

Bridging the Intelligence-Policy Divide

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“Intelligence failure” is a frequent topic of discussion in news media and academic journals. The focus usually is on a failure of the Intelligence Community to predict events abroad—a dramatic development like the overthrow of the Shah of Iran or a longer term trend like the collapse of Communism. Observers also criticize policymakers who fail to heed intelligence warnings, as in the Vietnam war or US involvement in Lebanon. But there is a third type of weakness that can reduce the effectiveness of intelligence and policy—the failure of communication between intelligence officers and policy officials.

In recent years, both intelligence officers and policy officials have taken important steps to improve understanding of each other and to bridge the cultural gap that can reduce effective communication between the two groups. With this in mind, the CIA’s Center for the Study of Intelligence and Georgetown University’s Institute for the Study of Diplomacy have sponsored an ongoing dialogue between current and former intelligence officers and policy officials in the hope that discussion of their experiences will provide valuable insights for current and future practitioners. This article summarizes the results of about 20 interviews and three seminars that include more than 60 intelligence officers and policy officials.

The “Tribal Tongues” Phenomenon

Observers of US national security decisionmaking have noted that a cultural barrier between policy and intelligence can defeat efficient use of intelligence. According to this view, intelligence officers tend to look at issues in abstract, scholarly terms, while policy officials are more pragmatic and activist in their outlook. Intelligence officers complain that policymakers ignore reality abroad; policy officials counter that intelligence officers are too detached

from the reality of Washington and do not have to take responsibility for their errors of judgment. Mark Lowenthal has dubbed this difference the “tribal tongues” phenomenon. In his view, intelligence and policy officials, like Britons and Americans in George Bernard Shaw’s famous quip, are “divided by a common tongue.”¹

Strategies for Improving Relations

Over the past decade, a number of intelligence officers and policy officials have overcome these divisions and created successful strategies for integrating intelligence into the policy process. The key element in all these strategies has been a recognition that intelligence and policy personnel have to function as members of a team, and that direct communication, feedback, and careful tailoring of support are essential.

Although officials participating in the dialogue differed as to whether intelligence or policy officers should take the lead in forging closer relationships, all agreed that the effective use of intelligence in policymaking is a shared responsibility. They also noted that, although intelligence officers have to “sell” their products to policymakers, it is the quality of intelligence support that makes for strong relationships. Many interviewees criticized the high volume of general intelligence publications and complained about overclassification.

Both intelligence and policy officials stressed the need for timely, actionable intelligence, tailored to the requirements of particular officials and events. They agreed that there is a continuing need to foster expertise and objectivity. And officials from both camps stressed the need for intelligence agencies to coordinate their efforts and reduce unnecessary competition and redundant products.

Thus far, the dialogue has identified a number of techniques that foster closer intelligence-policy ties. The following sections describe the elements of these techniques and provide anecdotes that illustrate how successful policy and intelligence officials have worked together.

Experiences of Policy Officials

Finding Out What Intelligence Can Do. Policy officials have benefited from planning their relationships with intelligence providers. For some first-time appointees, this required accepting a quick tutorial on how the key intelligence agencies work. Many policymakers also took steps to understand the various types of intelligence reporting and how best to use them. Knowing the potential and limits of espionage or technical sources and how intelligence collectors evaluate them has been invaluable to policymakers in trying to deal effectively with complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty:

- CIA's Directorate of Intelligence (DI) has produced classified handbooks for policy officials detailing the support that it can offer.
- The Intelligence Community has tutorials available in the form of briefings, videos, and handbooks on collection sources and analytical methods.

Many policy officials have found that intelligence officers know details of the policy environment abroad that can help policy officials to refine ideas and package them to improve the chances of a policy success.² They can also be valuable sources of information that can be shared with foreign leaders in support of US policy:

- During the Cuban missile crisis, intelligence officers briefed key foreign leaders on the facts of Soviet missile deployment while policy officials sought support for the US response. Similar briefings for foreign officials became a cornerstone of US efforts to gain allied support for arms control proposals.
- Intelligence officers have worked closely with policy officials to develop information to support demarches to foreign countries on weapons proliferation and technology transfer issues.

Making Time For Intelligence. A number of the policymakers interviewed said that they found it useful to make themselves and their top staff aides available to intelligence and shared their schedules and agendas with intelligence counterparts:

- Some intelligence units have arranged to keep policymakers informed while they travel abroad via specialized cables timed to arrive at their various ports of call. In at least one instance, such specialized support alerted an Ambassador to the position of a foreign official hours before their meeting.
- With advance notice of meetings of the NSC Principals' or Deputies' Committees, intelligence officers have provided briefing papers, talking points, and tailored reporting to support policy discussions.

Encouraging Participation. A number of policymakers have brought intelligence officers directly onto their teams:

- Rotational assignments of intelligence officers to policy agencies have benefited both intelligence and policy organizations. One former NSC senior director had both CIA and DIA officers on his staff.
- Many policy officials invite intelligence officers to senior staff meetings. Others ask intelligence representatives to travel with them, to contribute "think pieces" for their private use, or to meet informally to discuss current developments.

Policy officials have used intelligence officers as soundingboards, relying on their discretion to protect policy ideas in the formulation stage:

- Before his death in the bombing of the US Embassy in Beirut, Robert Ames, National Intelligence Officer (NIO) for the Near East, was a key member of the backstopping team on US policy toward Lebanon. Ames's contribution was unique because he was a manager of analysis who also had many years of operational experience.

- One NSC Staff senior director convened an informal weekly meeting of policy and intelligence officers to share information and brainstorm issues. No notes were kept, and no policy positions were taken.

Asking Questions. Policy officials have found it useful to lay out tasks and requirements to take advantage of the specialized resources available to their intelligence counterparts. In addition to assistance in obtaining information on short-fuse issues, intelligence—with appropriate guidance—can provide insights about over-the-horizon policy concerns:

- While they concentrated on short-range issues, policy officials often task intelligence to speculate on mid- and long-term issues that may become more important. One State Department analyst recognized the growing weakness of Philippine President Marcos some four years before his fall.
- One policy official thought of the Intelligence Community as a library. When she needed factual information on analytical insights urgently, she tasked her intelligence counterpart for a quick answer.

Many policy officials have made an effort to involve intelligence officers in conceptualizing issues and developing terms of reference for policy analyses:

- One DCI Intelligence Center has developed a strategic plan to anticipate policy objectives, identify collection and analysis requirements, and report to policymakers on foreign reactions to US initiatives.
- An intelligence organization that was not in the loop was asked to provide a “threat projection” to support a major weapon acquisition decision. The time period of the projection fell more than a decade short of the expected life cycle of the weapon. When criticized, the intelligence officers responded, “That is what we were tasked to do.”

Experience has shown that it is also important that policy officials ask questions that intelligence officers can answer:

- “What should I do?” takes the intelligence officer over the line from intelligence to policy. Rephrasing the question as an intelligence requirement

will often yield useful insights. “Whom do I have to convince in country X?” or “Under what circumstances would leader Y change his mind?” are examples.

- A policy official in charge of a traveling negotiating team asked for an analysis of the likely tactics of the other country. The analysis showed that the adversary was planning to exploit divisions in the US delegation, and the official reorganized his team members’ responsibilities to limit the damage.

Providing Feedback and Sharing Information. Along with specific tasking, the policy officials who made effective use of intelligence have let intelligence officers know whether they were satisfied or dissatisfied with the support they received. Intelligence officers are used to criticism and debate, and they will accept and profit from direct and frank feedback:

- One former policy official made it clear he wanted to see the working analysts’ rough drafts on tasking he posed and not the version varnished by layers of review and editing. The same policy official insisted on exchanges in his office with working analysts as well as their managers.
- Criticism of intelligence analysis in the early 1980s on the proposed Soviet-European gas pipeline permitted intelligence officers to sharpen their assessments and contribute to a shift in US policy from opposing the pipeline to limiting European dependence on Soviet gas.

Policy officials who wanted insightful analysis have also kept intelligence officers informed about important information that may affect their judgments as well as future issues or events:

- One intelligence staff used its knowledge of policymakers’ concerns to convene monthly roundtable meetings of analysts and collectors and to produce calendars of future events; the result was reporting better targeted to policy needs.
- Because they were privy to reports from the special envoy, State Department intelligence officers

were able to provide timely support on US policy toward Lebanon in the early 1980s. CIA analysts, however, were not aware of the special envoy's activities, and they could not bring their expertise and sources to bear to meet his needs.

Initiatives by Intelligence Officers

Learning About the Policy World. Whatever steps policy officials may have taken, experience has shown that a major burden of bridging the cultural divide rests with the intelligence officers. Some intelligence collection and analysis units have developed training programs on the policy process. But intelligence officers have been most effective when they had direct experience in the policy process; only then could they anticipate policymakers' needs and develop collection or analytical strategies to support them. Intelligence managers have assigned "fast-track" officers to tours in policy agencies and on negotiating and backstopping teams. Intelligence liaison officers assigned to policymaking agencies have also provided valuable insights:

- CIA liaison officers at policy agencies have met regularly to discuss strategies for supporting their customers. The DI has appointed an officer to be the focal point for liaison support.
- Joint participation in war games and policy simulations has sensitized policy officials and intelligence officers to each others' cultures and contribute to closer working relationships.

Identifying Key Customers. Intelligence agencies have long produced large amounts of reporting and analysis that are disseminated broadly throughout policy agencies. But because of resource limitations, intelligence organizations have found it increasingly necessary to concentrate their support efforts on those policymakers who have the greatest impact on decisions.

In many cases this means focusing on senior officials, but many participants in this project advised that an effective dialogue is required at all levels of the policy process. Several noted that the relationship between intelligence experts and desk-level officers in policy agencies is particularly important, because it is here that the options are formulated for decisions by senior officials.

Intelligence officers have to devote considerable effort to determine the most influential individuals among policy officials. Here, too, liaison officers have helped by identifying who carries the most weight. Successful intelligence officers also have studied writings and public statements of key policymakers, watched them on TV talk shows, and read press reports on both policy issues and Washington politics. Many have worked initially through senior staffs to gain insights into the decisionmaker's priorities and, over time, to gain direct access:

- One NIO used issues raised in a policymaker's speech on regional policy to organize a series of sessions with intelligence analysts and policy officials.
- One important side benefit of the State Department reorganization that is now under way is the empowerment of lower-ranking officers—country directors and desk officers in particular—with greater influence over policy formulation.

Intelligence officers have had to look for matches between analytic or collection strengths and the professional needs of policy officials. Thus, during initial contacts, effective intelligence officers have briefed policy officials with specificity on how intelligence can advance their policy agendas—what services are available on what issues in what formats:

- Initial briefings of new policy officials have included a substantive overview, a summary of available products, and directories and phone numbers of experts in the policy official's areas of responsibility.
- In a first briefing of a new Under Secretary, a senior intelligence officer warned, "Here is an area in which I am going to frustrate you. I will keep you informed of developments, but the outlook is pessimistic, and no one has devised an effective strategy."

Taking the Initiative. One universal recommendation of experienced hands on both sides of the divide is that intelligence officers must take the initiative to establish ties to policy counterparts. Often, the good offices of those with access are used. For example, senior intelligence leaders have set up luncheon meetings with key officials;³ liaison officers can help—indeed, almost any intelligence professional who has had experience working with the policy officer can facilitate access:

- Many appointees of new administrations served previously in government or have come from academic institutions. Some were well known to former intelligence officers. Others have been accessible through academic colleagues of intelligence specialists.
- Some intelligence organizations have set up informal conferences involving newly appointed policy officials and academic specialists, as well as intelligence officers. These events, especially the opportunity for wide-ranging, off-the-record discussions, have often facilitated continuing relationships.

With or without such assistance, many intelligence officers have taken steps to inform policy officials, especially new ones, of available expertise and services, and to educate them on the intelligence process. Such initiatives have often been tied to a major event, such as a visit by a foreign official or a trip by the policymaker. Intelligence officers have provided briefings for policy officials on the factors affecting the foreign visitor's views or the domestic politics of the countries on the travel itinerary:

- The CIA has long produced brief video profiles of foreign leaders. The objective, according to the head of the analytical office, is to make a policymaker's first meeting with a foreign official seem like the second.
- Other intelligence products highly valued by policymakers have included biographic and personality profiles on foreign leaders, maps and graphics, papers and charts that summarize complex data, and sensitive reports from intelligence sources.

The most effective intelligence officers realize that their information has to be delivered in a form that is useful for the policy official. Because policy officials are action oriented, the most effective intelligence has been presented in formats that are easy to use and at the lowest possible classification level. Generally, intelligence officers should favor oral presentations in conversations where policymakers can ask questions and challenge judgments:

- Intelligence advisers to senior arms control negotiators usually brief them each morning when abroad and visit them in Washington to hand-carry reports and analytical papers of particular interest.
- When briefing policy officials, intelligence officers often have been asked if their information can be used in a public statement or private demarche to a foreign country. Sometimes, intelligence officers have prepared a "sanitized" version of the information in advance.

Sustaining the Relationship. Recognizing that they are operating in a highly competitive "buyer's market," many intelligence officers have assumed most of the burden of sustaining effective ties. Here, responsiveness—tailormade support for the policy official's needs—usually induces reactions that nurture a lasting relationship. In keeping up their side of the relationship, the intelligence officers' access to all-source information provides a key comparative advantage for adding value to the policymaking process:

- Intelligence reporting and analysis has often put in perspective information that policy officials hear from their foreign counterparts.
- Articles in current intelligence publications like the *National Intelligence Daily* have been valuable to policymakers when they provide intelligence not available from the media, including details of foreign military deployments or political insights from agent reports.

Many intelligence officers ask policy officials to identify the media for exchange that suits them best—briefings, bull sessions, written reports—and the mixture of information, explanation, and prediction that provides the most benefit:

- A senior intelligence staff chief supplemented the formal intelligence assessments for his customers with short “private papers” that were not formally coordinated and were focused on current policy debates.
- A CIA operations officer gave the Assistant Secretary responsible for his region an envelope each week containing the 10 best field information reports.
- A newly appointed Deputy Secretary found that his weekly schedule included formal briefings by the heads of departmental intelligence units. One day, he asked his aide, “Who are those people in the back row?” “They’re the desk officers—the experts,” the aide replied. The Deputy Secretary cancelled the briefings and replaced them with weekly informal chats with the experts.

Regular and frequent exchanges have provided important benefits to the intelligence professional. The policy official, for example, has special knowledge of the alternatives under consideration by the US Government, on the terms of debate among US decisionmakers, and on the information transmitted privately by foreign counterparts. Moreover, exposure to the policymaker’s personal analysis of issues can sharpen the intelligence officers’ command of the subject:

- Many intelligence officers have developed close working relationships with policy officials by volunteering to participate in evening and weekend meetings, and to carry out supporting tasks, such as keeping the master text of a paper or advising on security matters.
- During the Gulf war, secure teleconferences among intelligence and policy officials were conducted frequently, providing both groups with up-to-date information and ready access to experts from each department and agency.

Stressing Actionable Intelligence. Policymakers are often uninterested in or hostile to the Intelligence Community’s predictions. Policymakers look to

intelligence primarily for facts. Many report a preference for “opportunity analysis” that helps them implement established policies or develop new ones by pointing to opportunities for using leverage to support US initiatives. Examples of opportunity analysis include:

- A memo prepared for a former President assessing the reasons for anti-US statements by a foreign leader and steps that could be taken to ameliorate his hostility.
- An assessment of public opinion in a key country and suggested themes for a US public diplomacy campaign.
- A cataloging of the strengths and weaknesses of a potential military adversary, together with suggestions on how to exploit the weaknesses.

In most relationships, timeliness has been all but synonymous with responsiveness in the policy official’s mind. For some accounts, secure fax machines have also met the standard of timeliness. Examples of timely intelligence support include:

- Quickly disseminated, lightly annotated reports affecting the dynamics of a negotiation.
- Customized support cables for traveling officials.
- Regularly updated data sets, graphics, and biographies.

“What If” and “Low Probability–High Impact” assessments and other forms of alternative analysis have also provided vehicles for adding value to the policymaking process.⁴ Under circumstances of high uncertainty and policy sensitivity, they help place the focus on the policymakers’ questions and concerns.

Some Special Issues

Multiple Voices and Information Overload. Policy officials are sometimes confounded by the multiplicity of intelligence officers and organizations that clamor for attention. And nearly all the policymakers

interviewed for this project complained about the deluge of intelligence reporting and analysis that they receive. They have been particularly critical of intelligence that is too general, that adds little to what is available from open sources, or that is hard to use because it is too highly classified.

The support that a policymaker requires, and the appropriate contact within the Intelligence Community, varies depending on the issue, specific information needs, or personal considerations. Departmental intelligence organizations such as the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, the Defense Department's Defense Intelligence Agency, and the intelligence components of the military services are close to officials in their departments, can provide support quickly, and are sensitive to departmental concerns. National intelligence organizations such as the CIA have collection and analytical responsibilities that transcend the requirements of any single department. The CIA was created specifically to provide intelligence that was independent of the departments' policy agendas.

The National Intelligence Council, with its NIOs, is responsible for producing National Intelligence Estimates that draw on the analytical resources of the entire Intelligence Community. NIOs, who specialize in regions or functional issues, come about as close to "one-stop shopping" as can be found in the US intelligence establishment; they can provide a window into all the elements of the Intelligence Community. They represent the community at policy meetings, and they are conversant with the views of all intelligence agencies. Many develop close and effective working relationships with policy counterparts. DCI Centers for counterintelligence, counterterrorism, counternarcotics and nonproliferation also provide a single focal point for policy support on these issues.

Intelligence officers have to understand the full range of policy needs, to provide feedback to all concerned intelligence organizations, and to tap all the resources of the Intelligence Community. Senior intelligence managers are increasingly aware of the weaknesses of generalized intelligence products and the need to avoid unnecessary duplication and competition. With the prospect of shrinking intelligence resources, these issues require continuing attention.

Dealing with Congress. For Executive Branch officials, there are few experiences more exasperating than seeing a carefully crafted policy initiative undercut because of intelligence reporting that fosters opposition from the Congress. Yet the Congress is a legitimate intelligence consumer that has become increasingly active.

Our system of government makes struggles between the Congress and the Executive Branch inevitable, intense, and political. Despite its aspirations to objectivity and detachment, intelligence will inevitably be used in those struggles. The disruption has been minimal when policy officials have alerted intelligence to the political sensitivity of issues, and the intelligence officers have informed policy officials in advance of reporting or analysis that may be controversial.

The intelligence officer's commitment to objectivity and to "leveling the playing field" has run into roadblocks when it had to be balanced against the policy official's commitment to advancing the President's program. Intelligence officers have felt a professional obligation to offer the same basic intelligence judgments to all parties, but no similar obligation to report on US policy; indeed, they have generally been reluctant to comment on policy even if asked.⁵ When briefing Congressional staffs, for example, the CIA's Arms Control Intelligence Staff invited State Department representatives to field policy questions.

Intelligence Analysis and Covert Action. Some policymakers have been especially concerned about the objectivity of analysis on regions where the CIA is conducting a covert action, or where senior intelligence officers have expressed strong policy views.⁶ This is a concern for intelligence managers as well. With the ending of the Cold War, covert action is likely to diminish in scale; according to DCI R. James Woolsey, the portion of the CIA budget devoted to covert action has declined to 1 percent. But it remains incumbent on intelligence officials to ensure objective analysis regardless of the operational involvement of the Intelligence Community. Policy officials responsible for covert action have been best served when they were appropriately

agnostic, pressed intelligence analysts on the basis for their judgments, and sought out alternative views among informed (and appropriately cleared) critics.

A Final Caution

This report has documented a clear trend toward an increasingly close relationship between intelligence and policy. This is becoming the new orthodoxy, supplanting the traditional view that intelligence should be kept at arms length from policy and concerned principally with the objectivity of its assessments. The authors, and most of the intelligence and policy officials interviewed for this project, support the new trend. But there also is continuing validity in the traditional concerns.

Intelligence managers have to recognize that more effective policy support requires the building and maintaining of expertise. Intelligence officials know that professional knowledge and expertise are their principal assets in the policy process. In view of the new issues now facing the Clinton Administration, the Intelligence Community has to develop the expertise to provide support on topics that previously were low on the scale of priorities or not covered at all.

Similarly, intelligence managers have to continue to foster professional integrity, and they cannot hesitate to render judgments that conflict with policy assumptions. There is a delicate balance to be struck between the intelligence officer's obligations to provide warning of adverse policy consequences on the one hand and to assist policymakers in crafting strategies for promoting US interests under conditions of great risk and uncertainty on the other. This is particularly challenging when the DCI or other senior intelligence officials are deeply involved in policy deliberations and have their own views about policy matters.

The track record of intelligence is far from perfect. Failure to warn of such profound changes as the fall of the Shah of Iran and the 1973 Middle East war indicate a continuing need to strengthen collection and analysis. But these have also been situations from Vietnam to Lebanon in which the insights of intelligence analysis proved to be more correct than the views of officials who were immersed in policy arguments. This suggests a need for intelligence to follow a balanced approach, warning of dangers and helping to identify opportunities.

Policy officials also need to respect the professional objectivity of intelligence officers, and, while using their expertise to the fullest, must not try to make them into policy officials like themselves. To do so would undercut those very characteristics of intelligence officers that make a unique and valuable contribution to policy formation.

NOTES

1. "Tribal Tongues: Intelligence Consumers, Intelligence Producers," *Washington Quarterly*, winter 1992. Reprinted in the summer 1992 edition of *Studies in Intelligence*.
2. One former official, particularly successful in using intelligence, used an analogy dear to the hearts of Washington Redskins fans when he called intelligence officers his "analytical hogs."
3. In most administrations, DCIs have had regular meetings with the National Security Adviser and the Secretaries of State and Defense. Feedback from these meetings is an excellent source of information on the issues that these senior officials are focusing on and which officials in their organizations should receive intelligence support.
4. "What If" analysis seeks to determine the conditions that could change the analyst's judgment of the likely behavior of a foreign country; "Low Probability-High Impact" assessments deal with important contingencies that may be unlikely but which would have a major consequence for US policy.
5. This general observation may be less true at the most senior levels, where the distinction between intelligence and policy may be blurred.
6. Former Secretary of State George Shultz has noted in his memoirs that he became so concerned about DCI Casey's policy advocacy that he began to mistrust intelligence analysis in general.