
The Beginning

“First callers” is the description President George H.W. Bush attributed to Harry Truman in describing Truman’s morning meetings with the first DCIs, Adm. Sidney Souers and Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg.⁶ The current object of that “first call” is the PDB. Not surprisingly, the senior officials with access to the PDB follow the lead of the president. If he reads it, they surely will, if for no other reason than the fact that he had read it.

For some administrations, the PDB becomes a powerful driver of foreign-policy-decision-making; for others it is less central. Nevertheless, it long has been regarded as the crown jewel of intelligence. On a per page basis, it has to be the most expensive publication since Gutenberg. Its compilation requires a dedicated full-time staff, the latest printing technology, and a set of briefers informed enough to answer questions and observant enough to gauge principals’ reactions to the information being provided. And because it is for the eyes and ears of the president, it is surrounded by mythology in the public consciousness; it commands the attention of those administration officials granted access; and it is a source of pride—and anxiety—for the intelligence practitioners who generate its content.

Yet it took several administrations for the “first call” to become the PDB. In the summer of 1961, the Kennedy White House felt overwhelmed with the barrage of intelligence publications it was receiving, some of them duplicative. Despite—or perhaps because of—this deluge, it feared critical information would fall between the cracks. Indeed, the president’s brother and attorney general, Robert Kennedy, had complained that he had not seen something he should have seen. Richard Lehman, one of the founding fathers of CIA’s Office of Current Intelligence (OCI)—the agency’s early analytic shop charged with preparing short-term assessments for policymakers—describes his conversation with Kennedy’s senior military aide, Maj. Gen. Chester Clifton:⁷

“What I need,” [the general said] “is something that will have everything in it that is worth the president’s attention, everything that is worth his knowing in all these things so I don’t have to fuss with them.” [He added that] *it would be nice to be able to fit it into a breast pocket so that the president could carry it around with him and read it at his convenience.*⁸

Thus was born the PDB’s predecessor, the *President’s Intelligence Check List*, or *PICL* (pronounced “pickle”).⁸ The *PICL* was renamed the *PDB* in the Johnson administration, but it was not until the Ford administration that the CIA regularly briefed the president in person, as opposed to simply delivering the document. Practices continued to vary, both across and within administrations. After all, both publication and process were tailored to what the president wanted. George H.W. Bush read the publication thoroughly in the presence of the briefer and his national security advisor, while Bill Clinton for a time took the publication and read it later. George W. Bush occasionally received items in advance, but he too read while he was briefed orally. So too, the first Bush sharply restricted the number of senior officials who received the PDB (to about six), while it went to many more officials in the Clinton administration (as many as two dozen).⁹

When George W. Bush first became president, he had relatively little foreign affairs experience, so the PDB initially was heavy on information. Later, as the administration settled into power and knew the issues, the PDB became more strategic, more an opportunity for a conversation about policy—a point that underscores that the PDB is hardly apart from but, rather, is a keystone of an administration’s broader relationship with intelligence.

a. A history of the PDB’s creation was posted to the CIA’s Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room in 2015 along with a redacted collection of PICLs and PDBs published during the Kennedy and Johnson years. See http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/PDB%20CM%20Final%20Kennedy%20and%20Johnson_public%208%20Sep%202015_2.pdf and <http://www.foia.cia.gov/collection/PDBs>.

The Process

While the PDB and the process for producing it have changed over time, the basics have not. The core attributes have remained the same. It must be easy to read, and so features graphics, coming to utilize four-color displays of, for instance, global trends. It should display and be faithful to intelligence's sources. And the reasoning should be logical.¹⁰ Until the legislation creating the director of national intelligence (DNI) in 2004, the PDB was entirely a CIA process. The timing has always been driven by the desire to be the "first caller." A sketch of the process circa 1995 drives that point home.¹¹

The process would begin with the staff responsible for assembling it meeting in the early morning, the day before it was due at the White House. By that point, most of the briefers would have returned from that morning's briefings, and they would be debriefed about any reactions the principals had to the briefing. Had they asked questions? Did they want more on any particular issue? The conversation triangulated what the principals were interested in, with what interesting new information the agency had from intelligence's special sources, with what were likely to be immediate hot topics, based on looking at the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Washington Times* and *Wall Street Journal*. As the agenda of items for the next day began to take shape, the PDB staff would begin canvassing offices around the agency—and to some extent outside it—for who could contribute to particular items. This canvassing continued from midmorning through late afternoon, even as drafting proceeded.

By 8:00 p.m., the draft was ready for review by who was then-titled deputy director for intelligence (DDI) of the CIA and the director of central intelligence (DCI). If need be, the draft would be delivered to their homes by secure fax. Throughout the night, editing continued, and by the early morning hours printing and collating would begin in a low-slung building, equipped with the latest printing technology, adjacent to CIA Headquarters. In the Clinton administration, the document was

9–12 pages long. For Bush 43, it was a "series of one or two-page articles totaling a dozen pages or so, printed on heavy paper and enclosed in a leather binder."¹²

By 5:30 a.m. the PDB was ready to go, and between about 6:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m. the PDB briefers hand-carried it to the recipients. In some cases, the briefers met the principals at their homes, and briefed them on the way to the office; in others, the principals were briefed in their offices. In all cases, the briefers were available to answer questions or provide more detail. If they could not provide what was wanted immediately, they would reach back to the agency for an answer later in the day or the next morning. By 9:00 a.m. or a little after, the briefers would return to Headquarters to debrief on the morning's sessions, and the process would begin for the next day.

William Webster described his experience as DCI during the Bush 41 years:

The PDB was a very important document to us, and to the president, and he set the tone for it. He allowed Brent [Scowcroft, the national security advisor], of course, and Bob Gates [Scowcroft's deputy] to see it—Dick Cheney, Jim Baker, and, occasionally, someone else if they needed to see it, but, in all cases, we retrieved the documents rather than leaving them to be potentially copied.

Now, they were about 18 pages, as I remember. The last thing I did before I went to bed was to review the night draft, knowing that it would be revised all night until 4 o'clock in the morning, when they had to go to print, and then I spent my time in the car coming down to meet with the president, the briefer, and [Scowcroft and Gates] and, occasionally, John Sununu [the chief of staff], trying to catch up with the changes and the editorial things, and glance

a. For the sake of conciseness, the terms "Bush 41" and "Bush 43" will frequently be used to distinguish between the administrations of George H. W. Bush (1989–93) and George W. Bush (2001–2009) respectively.

*at the newspaper knowing that the president would have read five newspapers before I got there and wanted to know if I'd read an editorial or a comment relative to intelligence. It was an interesting exercise.*¹³

The PDB's major "competition," one that appears throughout this case, was the *Secretary's Morning Summary*, done every day by the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR). Its distribution was wider than the PDB's, going not only to the national security principals, including Treasury, but also the NSC staff and others, and it was fairly widely circulated in the State Department. The "book," as it was called in INR, was normally about six to seven pages, with the first half devoted to short, current items, called "front of the book" items. The "back of the book" was no more than three somewhat longer items, one-page, two-column, all-source analyses. The analysts preferred

back-of-the-book placement where they expected and found more readers and had more space, though not much, to expound on an issue, topic, or development.

Unlike the PDB, the *Morning Summary*— and especially the *Morning Summary* "back of the book"— was less driven by exotic collection and for space reasons did not list its sources (only the backup copy had those on hand if needed). In the words of Bowman Miller, a distinguished INR veteran, "Much of what was in our work reflected informed analytic judgments, not slavish attention to sourcing, everything said, pardon my bias."¹⁴ The *Morning Summary* was published from the mid-1970s until 2001 when Secretary Colin Powell deemed it superfluous to his "current intelligence needs," since he already had a morning take of the PDB, the [JCS's] "Chairman's Brief," other CIA materials, and his global news account via AOL, on whose board he previously had served.



Briefing the President: George H.W. Bush

“Needless to say,” George H.W. Bush told a gathering at Texas A&M University in 1999, “when I entered the presidency...thanks to my brief time out there at Langley I understood the value of intelligence and the need for intelligence.”¹⁵ His preferences for receiving the PDB were already well-established. John Helgerson, a former DDI who has both participated in and written about transitions, wrote, “From the point of view of the US Intelligence Community, the transition to the Bush presidency in 1988 was undoubtedly the easiest of the eight transitions in which the CIA had been involved.” This Helgerson attributes in large measure to Bush 41’s “deep personal interest” in foreign affairs, years as an intelligence consumer, and, of course, his prior service as DCI.¹⁶

The president’s preference extended not only to the timing and frequency with which he was to receive the PDB—first thing and daily, insofar as possible—but extended also to who it was that would provide the briefing, who among his staff was to receive the PDB, and the manner in which they were to receive it. Bush parried the idea of having the DCI do the briefing, instead asking that “working level officers” provide it and he often had one or more senior policy advisors sit in.¹⁷ Cabinet officers in later administrations also indicated a preference for having one of their policy colleagues sit in when the president digested the PDB, lest the president get “spun up” over a particular item in a way that might cause policy trouble. But President Bush’s comment also foreshadows another theme: for presidents, the

intelligence provided by the PDB was also a springboard for a policy conversation:

And so I made it a point there to read it with the CIA officer and usually Brent Scowcroft, or sometimes his deputy, or sometimes both. This way, I could ask the briefers for more information on matters of critical interest, consult with Brent on matters affecting policy.¹⁸

Bush 41’s insistence on receiving his briefing from analysts seems to have been motivated by the desire to use the briefings as an opportunity to delve more deeply into the PDB’s contents. As described by Robert Gates, who served Bush 41 as deputy director of central intelligence (1986–89), deputy national security advisor (1989–91), and DCI (1991–93), he and his boss, National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, would have a pre-brief with the briefers.

Brent and I would often ask questions on the pieces that were in the [PDB] before we would go see the president at this 7:30 briefing. We would often disagree with the pieces, would say, “Why do you think that?” “Do you have any evidence for that?” You know, it was a real grilling. The briefers were very professional analysts, you’ve got to admit, and I tried to keep some perspective. It is a little daunting for some GS14 or 15 analyst to come down to the White House and the people they’re going to see are the fellow who’s been national security advisor to two presidents, the former DDCI,

and a former DCI who happens to be president....

In fact, when the Nicaraguan elections came along, CIA predicted that Dan Ortega would beat Mrs. Chamorro and when this was briefed, when Bush read this, he looked at the PDB briefer and he said, "I bet you an ice cream cone you're wrong." And when Bush was proven right, the briefer showed up the next day with an ice cream cone.... Bush was, to the best of my knowledge, the only president who received the briefing directly from a CIA briefer.... So he took his intelligence sort of unadorned by anybody else's view.¹⁹

Bush 41's second impetus for being briefed by analysts was less substantive than a desire to boost the morale of his former CIA troops; as he put it,

I think it helped those who were working night and day out there in Langley to prepare the PDB to know that at least their product was being looked at by the president himself. I think it helped a little bit in the morale of that section of the CIA that works so hard to put this together.²⁰

This sensitivity to CIA's perceptions extended to careful attention to which of his staffers would have access to the PDB, and how it was to be distributed. As described by Gates,

The briefer would bring the PDB to us [Gates and Scowcroft] and we would each have a copy of the PDB and the president was very security conscious. His time as DCI and his other experiences with leaking made him very concerned about leaks of intelligence material in particular. So, while he authorized that the PDB be provided to the secretary of state, the secretary of defense, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, he also insisted that the way it would be done was that a briefer from CIA would hand-carry the President's Daily Brief to each of those individuals personally, meet private-

ly with them, let them read it, answer their questions, take their tasking, and then take the document back. So the PDB was never left with even the secretary of state or the secretary of defense—it was taken back. Same thing at the White House.²¹

Bush 41 explained the rigor of this system as fundamental to maintaining the necessary level of trust between the Intelligence Community and the executive:

We tried to protect the distribution of the PDB because we knew very well once it was faxed or put through a Xerox machine, then the people preparing it, with their oath to protect sources and methods, would be inclined to pull back and not give the president the frankest possible intelligence assessments presenting the best possible intelligence.²²

Adm. David Jeremiah confirmed the tightness of the distribution, noting that he didn't receive the PDB as vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs, only receiving it during a brief tenure as acting chairman.

These efforts to engender the trust and goodwill of the Intelligence Community seem to have been effective. DCI William Webster (1987–91) noted that the "PDB was a very important document to us, and to the president. And he set the tone for it."²³ Helgerson goes further, describing CIA's relationship with Bush 41 as "undoubtedly the most productive it had enjoyed with any of the nine presidents it served since the Agency's founding in 1947."²⁴ Members of the Bush 41 administration are similarly positive about their experience with the PDB, with some having expressed both appreciation of and admiration for the quality of the intelligence they received.

Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney was one of those who read the PDB in the car; other documents would be waiting for him at the office. He also alluded to the fact that the briefers seldom brought only the PDB; rather they would also bring other documents, ones in which Cheney had expressed

an interest or ones they thought he should see: “The PDB is the main thing. Usually the *Early Bird* would be in the car too...usually I’d get through the PDB on the way to work. Sometimes there’d be special reports of various kinds that they’d bring to us.”²⁵ The *Early Bird* was then a Pentagon-prepared compilation of around 50 media stories and circulated widely in the national security agencies.

For other senior officials, as it did for Cheney, the lead stories would often frame his day’s work. For example, James Baker, secretary of state (1989–92) and White House chief of staff (1992–93) said,

*I was religious about reading the PDB every day.... People used to kid about the fact that if you’d read the papers, you pick up a lot of it. That’s true. But there was a lot in [the PDB] you wouldn’t pick up, too.*²⁶

Robert Gates, who had read the PDB as DDCI (1986–89), as deputy national security advisor (1989–91), and as DCI (1991–93) remembered,

*One telling moment, when it was fairly important, was on the Saturday before the coup in the Soviet Union, the coup attempt in August of 1991.... [Bush 41] was reading the [PDB] and the last item...was CIA’s view that there was very likely to be a coup attempt.... I’ll never forget the president turning to me... and saying, “Should I take this seriously?” And I said, “Yes, and here’s why.” So, for all of the criticism the Agency has taken about Soviet things, on a lot of important stuff they gave the president good warning.*²⁷

Bush 41’s chief of staff, John Sununu, outlined how the working day began for the president. Every day, Sununu and Scowcroft met with the president to manage four topics:

Number one was the critical CIA briefing—“Mr. President, this is the most important thing happening in the world today for you to pay attention to, the broad foreign policy issues, the broad domestic issues, and the

political issues....” This president was briefed every single day by the CIA. I cannot imagine a presidency that isn’t and yet I understand the last administration stopped that and has it less frequently...they [the PDBs] were artfully done documents. They would come in with a document of about eight or 10 pages, I think that’s the right amount, multicolored, nice diagrams, nice maps.... The president would ask questions, Scowcroft and I would ask questions as we went down this checklist, and it again would define what the president wanted more information on, and get back to him eventually, through Brent. CIA stuff would come back through Brent and would be discussed at a later meeting.

[After the] briefer leaves—Sometimes Bob Gates, who was Brent’s deputy, was there for that part of the meeting, stayed for the foreign policy stuff. The meeting then starts off with the president, Brent, myself. Brent going over either what we had just read from the CIA report, after the briefer leaves, or talking about any of the other foreign policy issues that have to be addressed that day, the results of whatever got done the day before, what we have to do that day.²⁸

*In each case, on every item, the whole purpose of those meetings is to find out what the president wants done on what and what he doesn’t want done on what.... At some point in there, and I don’t know why it was traditionally done in the Bush White House this way, but I think it had been done in the Reagan White House and the president continued it—the president and the vice president got separate CIA briefings. When the vice president finished his CIA briefing, he came in, sometimes before ours was finished, most of the time after ours was finished, and just about when Brent was starting foreign policy stuff.*²⁹

In addition to these institutional mechanisms of solidifying the policy-intelligence relationship, the Bush 41 administration also benefitted from the collegiality that existed at the upper levels of officialdom. The most senior officials—Baker, Cheney, and Scowcroft—the “principals,” in Washington parlance—formed a tight-knit team. In Sununu’s words,

It doesn’t sound like a very big thing. But I remind you of Kissinger, Rogers, Baker, Meese—that kind of a tension in the White House—and it was very important when we got to the Gulf War. It got forged by the crisis on the Tower nomination probably.³⁰ We got to know each other certainly during the campaign; I got to know Brent after the election, after I’d been named chief of staff, as we started to prepare. But I stress that because it made things a lot easier for the president that way. He never had to worry about dealing with staff tensions, which I guarantee you is the most debilitating drain on the president’s time, when there is a conflict amongst the two key people that he has in the White House.³¹

Scowcroft used the PDB as a way of reflecting on the different kinds of intelligence products senior officials receive, and how they calibrate those products.

Having been the producer of the intelligence, he [Bush] would take out the PDB and look at it—not only for what it had in it, but how it was done, what wasn’t in it that should be, was it presented the right way—and the poor intelligence briefer who brought it in for him to read sometimes got quite a grilling on it. But that is a reflection of the job that intelligence has, and how the president looks at the product. Whether he thinks it’s a bunch of pap or whether he really is able to make use of it.

And then the intelligence itself sort of divides up into different levels of confidence. The first is facts—you know, the Soviet Union has so many ICBMs, so many warheads, and so on. There is a tendency to say, “Okay, that’s the way it is.” And there’s a great deal of credence to that. The second category is the facts plus an interpretation. Yeltsin collapsed in a meeting and they took him to the hospital. What does that likely mean? Did he have a bad headache, or are there some complications to it? And then the last category, that of predictions—looking out, “What is going to happen to the Soviet Union? What’s happening to the Soviet economy?”

And the confidence of the decisionmaker in the intelligence goes down with each one of these categories. He trusts the experts so that the facts are taken pretty much wholesale. Interpretation, a little less so, but since they’re so intimately related to the facts, and the expert is going to know more about the surrounding circumstances, yes. But when you get to the predictions, there’s a lot of skepticism on the part of the decisionmaker, again, depending on his personality, but frequently to the point that they’re considered just one opinion of another.

There are some other factors that the decisionmaker[s], at least some of them who have had some relations with the Intelligence Community, also think about, and, especially with respect to estimates, and that is the objectivity of the intelligence that is given when you have the expert analysis attached to the facts themselves. The estimators, for example—there used to be annually a national estimate of the Soviet Union, what it was doing, how it was coming in defense, what its economy was, and so on and so forth. Well, for a long time, that was done by the same group of estimators each year...[and]

there's a human tendency, when you're doing another one in 1975...to make the '74 one look like you're really prescient. So that, in the end, you know, can over a period of years, lead one astray.³²

Clearly, much in the policy-intelligence relationship during the Bush 41 administration worked well. The president himself was a knowledgeable and experienced consumer with defined preferences and a demonstrated attentiveness to the “intangibles” of the relationship— ensuring that the PDB’s producers knew the document was, indeed, read

carefully by its intended audience, and controlling its distribution in such a way that the Intelligence Community could feel confident that its sensitive sources and methods were well protected. That Bush 41’s national security teams—principals and deputies—were friendly seems to have furthered the effectiveness of the policy-intelligence interaction. The Clinton administration entered office in 1993 with neither of these particular advantages; as the president’s introduction to the Intelligence Community, the PDB was fundamental to the manner in which the Clinton administration’s use of intelligence evolved.



Briefing the President: Bill Clinton

Unlike Bush 41, Bill Clinton entered the Oval Office as a neophyte about both foreign policy and the use of intelligence. He received his first CIA briefing as governor of Arkansas and Democratic presidential candidate in September 1992; these briefings became daily events shortly following his election in November. Helgerson's description of the Clinton transition contrasts sharply with the smoothness of the transition to George H.W. Bush. The advance work for candidate Clinton's first briefing, for example, included DCI Robert Gates' spending "considerable time preparing, mindful of the governor's lack of familiarity and experience with the Intelligence Community and its products." During this same meeting, Helgerson describes Gates as being "heartened when Governor Clinton expressed his support for a strong and capable US intelligence service." Helgerson himself, at the time head of CIA's transition team, had his own concerns about establishing an ongoing and direct relationship between CIA and then President-elect Clinton: "I had more than a few apprehensions. We were aware that staff members in some previous transitions, including at least a couple at very senior levels, had worked vigorously to thwart undertakings such as we were about to propose."³³

These concerns were quickly allayed when Clinton's staff proved in fact to be quite receptive, and indeed "interested in ascertaining what kinds of support could be provided Governor Clinton and key staffers in Little Rock and Washington." Helgerson describes Clinton as having a pronounced

interest in the PDB from the beginning: "[Ten] days following the election, we had our first session with Governor Clinton.... After offering a brief but friendly welcome, [Clinton] read every word of that day's PDB, obviously intrigued to see what it contained." Though these briefings contained drafts of national intelligence estimates (NIEs), and some raw intelligence, "it quickly became apparent that the governor's primary interest was in studying the PDB."

Clinton proved receptive to CIA suggestions concerning logistics, continuing Bush 41's practice of receiving the PDB in the morning and in the presence of an agency briefer. He similarly was amenable to receiving a "personalized supplement" during the interim between election and inauguration. These additions provided "back-ground articles pegged to issues treated briefly in the PDB and...in-depth material on issues...high on the Clinton agenda." As Clinton's exposure to intelligence continued and his preferences developed, however, this practice was discontinued; Clinton similarly dispensed with the "page-size maps of virtually every place of interest in the world" used by Bush 41.

Although Clinton used these initial transition briefings as opportunities to ask questions and engage in discussion with briefers, this practice seems to have lapsed over time. From the perspective of CIA's then-DDI, Douglas MacEachin, the national security advisor, Anthony Lake, would take the PDB and pass it to the president. It was not always clear whether the president read it, for the briefers did

not have direct access to him. That access resumed after the “Blackhawk down” disaster in Somalia in October 1993, when 18 American soldiers were killed.

Indeed, though Clinton is reported to have read the PDB consistently and thoroughly, he tended to have “little use for the follow-up oral briefings offered by the CIA.”³⁴ It is not clear whether this pattern was a cause or a symptom of what has been described, perhaps in some caricature, as the “debacle of the Clinton administration’s attitudes toward intelligence.”³⁵ The DCI, James Woolsey, never established a relationship with the president and his inner circle. Indeed, he himself joked, after a small plane crashed into the White House, that it had been him, trying one more way to get to see the president! Suffice to say that in the Clinton administration, while senior officials read the document because they knew the president did, it did not play the same organizing function that it had for George H.W. Bush.

While Clinton did not always avail himself of briefers, others in his administration who received the PDB—of whom there were up to around two dozen—did.³⁶ Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, for example, recalled finding it odd but important to have a briefer watch her read the PDB.³⁷ She also experimented with having an INR briefer present when the PDB briefer came. That, however, did not seem to work, for whatever combination of agency competition or conflicting personalities. She did feel it was important to have the document as well as the briefer, though of course no briefer can be an expert on everything, so his or her role becomes as much courier of more background as briefer. This was not a negative comment on the briefers. Virtually all the principals who commented on the subject praised the professionalism of the briefers. In an important sense, that fact might be seen as the genesis of the deep dives.

For John Hamre, the deputy secretary of defense, the PDB served the function that other officials have noted: it helped them all stay on the same page. He also valued the briefers.

Because I am a slow reader (I suffer from mild dyslexia), I opted for a briefing about the PDB, during the morning drive into the office. The briefer selected the most important materials and integrated these materials with a range of additional inputs into a useful process and product. What I found most valuable about this daily PDB briefing is that it synchronized me with my counterparts in the administration every morning. Invariably I would receive a phone call from one of my counterparts, questioning something that appeared in the PDB. I needed to know the facts and context of the problem so that I could bring the resources of the department to bear on its solution.³⁸

James Steinberg, who had moved from INR to become deputy national security advisor, placed yet more emphasis on the role of the briefer:

I think the most satisfying part was [that] there was a very clear sense through the relationship with the briefer...that was a medium through which we could define our interests and areas of concern, and that requests for information, clarification, follow-up could be pursued. And I thought that was very effective...we were extremely well served.³⁹

Virtually all of the Clinton administration principals who commented on the subject praised their briefers’ professionalism, despite these differences in how they were used. That was true of the other administrations as well. The briefers were and are experienced analysts; being a briefer, especially to the president, was prized within CIA and regarded as an almost-certain steppingstone to high advancement. Briefers across all the administrations said they came to be treated like part of the family. One briefer recalled being in the secretary of defense’s office and asking where he could get coffee. He was quickly shown to the secretary’s own coffee pot. Their challenge was to be part of the family but not of the “team” in any political sense, and so

they found it uncomfortable when the conversation turned in a domestic political direction.

The PDB itself, however, received mixed reviews. Though Hamre noted that the PDB was “valuable [because] it synchronized me with my counterparts in the administration every morning,” his appreciation for his briefers seems to have been their ability to compensate for a shortcoming in the document itself—their ability to “integrate lots of data, some that went beyond what was in the *President’s Daily Brief*.”⁴⁰ For Chief of Staff John Podesta, the PDB

*was more timely but to some extent thinner than, for example, the INR product [INR Morning Summary]...the thing that was missing that might have been helpful in shaping policy was not what was happening today but what was going to [happen] a year from now. There was kind of that mid-ground of interesting trends that were happening.... It’s sort of the difference between reading the daily newspaper and reading.... the New Yorker or the Atlantic Monthly.*⁴¹

President Clinton’s second national security advisor, Samuel (“Sandy”) Berger, seems also to have found the PDB to be a bit thin, and so provided the State Department’s *INR Morning Summary* in tandem with the PDB:

*I started giving the president the PDB and the INR Summary together; I felt much better about it. They’re different products. The PDB is the most important intelligence that we have that day...that ought to be brought to the president’s attention. The INR embeds it in a little more analysis. Probably President Clinton would have read it had it been three times as long with a little bit more context...you know, you go from Bosnia to North Korea to bump, to bump, to bump...it’s a short album of snapshots which, I think, if put together with other intelligence, is fine. Standing alone, I think, I would have redesigned it.*⁴²

Steinberg offered a similar assessment, attributing a large measure of the value of the PDB to the interaction with analysts it occasioned, rather than to the document itself. As he described it, the relationship with the briefer was “about 75 percent of the value. I think I was less satisfied with the kind of the canned product, the daily product [PDB], which was, you know, in part because it was designed to meet multiple audiences.”⁴³

Steinberg’s highlighting of the “multiple audience” problem suggests that the Clinton administration’s somewhat ambivalent relationship with the PDB might have stemmed in part from its relatively broad circulation, including content on topics of interest to so many may have come at the expense of depth, context, and trend projection. The breadth of its distribution may also have contributed to what Steinberg has characterized as a disconnect between what the PDB editors thought policymakers needed to know, and what it was they were actually interested in—that is, the need to serve many masters may have reduced the document’s focus on the issues any single policymaker, or group of policymakers, deemed most important. Although Steinberg did think there was “some improvement over time,” he nonetheless thought that the *INR Morning Summary* compared favorably with the PDB, perhaps because the people preparing the former were closer to policymakers than CIA analysts, in the sense that unlike CIA officers, they are in the same building with the policy officials they seek to help, and so can interact directly with them more easily.⁴⁴

One particular challenge of intelligence support to policy is not unique to the PDB context but is sharper there—assessing the foreign counterparts of US foreign policy leaders. Leaders, especially elected officials, got where they are in considerable measure because of their people skills, and so are likely to reckon themselves better analysts of counterparts than someone sitting in Langley. As important, they will have direct dealings with those counterparts and usually are notoriously bad at debriefing anyone, let alone intelligence officers. This challenge is more pronounced in the

PDB context because the readers are so senior, and thus are in frequent touch with prime ministers and foreign ministers. One briefer recalled Vice President Gore's uttering an epithet when he read a description of a Russian leader with whom he had dealt. Moreover, CIA assessments on paper will be

relatively static, while US leaders acquire more and more texture through their dealings with counterparts. The challenge is all the greater if intelligence and its sources don't bring much to the party—as is likely to be the case with countries in which only open-source information is available.



Briefing the President: George W. Bush

Two events during the presidency of George W. Bush resulted in significant change in the PDB production process—the creation of the office of the director of national intelligence (ODNI) at the end of 2004, and the beginning of what came to be called “deep dives”—deeper looks at particular issues—in the latter part of the second term. Together, these changes made the PDB process somewhat more cumbersome and the clearance process more involved as a larger number of agencies contributed content and advance scheduling became more of a necessity. In the end, though, most of the content continued to be contributed by CIA. Like Clinton, George W. Bush entered office having had little exposure to intelligence products and without established preferences or routines for receiving them. How he used the PDB thus evolved a good deal over his two terms in office. Then-Principal Deputy Director of National Intelligence Michael Hayden’s comments nicely summarize the change in Bush 43’s intelligence savvy over time:

*In the first term, most people were very happy that he had...surrounded himself with what was thought to be the “A Team”—Condi Rice, Secretary Rumsfeld, Colin Powell, and so on. It was my observation in the second term that the president—and I don’t mean this to criticize his advisers—but that the president had grown past his advisers in his understanding of things.*⁴⁵

Hayden attributes this development in no small measure to the PDB, an attribution that seems on the mark. During the Bush 43 presidency, the PDB process—what was provided to the president and how it was used—all evolved over time. As a result, the PDB became less the “snapshots” lamented by Berger and more of a content-driven discussion between policymakers and intelligence analysts, including a series of conversations—the “deep dives.” Bush 43 established a close working relationship with CIA early on, apparently in large measure because of his quick and easy rapport with DCI George Tenet, a marked contrast to the relationship between Clinton and his three DCIs, especially Woolsey. Tenet would meet with Bush 43 several times each week and often would be present at the daily briefings.⁴⁶ These briefings were also regularly attended by Vice President Cheney, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, and Chief of Staff Andrew H. Card, Jr., who counted among the small group of a half dozen advisers who received the PDB.⁴⁷

The first set of changes was driven not by the president and his preferences but rather by the aftereffects of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. First, in the spring of 2004, the contents and use of the PDB came under public scrutiny as a result of Rice’s testimony before the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks on the United States, popularly called the “9/11 Commission,” which was charged with providing a “full and complete account of the circumstances surrounding the attacks.” One partic-

ular focal point of the controversy was the contents and impact of a PDB item on 6 August 2001, just a month before the attacks, entitled “Bin Laden Determined to Strike US.” That document, reproduced in the appendix, was declassified and included in the commission report.⁴⁸

The rather spectacular title quickly elevated the 6 August PDB to infamy and placed the administration on the defensive about its use of intelligence. As with newspapers, the title had been added by the editors of the PDB, not the authors. It was the headline, however, that created the most heat, more so than the document’s origins, tone, and content. In origin, the item was different from many PDB items for it had not been touched off by the acquisition of a new piece of intelligence that required the president’s attention. Rather, it originated in a request from the president, either directly or surmised by the briefer from conversation. In terms of composition, one experienced analyst called the 6 August entry “a classic CIA response” to a White House request, while a national security reporter for the *New York Times* characterized it as a “terse distillation of what the Central Intelligence Agency had pieced together over four years,” provided in “11 dispassionate paragraphs” and a “neutral tone.”⁴⁹

To be sure, the tone was dry and the brevity of the PDB format confining. It sounded historical but was meant to convey a five-part current message: while we have no specific indications of an attack on the United States, we know bin Laden wants to attack, has tried and may be trying, al-Qa’ida has people here, and the FBI has seen suspicious activity consistent with hijackings or other attack. In the review process, a request for more detail entailed more communication between the CIA and FBI, leading to the mention of the 70 ongoing al-Qa’ida-related investigations in the last paragraph.

In her testimony to the 9/11 Commission and later, Rice depicted the PDB’s contents as vague, descriptive rather than predictive—outlining bin Laden’s aspirations, not his capabilities—and historical.⁵⁰ Bush explained the PDB and his administration’s response to it in similar terms:

*The PDB was no indication of a terrorist threat. There was not a time and place of an attack. It said Osama bin Laden had designs on America. Well, I knew that. What I wanted to know was, is there any- thing specifically going to take place in America that we needed to react to?*⁵¹

Yet in light of actual events, many observers considered the 6 August PDB to be smoking-gun evidence of a lax policy response to an alarming warning—one commentator called Rice’s testimony an indicator of “ominous passivity,” while another offered the acerbic comment that “putting together the facts may not have been as simple as adding 2+2, but it couldn’t have been more complicated than 2+2+2.”⁵² Others, however, considered the PDB item to be but one among many that provided information that was serious but speculative, and nonspecific in nature. Intelligence expert Richard K. Betts, for example, argued that as a hallmark of the administration’s use of intelligence product the 6 August PDB should not necessarily be all that damning for the administration. During tense times, high officials are often flooded with inconclusive warnings of numerous potential dangers, generally without specific “actionable” information, discussion of the relative likelihood of various scenarios, or evidence about which ones are worth the diversion of scarce resources to counter.⁵³

The 6 August PDB thus intensified the ongoing national post-9/11 debate about how to “fix” intelligence, and policymakers’ use of it.⁵⁴ This discussion culminated at the end of 2004 in the creation of the ODNI. That immediately affected who delivered the PDB: John Negroponte, the first DNI, won the contest with the DCI (who then became the director of CIA, or DCIA) for the job of delivering the PDB to the president. When Negroponte took over the PDB, he delegated the responsibility to Thomas Fingar, who served as both the chairman of the NIC and the deputy DNI for analysis. In that latter capacity, he supervised the PDB and appointed an assistant deputy DNI for analysis to manage the process. The CIA’s Directorate of Intelligence

continued to provide the bulk of the review staff, but staff was expanded to include representatives from INR, DIA, and eventually other contributing agencies. As Negroponte recalled, the contributions of the other agencies remained slender, given the small size of some of those analytic shops and their other responsibilities:

*The one thing we tried to change substantively was that we tried to get a few more agencies involved in the drafting, so...INR used to get some pieces in every now and then, the FBI, the NSA. But let's face it, the lion's share was CIA. It was 95 percent.*⁵⁵

Negroponte was succeeded by VAdm. Michael McConnell, whose tenure as DNI overlapped with Gen. Michael Hayden's term as DCIA. Although some measure of competition between the two agencies persisted across leadership terms and although CIA still did the bulk of the work preparing the PDB, Hayden's approach to working with the new agency was to defuse what tension he could:

*I deferred to the DNI...this is kind of all screwed up between the DCI and the DNI—the only way you can make it work is on a personal basis...it can be overcome with personal contact. My general mantra is the DNI owes the DCI freedom of action; the DCI owes the DNI transparency....That's to be the social contract.*⁵⁶

Frances Townsend, the homeland security advisor, preferred a different solution, suggesting that inter-agency competition was not helpful and could have been discouraged by having the two agency heads attend the briefing together—more frequently than the once a week that was the then-current practice: “A president, if he had them both in the room, could instill some discipline that requires them to get over it.”⁵⁷

However, even if Townsend's approach could have solved one problem, it might have magnified another: although in Washington it is a very rare

official indeed who turns down an opportunity for face time with the president, it remains a matter of debate whether sitting in on briefings, including to the president, is actually a good use of time for one agency head, let alone two. When McConnell was DNI, for example, a senior member of his staff commented that all the waiting outside the Oval Office left McConnell trying to manage the Intelligence Community on his Blackberry. Negroponte, on the other hand, had no qualms about devoting time to preparing to sit in on the briefing of the president:

*That was a popular issue, because, “Oh, was he doing that at the expense of running the Community.” And my answer is, “Well, okay. It took me a couple of hours to prepare for the PDB, maybe. But I would have done that for any job...” I would spend a certain amount of time reading intelligence in any case. I'm going to say [I spent] 25 percent of my time supporting the White House.*⁵⁸

Concerns about time notwithstanding, Negroponte and others have called attention to the benefits that derive from the head of the Intelligence Community having regular, direct contact with the president. That contact, they argue, is crucial to doing their job well. Negroponte again:

*You can have a debate about the merits of having the DNI in the room for every briefing. In some ways, the upside is it gives a little top cover to the briefer. If they ask a hard question or a politically delicate question about policy, you have somebody there who can take the question on it. Also, it's nice to have a witness, just as a sounding board and someone who can help out...the president is the commander in chief and he's got all these authorities. It [being there] helps you set your priorities during the day, too, based on what you might have heard during that morning briefing. I wouldn't change that.*⁵⁹

Other senior officials, however, voiced concerns, or worse, about DCIs' or DNIs' becoming too close to the White House. As one senior CIA officer put it: "The downside...if the DNI is in there every day, you run the risk that Tenet ran.... If you're there every day, you start—informally, you become part of the team."⁶⁰ The Tenet reference concerns his comment to the president, at a meeting on 12 December 2002, that the evidence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction was "a slam dunk case," when in fact no such weapons were found. Richard Armitage, the deputy secretary of state for Bush 43, was an even more plainspoken critic:

I've been opposed to the director...briefing the president on a daily basis...because you bond with your client. It's a natural human tendency and I think it's a bad thing for intelligence officers. I would prefer to keep it, first of all, at the briefer level, not having a principal briefing the principal, because you bond.⁶¹

Although views on the nature and value of the relationship created by the DNI's presence at the daily briefings differ, members of the George W. Bush administration are almost uniformly positive about the PDB's content. General Hayden considered Bush 43's exposure to the PDB largely to be responsible for his becoming a seasoned consumer, and DNI McConnell has described the PDB as very important:

The PDB is a wonderful document, because it is focused on the key issues and it goes into enough depth to be able to make sure you understand. It's written clearly and concisely. We put a lot of effort into that. If you read just the PDB, you are very, very well informed.⁶²

Joshua Bolten, the president's chief of staff in the second term, noted that he did not apply his usual filter to the PDB and related material:

I had weighed in a number of times earlier in the administration to suggest that the president was getting too much granular information—

that he was actually reading the threat matrix... [I said that I] look at the same thing and I think it's ridiculous for the president to try to read this thing. It's just raw intelligence.... But the president liked it, and he was interested.

In almost every other aspect of the president's day, I viewed it as my job to filter the presidential from the nonpresidential. I did not view the PDB that way, and my guess is that I therefore probably allowed more to get through to the president than was necessary. But that was also partly the president's preference...the president had been doing this for five years, and he had his way of doing things. He knew what he liked and what he wanted.⁶³

Condoleezza Rice echoed comments of those in prior administrations for whom the PDB was valuable, as much because it let them know what the president was seeing as for any other reason. Still, she shared Armitage's trepidation that the DNI would bond with the president; so, too, were both cognizant of the PDB's potential negative effects. These, for Rice, ranged from the comparatively benign—the PDB's content lagging behind the pace of diplomacy, for example—to the more dangerous, which she described as the president's getting "spun up" over a minor item. It was for this reason in particular that she didn't want the president to read the PDB without the national security advisor in the room. Armitage conveyed his feelings, again more bluntly:

I think the PDB is one of the most dangerous things known to man.... I call it that because something may stick in the president's mind which doesn't have the opportunity to flesh itself out in the PDB, which leads me to another pet peeve...in the intelligence product, I think that just like in the newspaper, the analysts probably aren't responsible for the headline, but the headline might be what people remember. It's bad. It can be very bad. It can be very misleading—and always without intent to do so.⁶⁴

Armitage's worrying over the "granularity" of the PDB was somewhat mitigated by the emergence of "deep dives" in the second part of Bush's second term, in early 2007. Success has a thousand parents, most especially in Washington, and like many things in government, it evolved as much as it was created. Fingar recalls a portentous scene at Bolling Air Force Base—the location of the ODNI before its permanent building in Liberty Crossing was finished—after McConnell's swearing-in ceremony. The president redirected a conversation that was to have been about links between analysis and collection into one about how the analysts could understand what he was interested in. As Fingar recalls,

*I was with others...hovering around, and the president sat down and began to muse, "Do the analysts really know what I think? Wouldn't it be useful for them to know what I'm actually interested in? They write about things without awareness of what I'm worried about."*⁶⁵

Still, it is Bolten, and National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, who are uniformly identified as being central to the introduction of deep dives. Fingar recalls that the conversation with the president led to an implicit tasking for Hadley to develop the idea, with McConnell and Fingar. Homeland Security Advisor Frances Townsend recalls a conversation with both Bolten and Hadley, though Hadley gives the credit to Bolten:

*It was an idea that Josh Bolten actually had, which I thought was a good idea...we took it to the president. He was a little skeptical, said we'd try it, and after a couple, three weeks of shakedown, he liked it. And so we did it for the rest of the administration.*⁶⁶

Long before the deep dives, senior policymakers had begun to worry that the PDB sessions were becoming not just briefings, but also policy conversations—between the president and intelligence analysts. Hadley recalled, "[Secretary of Defense Donald] Rumsfeld kept saying to me..., 'The

president, he's sitting down with these intel briefers and he's having policy discussions, and his policy principals aren't there, and that isn't a good thing to do."⁶⁷ Bolten agreed:

*As chief of staff...I found it unhealthy that he [the president] was having a pretty vigorous policy debate and debate about the intelligence with the briefer. And Steve [Hadley] and I got together and said, "You know, let's open up the aperture a bit here for the president, and let's give him access to the people who prepared the piece so that he can drill down better.... Let's invite in other members of the senior national security team, because the president's spending a lot of time and he's having important conversations with too small an audience."*⁶⁸

Thus, it became practice for policy principals to participate in the deep dives. Fingar and McConnell provide more detail. Fingar's take:

*The president spends between 30 minutes and an hour with us six days a week.... Read-ahead papers [are] provided to the principals, analysts [go] into the Oval Office to present and defend and respond to questions, sort of demonstrating who we are, what we know, to be able to say directly what we don't know, what assumptions we are making, to talk about the collection capabilities. We've done almost 100 of these deep dives. We've had more than 200 analysts who have been participants in this. I confess to a high degree of trepidation when we began this. I knew we could start off with a bang. I wasn't sure how deep our bench was.... But after 100 of these, we are still going strong. And we have them scheduled out for weeks, and in some cases months in advance, because they have proven useful."*⁶⁹

McConnell described the process this way:

In the Oval, we always had the president, vice president, chief of staff, [and] Steve Hadley at a minimum.... We organized the week so we

could focus on principal issues. On Monday, it was Iraq-focused. So in addition to the players I just mentioned, we frequently had the SecDef, the SecState, and the chairman Joint Chiefs on Monday. Tuesday was homeland security-focused...in addition to that group, we'd have the attorney general, the director of the FBI, and secretary of homeland security. Wednesday was kind of intelligence day, and what we [would] do was a deep dive on a topic of interest.... When we gave the president the deep dive piece the night before, I would say at the 95-percent level he read it before [we arrived]. Thursday was CIA Ops and Friday Iraq or Afghanistan, whichever was hotter. Deep dives could be added at any time, including Saturdays, based on the president's interest.⁷⁰

The deep dives generally got high marks all around. DNI Negroponte put the value in terms of the evolution of the administration:

I think by the second term, [the president] probably had a little better sense of what [intelligence] could and couldn't do, and he also had a bit better sense of what...I think he had a good sense of what it is to be a customer of intelligence. It's not a magic bullet, but it's very important too. And he also had a very interesting Socratic sort of method—a very dialectic style. I mean he'd almost invariably start out by kind of questioning a report and then through the process of questioning would refine his opinion and his judgment and his understanding of an issue. So he really liked engaging the analysts. He liked meeting the analysts who wrote the pieces.⁷¹

Cheney, too, valued the direct interaction between policymakers and analysts that the deep dives occasioned:

I thought it was useful. I thought it was helpful from time to time to have Secretary Paulson there, because we were involved in the Treasury in some way. Get the secretary of state

over, secretary of defense. Maybe get them all there.... I mean they were invaluable sessions, because you'd learn a lot. There was an opportunity for them [the analysts] to show what they could do, what they knew.... You couldn't help but be impressed by the people. The caliber of the personnel that we saw through that.... It gave you a fair degree of confidence in terms of what we were doing.⁷²

The vice president made clear, though, that the wider group should be an occasional event, not a regular one: “You need to avoid increasing the number of people to the extent that it changes the nature of the PDB sessions. A couple of cabinet members once a week would probably be okay. [The] president needs to have that regular daily session where he can discuss the most sensitive subjects with a very small group.”⁷³

Hayden stressed the value to the analysts of the deep dive briefings:

They became interactive—[that] is the neutral word; contentious is an accurate word—occasionally, [the president would say], “Ahh [so-and-so] doesn't think that way. I just talked to him,”—that sort of thing, which, by the way, is a magnificent experience for the analyst. I mean, let's not forget everybody in the room's getting influenced, and the analyst now is leaving, saying, I never thought the president thought about it that way.”⁷⁴

From the analysts' perspective, deep dives were exhilarating if also sometimes terrifying. The president reportedly would often say at the end of the dive, in effect, you've given me your assessment, now tell me what you think I should do. By all accounts, if an analyst demurred, saying that wasn't really his or her job, that was fine; but so too was it fine for the analyst to give a personal view on policy. In Negroponte's words,

Well, first of all, he tried to make [the analysts] comfortable, because he's a very consid-

erate man. Because some of them come in half petrified. And he would sort of ask them what their background was, where they'd studied... and he'd end up being pretty impressed by the kinds of qualifications these people have. Yeah, he was very interested in what they had to say—I mean, there were times when he could get very cross with the analysis, but that's just human. Of course, there were also times—and this is not the fault of the analysts—where they were writing about some leader who he happened to know very well. Yeah, and he'd just... say, "Well, that's not what he told me."⁷⁵

Fingar regards only a small number of these policymaker-intelligence interactions as having been unsuccessful:

*From my perspective it was a very small number—less than five—that really didn't work. What the precise combination of analyst not [being] adequately prepared, or the topic didn't lend itself...or the president had a stomachache, or the vice president weighed in on something else and squeezed the time. I don't think there was a pattern to what didn't work.*⁷⁶

The combination of the DNI plus a president comfortable with the details of foreign policy and thus eager to reach out for deeper dives changed the nature of the process. From the analysts' perspective, the PDB staff wanted to tee up pieces ahead of time to make sure they met policy concerns and to help with scheduling. In this framework, they—and key briefers—might ask for a piece ahead of time to get a sense of it and mull it over. This meant they might fiddle with the piece, or that it would be overtaken and have to be changed anyway. The review process was lengthy in any case, leaving analysts with the impression that they should spend as little time writing and leave time for several layers of mulling. That meant that preparing and shepherding a single piece might take the better part of a week. Items that were responses to breaking events were to be

done, ideally, the same day—but even those could take as long as several days to get out.

From Fingar's perspective of the deep dives,

*The PDB staff didn't bring any concerns to me and, as far as I recall, did not have to do additional work. The DI took this very seriously and rehearsed their people when they were to do a deep dive.... There was no impact on the number of pieces in the PDB. [While the] DI was almost totally geared to producing for that vehicle...by simple arithmetic, there were not enough spaces in the book to accommodate even one piece per DI analyst per year.... By the time we were doing deep dives, a very high percentage (roughly 70 percent when I left) were written with input from analysts in multiple agencies. Most of this was bottom-up collaboration—analysts, usually at the DI, reaching out to counterparts elsewhere and without formal coordination between agencies.*⁷⁷

Bolten offered a different, more general comment on the nature of the policy-intelligence relationship during the Bush 43 administration, raising two important issues—bias and the craft of analysis. In the latter, he echoed Scowcroft's comments from Bush 41:

[The president] often suspected bias, he often suspected policy differences, and it was hard for him to get past that.... It's hard to get past that if you're not actually talking with the person who wrote the piece...no discredit or disparagement of the briefers themselves, [who] I thought were exceptionally good professionals. But they didn't write the pieces...what partly generated the president's frustration is that there were not always clear distinctions drawn between "here's what we actually know, here's what we have a little bit of evidence for but we're guessing about, here's what we're really guessing about, and here's our opinion..."

The most difficult one was a situation in which there would be just one small piece of evidence, which to an intelligence professional is pretty exciting when you've been looking for evidence for a long time, but then it ends up...magnifying the importance of a particular piece of intelligence. And a lot of times we had the feeling that conclusions were being drawn based on relatively limited evidence. I think a number of pieces would have been better had they said, "We have a piece of evidence, and based on this small piece of evidence, we think it points in this direction, which, if you took it far enough, a conclusion would be X." But often those intermediate steps were left out—maybe for purposes of brevity.⁷⁸

Several other principals commented that the assessments of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction in 2002 had left the president skeptical of intelligence, and of NIEs in particular. There was also concern that the well-intentioned initiatives in tradecraft

spawned by the failure—especially the emphasis on more careful sourcing—could have the unintended side effect of enhancing, rather than diminishing, the PDB's snapshot character, filtering out the analysts' expert views that were a feature of the *Morning Summary*.⁷⁹ To some extent, the deep dives offered a way to assuage both sets of concerns—helping rebuild the confidence the president and other high-level policymakers had in intelligence and, at the same time, giving them direct access to analysts and their expertise.

Over the course of Bush 43's two terms, the PDB process evolved from the president's being briefed on a shorter, seven-to-10-page document, while the president read along, to, by the second term, a longer document accompanied by a deeper interaction with CIA and other intelligence briefers and analysts.⁸⁰ However the administration's use of intelligence is judged, the relationship between intelligence and policy underwent a marked transformation during George W. Bush's eight years in office.



Looking Ahead

A Comparison of the PDB and the PDB Process across Three Administrations

	George H. W. Bush	Bill Clinton	George W. Bush
President briefed orally?	Yes	Not consistently; sometimes read later in day	Yes
How wide the readership?	Very restricted; documents not left	Much wider, up to two dozen	Between the two previous
Did PDB process change over term?	No	No	Yes: deep dives
PDB a part of foreign policy process?	Yes, was part of morning rolling senior staff meeting	No, though for some deputies, especially, was early warning	Yes, especially after deep dives became policy conversation
Deeper dives?	No, though in all administrations other documents came with PDB	No, relatively few follow-up questions from president	Yes, key feature of PDB in second term
Comments on competition?	No	Yes, some thought INR Morning Summary a little richer	No

The first overarching question raised by the PDB case study—Is something like the current PDB process the best use of a morning half-hour of the president’s time, given America’s circumstances in the 2010s?—is specific to the PDB. However, the second—What are the implications of thinking of intelligence as a process, not a product?—has profound implications across the relationship between intelligence and policy. Plainly, the answer to the first question will depend on the president. Yet the early months of intelligence support, through the

PDB or in other ways, are bound to be rich in sheer volume of information.

Over time, though, that will change, and the president will want something else or something more. It would be natural to move toward deeper dives and more conversations with experts and to build off the intelligence to engage in a policy conversation among the principals, ranging from traditional national security topics to economics, homeland security, or global health. The virtue of the deep dives was that they began with intelligence, and

in that sense, they followed the logic of President George W. Bush's offer to the briefers: you've given me your assessment of the situation, now tell me what I should do. It is interesting that the idea of the dives came from neither intelligence nor foreign policy officials but rather from the president's chief of staff (whose father was a professional intelligence officer).

The more the PDB, and the relationship between intelligence and policy more generally, were thought of as a conversation—not a commodity—the more ways that conversation could be provoked. Fully coordinated background papers would hardly be required and might be regarded as less helpful than the views of a single expert analyst, or the contrarian views of a “red cell,” or even pure speculations clearly labeled as such. And the “provocateurs” might include FBI or DHS analysts, or even doctors from the National Institutes of Health. The toll on the CIA's analytical corps in preparing the PDB could be reduced correspondingly.

In these conversations, the intelligence analysts are the intelligence “product”—or, better labeled, “output”—not the written analyses. In considerable measure, the briefers already play that role. They take background notes to help them explain PDB items and, as intelligence professionals, are careful not to get into issues they do not understand. In that sense, policy officials sometimes see them more as couriers than as briefers. But they are really in the business of serving clients, answering questions when they can and finding answers quickly when they cannot. They are, and think of themselves as, a kind of special team. They are as important as the product they deliver. And their “clients” regard them so—witness the laudatory comments about the briefers across all three administrations.

There are other precedents for thinking of people, not paper, as the product of intelligence analysis. NIEs did not come up often in the comments of senior policy officials, and when they did, the comments were not always favorable. Yet in a very real sense the products of the National Intelligence Council (NIC) are people, not paper. The estimates

are homework, keeping the NIC in touch with analysts around the Intelligence Community; they are also calling cards, demonstrating what the NIC can do. But the real product is not the output of NIEs but the corps of national intelligence officers (NIOs), experts in positions to attend meetings and offer judgment. And in those interactions, they do not have to be so careful to avoid speaking to Bush 43's question: What should I do?

For all the digital technology, face time between intelligence and policy officials remains important, perhaps increasingly so. Policy officials, like most other people, think they can absorb information faster by reading than by being briefed. Yet, if a senior policy official asks intelligence for a paper, chances are the response will be somewhat out of focus. In contrast, as Bush 43 found, spending 20 minutes with an expert analyst allows the analyst to be clear about what is needed and gives the policy official the opportunity to calibrate the expert.

Beneath these overarching questions, the PDB case study raises a number of more specific issues and lessons in best practice. The first of these is specific to the PDB, but the others all have relevance for intelligence-policy relations well beyond the PDB.

Who should deliver the PDB?

This of course turns on whether the PDB is considered a commodity or a conversation. No one in Washington will turn down face time with the president. If the president asks, the DNI is bound to attend the briefings. In Washington, proximity to power is power, and the DNI's presence while the president is being briefed helps lend greater authority to the position. That said, the tangles in the relationship between the DNI and the DCIA run well beyond the PDB. As Hayden's comments suggest, the PDB issues can be worked out if the personal chemistry between the two is good—which hasn't always been the case even in the short history of the DNI.

The episodes in this case study, though, do point to a need to work out an agreed procedure between the DCIA, whose troops do the bulk of the work,

and the DNI, who oversees the process and presents the document. More generally, perhaps the relationship between the FBI director and the attorney general is a kind of model for those between the DCIA and the DNI: the FBI director is formally the attorney general's subordinate, but there is the expectation that he will have his own, independent relationship with the president as well.

How should it be delivered?

This also turns on whether the PDB is considered a commodity or a conversation. But James Steinberg's thought that advancing technology could facilitate much more interaction is provocative, especially, perhaps, early in an administration when the pure information and question-answering content of the PDB is high. The use of iPads and the like will be the future of intelligence—they are already the present for policy officers. To be sure, those devices challenge the way intelligence does its business, most obviously in quality control if analysts are answering questions from policy officials more or less on the fly. But intelligence will need to adapt, at least by empowering some set of analysts to respond to questions without having to run the answers through many levels of quality control. PDB briefers are already in that position. They are serving clients, not just providing products to consumers.

More generally, for all the experimenting through the years with video, intelligence products remain remarkably unchanged: they are primarily static, branded, and stovepiped. They are words on a page or bytes on a computer produced within agency stovepipes that give pride of place to subject-matter expertise. Indeed, a team of intelligence officers working on the question realized that the language of "products" was itself confining because it tended to channel thinking into the familiar grooves—ones that were static and commoditized. Thus, they suggested switching to "outputs" to open up thinking both about what it is the Intelligence Community "produces" and how the IC interacts with policy officials to share the fruits of its work.⁸¹

For instance, in principle, social media, especially wikis but perhaps also Facebook and others, might provide openings for rethinking outputs. Wikis seem tailor-made for intelligence. As evolving, living documents, changed as new evidence surfaces and new ideas arise, wiki pages let experts in different subject areas come together, while permitting interested nonexperts to challenge views. And throughout, they maintain easily followed and rich metadata about where evidence comes from and who altered content.

These innovations do pose challenges to the way the community currently does its business. Assuring quality is much easier with products than with people, especially if those people are responding to policy officials more or less in real time. And if analyses were produced through a wiki, who would get to participate—only designated analysts, or a wider set? What about consumers? They too are often experts, and they surely have human sources—policy counterparts in other countries—that intelligence does not. Could they participate? None of these challenges is easy, but the Intelligence Community is going to face them in any case. And the experience of the PDB briefers suggests what can be possible.

"Tell me what you know and you're sure of; tell me what you don't know and you're sure you don't know it; and tell me when you're guessing about something." This is one version of the line Colin Powell has used in many forums. While this case study has focused on senior consumers of intelligence, what they need and want, rather than on the tradecraft of intelligence analysis, it does speak to the latter. One of the tradecraft issues that runs through this case study is frequent confusion among policymakers about what they were hearing. Condoleezza Rice, for instance, thought that speculative pieces were fine but should look different. Brent Scowcroft was also eloquent about the continuum from facts to interpretations to predictions. Intelligence's specially collected information can sometimes solve puzzles about what is going on. In that sense, pictures—really satellite imagery—can

be worth a thousand words (especially in the hands of a good imagery analyst). Many PDB items fall into Scowcroft's second category, interpretation: "Here's what we've seen or learned, and here's what it means."

The rub is that most interesting intelligence questions begin where the information ends. They involve more than interpretation; they involve projection, if not prediction: "Here's what we think will happen next, and here's why." The why is not often specific information. Rather, it is inference from history, or patterns elsewhere, or deductions from how states or groups behave. PDB items are not conducive to spelling out the reasoning in detail, so pieces might be explicitly labeled by type of article; for instance, newspapers place articles in different places, and the INR *Morning Summary* suggests separating more factual from more speculative pieces. Even "red cell" or other explicitly contrarian pieces might be included, labeled as such.

The dangers of headlines and factoids.

PDBs are like newspapers in that the analysts who write the items generally do not add the headlines. The urge to add a catchy spin to headlines to "spin up" readers, including the president, is another tradecraft issue. Surely, Bush 43 and his colleagues felt burned by the headline of the 6 August 2001 item when it became public: "Bin Laden determined to strike US." The headline was not inaccurate but was meant to convey intention: bin Laden had sought and continued to seek ways to attack the United States. It could, however, be read as more deterministic, indicating that a strike was imminent. It may be part of the nature of the PDB that not only may presidents be "spun up" by particular items but the format is inherently misleading, perhaps giving too much weight to particular "information," whether exotically collected or not. Joshua Bolten was interesting on that score. Sometimes one particular piece of information can provide the solution to the puzzle, but that is rare.

The virtue of differences.

This is another tradecraft issue. Bolten spoke intriguingly of what happens to people when they enter the Oval Office:

In dealing with the president, most people—even very opinionated ones—find themselves trying to reach some kind of compromise before they get to the Oval Office, so that they don't present the president with an ambiguity, in the case of intelligence, or present the president with a tough decision, in the case of people having disagreements. And I always thought that disserves the president, especially if you've got a smart president.⁸²

In interviews with senior policymakers, virtually all who spoke on the point found it valuable to hear differing points of view from intelligence. To be sure, sometimes the differences can simply puzzle, leaving policymakers to say to themselves, "I'll just stick with what I think." And if differences of view are based on different evidence, they can be dangerous. Some of that was present with respect to the 2002 WMD estimate when some agencies accorded credibility to the source labeled "Curveball" that others did not. Differences of view are instructive, though, when analysts reason their way through the same evidence to reach different conclusions. That is so precisely because, for most important questions about the future, the analysis begins where the evidence ends. As Leon Fuerth, national security advisor to the vice president in the Clinton administration, put it: "Well-informed hunches can be awfully valuable."⁸³

The value of feedback.

If the PDB is the crown jewel of intelligence, the feedback from PDB briefers is the crown jewel of knowledge about the policy agenda. That feedback is instrumental in making decisions about what to include in the PDB. It used to be closely guarded when the CIA entirely controlled the process, but presumably is more available now to other agencies. It should be used systematically as a driver of intelligence priorities. To be sure, most of the policy

officers who get the PDB have short time horizons, and some of the most avid consumers of intelligence can be slightly quirky, with their own agendas and hobbyhorses. Yet there is nothing better than hearing directly from presidents and their associates what is on their minds, and how issues are framed by them.



Appendix: The 6 August 2001 PDB

Bin Ladin Determined To Strike in US



Clandestine, foreign government, and media reports indicate Bin Ladin since 1997 has wanted to conduct terrorist attacks in the US. Bin Ladin implied in US television interviews in 1997 and 1998 that his followers would follow the example of World Trade Center bomber Ramzi Yousef and "bring the fighting to America."

After US missile strikes on his base in Afghanistan in 1998, Bin Ladin told followers he wanted to retaliate in Washington, according to a [REDACTED] service.

An Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) operative told an [REDACTED] service at the same time that Bin Ladin was planning to exploit the operative's access to the US to mount a terrorist strike.

The millennium plotting in Canada in 1999 may have been part of Bin Ladin's first serious attempt to implement a terrorist strike in the US. Convicted plotter Ahmed Ressam has told the FBI that he conceived the idea to attack Los Angeles International Airport himself, but that Bin Ladin lieutenant Abu Zubaydah encouraged him and helped facilitate the operation. Ressam also said that in 1998 Abu Zubaydah was planning his own US attack.

Ressam says Bin Ladin was aware of the Los Angeles operation.

Although Bin Ladin has not succeeded, his attacks against the US Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 demonstrate that he prepares operations years in advance and is not deterred by setbacks. Bin Ladin associates surveilled our Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam as early as 1993, and some members of the Nairobi cell planning the bombings were arrested and deported in 1997.

Al-Qa'ida members—including some who are US citizens—have resided in or traveled to the US for years, and the group apparently maintains a support structure that could aid attacks. Two al-Qa'ida members found guilty in the conspiracy to bomb our Embassies in East Africa were US citizens, and a senior EIJ member lived in California in the mid-1990s.

A clandestine source said in 1998 that a Bin Ladin cell in New York was recruiting Muslim-American youth for attacks.

We have not been able to corroborate some of the more sensational threat reporting, such as that from a [REDACTED] service in 1998 saying that Bin Ladin wanted to hijack a US aircraft to gain the release of "Blind Shaykh" Umar 'Abd al-Rahman and other US-held extremists.

continued

For the President Only
6 August 2001

[REDACTED]
Declassified and Approved
for Release, 10 April 2001

- Nevertheless, FBI information since that time indicates patterns of suspicious activity in this country consistent with preparations for hijackings or other types of attacks, including recent surveillance of federal buildings in New York.

The FBI is conducting approximately 70 full field investigations throughout the US that it considers Bin Ladin-related. CIA and the FBI are investigating a call to our Embassy in the UAE in May saying that a group of Bin Ladin supporters was in the US planning attacks with explosives.

For the President Only
6 August 2001

██████████
Declassified and Approved
for Release, 10 April 2004

Endnotes

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