

An Educated Consumer Is Our Best Customer

Dennis C. Wilder

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The quality of service a consumer receives from the IC depends heavily on the expertise and experience that the policymaker or legislator brings to their interaction with the IC.
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This essay was a recipient of the top prize in the 2010 Galileo Intelligence Community Award competition. The competition, held annually since 2004, is intended to provide active members of the Intelligence Community opportunities to put forward innovative ideas.—Editor

It may seem odd to title a paper on Intelligence Community (IC) innovation in the 21st century with the commercial slogan made famous by discount clothier Sy Syms. But this slogan holds the key to solving some of the challenges vexing IC leaders that span issues from policymaker expectations to intelligence budgets to public perceptions of the IC. At the core of this paper is the contention that we have neglected the education of our customers—defined as appointed and elected officials and the American public—to our own detriment. The quality of service consumers receive from the IC depends heavily on the expertise and experience that policymakers or legislators bring to their interaction with the IC. Our chronic failure to communicate across the policy-intelligence divide has led to pent-up frustrations on both sides and, too often, charges of intelligence failure. This proposal provides a series of recommendations for the ODNI on redesigning the pol-

icy-intelligence interface and implementing a strategic communications strategy that leverages new social media so that the American people and the policy community will better understand and appreciate the centrality of the Intelligence Community to national security.

Taking Our Customers' Knowledge of Us for Granted

Policymakers who are steeped in the ways of the Intelligence Community (IC) know how to get superior service and support. Former Acting Director of Central Intelligence John McLaughlin, from his years of experience, explained the savvy policy consumer of intelligence this way:

Policymakers who knew how to use intelligence generally had a realistic view of what it could and could not do. They understood, for example, that intelligence is almost

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

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*always more helpful in detecting trends than in predicting specific events. They knew how to ask questions that forced intelligence specialists to separate what they actually knew from what they thought. They were not intimidated by intelligence that ran counter to the prevailing policy but saw it as a useful job to thinking about their courses of action.*¹

My observations during more than four years of service on the National Security Council have led me to conclude that policymakers with no or little exposure to the IC, especially in the case of novice policymakers, too often find themselves in a frustrating maze that involves trial and error and dead ends in their attempts to get the right kind of intelligence support. This inexperience can, and has, led to serious policymaker disappointment with IC products not because the IC did not have the correct information or analytic insights to offer, but because the con-

sumer did not have the sophisticated understanding of IC capabilities and limitations that would allow them to ask the right questions, of the right people and at the right moment to get the best information and analysis. Frequently, this has led to charges of intelligence failures because the policymakers had unrealistic expectations of what the IC could do.

What we have is a failure to communicate across the IC-policy community divide. Gregory Treverton, a senior RAND scholar of the intelligence-policy interface had a particularly useful explanation of why IC experts typically fail to meet the expectations of eager, new policymakers out to change the course of history.

*Intelligence analysts are reflective by nature; they want to understand.... Policy officials, by contrast, tend to be active; they want to do, not just to think. They came to Washington to signify; they want to make a difference.... If policy officers are to signify, they have to do so quickly; the average tenure of an assistant secretary is not much more than a year.*²

¹ John McLaughlin "Serving the National Policymaker," in Roger Z. George and James B. Bruce (eds.), *Analyzing Intelligence: Origins, Obstacles, and Innovations*, 2nd Edition, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 72.

The First Customer Will Always Come First

Who are the IC's customers? Our most important customer is and will remain the president. He is well served through his direct relationship with the director of national intelligence and he, each day, receives the finest intelligence publication in the world, the *President's Daily Briefing* (PDB). The history of the PDB is one of flexibility and remarkable adaptation of support to fit each president's needs and information acquisition styles.³

I would argue, however, that historically we have not done justice to the rest of our customers, from policymakers below the president to the members of the US Congress to the American public, in large measure because we have neglected educational outreach and strategic communications. Without such outreach, and in a decade when massive deficits burden the national budget and the competition for resources in the federal government will intensify, we are in danger of repeating the disaster that befell us at the

² Gregory F. Treverton, *Intelligence for an Age of Terrorism* (Rand Corporation, Cambridge University Press, 2009), 170–71.

³ For an excellent example of the kind of close attention that has been paid to getting analysis right for presidents, see John Helgerson, *CIA Briefings for Presidential Candidates*, (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, CIA, 1996).

end of the Cold War with the advent of the peace dividend—debilitating budget cuts, dangerously slashed human intelligence capabilities, and even debate about the necessity of the US Intelligence Community, the most expensive intelligence enterprise on the planet.

In the decade after 9/11, the IC has demonstrated the centrality of intelligence to policy, but that position may not be secure as the memory of 9/11 fades and as we enter an era of belt tightening. The new reality that the US foreign policy establishment, and by extension the IC, faces is spelled out in a thought-provoking book by Michael Mandelbaum in which he warns that because of domestic obligations this country faces, particularly caring for the ever increasing ranks of its older citizens, “The defining fact of foreign policy in the second decade of the 21st century and beyond will be ‘less.’”⁴ Thus, we are living in an era that none of us has ever experienced because, unlike most countries, our economic constraints have not affected US foreign policy decision-making for the past seven decades.

⁴ Michael Mandelbaum, *The Frugal Superpower: America's Global Leadership in a Cash-Strapped Era*, (New York:Public Affairs, 2010).

How do we encourage deeper policymaker literacy about the IC?

Informed Policymakers

How do we encourage deeper policymaker literacy about the IC? Brookings Institution in 2009 published a thoughtful study by Ken Lieberthal—a former special assistant to a president, senior director on the NSC, and a long-time student of intelligence—analyzing the strengths and shortcomings of the IC in the wake of the 2004–2005 intelligence reforms that provides some clues. Lieberthal reported from his interviews with then active and former policymakers and intelligence professionals that most policymakers are undereducated in the use of intelligence and have no systematic understanding of the IC or of the products they receive from the IC. Moreover, he contended that most policymakers are ill equipped to ask the right questions and therefore ask for briefings on topics that often elicit “a relatively standard bureaucratic process that pulls together pertinent information and lays it out without serious attention being given to priorities, underlying uncertainties, and real insights.”⁵

⁵ See Dr. Kenneth Lieberthal, *The U.S. Intelligence Community and Foreign Policy: Getting Analysis Right*, (Brookings Institution, Foreign Policy Paper Series, Number 17, September 2009), 56.

Such products, the author argued, are useful to a policymaker needing to get up to speed on a topic, but they tend not to force IC analysts to think through the implications of their data, debate the relative significance of different facts, and make explicit their levels of confidence in the responses they produce. *In short, because our consumers are not well schooled in what we can provide, we often fall short of helping them make deeply informed policy recommendations to the president and his Cabinet.*

What can be done to create intelligence-literate policy customers? First, we need to understand that educating the customer is an extremely difficult task that we have never done well. We have avoided tackling the issue because it can seem condescending and can lead to charges of attempts to politicize the relationship. Beginning with the legendary Sherman Kent, we have analyzed exhaustively every aspect of the IC side of the relationship with the policymaker, and we have set up high firewalls not to be crossed between the policymaker and the IC producers.⁶ We have as a result, after each perceived intelligence failure, studied carefully what the IC did that led to that intelligence mistake and then carefully schooled our officers to

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help them discern what constitutes success and failure in intelligence analysis.

But I am unaware of any effort to systematically study the policymaker's role in either intelligence successes or intelligence debacles. Most often, if policies work out, policymakers will assume that it was their hard work that made the difference and, unfortunately, if there is a policy debacle there is a strong tendency to blame the community.

We know what we could have done better on the Iraq WMD issue because we have written excellent studies of our shortcomings, and we have appropriately implemented systematic changes to our analytic tradecraft. *I am, however, unable to find any parallel effort, either within government or in academia, to systematically educate current and future policymakers to maximize the utility of intelligence and to ask the right questions to avoid policy failures because of inadequately tapping of the capabilities of the IC.* James

Steinberg, currently deputy secretary of state, lamented this lack of attention to the issue in 2008 saying, "Given the enormous consequences of the evident breakdown apparent both in the September 11 and Iraq events, it is vital that practitioners on both sides try to understand the challenges inherent in the policy-intelligence interaction and how to overcome the gulf and suspicion that haunts this critical relationship."⁷

Designing a New Relationship with the White House

I believe some of our problems only can be ameliorated by radically revising our interaction with new administrations from the moment that presidential candidates are selected by their political parties and are given their first national security briefing. This is the point at which the relationship with the next president and his core national security team—in effect, his national security players in waiting—forms and needs to be shaped with briefings not only on top national security concerns, but on how

we would propose to help the team prepare to use intelligence more efficiently and effectively than any past administration through a deliberate and thoughtful education process.

Obviously, this new process of education is far more complex than what I just outlined and so let me present some of the foundational work that needs to be done in advance of such an opportunity. Now in our third year of the Obama administration and with a new Congress, we have new faces involved in security policy. If the past is any indicator, too many of these new officials will have come into office, eagerly been read into their top secret codeword clearances, and started reading daily intelligence with only the most superficial understanding of what it is they are reading. Many will immediately be disappointed because they had convinced themselves that, once they got their clearances, they would see the "real secrets." If they are lucky enough to have a personal briefer, this will help but too often the briefers themselves are young and only steeped in the intelligence analysis side of this question.

Creating Intelligence Connoisseurs

What is required is the equivalent of the course now taught for analysts on the art of intelligence analysis, but this would

⁶ For an example, see the incisive article written by CIA analyst Jack Davis on the history of the debates over how to serve the policymaker, "The Kent-Kendall Debate of 1949," in *Studies in Intelligence* 1992, Issue 5.

⁷ James B. Steinberg, "The Policymaker's Perspective: Transparency and Partnership" in George and Bruce, *Analyzing Intelligence*, 83.

be for policymakers and members of Congress—let's call it, *Applied Intelligence for the Savvy Policymaker*. With today's technology we are capable of deploying such a course in various appealing media formats to include interactive online presentations. This course would not just be given by intelligence professionals but co-taught with former policymakers willing to share the lessons they have learned in working with the IC. Ideally, new policymakers in the future would want to take this course because it would be known to provide them a sophisticated understanding of the IC under the ODNI. Demand for the course would be high if it were known that the president and his cabinet had endorsed it.

Any attempt to design this course for new policymakers and members of Congress that is exclusively done in-house is vulnerable to charges of IC attempts at propaganda and proselytizing. Also, we have simply not developed a deep enough understanding of the topic ourselves to provide a rich and systematic briefing at this point. Thus, the director of national intelligence should ask prominent former officials from both major parties to lead a task force to develop such a course. Former officials such as Congressman Lee Hamilton, Deputy Secretary of Defense John Hamre and National Security Advisor Steve Hadley,

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Director of National Intelligence John Negroponte, Deputy Secretary of State Thomas Pickering, US Trade Representative Charlene Barshevsky, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Peter Pace, DCIA Michael Hayden, DCI George Tenet, and Acting DCI John McLaughlin spring to mind but there are, of course, many others with the requisite expertise.

Partnering with the Private Sector

To provide the intellectual rigor needed to undergird a course for new policymakers and Congress, the DNI also should seek out a partnership with prominent think tanks and relevant academic institutions that span the political spectrum to design case study materials from past policy successes and failures analyzing how policymakers either got the best or inadequate support from the IC.

This process would require extensive interviews with those who were intimately involved in the intelligence support and policymaking during the period studied. Such an effort would be open to suspicion if it was done in house and the academics would need access to the classified record. *To avoid ran-*

cor, the case studies might avoid recent politically charged controversies such as the issue of intelligence support to decision making on Iraq WMD but could be just as useful if done on such issues as IC support to policymakers on the Soviet Union or intelligence support during the Kosovo conflict.⁸

Once case studies are drafted, it would be in the best interest of the IC to present them to a conference of academics and policymakers, current and former, at a symposium for a reality check and fine-tuning. Such a symposium might be appropriately convened at one of the presidential libraries and perhaps carried on CSPAN television, providing the added benefit of educating the general public on this new initiative.

Net Gens and Unauthorized Disclosures

One final important aspect of this tutorial would be a frank discussion of the damage

⁸ IC assessment of the Soviet Union is attractive as a topic because it has already been extensively studied from the IC side. For example, see Douglas J. MacEachin, *CIA Assessments of the Soviet Union: The Record Versus the Charges*, (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, CIA, 1996).

The general public's understanding of the IC and its mission and capabilities is equally worrisome.

caused by unauthorized public disclosure. We should take heed of the implications of the recent arrest and arraignment of the 22-year-old member of the US military on charges of unauthorized disclosure of the classified information revealed through Wikileaks. He is a member of Net Gen, the generation of children, teens, and young adults aged 11 to 31 who have grown up immersed in digital technology. He allegedly downloaded a staggering 260,000 documents because he hoped their release would lead to a "worldwide discussion, debate, and reform" of the tactics in the war on terror.⁹ The younger generation, whether policymakers or members of the IC, come into government with much more open view of information and information sharing and need help understanding our unique issues.¹⁰ Thus, the course should include a discussion of the enormous damage to US security and the financial costs to the American taxpayer when unauthorized disclosures result in damage to sensitive intelligence collection capabilities. To

be effective, such a course should be open with policymakers and members of Congress in discussing the specific, recent examples of unauthorized leaks and the damage they have inflicted.

An Informed Public

The general public's understanding of the IC and its mission and capabilities is equally worrisome. All of us have experienced the uneasy feeling as we watched our profession personified by Hollywood as either the omnipotent Jack Bauer or the bumbling Maxwell Smart. At times we are portrayed as flagrantly violating the US Constitution and abusing the human rights of US citizens and foreigners alike. At other times, we are portrayed as laughingly incompetent or, worse yet, creating wars and crises because we act in secret without oversight. Few and far between are the accurate portrayals of the critical mission of the IC as the "Silent Service," going where others cannot go, risking our lives to protect Americans from harm, and providing the needed raw and finished intelligence products to inform and elevate policy deliberations.

Middling Public Approval Ratings

It is therefore not surprising that public opinion polling con-

sistently shows that elements of the IC typically glean only about a 50-percent approval rating from the general public. This contrasts starkly with the various armed services and the FBI, which routinely poll at least 15 percentage points higher than the CIA in public opinion surveys.¹¹ Surveys do not even try to measure the public approval for the ODNI since there is very little public recognition of the name and almost no general understanding of its role. In the aftermath of 9/11, it seems counterintuitive and surprising that we have gained little in public approval ratings despite our large role in the battle with terrorists and the fact that intelligence has played a vital role in making sure that another 9/11 has not happened. Many IC officials have pointed to the large number of excellent resumes received each year by the IC to demonstrate that our public image is strong, but this indicator may say as much about the state of the job market and the glamorized Hollywood vision of the IC as it says about public attitudes.

Why does our public image pale in comparison to that of the armed services? To be fair, a part of our problem is simply

⁹ Kevin Poulsen, Kim Zetter, "I can't believe what I am confession to you: The Wikileaks Chats," *Wired Magazine online*, 6 June 2010.

¹⁰ For an excellent study of the challenges we face in the information age see *Where Tomorrow Will Take Us: The New Environment for Intelligence*, (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, CIA, 2010).

¹¹ See for example, "Distrust, Discontent, Anger and Partisan Rancor: The People and Their Government," Pew Research Center for the People and the Press <http://people-press.org/2010/04/18/distrust-discontent-anger-and-partisan-rancor/> (accessed 9 May 2011).

Part of the problem is that we have not worked hard enough at strategic communications with the general public.

that we must operate under the cloak of secrecy and are therefore perceived as a bad fit for an open democracy. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recently put it when speaking about the CIA, "The truth is, across the political spectrum, it has had relatively few supporters other than presidents who find they like its clandestine powers. It's just an itch in our system that's hard to scratch."¹² *Secretary Gates may be a bit too fatalistic about our lot, and I believe it is this kind of presumption that holds us back from exploring new ways to convince Americans that we are not an anomaly but a necessity in American democracy.* To me, part of the problem is again that we have not worked hard enough at strategic communications with the general public. Too often, we allow others to define us (mostly negatively) by making it sound as if the sum total of our role can be summarized by referring to such controversies as Abu Ghraib and water boarding.

Reengineering Our Public Profile

Although some argue that the IC by its very nature should not have a public profile, that philosophy may be outdated in the age of new social media. *Frankly speaking, we only need to look at the outmoded design*

¹² David Ignatius, "Gates: The Pentagon's Accountability Cop," *The Washington Post*, 9 September 2010.

of www.dni.gov website in comparison to the websites of the Department of Defense or even the Defense Intelligence Agency to see that we are not communicating as well as we could with the public. Here are a few other ideas on developing stronger public insight into the IC:

- *Internet Chats with IC experts.* Many executive branch agencies, including the White House, offer the public the opportunity for periodic on-line chats with administration officials on topics of wide interest. This is also being done with regularity by major academic think tanks. There is no reason that the ODNI and other IC leaders could not do the same under carefully controlled circumstances. National intelligence officers (NIOs) and other top-notch experts could provide on-line chat opportunities on important topics of the day to the general public. For example, the NIO for South Asia might field questions from the public on the implications of the floods in Pakistan or the NIOs for economics and East Asia might discuss the implications of China's recent emergence as the world's second largest economy. On-line chatting of this sort allows for the public to submit questions in advance so that they can be screened for any politically

sensitive or inappropriate questions.

- *Outreach to Local Officials and Emerging Leaders.* It is striking when meeting with officials at the state and city level around this nation how little contact most have with the IC, beyond the FBI. Similarly, most politicians only have an association with the IC if they serve in Washington. Although there is a natural IC reluctance to hold town-hall meetings with the general public on intelligence, by invitation seminars for local officials and emerging politicians would expose them to our issues long before they became Washington policymakers. This kind of seminar is a proven formula that IC elements have used for recruiting sessions with students at universities and colleges.
- *An Official Guidebook to Intelligence.* The *CIA World Factbook* is a wonderful resource to the general public that is heavily used on line. Although the DNI publishes the "A Consumer's Guide" to intelligence, the document is primarily intended for senior intelligence consumers in the US government and is not particularly user friendly for the general public. Creation of a general guidebook might be best accomplished by commissioning a prominent, profes-

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sional writer outside of the IC to write an unclassified guide that captures more fully what the uninitiated would want to know.¹³

- *Greater Publicity to Our Role in Supporting the Military.* Part of the public's high respect for the armed forces comes from their long traditions of service to the nation. Most Americans can hum the tune of the Marine Corps Hymn. The tradition of intelligence support to the military began with General George Washington, but the public perception is that the IC is only about 60 years old. While I am not suggesting uniforms and salutes, I am suggesting that we look harder at those things we might do to make ourselves more associated with proven, military traditions. One such effort is a recent *Studies* special edition, *CIA at War*, which commemorates the work of CIA men and women in conflict zones around the world since the Agency's creation.

Perceived Intelligence Failures Are Inevitable

A final reason I would cite on why strategic communications to the public is important going

forward is this simple fact —there will be successful terror strikes on US soil in our future, and they may even involve the use of weapons of mass destruction. *We need only look at the major outcry against the IC that occurred after the failed terrorist attempt to blow up a commercial airliner last December to see a glimpse of the kind of blame game that is likely to engulf the IC when the next successful foreign terrorist attack occurs.* As two prominent British observers of our profession sagely put it, "Intelligence failure is a matter of expectations, and seeking to adjust expectation of what intelligence can and cannot do is surely essential to informed democratic debate. Yet if and when a catastrophic terrorist attack succeeds, public confidence in the intelligence and security services will inevitably be tested."¹⁴ We cannot afford to wait passively for that test to come before we try to shape public expectations and understanding of what we do.

Confronting a Taboo

As we begin a new century there is one major aspect of intelligence policy that needs a clear rethinking in consulta-

tion with the Executive Branch and the US Congress. This is the bright line we have drawn over the years between intelligence and policy. Sherman Kent was adamant in his belief that intelligence analysis is a service arm to policymakers and that it should not be a formulator of objectives, a drafter of policy, or a maker of plans. But increasingly today, policymakers and legislators find that the intelligence analysts' adherence to this article of faith robs the policymaker of the ideas and suggestions for policy that a highly informed analyst can provide. They often complain that briefings that provide just the facts are simply not relevant and helpful enough. They can get the facts off of the Internet at a greater speed than we can deliver them, but what they crave from us is analytic insight and our thoughts on how US foreign policy can be advanced.

I believe former DNI Dennis Blair took a large step toward toning down the bright line when in a media roundtable in March 2009 he told the press that he had mandated that every piece of analysis on important issues not only have a threat analysis section but also an opportunities analysis section. He described opportunity analysis as helping policymakers "find the levers...which will enable us to advance our interests and our common interests."¹⁵ Despite his pronouncement, opportunities analysis remains uncomfortable and controversial in many IC

¹³ The DNI guide is located at http://www.dni.gov/reports/IC_Consumers_Guide_2009.pdf.

¹⁴ Len Scott and R. Gerald Hughes, "Intelligence in the 21st Century," *Intelligence and Security* 24, No. 1 (February 2009), 24.

components. Analytic managers are far too concerned that providing some suggestion on policy options will taint analysis and destroy its purity. Yet in most of the advanced intelligence services around the globe no such bright line is drawn. And, I would argue, this bright line robs the policymaker of some of the most useful byproducts of analytic depth and sophistication.

We have consistently not prepared our customers to use intelligence wisely, and thus we are afraid of what they will do with even guarded policy inputs. Were we better at in-depth communication with our customers, we could jointly set parameters on opportunity analysis that would protect the IC from accusations of politicization or meddling in policy. In this regard, I am reminded of Secretary of State Colin Powell's famous adage that demonstrates his sophisticated understanding of the role of intelligence:

I will hold you [the intelligence expert] accountable for what you tell me is a fact; and I will hold you accountable for what you tell me is not going to hap-

¹⁵ Media roundtable with DNI Dennis Blair. 26 March 2009. Available at: http://www.dni.gov/interview/20090326_interview.pdf. For another challenge to the taboo, see Josh Kerbel and Anthony Olcott, "The Intelligence-Policy Nexus: Synthesizing with Clients, Not Analyzing for Customers," *Studies in Intelligence* 54, No. 4 (December 2010).

My worry is that, if we continue to defend a rigid line of detachment from policy, we will lose our reason for existence—the opportunity to elevate the policy debate.

pen because you have the fact on that, or you don't know what's going to happen, or you know what your body of ignorance is and you told me what that is. Now when you tell me what's most likely to happen, then I, as the policymaker, have to make a judgment as to whether I act on that, and I won't hold you accountable for it because that is a judgment; and judgments of this kind are made by policymakers, not by intelligence experts.¹⁶

I recognize that many will argue that, if we cross the divide, we will lose our analytic objectivity and integrity. I think that this was more of a problem when we were just beginning after World War II to create the craft of intelligence analysis. That craft is now well developed, and we have a keen sense of how to keep our integrity. *My worry is that, if we continue to defend a rigid line of detachment from policy, we will lose our reason for existence—the opportunity to elevate the policy debate.* Policymakers have often stated that, when the IC becomes a part of a policy-intelligence task force working a particular problem,

¹⁶ Secretary Colin L. Powell, "Testimony before the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee," 13 September 2004.

the intelligence provided becomes much better targeted to assist the policymaker. This is in part because, when we stay outside the policy circles, we have less understanding of what is really needed. Whereas when we are in the circle, we are better able to target our resources and analysis to the exacting needs of the moment.

This brings me to my final recommendation and that is the need for a *Center for the Study of the Intelligence Innovation administered by the ODNI*. As noted above, we can do a great deal by reaching out to former officials, the academic community and think tanks for help on educating our consumers. But ultimately we should have a permanent staff of professionals who study this centrally important question on a continuing basis. The Center for the Study of Intelligence (CSI) at CIA provides a good model for this activity and is adapting to widen its focus beyond CIA. CSI recently has begun assuming the IC's Lessons Learned and history functions and is thus taking a greater community role. Policymaker needs are dynamic and change quickly because of the flow of world events and rapid technological advances. If we are to remain relevant, we cannot neglect serious study of the policy-intelligence interface.

