

A Call for More Humility in Intelligence Analysis

John S. Mohr

Humility is probably not something most intelligence analysts consider to be a central tenet of their work.

Wisest is she who knows she does not know.”^a

Humility is probably not something most intelligence analysts consider to be a central tenet of their work. The notion of humility and intelligence may create dissonance for many unfamiliar with the intelligence discipline. This dissonance stems from intelligence analysts staking their reputations on their specialized knowledge, in addition to solid tradecraft and polished communication skills.

There is scant literature devoted to the topic of humility and intelligence analysis. Ample studies of humility exist in other fields, including medicine, business, and religion, but writings on the intelligence discipline have only addressed humility as a peripheral issue. The late CIA analyst, national intelligence officer, and intelligence educator Jack Davis’s 2006 work on the analyst-policymaker relationship may contain the most direct allusion to analytic humility. In discussing public criticism of flawed analytic performance, Davis wrote:

Confidence, even overconfidence, in substantive judgments is a staple of the analysts’ environment. Especially the more

a. Jostein Gaarder, *Sophie’s World* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2007), 58.

experienced DI (Directorate of Intelligence in CIA) analysts tend to see themselves as the best informed on the issues they follow as well as the most objective national security professionals in the US government.^b

Davis follows this critique with his view on how analysts react to negative feedback from policymakers.

A common first reaction . . . is to suspect that either politics or the critics’ lack of requisite substantive expertise is at work. Digging in of heels in defense of the original assessment at times follows.^c

This essay builds on Davis’s admonition and attempts to add to the body of literature on critical thinking and intelligence analysis by advocating for greater humility in intelligence analysis and addressing the dangers of insufficient humility. I will argue that the Intelligence Community (IC) needs to embrace humility as a central tenet for three reasons.

b. Jack Davis, “Intelligence Analysis and Policymakers: Benefits and Dangers of Tensions in the Relationship,” in *The Journal of Intelligence and National Security*, Vol 21, Issue 6 (22 December 2006): 1001.

c. Ibid.

The views, opinions, and findings of the author expressed in this article should not be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations or representing the official positions of any component of the United States government.

Uncertainty is among the few certainties in the intelligence field and requires humility to appreciate.

- First, humility helps the community cope with uncertainty that is inherent to the industry.
- Second, a humble perspective reveals that genuine subject matter expertise is rare.
- Finally, a lack of humility can manifest itself as hubris and cause harm to analysis.

While I am writing from an intelligence analyst's perspective, the facets of humility I discuss apply across functions in the IC.

Scholars of critical thinking Dr. Richard Paul and Dr. Linda Elder include intellectual humility as one of eight intellectual traits in their seminal work on critical thinking. They define intellectual humility as

having a consciousness of the limits of one's knowledge, including a sensitivity to circumstances in which one's native egocentrism is likely to function self-deceptively; sensitivity to bias, prejudice and limitations of one's viewpoint. Intellectual humility depends on recognizing that one should not claim more than one actually knows. It does not imply spinelessness or submissiveness. It implies the lack of intellectual pretentiousness, boastfulness, or conceit, combined with insight into the logical foundations, or lack of such foundations, of one's beliefs.^a

Intelligence analysts are unlikely to protest the utility or applicability to intelligence analysis in what these scholars postulate. To what extent, however, do IC analysts heed their words? I believe there are three major reasons they should.

Reason 1: Humility Helps Us Cope with Uncertainty

Uncertainty is among the few certainties in the intelligence field and requires humility to appreciate. Uncertainty underpins humility, according to Paul and Elder's view that humility entails comprehending the limits of one's knowledge. While the IC strives to combat uncertainty by pursuing new collection and methods to fill gaps and goes to great lengths to convey degrees of uncertainty to clients, it remains an uncomfortable and persistent constant.

One of the first lessons I learned as a student at the US Air Force intelligence officer school was to be comfortable saying to a questioner, "I don't know, but I'll get back to you." Author and scholar Leah Cohen devotes an entire book to this theme. In *I Don't Know* she argues that embracing this theme improves communication and enables more honest debates about issues.^b This simple concept of admitting ignorance is hard to implement, particularly when one's reputation is tied to knowledge of a particular topic.

Washington Post staff writer Joel Achenbach alludes to this awkward acceptance of uncertainty in his 2007 article on the absence of doubt among Washington policymakers. While he does not make reference to the IC, Achenbach's findings are directly applicable to intelligence analysis. He writes,

Doubt has been all but outlawed in contemporary Washington. Doubt is viewed as a weakness. You are expected to hold onto your beliefs even in a hurricane of contradictory data. Believing in something that's not true is considered a sign of character.^c

In other words, he is encouraging readers to embrace uncertainty and open their minds to new evidence as it surfaces. Achenbach goes on to discuss the dissonance between asking questions and a culture that demands instant answers: "Defining your problem correctly, examining evidence and contemplating biases can be extremely inconvenient."^d These steps should be staples in intelligence analysis.

Intelligence analysts should strive to employ humility to cope with their lack of knowledge and fallibility, as a means to improve thinking. Paul and Elder argue that an awareness of one's ignorance can improve thinking by illuminating "prejudices, false beliefs, or habits of mind that lead to flawed learning."^e This idea is central to intelligence analysis, which intelligence community veteran Dr.

a. Richard Paul and Linda Elder, *Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of Your Professional and Personal Life* (Pearson Education, Inc., 2002), 22.

b. Leah Hager Cohen, *I Don't Know: In Praise of Admitting Ignorance (Except When You Shouldn't)* (Riverhead Books, 2013)

c. Joel Achenbach, "Three Cheers for Nervous Hand-Wringing," *Washington Post*, 1 July 2007.

d. Ibid.

e. Paul and Elder, *Critical Thinking*, 23.

Mark Lowenthal describes as an “intellectual process prone to all sorts of challenges.”^a

Former Office of the Director of National Intelligence staff member Elbridge Colby discusses the complex and often politically-charged substantive challenges the IC faces in a posting on the website of the Hoover Institution. According to Colby,

These are questions of intention and of human decisions. They are not questions that can be answered satisfactorily by being run through a computer. They require a depth of knowledge, a humility about our ability to understand and predict, and a holy fear of the power of contingency.^b

In their 2015 book, *Superforecasting*, Phillip Tetlock and Dan Gardner argued that humility is a key trait for “superforecasters,” a term coined to describe people who excel in accurately predicting events. This “spirit of humility” recognizes “a sense that the complexity of reality is staggering, our ability to comprehend limited, and mistakes inevitable.”^c

a. Mark Lowenthal and Ronald Marks, “Intelligence Analysis: Is It As Good As It Gets?” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, Vol. 28, Issue 4: (5 August 2015): 664.

b. Elbridge Colby “Making Intelligence Smart,” Hoover Institute, Aug-Sept 2007, www.hoover.org/research/making-intelligence-smart

c. Phillip Tetlock and Dan Gardner, *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction* (Crown Publishing Group, 2015), 3 and 212–13.

Examining how the IC defines this nebulous concept of expertise and at what point it extends into hubris is germane to understanding humility.

Reason 2: Humility Reveals Subject Matter Experts are Rare

Developing expertise is among the IC’s primary tools to fight uncertainty, but true expertise is rare and takes considerable time and effort to develop. Showcasing expertise often manifests in using the ubiquitous and overused title known as “SME” or subject matter expert. It is not clear if this title is self imposed or earned, or if its use is for self-promotion or to boost an agency’s credentials. Its use is a swift way for an analyst to establish their credibility, whether in an e-mail or during an introduction for a briefing. The term’s overuse, however, risks diluting its value and overplaying the IC’s hand in what it can actually provide to clients, therefore violating Paul and Eider’s position that one should not claim more than one actually knows.

No analyst would want to be introduced as a novice on North Korea, and no manager would want to turn away a tasking because the office lacks expertise, but the IC needs to guard against applying the SME title too broadly and consider what really constitutes an expert.

Examining how the IC defines this nebulous concept of expertise and at what point it extends into hubris is germane to understanding humility.^d Most analysts have advanced educational degrees, may have visited the

countries in their portfolios, and have studied their targets’ major facets, from political institutions to security actors. Some have foreign language capabilities, which may amplify understanding of cultural nuances. An academic would be quick to point out that this substantive depth, like understanding the difference between the Tuareg and the Toubou, is not unique to the IC. As in academia, the process aspects of our work—using logic, reasoning, and evidence—are as important as substance. Tetlock and Gardner argue that how forecasters think is paramount and that superforecasters tend to be open-minded, careful, curious, and self-critical.^e CIA veteran and author of a seminal often-cited work, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis*, Richards Heuer adds to this by saying, “analysts should think about how they make judgments and reach conclusions, not just about the judgments and conclusions themselves.”^f

Time spent on a subject has also been used to define expertise, suggesting that after some arbitrary period an analyst becomes a substantive expert. In his book, Lowenthal posits a period of around 5 years for an analyst to be considered a subject matter expert.^g Bestselling author Malcolm Gladwell takes a similar approach in his book, *Outliers*. He offers a “10,000-hour rule,” which says that

e. Tetlock and Gardner, 20.

f. Richards Heuer, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis*, (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1999), 31.

g. Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy*, 210–11.

The antithesis of intellectual humility is intellectual hubris, a quality that may be most harmful in the intelligence field because of the impact on analysis.

it takes 10,000 hours of deliberate practice to be considered “world-class” in a subject.^a While his rule refers to performance that transcends the expert level and into the elite level, it supports the argument that analysts should work a portfolio for a longer time period to develop depth and continuity, instead of moving every few years. This is not to say, however, that analysts should become “hedgehogs”—the term Tetlock uses to describe those who know one big thing well—rather than “foxes”—Tetlock’s term for nimbler thinkers.^b Tetlock’s research suggests that foxes are superior forecasters.^c

In my 13 years in the IC, I can think of a handful of analysts I would consider true experts. The most prominent is one who shared the common analyst’s experience by studying the target country at a university, traveling there, and working the portfolio for more than a decade, signaling a commitment to a focus area. He could recite all of the country’s major facets—the size of its army, heads of state tenures, geographic features, and economic imperatives. This analyst’s knowledge, however, went much deeper.

How did the analyst cross into the expert threshold? The analyst’s house was filled with nearly every book written on his target country, he had regular dialogue with leading academics who had done field research in his country, and he had colleagues who were natives of the country or still lived there. He also traveled regularly to the country, often for extended periods, and journeyed outside of the capital where he could meet various stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations, religious officials, and citizens outside of elite circles. He understood how elites in his target country thought and his expertise was in high demand from policymakers.

True expertise alone does not prevent intellectual hubris and can sometimes foster it. Tetlock, in one of his research’s main points, says that specialists in a field are often not significantly more reliable than non-specialists in forecasting what is going to happen in their region of study.^d His work is a reminder of the value of self reflection for anyone working in a field like intelligence analysis, no matter what their experience or expertise.

Dr. Kjetil Hatlebrette and Dr. M. L. R. Smith, in their 2010 article examining the human and cognitive underpinnings of intelligence shortfalls, allude to the dangers of not practicing self-awareness. They advocate for “the importance of humility and responsibility in relation to threat

perception and what the results may be if such humility and self-criticism are not taken seriously.”^e

(U) Reason 3: Lack of Humility Can Harm Analysis

The antithesis of intellectual humility is intellectual hubris, a quality that may be most harmful in the intelligence field because of the impact on analysis. Analysts are often passionate about their work and employ what is usually a healthy defense to any changes to it. The pressures analysts face to answer salvos of policymaker demands may contribute to arrogance among analysts. Sometimes, however, analysts become entrenched in their views and become unwilling to hear alternative views.

This mentality is commonly manifest in coordination or peer review processes in which analysts receive feedback on articles they have written from colleagues who may take different views. Many analysts instinctively prepare for the defensive by crafting counterpoints, which risk devolution into verbal or e-mail sparring. It is during these moments that Paul and Eider’s guidance to examine the logical foundations of our beliefs is particularly relevant. I once heard that coordination is “free feedback,” which is a mindset that helps advance collaboration, no matter how challenging the coordination. Psychologist Adam Grant’s “givers and takers” framework encourages us to mirror this philosophy when providing

a. Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (Little, Brown & Company, 2011), 35–40.

b. Philosopher Isaiah Berlin, drawing on an ancient Greek poem, originally developed the fox and hedgehog framework, which Tetlock incorporated into his work. (*Superforecasting*, 69.)

c. Tetlock and Gardner, *Superforecasting*, 69.

d. Phillip Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment, How Good is It, How Can We Know?* (Princeton University press, 2005), 42–43.

e. Kjetil Hatlebrette and M. L. R. Smith, “Towards a New Theory of Intelligence Failure? The Impact of Cognitive Closure and Discourse Failure,” *Journal of Intelligence and National Security*, Vol 25, No. 2 (5 July 2010): 147.

feedback to a colleague. In discussing givers, Grant says “a willingness to help others achieve their goals is at the heart of effective collaboration, innovation, quality improvement, and service excellence.”^a

Intellectual hubris impedes collaboration in the process of sincerely addressing dissent. Paul and Elder’s definition of intellectual humility includes awareness of the deceptiveness of one’s native egocentrism. This egocentrism is what Tetlock says “prevents us from seeing any world beyond the one visible from the tips of our noses.”^b

An analyst’s ego is also an automatic defense against a dissent because of the stigma associated with it. Few analysts welcome disagreement with their theses and insertion of dissent into their work. Striving to alter this mindset into one that sees a dissent as a means to strengthen analysis would enrich such analysis. Dissent also underscores the complexity of the issues the IC faces, the uncertainty ingrained in them, and presents policymakers with additional perspectives.

Another important facet in evaluating humility is how we respond to criticism or to instances where we are wrong. There are scores of pages devoted to the study of intelligence failures, which focus on system-level deficits. Lowenthal and former CIA officer Ronald Marks advocate for a “robust ‘lessons learned’ capability”

a. Adam Grant, “In the Company of Givers and Takers,” *Harvard Business Review*, April 2013 at <https://hbr.org/2013/04/in-the-company-of-givers-and-takers>.

b. Tetlock and Gardner, *Superforecasting*, 233.

Another important facet in evaluating humility is how we respond to criticism or to instances where we are wrong.

to reflect on such analytic lapses.^c This same mentality is important at the individual level too. How do analysts reconcile their own shortfalls, whether missing an assessment or facing disagreement from a policymaker during a briefing? Amid the steady production grind, it is important to pause to admit one was wrong and reflect on the respective causes that Tetlock and Gardner call an “unflinching postmortem.”^d This may entail revisiting one’s evidence and critiquing one’s own assessment. It could also involve outreach to a key stakeholder who may have had a divergent view that has since become more pertinent. Tetlock and Gardner also suggest that people facing situations with great uncertainty keep a journal to “create an immutable record” that they can reference.^e These are tough steps to take, particularly when one is on the losing side.

Proposals to Cultivate Humility

How then can the IC encourage and institutionalize humility, and how can it keep people humble? The following recommendations seek to achieve these goals:

- *A Recertification process.* An intelligence analysis aptitude assessment, akin to a physician’s

c. Mark Lowenthal and Ronald Marks, “Intelligence Analysis: Is It As Good As It Gets?”: 664.

d. Tetlock and Gardner, *Superforecasting*, 283

e. Dan Gardner and Philip Tetlock, “Anxious about the election? Here’s some perspective,” *Washington Post*, 4 November 2016

requirement to pass a board certification exam every 10 years, would work toward institutionalizing humility. The project management professional’s certification process offers a gold standard model and the Defense Department’s “Certified DoD All-Source Analysis” program is a step toward this, in the way it requires DoD analysts to pass a comprehensive knowledge exam.^f

- *Continuing education.* The IC Advanced Analyst Program (ICAAP) provides a standard of continuing education for analysts. The IC should seek more informal ways to promote continuing education through avenues such as periodic “coffee” or “lunch” talks in which analysts give presentations on their current research.
- *Double down on analytic outreach.* Analytic outreach is among the fastest ways to overcome the limits of our knowledge. The State Department’s Intelligence and Research Bureau’s outreach events serve as a community model. Individual analysts should seek to develop their own outreach networks through the appropriate analytic outreach avenues.
- *A new ODNI analytic standard.* The analytic standards and associated tradecraft standards embody aspects of humility but do not explicitly address them. Incorporating intellectual humility as an analytic standard would be among

f. Catherine Johnston et al., “Transforming Defense Analysis,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Issue 79 (Fourth Quarter 2015): 16.

At its core, intelligence analysis is an intellectual—not mechanical—activity.

the strongest means to apply the principle.

- *Embrace a customer service mentality.* Remembering our *raison d'être* and that we support the greater good is imperative to promoting humility as a community. We exist, not for self-promotion, but to support policymaking clients.
- *Utilize humor.* Humor is the sister of humility, and self-deprecating humor can go a long way toward promoting humility.
- *Personal ownership.* No formal program is a substitute for individual efforts to incorporate humility into analysis and devote time to personal reflection. Humility is a private quality and carries different meaning to different people.

Intelligence analysis pioneer Sherman Kent famously said that if given three wishes, intelligence

professionals would desire to know everything, to be believed, and to influence policy for the good.^a Imbued in this, however, is intellectual humility and recognition of the limits of our knowledge and openness to other viewpoints.

At its core, intelligence analysis is an intellectual—not mechanical—activity, as Lowenthal has adeptly described.^b This activity is nested in a business dominated by uncertainty, a paradigm we must accept while constantly pushing for new and

a. Sherman Kent, “Estimates and Influence” in *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates—Collected Essays* (Originally in *Studies in Intelligence*, Summer 1968) at www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/Sherman-kent-and-the-board-of-national-estimates-collected-essays/4estimates.html

b. Mark Lowenthal, “A Disputation on Intelligence Reform and Analysis: My 18 Theses,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, Vol. 26 Issue 1 (30 November 2012), 32.

deeper knowledge. Intelligence focus areas are intrinsically complex and the community needs to understand the limits of its knowledge so as to not overplay its hand. Doing so will reflect more accurately the services the community provides to clients, such as providing niche value.

We also must constantly guard against hubris and, in our most confident moments, recall the early days of our careers, when we sometimes seemed overwhelmed by the scope of a new portfolio or the magnitude of our work. All passionate analysts become the chief advocates and defenders of their work, owing to the intimate study of a topic and the slog of written production. While this mentality fuels our work, we need to pause to remind ourselves that we work in a service industry in which a service philosophy will advance humility. Ensuring humility is ingrained in all aspects of intelligence analysis will help uphold the intelligence community’s longstanding, quiet professionals, *credo*, instilled in President Kennedy’s words that our “successes are unheralded.”



The author: *John S. Mohr* is a DIA analyst who currently works in the NORAD and USNORTHCOM J2. He has served in DIA in Washington and as a country director on the National Security Council Staff.