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Preventing Intelligence Failures by Learning from the Past

The literature on strategic surprise and intelligence failure contains nuggets of insight that United States policymakers can mine in their attempts to prevent future terrorist attacks. In the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks, national security policymakers in both the George W. Bush administration and Congress would do well to examine Intelligence Community performance within a historical context before making any lasting changes to the intelligence agencies' structures or processes. Many imperfections in the intelligence process are the result of unavoidable tradeoffs in structure and processes. Any specific changes made to address imperfections that led to the failure to prevent the 2001 attacks could easily lead to corresponding pathologies that will cause future failures. In the end, the only way to improve intelligence capabilities is to understand the tradeoffs and either fine-tune the balances more effectively or create new ways of doing business that get past existing tradeoffs. The study of strategic surprise and intelligence failure from a historical perspective provides the best vantage point for understanding the tradeoffs that exist and the pathologies they can cause. Fortunately for policymakers of today—if unfortunately for policymakers of yesteryear—a long string of both policymaker surprise and intelligence failure in the annals of intelligence history can be mined for insight.

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While looking for structural and procedural changes which might decrease the chances of intelligence failure, national security policymakers should make sure that the Intelligence Community increases its emphasis on two basic principles of intelligence provision: the use of rigor and tradecraft in the production of intelligence analysis, and the integration of analysis into the policymaking process.

USING INTELLIGENCE TO PREVENT SURPRISE

The provision of accurate intelligence is an important part of the process of preventing surprises in the national security realm. As a result, when surprises such as the 11 September attacks occur, intelligence agencies bear the brunt of scrutiny. But, even in the wake of attacks, diagnosing the specific causes of a surprise is no easy task. Intelligence failure can lead to surprise when information is not collected or integrated effectively, and policy failure can lead to surprise if actions were not taken despite intelligence warnings. Even now, whether intelligence agencies or policymakers could have prevented the 2001 terrorist attacks is still not clear. Nonetheless, exploring the role intelligence plays in preventing surprise can shed light on the ways that changes in intelligence process could improve agency performance, and possibly prevent future surprises.

Surprise is ever present in international relations. Many surprises are the intentional products of adversaries who successfully employ secrecy to hide their intentions. Secrecy in policy creation and implementation magnifies the application of power internationally because, when done successfully, the victim has little time to effectively counter the respective policy. In military terms, this power magnification is known as a “force multiplier,” although the concept is applicable to the economic and political arenas as well. As a result of its utility, secrecy has become a ubiquitous technique in the implementation of most international policies. While secrecy for purposes of surprise is a useful tool in the application of power, its converse—preventing surprise—has become just as necessary, and is usually assigned to institutionalized intelligence agencies, due to their ability to uncover secrets.

Intelligence agencies may be responsible for the prevention of surprise, but not all surprises can be prevented by uncovering secrets. Sometimes international forces can produce spontaneous events that surprise everyone involved, such as the end of the Cold War. These are the “mysteries” emphasized in some writings on intelligence.¹ If a surprise occurs, intelligence agencies tend to be held responsible, regardless of whether the surprise was due to the inability to uncover and correctly interpret secrets, or the inability to accurately divine an unknowable mystery. As a result, intelligence agencies have broadened their mission from one that focuses

exclusively on uncovering national security secrets and interpreting their implications, to a more expanded role with the goal of knowing everything relevant to national security policymaking and a lot about general foreign policymaking besides. Provided with marvelous technological tools and a mandate to lie, cheat, and steal its way to the information, the U.S. Intelligence Community fulfills its role as best it can. But preventing surprise is a difficult endeavor, entailing numerous cognitive and institutional tradeoffs that ultimately make surprises inevitable, and “intelligence failures” relatively frequent.²

Intelligence Failure

A digression into the meaning of “intelligence failure” is important here. While frequently used, the term is rarely defined. “Intelligence failure” often connotes a highly negative impact on U.S. national security. But it is also used to describe a situation such as the 1998 India nuclear weapons tests, in which U.S. and Western policymakers were surprised by an international incident, even if that surprise caused minimal impact to their national security. In fact, “failures” of every stripe, from the trivial to the vitally important, occur every day for a variety of reasons, including the failure to collect relevant information due to the mis-prioritization of collection systems, hasty analysis, and inappropriately applied assumptions. The acquisition and accumulation of information, its interpretation, and subsequent dissemination to policymakers is an iterative process that, at any single point in time, usually fails to portray international events completely accurately or sufficiently in-depth to provide policymakers with either “perfect information” or complete certainty. Instead, the process resembles learning with multiple feedback loops, as knowledge is constantly accumulated and refined. And at any point in time, multiple failures are occurring simultaneously within the Intelligence Community, yet most instances of “failure” do not lead to direct negative consequences for the United States, simply because most daily foreign policy decisions do not reflect the use of—or defense against—an application of power. Only when military, economic, or political power is actively applied do inadequacies in information become known. An example is the uncovering of the inadequacies in the Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA) maps and databases due to the accidental May 1999 bombing of China’s embassy in Belgrade, Serbia. Only when these kinds of inadequacies result in high-profile surprises is the term “intelligence failure” brought out to describe them. Using the word “failure” to describe situations where negative consequences for U.S. national security is minimal or nonexistent may be unusual, but it highlights the indeterminate meaning of the word, and the more general

continuum of inaccuracy and inadequacy that is ever-present in both intelligence activities and foreign policy.

Even if intelligence failure and corresponding policymaker surprise are inevitable, the process of intelligence collection and analysis can and should be reformed and refined to improve its product on the margins. Just as the military conducts exercises to strengthen the skill of its soldiers and develop tactical proficiency, so the Intelligence Community would benefit from a self-conscious scrubbing of its processes. The system is not—and cannot be made—perfect. It can, however, be made better through modification on the margins to fine-tune the inherent tradeoffs. Reforms, suggested reforms, and the source of further ideas for reforms can be found within the literature on both strategic surprise and intelligence failure.

FINDING INSIGHTS FROM STRATEGIC SURPRISES

The strategic surprise literature is part of the Security Studies subfield of Political Science, and consists of analyses of successful military surprise attacks and the reasons for the failure to prevent them. The development of this literature after World War II coincided with the establishment of an institutionalized United States intelligence capability, and appeared to stem from the desire to improve the intelligence warning function and prevent any future Pearl Harbors. As a result of decades of study, these scholarly treatments of strategic surprise and intelligence failure provide ample empirical evidence of the inadequacies of institutional intelligence, while developing the corresponding theory for their inevitable failures. The historical cases from the past half-century which receive the most scrutiny are the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the German attack on Russia in 1941 (Barbarossa), the North Korean invasion of South Korea and subsequent Chinese involvement in 1950, and the Arab attack on Israel in 1973.³

Pearl Harbor

On 7 December 1941, Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor took the United States by surprise, despite its possession of a body of evidence which could have been pieced together to warn relevant military and civilian leaders. Foremost of the strategic surprise case studies, Pearl Harbor appears to have been one event that the U.S. public desired not to experience again. The creation of the CIA in 1947 to coordinate intelligence collection and analysis, and the subsequent development of the strategic surprise literature probably stem from this desire.

Roberta Wohlstetter's 1962 analysis of the attack, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, is perhaps the most prominent single entry within the strategic

surprise literature.⁴ According to Israeli Professor Abraham Ben-Zvi—a surprise attack specialist—“Wohlstetter’s central thesis is that the Pearl Harbor surprise occurred not for lack of relevant intelligence data, but due to misperceptions of the available information.” He later noted that “Wohlstetter’s work raised the level of discussion, for the first time, above the incessant quarrels over who was to blame, and emphasized the perceptual bases of the decisions made.”⁵ In addition to bringing theory to the analysis, Wohlstetter apparently broke new ground by introducing to the study of intelligence the “signal to noise” concept originally developed within the Information Theory school.⁶ The concept—distinguishing relevant data (signals) from the irrelevant (noise)—is used to highlight the varying utility of bits of information, and is useful for prioritizing data and assessing means of sifting through it. Also, Wohlstetter’s observation regarding the need to centralize scattered bits of information to create a coherent picture of the situation is still present today in discussions regarding Intelligence Community interconnectivity, and the removal of barriers due to both institutional prerogatives and classification levels that prevent the free flow of information within the intelligence and policy communities.

Barbarossa

Germany’s surprise attack on the Soviet Union in 1941—known as Operation Barbarossa—may have turned out in hindsight to have been a strategic mistake for Germany, but the tactical surprise itself was quite successful, and has developed into a case study for the strategic surprise literature. The German use of deception contributed to the Russian failure to prepare, although greater weight for that lack of preparation should be attributed to Josef Stalin’s lack of receptivity to intelligence reporting. Stalin’s intelligence apparatus provided him with a large amount of intelligence indicating an attack was forthcoming, but he chose to believe data that fit within his preexisting belief that the Germans would not attack.⁷ In sum, Barbarossa, as a strategic surprise case study, highlights the use of deception to manipulate perceptions of capabilities and intentions, and the importance of policymaker mindsets in the use—or more accurately, nonuse—of intelligence data.

Korea

The 1950 North Korean invasion of South Korea, and subsequent Chinese involvement in the conflict, were surprises to the American military commanders in the field, and had large negative impacts on the United States military operations. Although these surprises are included within the strategic surprise literature, they are not intelligence failures per se, but

rather policymaker failures. In March 1950, the CIA predicted that an attack could happen in June, and there were subsequently almost 1,200 separate reports provided to the military leaders indicating a massive North Korean military buildup.⁸ Despite these warnings and indicators of North Korean capability to attack, United States military commanders believed that geostrategic considerations would prevent North Korea from actually attacking. They were wrong, and for very similar reasons were wrong about the later Chinese intervention as well.⁹

George Poteat argues that American surprise at China's involvement was the product of policymaker failure to attend to the intelligence because of policy commitments rather than a failure on the part of the Intelligence Community. In doing so, he helps develop the concept of the disconnect between intelligence and policy, and that failure can occur even if intelligence is providing warning signals. Based on his hypothesis, Poteat also provided a guideline for future receptivity of policymakers to intelligence: "high receptivity levels will tend to exist mainly when policymakers are relatively uncommitted, and low levels will tend to occur in the presence of high or heavy commitments."¹⁰ As Poteat later notes: "Strategic surprise is a cognitive problem related to the attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of those responsible for using intelligence. If an intelligence gap exists, it is in the minds of those who use (and misuse) intelligence."¹¹

Yom Kippur War

The nature and timing of the October 1973 Arab attack on Israel came as a surprise to Israeli policymakers, despite their intense awareness of the threat. According to Avi Schlam's case study, Israeli intelligence knew what was happening in regards to Arab military deployments, but interpreted the "so what" incorrectly as "evidence of a defensive move in Syria and a multi-division exercise in Egypt." Israeli misperceptions were facilitated by improper discounting of contradictory evidence, and by Arab deception strategies. By the time the correct interpretation was made, the warning came too late to have much impact on Israeli preparations.¹² Again, this historical case study indicates that deception and wishful thinking impervious to contradictory evidence were contributing factors to the Israeli surprise.

APPLYING INSIGHTS TO INTELLIGENCE FAILURES

Insights from these four case studies, highlighting numerous useful concepts regarding the causes of strategic surprise, have been appropriated by those studying intelligence failures more generally. As the late scholar Michael Handel pointed out: "The study of surprise and the frequent failure to

avoid it has . . . led to a better understanding of the methodological problems involved in intelligence—the need to make forecasts and predictions under conditions of uncertainty and the inherent contradictions, tensions, and ‘paradoxes’ of this type of work.” He also noted that the study of strategic surprise developed basic concepts such as signals, noise, capabilities, and intentions, and key issues such as the psychological problems of perception (both by the intelligence analyst and policymaker), deception, and organizational and bureaucratic problems.¹³

Yet, by the mid-1970s, military power was beginning to wane in relevancy for the world’s major powers, and strategic surprise was becoming more of a hypothetical threat than a real one. Most of the relevant historical case studies had been mined for insight, leaving little left to analyze. As Handel noted in the early 1980s: “Although detailed studies of surprise attack have made valuable contributions to the field, further research in this area may soon reach the point of diminishing returns, if it has not already done so.”¹⁴ As a result of this lack of empirical evidence, the strategic surprise literature began to shrink. Soon afterwards, the growth in the intelligence failure literature compensated for the reduction in focus on preventing strategic surprise as it adapted the same concepts and applied them to policymaker surprise more generally.¹⁵

The intelligence failure literature has followed a pattern similar to that of the strategic surprise literature; identification of intelligence failures led to investigations into their causes, which led to further clarification of the tradeoffs inherent in the prevention of strategic surprise. More than twenty-five years have elapsed since publication of Richard Betts’s 1978 seminal article on intelligence failure. Since then a consensus appears to have developed among students of intelligence that perfection will be unattainable and failure inevitable. At this point, the conceptual and empirical study of surprise appears to have stalled. While empirical studies have allowed researchers to derive the causes of failure, the conclusion that the causes are immutable prevents development of methods to counter future failures.

A suggested avenue for future study is the analysis of analytical successes to derive factors that may be lacking when failure occurs, thus opening up a new body of empirical evidence. While information about failures becomes public through investigations and postmortems, however, intelligence professionals would likely be more reticent to share the reasons for their successes in order not to risk losing sources and methods. Therefore, while such a study of successes might be promising, it would also be very difficult to accomplish from outside the intelligence community. Such assessments have hopefully been produced in the classified environment to derive lessons learned, which can then be disseminated to other practitioners as “best practices.”

Nonetheless, insights derived from the study of strategic surprise and intelligence failure have value even if surprise and failure cannot be avoided completely. Failure, though perhaps inevitable, can be made less frequent through the implementation of a number of reforms that improve the quality of intelligence analysis.

POSSIBLE REFORMS

The challenge facing current and future Intelligence Community managers will be minimizing the occurrence and impact of analytical failure, while maximizing the positive impact on policymaking of intelligence information and analysis. This will require a two-pronged approach: more rigorous tradecraft to minimize faulty or incomplete analysis, combined with better “customer service.” These approaches entail numerous reforms of intelligence processes so as to improve the output of the intelligence institutions on the margins.

Removal of Barriers to Accurate Information

Impediments to accurate intelligence assessments include the existence of organizational or classification barriers to the free flow and sharing of information as well as the use of denial or deception by a foreign entity. The implementation of numerous reforms to intelligence processes could theoretically reduce the likelihood of mistakes by increasing community-wide connectivity, and enhancing efforts to identify cases where foreign governments may be applying denial and deception techniques to hide their activities and/or capabilities.

Organizational and classification barriers impede the free flow of information, thereby preventing intelligence analysts from integrating all the relevant information, as occurred at Pearl Harbor in 1941, and apparently prior to the 11 September attacks. The removal of organizational controls on certain types of information, and the relaxation of the need-to-know principle and other security devices responsible for informational “stovepipes,” would allow for more horizontal distribution of information throughout the intelligence and policy communities. In this way, the all-source intelligence analysts responsible for assessing the development of vital national security issues would have at their disposal all the relevant information the United States government possesses.

Also, the accuracy of intelligence could be aided through efforts by intelligence agencies to identify vulnerabilities in the intelligence collection assets which foreign governments and entities might use to manipulate the perceptions of foreign observers.¹⁶ Foreign governments have used these methods to hide their activities from interested observers in the past,

such as Germany in 1941, the Arab states in 1973, and India in 1998. Each method of intelligence collection—from human intelligence through signals intelligence and imagery intelligence—is vulnerable to some level of denial and deception. Efforts taken to hide certain activities from satellites, as the Indian government was alleged to have done in 1998, feeding false information through double agents, and the manipulation of signals traffic analysis impact the accuracy of the final intelligence product.¹⁷ A thorough understanding of the vulnerabilities of collection systems to denial and deception, combined with aggressive efforts to uncover instances of such activities, could go far toward reducing both the success of these operations and the subsequent surprise of U.S. policymakers regarding certain international developments.

While neither of these reforms would prevent all surprises, the self-conscious implementation of processes geared to prevent these causes of failure may improve certain intelligence assessments, thereby on the margins reducing the possibility of policymaker surprise. In the wake of the 1998 India failure, the CIA began implementing measures to counter denial and deception efforts by hiring analysts devoted exclusively to this task.¹⁸ The Agency hopes that these efforts will prove effective in countering the attempts of foreign entities to manipulate the perceptions of the American government.

Create a Better Conceptual Product

The value of the intelligence product comes from not only the information contained within, but also its conceptual depth and organization to help clarify important national security concerns for policymakers. The true substantive expert analyst can provide insight and conceptual organization that the policymaker may not have access to anywhere else. This is the benefit of having a “think tank” provide personalized service to address the questions and needs of those responsible for making national security policy. Secret intelligence information can then be integrated into a conceptual context more accurate than that of the lone policymaker’s. In this way intelligence can provide its greatest impact by educating—rather than just informing—the policymaker.

Most causes of strategic surprise so far identified are in some way related to flaws in the delivery of the more conceptual rather than merely the informational product. Flaws in the production of this kind of analysis include the inability to create the accurate conceptual frameworks necessary to separate the signals from the noise of irrelevant masses of data. The signal-to-noise problem noted by Roberta Wohlstetter in her Pearl Harbor case study has no obvious or easily implemented solution. Hindsight is the primary method used to distinguish signals from noise. And, in some cases, the controversies continue for decades in the form of

debates over primary causes of events such as World Wars I and II.¹⁹ While conceptually useful for explaining the occurrence of intelligence failure, the problem of deciphering relevant signals from background noise cannot be improved upon directly through procedural reforms. Only through indirect methods can this potential cause of failure be reduced.

Sifting out signals from noise requires an accurate mental model that identifies relevant information from the irrelevant.²⁰ As Loch K. Johnson—a former U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence staff member and current intelligence scholar—noted: “Facts rarely speak for themselves; they have to be interpreted.”²¹ In addition, longtime CIA officer Richards Heuer noted: “Intelligence analysis is . . . a cognitive process. If we are to [improve] . . . analysis, we must somehow penetrate and affect the mental processes of the individuals who do the analysis.” He suggested ways to “(improve) the mental models employed by the analyst to interpret his data.”²² A variety of reforms have the potential to aid in the construction of theoretical frameworks. They include the publishing of dissenting opinions in finished intelligence products, alternative formats, and methodologies for intelligence products, and the institutionalization of a Devil’s Advocate to test the soundness of analytical reasoning and conclusions. Each of these could provide a unique contribution to the policymaker’s understanding of the security issue at hand:

- *Dissenting Opinion*: In many cases the ambiguity of the intelligence information is such that differing hypotheses regarding the meaning of the event can exist at the same time. At times, intelligence analysts will disagree as to the implications of an event, indicating the existence of multiple hypotheses. If this occurs when publications require that intelligence speaks with one voice, then a number of extraneous characteristics of the individual analysts—such as force of personality, seniority, or writing ability—can impact the determination of the final analytical judgment and the data the policymaker will see. The inclusion of dissenting opinions in finished intelligence would provide both intelligence managers and policymakers a sense of the uncertainty of the judgment, plausible alternative interpretations, and possible insight regarding further intelligence collection requirements.²³
- *Alternative Analysis*:²⁴ Some issues—particularly those of great importance or complexity—are ill-served by a single analytical judgment or estimate. Alternative formats and methodologies could instead be used to present existing uncertainties in a more useful format. Alternative analysis spans a range of product possibilities including contingency analysis (if/then), scenarios, Team A/Team B exercises (entailing consultations with outside experts), role-playing, or other unconventional methods. The basic idea is to use alternative formats for exploring issues and building theories in such a way that assumptions become explicit, conventional wisdom challenged, and the reasons for uncertainty explained.

- *Devil's Advocate*: As a possibly extreme type of alternative analysis, a Devil's Advocate would entail a challenge to the prevailing analytical judgment. Whether institutionalized or assigned on an ad hoc basis, the role of the Devil's Advocate would be to build a case—using primarily the same evidence, with different assumptions—that the respective analytical component would, but coming to an opposing judgment.²⁵

These reforms are geared to preventing intelligence failure via improved self-conscious rigor in the construction of the analytical product. In addition, many also fit the recommendation Admiral David Jeremiah made in his India failure assessment when he suggested an increase in “competitive analysis.”²⁶ By increasing the variety of inputs, a Darwinian-like weeding of inaccurate hypotheses and analysis becomes possible over time: Both the inclusion of dissenting opinions in finished intelligence and the creation of a Devil's Advocate would add views differing from the main analytical line, a reform known as multiple advocacy. The potential downside of increasing the number and variety of analytical lines is the possibility that the analytical line that most closely matches the policymaker's existing beliefs will be chosen. While this would impede the objective search for truth—and therefore should be guarded against—consideration of other likely alternatives is necessary for the construction of the most accurate hypothesis possible for the final intelligence assessment.

While these reforms may be necessary for an effective analytical construct, they may not be sufficient to ensure accuracy. As Michael Handel noted: “While the absence of competition and variety in intelligence is a recipe for failure, its institution does not guarantee success.” He later added that, at best, it can lead to a greater number of opinions, but cannot contribute to identification of the better choice.²⁷ Therefore, alternative approaches will not be a panacea for existing problems. But to the degree that they would force intelligence analysts to reexamine their own beliefs and assumptions, the product could be improved.

An additional method for increasing the accuracy of a conceptual model is to ensure that the analyst possesses in-depth knowledge of the account, to include, as necessary, context, history, or language.²⁸ Through greater knowledge can come greater ability to distinguish between typical events and those outside the bounds of past experience. The tradeoff inherent in greater knowledge is an acceptance—and to a degree a reliance on—patterns of continuity which may impede the recognition of indicators of change. Therefore, a balance of true substantive expertise, matched with insightful and curious new analysts, should provide the requisite energy to uncover important changes, combined with the expertise to understand their importance.

Improving the Integration of Intelligence into Policy

Intelligence failures arising from a disconnect between the worlds of intelligence and policy—such as occurred at Barbarossa and Korea—are frequent occurrences according to the literature on intelligence failure. Part of this disconnect may arise from typical organizational barriers to cooperation, but an even larger component may come from differences in the mindset and goals of intelligence analysts and policymakers. A more seamless integration of intelligence information and processes into the policymaking and implementation process would work against these natural disconnects, and perhaps help reduce the frequency of policymaker surprise.²⁹

Loch Johnson included policymaker “disregard of objective intelligence” as one of his “seven sins of strategic intelligence.” He went on to note that “no shortcoming of strategic intelligence is more often cited than the self-delusion of policymakers who brush aside—or bend—facts that fail to conform to their *Weltanschauung*.”³⁰ Despite the serious implications this disregard for intelligence may have on the efficacy of policy, the problem of using intelligence products to bolster existing beliefs, while not accepting those which challenge the policymakers’ preferences or commitments, may be a barrier too difficult to bridge, since it gets to the core of power and the reasons for its application. For this problem, intelligence can provide no solution; the only checks are in the political arena. Be that as it may, a policymaker’s potential lack of receptivity to intelligence analysis is an important point to be aware of when assessing past failures and attributing responsibility.

The disconnect between intelligence and policy can be further exacerbated by a noted desire by some intelligence analysts to prove the policymakers wrong.³¹ This tendency to poke a stick in the eye of National Security Council, State Department, or Department of Defense policymakers may arise from the differing missions of each institution. The typical CIA analyst’s niche expertise and lack of vested interest in policy provides benefits for nominally objective information integration, but impedes his or her ability to understand United States policy which balances strategic tradeoffs and political considerations in its calculations.³² While something may be said for having analysts objectively focusing on the national interest, the degree to which they set themselves up in opposition to current policy becomes an impediment to policy creation and implementation. In addition, such opposition can marginalize the contribution of the intelligence analysis if it gets too far from the preferences and commitments of the policymakers.

Further difficulties may arise from a personality self-selection bias in the two professions. Stafford T. Thomas has noted that the “functional

requisites of the DI emphasize contemplation, a concern of objectivity, and application of methodological and epistemological considerations of the data.”³³ As such, the people who fulfill this function—intelligence analysts—“tend to be men and women of ideas, studious and introspective, more comfortable with ambiguity and objectivity. Their customers, on the other hand, are . . . generally more extroverted, decisive, goal-oriented, and impatient with uncertainty.”³⁴ This difference in personality style may lead to communication difficulties and miscommunications between both individuals and—if aggregated—institutions.

As with the other causes of failure identified in the strategic surprise literature, no reform is certain to overcome the gulf between intelligence and policy. A closer working relationship that integrates the intelligence more closely into the policymaking process may, however, improve coordination on the margins, and help prevent future policymaker surprise. Former Director of Central Intelligence Robert M. Gates recommends “more interaction, feedback, and direction as to strategy, priorities, and requirements that are critical to better [intelligence] performance.”³⁵ In addition, Anne Armstrong noted, in a 1989 article on intelligence, that “ultimately the intelligence officials must be guided by the needs of the policy, rather than by the search for knowledge for its own sake.”³⁶ She concluded her discussion of the intelligence/policy disconnect by observing that the “strategy of narrowing the distance between intelligence and policy holds certain risks for the integrity of the former. Nevertheless, the risks must be run.”³⁷

A close relationship between analysts and policymakers may be necessary to overcome barriers in communication and intelligence acceptance. But, if it becomes too close, the relationship risks politicization, which is the manipulation of intelligence data and assessments to support policy. This tradeoff, a fundamental issue for intelligence managers, has been the subject of many discussions over the past fifty years. Theoretically, obtaining both the objectivity and accuracy inherent in intelligence that is outside the chain of command and the relevancy derived from a close policy support should be possible.

A variety of mechanisms have been posited to close this gap while avoiding the apparent tradeoff inherent in the dynamic. The report of the Commission on the Roles and Capabilities of the United States Intelligence Community (the Brown Commission) in March 1996 stated that “Intelligence analysts may be assigned to the staffs of certain consumers and integrated into their workforce, taking part in the substantive work of the office, participating in foreign travel, discussion with foreign representatives, etc.”³⁸ In addition, “Some consumers are supported by detailing intelligence analysts to help with a particular issue

or process; for example, to support a treaty negotiation. In other cases, intelligence producers station 'liaisons' with their customers, not to provide substantive support, but to serve as a focal point for requests for such support." By such mechanisms intelligence retains autonomy and institutional objectivity, but integrates intelligence analysis into the actual policy process. Quoting again from the Brown Commission report: "The Commission found that those consumers who have intelligence aides on their staffs . . . tend to express greater satisfaction with the quality of intelligence." A more satisfied consumer indicates that more targeted intelligence analysis was applied to more relevant policy questions than had been the case prior to this procedural mechanism. Such attempts to expand the relationship between intelligence and policy, to close the gap the naturally exists between them, should help U.S. policymakers by providing them with more accurate and relevant information to create and implement national security policy.

IMPROVEMENTS FOR A POST-SEPTEMBER 11TH WORLD

The United States will continue to face threats to its people, wealth, and power. The best safeguard against catastrophic surprise will be continued vigilance against the potential for intelligence failure. This entails recognition of the tradeoffs and pathologies that cause failure, the self-conscious administration of rigor to identify and hopefully correct deficiencies in analysis, and the continued efforts to better integrate accurate intelligence into policymaking. The dual emphasis on the basic principles of tradecraft and customer service would go far toward reducing the frequency of both high profile and mundane intelligence failures. Perhaps, in some future circumstance, these modifications would help provide key information to a policymaker at just the right time, so as to contribute to a decision that lets the United States avoid a strategic surprise such as a military attack by a rogue state or even a terrorist strike with a weapon of mass destruction. Yet, the suggestion that intelligence agencies increase emphasis on these principles does not imply that they are currently being ignored. Since 1998 the CIA has been pushing toward alternative methods of analysis. In 2000 it began training in both tradecraft and customer-oriented analysis for all new analysts in the Kent School's six-month Career Analyst Program. These programs, and others like them, should be encouraged and incorporated to a greater degree in analytic production and new product formats, if it has not been done already. If process and product modifications can help refine the accuracy or relevancy of the finished intelligence analysis product, then best practices should be derived from past failures, options to strengthen analysis explored, and reforms implemented.

Preventing intelligence failure also requires a better understanding of the analytic process and the analytic product. The CIA's Directorate of Intelligence—the home of the analysts—appears to operate according to a culture that rewards service to policymakers but does little to distinguish between informational and conceptual products. If the key to preventing intelligence failure is a scrub of the conceptual accuracy of the product, procedures and an incentive structure must be built into the finished intelligence production process to review and, if necessary, alter the product, so as to more accurately portray the international environment for the policymaker. Implementation of the reforms proposed here may marginally improve the product. But, processes to improve the informational content of intelligence products, such as greater and more targeted collection efforts, as well as greater intelligence community interconnectivity, would provide little improvement to the conceptual creativity and theoretical awareness of the substantive expert. While the informational product at times could use improvement, reforms could target the latter conceptual aspect to greatest effect.

In addition, institutional mechanisms must be created in tandem with the reforms, so that those analysts willing to avail themselves of the tools of the reformers—from dissenting opinions through alternative analysis—will be encouraged to question received wisdom with greater skepticism, while being protected from the backlash from entrenched authority that such questioning sometimes unleashes.

The intelligence production process entails a fair amount of bloodletting as the disagreements over fact and interpretation are engaged within a bureaucratic context. If intelligence product formats can be adapted to allow a fair hearing to alternative viewpoints, perhaps the open discussion of the basis for the reigning analytical line that is at times inaccurate might be facilitated. In this way, collegiality regarding both the substance and the process of intelligence production may replace the sometimes dysfunctional workings of a typical bureaucracy with an exceptional mission: ensuring U.S. national security.

The identification of causes of past failure leads to kernels of wisdom in the form of process modifications that could make the intelligence product more useful. A more effective, more accurate intelligence capability may still be vulnerable to the cognitive and institutional pathologies that cause failure, but a self-conscious and rigorous program based on the lessons derived from the existing literature would strengthen the intelligence product. This might lead to greater policymaker ability to respond to challenges, and thereby contribute to the national security of the United States.

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- ³⁰ Loch K. Johnson, "The Seven Sins of Strategic Intelligence," *World Affairs*, Vol. 146, No. 2, Fall 1983, p. 182.
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- ³⁸ This and the following quotes from "Chapter 8: Improving Intelligence Analysis" of the Brown Commission Report: Commission on the Roles and Capabilities of the United States Intelligence Community, *Preparing for the 21st Century: An Appraisal of US Intelligence* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996). It can also be found at http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/dpos/epubs/int/pdf/report/html