities for action.” Such “opportunity analysis” may be a close cousin to “policy prescription” but it

Agencies should make serious attempts to make e-mail distribution systems their primary approach to dissemination.

was not considered that by anyone in my experience at the NSC. While it is critical for IC analysts to maintain their policy neutrality, analytic products that highlight the possibilities in various courses of action, that flag the potential pitfalls of options under consideration, or that draw attention to historically analogous situations in current challenges are usually welcome, provided they are not delivered with a prescriptive or directive tone.

The DNI may want to reevaluate the size and mission of the National Intelligence Council or revisit how the NIC supports the interagency policymaking process.

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) was just over two years old and still establishing its role in the IC when General Lute joined the NSC. The NIC, then newly attached to the ODNI, is supposed to be the central point of contact between IC components and the policy community. The individual NIC officers we worked with did heroic work, but the NIC as a whole appeared to be understaffed and poorly postured for

the duties it assumed as a staff for the DNI. As a result, the NSC had to work partly through the NIC and partly through a patchwork of contacts in intelligence agencies to communicate taskings and receive information. In 2007, the IC was understandably still working through the implementation of the 2004 intelligence reform legislation. But by now it may wish to reassess its approach to policy support.

The IC needs to fix its dissemination systems.

The IC dissemination system resembles a stack of sliced Swiss cheese in which the slices haphazardly cover up the holes in the cheese. The IC has many dissemination systems, all of which have gaping holes. At the NSC, we simply hoped that one system would cover the holes in another. In practice, I had no idea if I was receiving the right papers.

I've already mentioned the tailored packages prepared for us by CIA, NSA, and DIA. However, those packages focused overwhelmingly on current production, not longer term analysis. Agencies send hardcopy papers to customers, but I found that dissemination lists

tended to be out of date, and I would get papers months after they were published. Papers were generally available online, but most policymakers will not take the trouble to sign up for an account, install a Web certificate, or regularly go to a Web site to look for new products.

E-mail, which policymakers actually read, was my easiest and most effective dissemination system. Agencies should make serious attempts to make e-mail distribution systems their primary approach to dissemination.

The last lesson about intelligence support to policymaking is that intelligence does not drive policy. Policymakers drive policy. Intelligence forms a crucial part of their intellectual background, but competing with intelligence are their prejudices and opinions formed over lifetimes of thinking about politics and history. These influences may include an undergraduate professor of political science, personal experience, the headlines of the *New York Times*, domestic political pressures, and a host of other factors. The job of intelligence is to offer insights that are profound and useful enough to break through those influences.

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