Facts, Findings, Forecasts, and Fortune-telling

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Jack Davis served in the Directorate of Intelligence.

In the post–Cold War era of declining resources for intelligence and increasing criticism of analytic performance, definition of the professional mission of CIA's Directorate of Intelligence (DI) has become an important task for leaders and well-wishers alike. An agreed and realistic definition would boost morale and productivity by helping to determine how to select, train, deploy, and reward analysts and their managers. Clarification of mission would also provide guidance on what to do more of and less of; in effect, on how analysts and their managers should invest the Nth hour of a busy day.

Mission definition, to cite a former Deputy Director for Intelligence (DDI), is by its nature a "difficult and somewhat metaphysical" task.[1] I write in part to encourage readers of *Studies in Intelligence* to join in the quest for a satisfactory characterization of the role of intelligence analysis.

The mission statement I offer, warts and all, is intended to meet three overlapping standards: provide key policy officials with distinctive professional support they will choose to rely on; promote the national interest by contributing to sound policymaking; ensure appropriate funding from Congress:

> *Intelligence analysis is the process of providing objective and effective support to help US policymakers, by means of information and assessments on events overseas, to carry out their mission of formulating and implementing national security policy.*

Under the requirements of this definition, a DI analyst's work has to provide values that are taken seriously by policymakers as well as exhibit rigorous treatment of evidence, inference, and judgment. The national interest is not well served by an unimpeachably objective assessment that key officials judge to add little value to their policymaking processes.

The needs of policymakers—especially what hands-on officials seek in support of their daily management of issues—has to be a central concern of intelligence makers. This is no trivial point. Former policy officials are quick to say on the record that they did not read some of the products the Agency sent to help them because they saw no loss in not knowing what was in them.[2]

At the same time, the national interest is not well served by an assessment much admired by policy officials that does not meet the standards of sound analytic tradecraft. Carefully weighed evidence and rigorously structured argumentation has to form the core of the analysts' papers and briefings, not their opinions or those of policy officials. This point too is made by former policy officials, both on and off the record.[3]

Analysts and managers who participated in the dozen runnings of the "Workshop on Reaching Policymakers" conducted during 1993-94 raised two thoughtful challenges to

Studies in Intelligence 39(3), 1995; 25-30.

this definition of the DI mission as elaborated in their reading books and in class exercises:[4]

- First, that the emphasis on close support of policy officials encourages politicization of analysis.
- Second, that constraints on analysts' opinions also debase the intelligence mission.

Politicization

Effective analysis requires the analyst to intrude into the policymaking process—to organize the available information and assumptions on contentious issues and to assist in implementing goals, including long-shot policy objectives. Analysts have to treat the most important policymakers working their accounts as "clients" in need of such professional services. Or, to use the former DDI's sports analogy, as *football coaches* in need of the specialized assistance that only *scouts* working on their behalf can provide.[5]

Why? Because policymaking is the only national security game in town. Intelligence analysts have to work through policymakers to contribute to the national interest (and, on a more pedestrian level, to earn their pay).

That said, can intelligence professionals provide close analytic support on difficult and debatable policy issues (Cuba, Caucasus, China) without opening themselves up to charges of politicization?

I know of no generally accepted definition of *politicization,* although it is usually meant to imply the breach of professionalism on the part of intelligence analysts and managers. Politicization cannot reasonably be defined to mean providing support to the policymaking process, because that is why intelligence analysis exists in the first place. At least, under my definition of mission, it cannot mean *effective* support—that is, sought-after and useful information and insight that gets at the policymakers' operational concerns about avoiding dangers and seizing opportunities.

Also, a meaningful definition of politicization should take account of the reality that the mixing of policymaking with personal, bureaucratic, and partisan politics is as American as apple pie. More than one former policymaker has observed that senior officials spend at least as much time trying to leverage their US counterparts in Washington as they do working directly against their problems overseas.

If effective relations between intelligence and policy professionals require the former to provide close support to the daily business of the latter, any mission statement that seals off intelligence analysis from politics seals it off from a significant (that is, fundable) role in the policymaking process.

That said and accepted, politicization as a debasement of professionalism cannot refer to intelligence assessments that seek to structure the substantive debates of competing policy officials by addressing contentious factors that could influence the outcome of their policy deliberations. Nor can it mean providing professional analytic support to the politically tinged action agendas that can emerge from the process. If the President wants to defy what the analysts see as the ground truth in country X, analysts are professionally obligated both to point out the long odds and to provide judgments and insights to shorten those odds.

Politicization, then, should be defined as something much different from close professional support to policymakers and policymaking. I define it as:

> *The distortion of analysis by setting aside or otherwise failing to meet the standards of objectivity in setting forth information and judgments—in order to support a world view or policy preference.*

Debasement of professional norms has happened in the past when analysts and their managers have given into bullying from a policy official or have deliberately distorted the analytic process at their own initiative. Politicization also takes place when analysts and managers, with or without awareness, let their own policy biases skew the marshaling of evidence and judgments.

The analytic profession needs to erect strong institutional guards against politicization; whatever its roots, it erodes confidence in the integrity of analysis, at times on the part of colleague analysts, at times on the part of policy officials. I contend that *objectivity* as I have defined it—a professional ethic that celebrates tough-mindedness and clarity in applying rules of evidence, inference, and judgment—is the only realistic safeguard.

Studies in Intelligence 39(3), 1995; 25-30.

Here, *realistic* means a practice that works without turning off the policymaker as client and thus, over time, Congressional funding as well. Trying to guard integrity by distancing the analyst from policymaking will not do.

Two additional observations on taking an experience-based measure of the danger of politicization. First, policymakers want to succeed. And most have learned that faulry premises, while they can at times turn policy debates, undercut the prospects for policy success. As one former ranking official explained his own strong commitment to objectivity:

> *Policymakers are like surgeons. They don't last long if they ignore what they see when they cut an issue open.*[6]

Finally, close professional ties between analysts and policymakers usually promote frankness, mutual respect, and even mutual dependence. In my experience, these in turn promote analysis to help understand and deal with tough problems, not analysis to please.

The Analytic Food Chain

A question asked these days by DI analysts, in hallways as well as classrooms, is whether intelligence professionals are still entitled to an opinion. Based on the proposed mission definition, the answer has to be *no*. The authority to interpret today's events and predict tomorrow's developments in DI papers and briefings has to be earned, first by hard work in amassing and arraying the available evidence, and then by constructing and clarifying the

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argumentation, behind all judgments. Sound tradecraft works equally well as protection against politicization and as the basis for more reliable analysis generally.

I endorse the efforts by DI leaders to place greater emphasis in papers and briefings on careful consideration of evidence and on judgments anchored in research expertise and sound reasoning. Survival of the DI as an independent cadre of analysts depends in good measure on its commitment to use rigorous analytic tradecraft to distinguish its work on behalf of policymakers from that of journalists, policy advocates, and other wordsmiths working the national security field.[7]

This in turn requires pushing DI assessments down what I call the *analytic food chain:* From fortune-telling to forecasts, and ultimately to facts and findings. Here, I use the following definitions:

Facts: vetified information related to an intelligence issue (for example, events, measured characteristics).

Findings: expert knowledge based on organized information that indicates, for example, what is increasing, decreasing, changing, taking on a pattern.

Forecasts: judgments (interpretations, predictions) based on facts and findings and defended by sound and clear argumentation.

Fortune-telling: inadequately explained and defended judgments.

The DI effort represents in part an adjustment to internal and external criticism of the quality of analysis. The managers professionally responsible for all issuances from the Directorate and the constituent offices want analysts to be more explicit about what they know and how they know it, as well as what they do not know that could affect the issue being addressed. One goal is to reduce avoidable error by relying more on evidence and logic and less on rhetoric and authority. As the former DDI put his bid for adding greater rigor, and thus greater modesty, to analysts' judgments, "We are not in the prophesy business."

More significantly, the DI's increased emphasis on facts and findings is a response to signals from hands-on policymakers that the analysts' in-depth knowledge helps them get through daily rounds of making decisions and taking actions. As a rule, they find that insights from what is known provide more *added value* than predictions about what is unknown, even unknowable. Why? Departmental assistant secretaries, NSC staff directors, and like policy officials see themselves as the *analysts of last resort*—the assessors who make the judgments for the President and other bosses on what is going on in country X and what lies ahead on issue Y. What these hands-on policy officials want most from intelligence professionals is solid information and sound argumentation for reaching *their own* bottom-line conclusions.[8]

Studies in Intelligence 39(3), 1995; 25-30.

In this sense, the role of intelligence analysis is to *reduce uncertainty for policy officials.* On many issues—what next for the Russian economy, for Cuban politics, for South Africa's military, for Iranian S&T—neither intelligence nor policy professionals can eliminate uncertainty. The latter, though, would prefer to be as well informed as possible before trying to seize opportunities and ward off dangers.

How best does the intelligence analyst reduce uncertainty for key policymakers? To use the scout–coach analogy, not by predicting the score before the game is played, but by providing specialized information and insights that help the policy official in making the best game plan. And, during the game or implementation phase of policy, the analyst sits in the stands with a powerful pair of binoculars and a book full of findings on the opponent's strengths and weaknesses to provide help in calling individual plays.

Policy officials are explicit and nearly unanimous here. The reason they prefer customized assessments (for example, timely and actionable memorandums) to broadcast publications (for example, feature articles in the *National Intelligence Daily* (NID)) is that they want to be helped up their individual learning curves. A former official attested that at one time he had been spending 60 plus hours a week on an important negotiation. He was insulted when the Agency sent him a NID feature telling the "story" of the week's events:

> *I am the story. Please tell me what you know that I don't know.*[9]

Similarly, the main reason many policy officials prefer oral briefings to written products is because they welcome the opportunity to "cross-examine" the analyst, probing for what he or she knows that could be helpful in making decisions amidst inevitable uncertainty.

Facts

Based on the casual sample of DI papers I have read over the last year or so, I see a decided increase in evidence-based analysis targeted for small numbers of hands-on policy officials. But analysts, and some managers, still complain that presenting factual materials is some kind of sub-analytic pursuit—and a disruption of their "real work."

I would argue that weighing evidence to determine what is known about a complex affair is a central *analytic* responsibility. An analyst can never be too well versed in the rules of evidence. What standard of proof is needed to determine what a foreign leader said? What he meant? What he fears and hopes? What he plans to do next?

Again, knowing and applying rules of evidence is no trivial matter, if analysts expect policy officials to rely on intelligence reports in making decisions on whether, when, and how to take action. Some veteran analysts, myself included, are willing to admit that at times they placed credence in highly classified information that turned out to be either third-hand speculation or an attempt at deception.

Findings

I believe that research findings or organized information on subjects of importance to policymakers will over time become the analysts' most important and appreciated contribution to the policymaking process.

Communication technology is eroding the analyst's advantage in being first to know what happened yesterday. The policymakers' preference to make their own bottom-line call on the important issues on their agenda is eroding the analyst's advantage in being the first to predict what will happen tomorrow. These trends increase the relative importance of having organized information at the ready to inform both the analysts' interpretations and predictions and those of policy officials.

The challenge to the DI here is to provide the same resources and recognition to research that leads to a powerful database—say for analyzing the political strength of contending forces in important countries—that once were given to published research papers. By powerful I mean solidly grounded, up to date, ready to go to the support of a memo or briefing, and set up to be used by the next tenant of the substantive account. With accelerating changes in policy agenda and analyst assignments and increased reliance on "analytic teams," corporate and not individual findings will count most.

Anchoring Judgments

By definition, analytic judgments are inherently subject to error. Analysts interpret, explain, and predict on

Studies in Intelligence 39(3), 1995; 25-30.

matters they do not or cannot know with full confidence. There is, then, no such thing as safe estimating. The peril of unintended consequences can be reduced, however, by anchoring estimative judgments via tradecraft that takes account of findings and warrants sound argumentation and precise communication of conclusion, reasoning, risk, and alternatives. Under my classification of analysis, these processes define a forecast.

The distinction between forecasting and fortune-telling is not that the first always provides a correct and the second an incorrect answer. The difference is that policy readers can see that forecasts are secured by findings and rigorous and transparent argumentation. Fortune-telling comes across to the reader as unanchored judgments. Perhaps the analyst possesses ample data and has reasoned carefully. But the reader cannot know that this is the case, and that the analyst has not relied instead on incomplete evidence, speculation, and bias. One veteran policy official refers to inadequately explained judgments as "the tablets handed down by the intelligence priesthood."[10]

Linchpin analysis is one way of showing managers and policy officials alike that all the bases have been touched. Linchpin analysis, a colorful term for structured forecasting, is an anchoring tool that seeks to reduce the hazard of self-inflicted error as well as policymaker misinterpretation. At a minimum, linchpin tradecraft induces rigor through a series of *predrafting checkpoints,* outlined below. Analysts can also use it to organize and evaluate their texts when addressing issues of high uncertainty. Reviewing managers can use linchpin standards to assure that the argument in such assessments is sound and clear:

- First, analysts identify the main uncertain factors or key variables they judge likely to drive the outcome of the issue. This forces systematic attention to the range of and relationships among factors at play.

- Second, analysts determine the *linchpin premises* or working assumptions about the drivers. This encourages testing of the key subordinate judgments that hold the estimative conclusion together.

- Third, because the premises that warrant the bottom-line conclusion are subject to debate as well as error, analysts marshal findings and reasoning in defense of the linchpins.

- Finally, because of the US stake in the outcome, analysts address the circumstances under which unexpected developments could occur. What *indicators* or patterns of development could emerge to signal that the linchpins were unreliable? And *what triggers* or dramatic internal and external events could reverse the expected momentum?

Linchpin tradecraft, again, is a tool to incorporate rigor into analysis of matters of considerable uncertainty. It is not an end in itself. Every analytic assignment represents distinct challenges regarding subject and audience and thus distinct challenges regarding how to explicate the judgments. Experienced analysts can achieve the same analytical insurance provided by linchpin tradecraft via a variety of anchoring practices.

That said, the institutional standard should be fixed: *When a DI paper or briefing makes estimative judgments on issues of importance to US national security interests, policy readers are provided with precise and powerful backup argumentation.*

But what if—as has happened—a policymaker at a briefing session wants the analyst to *hold the analysis and just make a call?* Policy officials vary at least as much as analysts, and at times some will ask for a bottom line laid bare.

Even here, I recommend the analyst substitute an *If, Then Projection* for a prediction. Explain what is driving the situation and the related linchpin premises. Make clear the call is based on these staying on track. Cause-and effect analysis will take an extra minute. But the requester will know he or she is dealing with a DI analyst.

The NID may be the toughest nut to crack, because most articles do not lend adequate space for argumentation. At least to me, this makes the case that analyst commentary should avoid prediction and rely instead on findings (especially what is seen as new and different in the reported events). Here, too, when a need to address future developments is deemed unavoidable, projections should be substituted for predictions.

There is a difference, for example, between predicting the success or failure of a military offensive, a political scheme, or an economic initiative and pointing to the precedents and patterns that will influence the

Studies in Intelligence 39(3), 1995; 25-30.

outcome. Anchoring judgments to findings can often be executed economically, in terms of the space required to meet the standard of sound and distinctive analytic tradecraft.

NOTES

1. Douglas J. MacEachin. *The Tradecraft of Analysis: Challenge and Change in the CIA; 1994; p. 3.*

2. See, for example, Jack Davis, "A Policymaker's Perspective on Intelligence," *Studies in Intelligence,* summer 1994, which cites Ambassador Robert Blackwill, former NSC Staff Senior Director.

3. Paul D. Wolfowitz, former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. Interview with the author, 13 December 1994.

4. The "Workshops on Reaching Policymakers through Opportunity Analysis" were taught jointly with L. Keith Gardiner.

5. Douglas MacEachin at the Meeting of the Working Group on Intelligence Reform, Consortium for the Study of Intelligence, 7 February 1994.

6. A former policy official at the meeting cited above.

7. MacEachin, *Tradecraft of Analysis.*

8. Herman J. Cohen, former Assistant Secretary of State for Africa. Interview with the author, 20 August 1994.

9. A former policy official at a meeting sponsored jointly by CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence and the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, Georgetown University, March 1993.

10. Wolfowitz interview, 13 December 1994.

Studies in Intelligence 39(3), 1995; 25-30.