

A Personal Perspective

Intelligence and Policy:

The Case for Thin Walls as Seen by a Veteran of INR

Bowman H. Miller, PhD

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall . . . [but]
"Good fences make good neighbors."*

—Robert Frost, “Mending Wall”

Each new presidential administration brings with it fresh expectations of the Intelligence Community (IC) that serves it. Given the fraught relationship evident in recent exchanges between the White House and former IC leaders over the IC’s 2016 report about Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election, there is reason to worry about today’s relationship between the intelligence and policy communities and to revisit the timeless questions, “How high and thick should the wall between the communities be?” and “Should there be a wall at all?”

As a veteran of State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), in my judgment, the model relationship—preserve a wall, but make it closer to none—exists within the State Department. A thick and impermeable wall does a great disservice to the nation, to its leaders, to sound decisionmaking, and to America’s allies and partners. Trust must be established and intelligence judgments must be received with confidence in the abilities of those who produce those judgments and in their good and honorable intentions.

In this essay, I argue that, while distinguishing between policy and intelligence is fundamentally important, the wall between the two needs to be characterized by the insights, experience, and wisdom of the likes of Sherman Kent and Sir Percy Cradock. These two titans in the annals of intelligence, American and British, rightly advocated for thin walls between intelligence and policy.

Sherman Kent and Sir Percy Cradock—Veterans’ Cautionary Insights

Often dubbed the father of US intelligence analysis, Sherman Kent published his seminal work on strategic

intelligence in 1949. In it he captured the essence of the problem:

Intelligence must be close enough to policy, plans, and operations to have the greatest amount of guidance, and must not be so close that it loses its objectivity and integrity of judgment To be properly guided in a given task intelligence one must know almost all about it. . . Intelligence is knowledge for the practical matter of taking action [Intelligence’s] job is to see that the doers are generally well-informed; its job is to stand behind them with book opened to the right page, to call their attention to the stubborn fact they may be neglecting, and—at their request—to analyze alternative courses without indicating choice. Intelligence cannot serve if it does not know the doers’ minds; it cannot serve if it has not their confidence; it cannot serve unless it has the kind of guidance any professional man must have from his client.^a

Kent was known to worry that, given too close a proximity to policy, analysts could be swayed in their judgments toward implied or explicit policy preferences—a matter of continuing concern. His focus on knowing intelligence’s “customer” has gone underappreciated, for it is knowing what the user knows, needs, does not realize he or she needs; the questions that need asking; and responses that are critical to a successful, mutually supportive relationship. From the views cited above, Kent clearly argued that intelligence cannot succeed if it is blind to the intentions and expectations of those in policy it serves. His pointed caveat, that intelligence has no business suggesting policy choices until or unless asked, remains crucial.

a. Sherman Kent, *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy* (Princeton University Press, 2015 [Princeton Legacy Library], 2015), 180, 182.

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Intelligence's role is to inform, not to influence. In effect, when it comes to talking or writing about policy, intelligence needs to heed the admonishment heretofore given to children—to speak when spoken to. By the same token, decisionmakers cannot thrust the blame for their failed policies onto intelligence, least of all if they have not even bothered to hear or read what intelligence has to offer.

For his part, Sir Percy Cradock, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's national security advisor and chairman of the British Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), uses a graphic metaphor to describe how intelligence and policy-making should relate:

The best arrangement is intelligence and policy in separate but adjoining rooms, with communicating doors and thin partition walls, as in cheap hotels.^a

Cradock went on to note the importance of being aware of what is going on next door, without necessarily witnessing it firsthand. This "cheap hotel" metaphor conjures up any number of images, but the point is well-taken. Like Kent, Cradock asserts the necessity that intelligence be in the know concerning policy deliberations and objectives if it is to be of relevant service to decision makers:

Ideally, intelligence and policy should be close but distinct. Too distinct and assessments become an in-growing, self regarding activity, producing little or no work of interest to decision-makers. . . . The analyst needs to be close enough to ministers to know the questions troubling them and he must not fight shy of tackling the major issues.^b

Bias in Both Camps: Shunning Cassandra and Garcia

What Kent and Cradock share is the overarching concern that intelligence prove itself a valuable and valued service to policy. It can only do that if it stays in its own lane—of independent collection and objective analysis. However, intelligence must be enabled to clearly observe what is going on in the parallel lane of policy and its deliberation. Intelligence fails if it sings to the policy choir,

if it loses its credibility and its readership, but also if it loses sight of its purpose in informing decisionmakers, regardless of the nature of the message.

Analysis is not and cannot be captive of, beholden to, or tainted by policy. However, it must still be acquainted with policy aims, instruments, and actions to be relevant to an informed decisionmaking process. All-source analysis is not the handmaiden of policy. But policy made without reference to intelligence and its judgments is a high-risk venture fraught with avoidable blindness.

One of the challenges in this relationship between intelligence and policy is recognizing the biases and mindsets on both sides. No one lacks bias. When commentators call out bias and politicization, they most often target intelligence that has been cherry-picked for what policymakers wish it to convey—or analysts or their betters trying to stay in tune with policy's known preferences and direction.

And almost always there will be a difference between the clear picture seen by a convinced policy-maker and the cloudy picture usually seen by intelligence.^c

The biases are quite different between the analytical world and the policy world. Analysts tend to focus on complexity, nuance, multiple explanations, a mix of variables, and often insurmountable uncertainties. Policy makers wrestle with complexity, but, given their need to come to decisions (and routinely to do so with less information than would be desirable), their urge is to ferret out facts, find simplicity, and, if possible, determine the one best answer, as Kent observed in his own commentary. "A single judgment is insufficient to characterize whatever situation we confront," he wrote, "not only because the judgment may be wrong, but also because it may miss important variables".^d

Policymakers are also analysts, at least in their own estimation. They form assumptions, sift information, and

a. Percy Cradock, *Know Your Enemy: How the Joint Intelligence Committee Saw the World* (John Murray, 2002), 296.

b. *Ibid.*

c. Thomas Hughes, *The Fate of Facts in a World of Men: Foreign Policy and Intelligence Making* (1976), quoted in Ephraim Kam, *Surprise Attack: The Victim's Perspective* (Harvard University Press, 2004), 200.

d. Paul Pillar, *Intelligence and U.S. Foreign Policy: Iraq, 9/11, and Misguided Reform* (Columbia University Press, 2011), 332.

envison estimates and reach conclusions. However, their focus and orientation are different:

The analytical process undertaken by decisionmakers is shorter and more simplified than that of the professional analyst, and images and conceptions play a larger role in it.^a

The biases of policymakers become apparent in their commitment to a given policy. That commitment involves sunk costs, stature, one's political capital and reputation, and averting accusations of vacillation. Analysis also takes time, precious time that policy decisions often cannot afford or will not tolerate. The late Richard Holbrooke, as the incoming assistant secretary of state for Europe and Eurasia in 1994, told me in no uncertain terms that he did not want to be bothered with streams of intelligence, but that, as his "chief of station," I was to get him only what he needed and when he needed it. This recipe for failure was not lost on me.

Policymakers yearn for pro and con, up or down, yes or no findings. Lacking such clarity, a danger arises when policymakers decide, on their own, to draw conclusions from raw data without the benefit of qualifying commentary and context from analysts.^b The veteran senior Israeli analyst Ephraim Kam notes, relevant to the present US condition, that distrust between policy and intelligence can result in no reference at all by policymakers to intelligence and analysis:

In extreme cases of mistrust, such as that of Stalin, decisionmakers may concentrate the entire assessment process in their own hands. This practice is not unique to totalitarian regimes.^c

This creates an impermeable wall, which is fraught with problems. At the same time, overreliance on intelligence as the basis of decisions can also be unhealthy and deleterious to sound and timely policy. If intelligence's assessment of an adversary's capabilities or intentions goes unchallenged and is the sole arrow in a decisionmaker's quiver, that can lead to tunnel vision and dangerous miscalculation.

a. Kam, *Surprise Attack*, 200

b. For his part, Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbot made this a key reminder to his own intelligence apparatus in the State Department in his farewell visit to INR.

c. Kam, *Surprise Attack*, 202

Contending with Bias

It is one thing to say bias is a universal human trait. It is quite another to claim that biases cannot be identified or moderated. One argument for thin walls between intelligence and policy is that they allow for a better chance that intelligence will recognize the biases that afflict policymakers and their decisionmaking in order to help them recognize blinders to a well-informed decision. Again, Paul Pillar put it succinctly:

The craving for certainty is even stronger with policymakers. They want to accomplish the policy agenda with which they came to office; they do not want to be diverted by the unexpected.^d

They hate surprise as much as they do roadblocks. Their desire is to be told how to achieve an objective, not why it appears unachievable.

Intelligence is not heralded as the frequent bringer of "good tidings." Often, its message is unpleasant, if not irksome. But, as former Secretary of State Colin Powell often reminded his staff, "bad news does not get better with age." His was the now well-known formula for the policy-intelligence nexus closest to the optimum, as seen from an intelligence perspective: "Tell me what you know; tell me what you do not or cannot know; but, most of all, give me your judgments." He went on to stipulate that once he had been given those, the analyst's responsibilities were fulfilled. He made plain that what he did with them was his decision and solely his responsibility—a welcome stance for analysts, who otherwise tend to hedge their bets or add qualifying adverbs to their views: "allegedly," "reportedly," "probably," "likely," and more.^e That freedom to remain objective and be candid proved liberating to those in analysis who supported Powell during his tenure at State.

Politicization vs. Objectivity

Many an analyst has felt the pressure, subliminally or explicitly, to hone their analysis toward the prevailing policy climate. Thus, in 2002, few if any were courageous enough to risk reputations and careers in questioning the George W. Bush administration's contention that Sadd-

d. Pillar, *Intelligence and Foreign Policy*, 333.

e. Personal recollection of the author.

am Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and that Iraq could be force-fed Western democracy.^a The two IC elements (Department of Energy and Department of State/INR) that placed footnotes of disagreement into the national intelligence estimate on the subject were variously extolled and lambasted. INR was at times tarred as the community's "step child" or, on the contrary, in an op-ed in the *Washington Post* as the "Spy World Success Story."^b Pilloried by some in the IC while winning plaudits in media and on Capitol Hill, members of State/INR felt whipsawed.

For all the pressures exerted on analysts to sing policy tunes, politicization of intelligence is not as frequent or endemic as many would have us believe. Moreover, most self-confident analysts, armed with facts and insights, are well-equipped to resist such pressures—presuming they enjoy higher-level backing in the process.

The temptation exists, of course, to be seen as "loyal" members of a team, but that loyalty must take the form of calling situations forthrightly, regardless of their coloration or trend. Thus, when some in the IC insisted that intelligence not focus on downside concerns over residual tensions in the postwar western Balkans "because the Secretary of Defense has already decided on a force withdrawal," more objective voices demanded that the tensions being witnessed be consistently reported and analyzed nonetheless.

Likewise, even given the known inclination of the Bush (43) administration toward an invasion of Iraq, there were major players in various segments of the IC stressing the realities and challenges of Saddam's Iraq. Decisions were made despite the many cautions expressed, and there was even a move to generate alternative analysis in a Defense Department entity set up outside the IC. That the Iraq War ensued and, at this writing, continues is not the fault of intelligence.

Living with the Policy Consumer

While thin walls should be a minimum goal in intelligence-policy connection, the absence of walls would

be an even better situation in my view. Many of us who have served in INR think we enjoyed the advantage—even a luxury—largely unavailable to the rest of the IC. As a departmental "directorate," it occupies the same space as the US foreign policy apparatus and it interacts with the geographic and functional bureaus of the State Department at all levels, every day. From the country analysts to the assistant secretary of INR, these purveyors of all-source intelligence analysis are privy to a variety of policy discussions and determinations that others in the IC lack—and, at times, envy.

At the same time, INR personnel also must be mindful of their access to sensitive information and their intelligence roles as they absorb what policymakers are considering, discussing, planning, and executing. In keeping with the admonition of Sherman Kent noted earlier, INR analysts and senior officers steer clear of recommending policy alternatives or of critiquing policy choices outright. That is not their job—not their right or duty.

By the same token, the members of policy bureaus and their chiefs are not allowed to engage in intelligence work in addition to their policy roles. In short, INR does intelligence in State but no policy; the remainder of the State Department can write policy but cannot produce intelligence-based analysis per se.

How does this actually work? It is not that complicated. State Department policy offices hold meetings and discussions at all levels of responsibility throughout the workday and outside normal hours. In most instances, INR personnel are given access to those meetings and, if asked, can offer opinions related to policy questions and offer intelligence-based perspectives—assuming those present have appropriate clearances. "They are the ones who furnish the knowledge for testing the feasibility of objectives and the knowledge from which policy and plans may be formulated."^c Even if policy consumers do not specifically task INR for insights or analysis day in and day out, the mere presence of INR officers inside the wall enables INR analysts to ascertain what intelligence and analysis could prove useful, relevant, and timely to the policy process.

Unlike most IC analysts, those in INR derive immediate and direct feedback on their work and become abun-

a. For a much deeper discussion of this chapter of US history, see Pillar.

b. David Ignatius, "Spy World Success Story," *Washington Post*, 2 May 2004.

c. Kent, *Strategic Intelligence*, 107.

dantly aware of their stature and reputation when policy consumers habitually include them in their deliberations. Analysts sense they have “arrived” when they are asked for their opinions (often in a side conversation) or for specific information and insights during policy deliberations. Becoming part of a policymaker’s “kitchen cabinet” is the *ultima ratio* of intelligence analysis.

While not all INR analysts attain and sustain this kind of access and reputation, those who do must remember to resist the occasional pressures to join a policy chorus. INR resists and has resisted such pressures throughout its history. The analyst, with assured top cover, must be able to say— as did Martin Luther in his brave defiance of a corrupt papacy 500 years ago—*Hier stehe ich, ich kann nicht anders*. [Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise.]^a

INR may benefit more than most IC agencies from policy proximity, but they all remain committed to keep-

ing the walls between themselves and policy deliberations and decisionmakers as thin and low as possible. When Robert Gates was the deputy director of central intelligence, he made it his credo to set aside any ethos of IC separation. He obliged CIA analysts to better understand policymaker needs and to communicate directly with them, whenever and however possible. That has included placement of CIA officers in other non-IC cabinet departments, ensuring that intelligence was represented in arms control and other negotiations, and invigorating the role of intelligence in support of the White House and NSC.

NSA and NGA analysts and operators serve in multiple outside agencies as well. Such assignments serve two purposes—the conveyance of intelligence directly to policy and the creation of better, closer acquaintance of analysts with the policy processes the IC supports. Moreover, finished as well as raw, actionable intelligence makes its way to cleared policymakers via briefers throughout the federal establishment in Washington and in the *President’s Daily Brief* that is available and used at the highest levels and through the Principals and Deputies Committee meetings in which the IC and CIA are represented.

a. For another, more detailed eyewitness portrait of this environment, see Thomas Fingar, *Reducing Uncertainty: Intelligence Analysis and National Security* (Stanford University Press, 2011).



The author: Bowman H. Miller, PhD, is a member of the faculty of the National Intelligence University. He has been teaching graduate courses in intelligence-related subjects since retiring in 2005 from the Department of State, where he had served in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) for 25 years.