

*Some reflections on what should
make intelligence persuasive in
policy deliberations.*

ESTIMATES AND INFLUENCE

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There are a number of things about policy-making which the professional intelligence officer will not want to hear. For example, not all policy-makers can be guaranteed to be free of policy predilections prior to the time they begin to be exposed to the product of the intelligence calling. Indeed, there will be some policy-makers who could not pass a rudimentary test on the "facts of the matter" but who have the strongest views on what the policy should be and how to put it into effect. We do not need to inquire as to how these men got that way or why they stay that way, we need only realize that this kind of person is a fact of life.

Nor should we be surprised to realize that in any policy decision there are a number of issues which we who devote ourselves solely to foreign positive intelligence may almost by definition be innocent of. The bulk of them are, of course, purely domestic ones: domestic political issues, domestic economic issues, popular attitudes, public opinion, the orientation of the congressional leadership, and so on. Even if we know in our bones of the great weight which such issues have carried in many a foreign policy decision, we do not readily and consciously acknowledge it. Our wish is, of course, to have our knowledge and wisdom about the foreign trouble spot show itself so deep and so complete that it will perforce determine the decision. The nature of our calling requires that we pretend as hard as we are able that the wish is indeed the fact and that the policy-maker will invariably defer to our findings as opposed to the cries of some domestic lobby.

But consider for a moment how people other than ourselves and our consumers view these phenomena which I have just dismissed with a mild pejorative. Look, for example, at the table of contents

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of any of the recent books devoted to "How Foreign Policy Is Made." Or look at the line-up of lectures and discussions in the syllabus of any of our senior service schools; look particularly at the section devoted to national security policy formulation. You will find that intelligence and what it contributes to the task, far from enjoying the overpowering importance with which we—quite understandably—like to endow it, is casually ticked off as one of a score of forces at work.

The Credibility of Intelligence

Thus a certain amount of all this worrying we do about our influence upon policy is off the mark. For in many cases, no matter what we tell the policy-maker, and no matter how right we are and how convincing, he will upon occasion disregard the thrust of our findings for reasons beyond our ken. If influence cannot be our goal, what should it be? Two things. It should be to be relevant within the area of our competence, and above all it should be to be credible. Let things be such that if our policy-making master is to disregard our knowledge and wisdom, he will never do so because our work was inaccurate, incomplete, or patently biased. Let him disregard us only when he must pay greater heed to someone else. And let him be uncomfortable—thoroughly uncomfortable—about his decision to heed this other.

Being uncomfortable is surely his second choice. Before he becomes uncomfortable he is going to ask himself if it is strictly necessary. This is of course the equivalent of asking himself if he really thinks that the information he has received from his intelligence colleagues is relevant to his problem and if he has to believe it. When we in intelligence look at the matter in this light we might consider ourselves fortunate that our policy-making consumers find so much of our product relevant, credible, and hence useful. Is there any way of categorizing that which is most happily, gratefully, and attentively read and that which is least? Perhaps a start can be made by having a quick critical look at three classical families of intelligence utterances.

First, basic intelligence. No question but that credibility is highest in this area of intelligence. Time and time again our consumer has need of something comparable to the perfect World Almanac or the perfect reference service. We come close to giving him just that, and nine times out of ten he is warmly appreciative of the breadth and

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depth of our knowledge and the speed with which we can handle his requests.

Second, how about current intelligence? There is probably less enthusiasm among consumers for this than for basic. They have a tendency to compare it—and unfavorably—to the daily press or the weekly news magazines; or they gripe because they often find it a gloss upon something they have just read in a cable.

Lastly, in the formal estimate credibility is lowest. It was more than a decade ago that Roger Hilsman, after interrogating scores of policy-making consumers of intelligence, concluded thus. He discovered that the people with whom he talked were extremely grateful to intelligence when it came up with the *facts* that they felt they had to know before they went further with their policy-making and operating tasks. They seem to have gone out of their way to praise intelligence in its fact-finding role, but to be anything but grateful for intelligence utterances in the estimate category.

Why was this so? Although Hilsman does not make the point, one may safely infer from his findings: The policy-maker distinguished in his own mind between things which he thought of as factual and those which he thought of as speculative. For the first he was grateful, for the second not at all.

This puts a number of questions before the house. Why should Hilsman's respondents (implicitly, at least) have questioned the credibility of intelligence estimates? Was it because the respondents had caught intelligence out in self-serving errors? Was it because they were fearful of being misled by intelligence? Had intelligence on its part ever done anything to merit this want of confidence on the part of its customers? If not, how did it come about that the very officer who besought the help of intelligence in one area eschewed intelligence in another?

The Nature of the Estimate

Let me begin with a look at estimates and the business of making them.

Let me first be quite clear as to the general and the particular meaning of the word "estimate" in the present context. In intelligence, as in other callings, estimating is what you do when you do not know. This is the general meaning. In this broad sense, scarcely an intelligence document of any sort goes out to its consuming public that does not carry some sort of estimate. Field reports

are circulated only when someone has estimated that the source is sufficiently reliable and content sufficiently credible to be worthy of attention. Current intelligence items as often as not carry one of those words of likelihood—"probable," "doubtful," "highly unlikely," etc.—that indicate that someone has pondered and decided that the report should be read with something less than perfect assurance as to its accuracy. An endless number of important sentences in even the basic intelligence category carry the same evidence of this kind of speculative evaluation, i.e., estimating.

But what I have in mind in particular when I use the word "estimates" here are the formal intelligence documents which begin to examine a subject from the point of view of what is known about it, and then move on beyond the world of knowing and well into the world of speculating. When you reflect upon a whole large subject matter—the future of Greece or the armed strength of Communist China, for example—and realize that you cannot begin to know about either with the degree of certainty you know your own name, you reach for the thing next best to "knowing." You strive for some sort of useful approximation. In pursuit of this you evoke a group of techniques and ways of thinking, and with their help you endeavor logically and rationally (you hope) to unravel the unknown or at least roughly define some area of possibility by excluding a vast amount of the impossible. You know that the resultant, while still a lot better than nothing at all, will be in essence a mix of fact and judgment. Upon occasion it turns out to be almost exactly correct, but at the time you wrote it you expressed yourself with appropriate reservation.

To the extent that your judgment and the many quite subjective things which influence it are now involved, the man who reads this estimate will by no means accept it in the attitude of relaxed belief with which he reads, for example, that "not counting West Berlin, there are ten *Länder* in the FRG." It is this form of intelligence document that Hilsman's respondents were cool about. What follows is an attempt to explain the chill.

Let me ask you to think of one of these estimates in terms of the geometrical form called a pyramid. Think of the perfect estimate as a complete pyramid. At its base is a coagulation of all-but-indisputable fact. With an absolute minimum of manipulation on our part, the facts have arranged themselves to form what is quite clearly the base of a pyramid. They have spread out in the horizontal dimensions to the degree that we pretty well perceive its base area, and

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piled up in the vertical dimension generally to indicate the slope of its sides.

Knowing the nature of the base of the pyramid, to take an illustrative case, is like saying that we now have enough solid information to know that a photo image we have been wondering about is of an aircraft—not, say, a dairy ranch; more importantly, it is a bomber aircraft, not a transport. As to the other things we want to know about it—its performance characteristics—we are not at all certain. We are, however, in a good position to speculate about them.

Raising the Pyramid

Now back to the pyramid. Let us assume that when we know the general locus in space where the sides will converge to form the apex, we will have most of what we want. Let us assume that the exact point of the apex is exactly what we want, that if we know this with certainty we will have what we are after. For the bomber, constructing the apex would be reasoned speculations about how it will perform: how far it can fly, how high, how fast, and with what bomb load. Just as classical induction revealed the base of the pyramid, so now we call upon the other classical methodologies of deduction, and with their help we reason our way up the pyramid toward the top.

The factual stuff of the base of the pyramid is likely to be largely the fruit of our own intelligence-gathering efforts and so constitute a body of material about which we are better informed than our consumers. But we enjoy no such primacy with respect to the matter above. In fact, the talent to deduce rigorously is one which we share with any other educated and intellectually disciplined human. Furthermore, the advantage we enjoy with respect to base material can be and usually is dissipated by our habit of making it available to quite an array of non-intelligence types. The point is that the studious consumer can approach our mastery at the base and match us higher up. He can be his own estimator whenever he wishes to invest the time.

Let me not pretend or even seem to pretend that all conceptual pyramids in our area of work are constructed as described. The procedure which moves from the known to the unknown with a certain amount of tentative foraying as new hypotheses are advanced, tested, and rejected is merely the most respectable way. Its very opposite

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is sometimes employed, though usually with a certain amount of clandestinity.

The follower of this reverse method first decides what answer he desires to get. Once he has made this decision, he knows the exact locus of the apex of his pyramid but nothing else. There it floats, a simple assertion screaming for a rationale. This, then, is worked out from the top down. The difficulty of the maneuver comes to a climax when the last stage in the perverse downward deduction must be joined up smoothly and naturally with the reality of the base. This operation requires a very considerable skill, particularly where there is a rich supply of factual base-material. Without an artfully contrived joint, the whole structure can be made to proclaim its bastardy, to the chagrin of its progenitor.

The Peak

But even under the respectable method the intelligence estimator at some moment in the construction process reaches the place where he has used his last legitimate deductive crutch and must choose one of three possible courses.

The first is to let himself be propelled by the momentum of his reasoning into a final and fairly direct extrapolation. The effect of this is to put a sharpish top on the pyramid—a measure which, in turn, has the effect of telling his audience that he is pretty sure that he has discerned the outlines of what must be the truth. For the bomber it would be like saying: "Thus we conclude that the bomber in question is almost certainly a supersonic aircraft of medium range. See Table II for our estimate of its performance characteristics."

The second is not to make this final extrapolation but to leave the pyramid truncated near its apex. This has the effect of telling the reader that you have narrowed the range of possibilities down to only a few. The further down you truncate, the wider their range. Thus the most unsatisfactory kind of intelligence construction is often that which perforce has to stop where the factual stuff of the base runs out. Often it is the equivalent of issuing the most general kind of news and asking the reader to suspend judgment pending the appearance of new evidence. For example: "Thus we are unable at this time to be more precise regarding the performance characteristics of this bomber. It is possible that it is a new supersonic medium."

The third is what I will call "the look before the leap" or the "clandestine peep ahead." It is, one may hope, less often used by the

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intelligence professional than by the policy officer doing his own estimating. What you do is to look hard at the final extrapolation and take full stock of where you will be if you go for it. Then, having taken stock, you ask yourself if you really wish to subscribe to this conclusion.

In the case I have in mind, you recoil. It may be that by making it yours you will be depicting yourself a non-patriot, or someone soft on Communism. It may be that by implication you can be made to seem a harsh critic of a higher authority or a scoffer at one of his policies. It may be that you will be doing the budget claims of your department or agency a grave disfavor. Or most important of all, you realize that your findings may be advanced to support a policy which you oppose or that they do not support with sufficient vigor a policy which you favor.

If you have taken the peep ahead and find the prospect not to your taste, you can settle for the second course and simply not complete the estimate. Or you can back down your argument, tearing it up as you go. Then when you have found a salubrious ground for another start, you can reargue your case upwards—perhaps using a few facts which you had dismissed as irrelevant the first time through, perhaps giving more weight to this analogy and forgetting about that, etc., etc. Thus with a small amount of tinkering you can create a somewhat different conceptual pyramid whose base is still the same, but whose apex will lie in a zone much less dangerous to your job security or much more appropriate to the requirements of your policy preconceptions.

The Policy Welcome

Irrespective of which of the three ways of handling the problem you choose and irrespective of the substantive conclusion—or lack of it—the completed estimate will be bad news to one if not more of its important readers: it may undercut a long-held position or destroy a line of painfully developed argument; it may indicate the unwisdom of a plan or the malallocation of large sums of money. Another thing you may be sure of is that he will react as any recipient of bad news reacts—the reflex is one of “I don’t believe you.” Need I emphasize again that estimates are far more vulnerable to the criticism which is bound to accompany incredulity than are propositions which are stated, at least, as if they were fact.

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The disappointed consumer may begin with a hard look at our pyramid's factual base. He may find some loose masonry which can be jimmied apart, and then jimmy. He may find some quite substantial building stones left off to one side, stones which, although of the same material and cut to fit some sort of geometrical form, were not incorporated into the base structure. He will speedily perceive that if these are chiseled a bit here and there they can be made to fit into this structure, with the result that they change some important aspects of its configuration. You may be sure he will soon focus on the upper zones of our pyramid.

One thing he will be most alert to is any evidence that intelligence, having taken the "peep ahead" and found the pyramid about to peak at an unwanted place, went on to take the corrective action I have indicated. If he can find evidence of this sort of disingenuous case-making, he will attack with very weighty weaponry. Before he is done he may be able to prove to himself and a number of others that the so-called intelligence contribution is a fraud—nothing more nor less than a policy brief brazenly masquerading as an intelligence estimate.

In these terms we may readily understand why a good many of Hilsman's respondents felt as they did about the value of intelligence estimates. For purposes of fuller explanation, let us suppose that an intelligence estimate on the Banana Republics had been prepared; let us suppose that our policy-making reader Mr. "A" is his department's authority on these Republics. A tour of his psyche as he reads the paper may be illuminating.

First, let us assume that the estimate accords in very high degree with his own estimate of the present and probable future situation in Banania. His psyche will begin to purr in contentment; "What a remarkably perceptive document," it will whisper. But this may be as far as the word of praise gets. When the moment comes to articulate his comment on the estimate, he is less likely to praise it than to proclaim, "This is exactly what I have been saying all along. Why in the world do we have to have someone who knows less of the matter than I say so before anyone pays attention?" In short, as far as he is concerned, the intelligence effort that went into the study was *unnecessary*. "A" may not always feel this way, particularly if during the policy debate he realizes that he can make points against his opponents by citing the estimate as a dispassionate outside opinion.

Alternatively, let us assume that the estimate accords not at all with the views of Mr. "B." He will be unhappy, for he will realize

that if the conclusions of the estimate are believed by his peers and superiors, the policy which he has been championing will have to be modified—perhaps drastically. If he wishes to stay in the fight, then, he must be prepared to attack the intelligence estimate as *misleading* and erect one of his own to replace it.

Lastly, let us assume that the policy issue is one of those which is going to be settled almost entirely on the basis of some purely domestic matter: the cotton lobby, the gold flow, the budget, and so on. Our policy-making consumer does not have to attack the substance of the *irrelevant* estimate. He will chuckle patronizingly to himself while his psyche warms in the feeling of superiority to those poor boobs in intelligence who have thought that what they called the "Situation and Prospects in X" could have any bearing on the way U.S. policy towards X is being shaped today. Out loud he wonders how such naiveté can persist; he has no comment on the substance of the estimate.

These views of an estimate as unnecessary, misleading, or irrelevant may coincide with those of some of the people whom Hilsman polled and explain why they were less grateful for estimates than for what they considered factual intelligence issuances.

The Defense

How seriously should we in intelligence take the indictment which damns our estimating work as unnecessary, or misleading, or irrelevant? Take the misleading charge first. If it is made, and if it is true because the document was designed that way, then it must be taken very, very seriously indeed. For this accusation implied that the peep ahead had been taken and the necessary retracing of steps and reconstruction had followed so that the conclusion of the estimate suited the policy predispositions of the estimators. They have been caught out in their stupidity, and their credibility, at least for this estimate, is dead. It is dead not merely for the reader who found the conclusions abhorrent, but for all the others who found out by themselves or were told.

If the same group of estimators are caught out a second or third time, their credibility will probably be dead for good. Thereafter almost any intelligence pronouncement they or their associates make will be slightly referred to as propaganda, and perhaps not even read. They have not only lost all hope of directly influencing policy, they have lost what is even more important because more attainable

than direct influence. This is the indirect influence which they might have exercised through an honest contribution to the debate which ought to precede every substantial policy decision.

Suppose the charge of misleading is made simply as a function of a committed reader's general disbelief or annoyance, and suppose that, try as he may, he cannot show a trace of bad faith on the part of the estimators. The estimators are confronted with nothing more sinister than a human disagreement, perhaps from a reader whose nose is out of joint. This is just life.

What of the charge, unnecessary? The question here is—unnecessary to whom? To everyone involved in the policy decision? Already I have dealt with Mr. "A" to whom it was unnecessary because it accorded exactly with his views, and Mr. "B" to whom it was unnecessary and many times worse because he found it misleading. But are these the only two officers or two kinds of officers involved? Is there perhaps not a Mr. "C" or Messrs. "C" who have no more than a layman's knowledge of the subject but who must participate in the policy debate and decision? Of course there are the Messrs. "C," and important men they are. The President, upon many an occasion, is a Mr. "C," and so are members of his staff and his Security Council. They have found the estimate anything but unnecessary.

It does not follow, however, that the impact which the estimate may make upon the Mr. "C"s will in itself cause the defeat of the dissenting Mr. "B"s. What it will do is to force the Mr. "B"s to put forth a better effort. This will stimulate the Mr. "A"s themselves to better effort. At a minimum, the intelligence estimate will have made its contribution in the way it promoted a more thorough and enlightened debate and a higher level of discourse within the high policy-making echelon. At a maximum it may have denied a wrong-headed Mr. "B" an easy triumph.

Lastly the charge of irrelevant. This rested upon the fact that the foreign policy decision was going to have to be made on the basis of a domestic consideration, something about which the estimate is wholly—and properly—mute. But it is just possible that the domestic consideration is not all that important and that the national interest is not really being served by this sort of deference to it. It may be that the estimate helped the policy people to reach this new appreciation of the national interest. Hence, even if the decision I am talking about gets made in conformity with the wish of the domestic pressure group, maybe the next such decision will not.

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Truth Before Power

I suppose that if we in intelligence were one day given three wishes, they would be to know everything, to be believed when we spoke, and in such a way to exercise an influence to the good in the matter of policy. But absent the Good Fairy, we sometimes get the order of our unarticulated wishes mixed. Often we feel the desire to influence policy and perhaps just stop wishing here. This is too bad, because to wish simply for influence can, and upon occasion does, get intelligence to the place where it can have no influence whatever. By striving too hard in this direction intelligence may come to seem just another policy voice, and an unwanted one at that.

On the other hand, if intelligence strives for omniscience and strives to be believed, giving a third place to influence, serendipity may take over. Unselfconscious intelligence work, even in the speculative and highly competitive area of estimates, may prove (in fact, has proved many times) a key determinant in policy decision.