

# The Academy of Political Science

475 Riverside Drive · Suite 1274 · New York, New York 10115-1274  
(212) 870-2500 · FAX: (212) 870-2202 · [aps@psqonline.org](mailto:aps@psqonline.org) · <http://www.psqonline.org>

## POLITICAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY

---

Volume 125 · Number 2 · Summer 2010

---

No part of this article may be copied, downloaded, stored, further transmitted, transferred, distributed, altered, or otherwise used, in any form or by any means, except:

- one stored electronic and one paper copy of any article solely for your personal, non-commercial use, or
- with prior written permission of The Academy of Political Science.

*Political Science Quarterly* is published by The Academy of Political Science. Contact the Academy for further permission regarding the use of this work.

---

*Political Science Quarterly*

Copyright © 2010 by The Academy of Political Science. All rights reserved.

# Why Intelligence and Policymakers Clash

ROBERT JERVIS

There is nothing a Government hates more than to be well-informed; for it makes the process of arriving at decisions much more complicated and difficult.

—John Maynard Keynes

Let me tell you about these intelligence guys. When I was growing up in Texas, we had a cow named Bessie. I'd go out early and milk her. I'd get her in the stanchion, seat myself and squeeze out a pail of fresh milk. One day I'd worked hard and gotten a full pail of milk, but I wasn't paying attention, and old Bessie swung her s[.]t-smearred tail through the bucket of milk. Now, you know that's what these intelligence guys do. You work hard and get a good program or policy going, and they swing a s[.]t-smearred tail through it.

—Lyndon Johnson

## INTELLIGENCE AND POLICYMAKERS

Policymakers say they need and want good intelligence. They do need it, but often they do not like it, and are prone to believe that when intelligence is not out to get them, it is incompetent. Richard Nixon was only the most vocal of presidents in wondering how “those clowns out at Langley” could misunderstand so much of the world and cause his administration so much trouble.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, not only will even the best intelligence services often be wrong, but even (or especially) when they are right, they are likely to bring disturbing news, and this incurs a cost. As Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Richard

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *The CIA and American Democracy*, 2d ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 177; for excellent discussions of intelligence and its role in policymaking, see Michael Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966); Gregory Treverton, *Reshaping National Intelligence in an Age of Information* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), chap. 6; Mark Lowenthal, “Tribal Tongues: Intelligence Producers, Intelligence Consumers,” in Loch Johnson and James Wirtz, eds., *Strategic Intelligence* (Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury Press, 2004), 234–241.

---

ROBERT JERVIS is Adlai E. Stevenson Professor of International Politics at Columbia University. His most recent books are *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* and *American Foreign Policy in a New Era*.

Helms said shortly after he was let go in 1973, he was “the easiest man in Washington to fire. I have no political, military or industrial base.”<sup>2</sup> Although DCI James Woolsey’s view was colored by his bad relations with President Bill Clinton, he was not far off the mark in saying that the best job description for his position was “not to be liked.”<sup>3</sup>

For the general public, intelligence is not popular, for the additional reasons that its two prime characteristics of secrecy and covert action clash, if not with American traditions, then with the American self-image, and even those who applaud the results are likely to be uncomfortable with the means. It is telling that discussions of interventions in others’ internal politics, and especially attempts to overthrow their regimes, are couched in terms of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) interventions despite the fact that CIA acts under instructions from the president. Critics, even those on the left, shy away from the correct label, which is that it is a U.S. government intervention. Political leaders see little reason to encourage a better understanding.

A New York clothing store has as its slogan “An educated consumer is our best customer.” Intelligence can say this as well, but its wish for an educated consumer is not likely to be granted. Many presidents and cabinet officers come to the job with little knowledge or experience with intelligence and with less time to learn once they are in power. Even presidents like Nixon, who were more informed and who doubted CIA’s abilities, often held unreasonable expectations about what intelligence could produce. Henry Kissinger sometimes knew better, as revealed by what he told his staff about the congressional complaints that the United States had failed to anticipate the coup in Portugal:

Why? Now goddam it, I absolutely resent—anytime there’s a coup you start with the assumption that the home government missed it. ... Why the hell should we know better than the government that’s being overthrown. ... I mean what request is it to make of our intelligence agencies to discover coups all over the world?<sup>4</sup>

Although Kissinger was right, even he sometimes expected more information and better analysis than was likely to be forthcoming and displayed the familiar schizophrenic pattern of both scorning intelligence and being disappointed by it.

## DECISION MAKERS’ NEEDS AND HOW INTELLIGENCE CONFLICTS WITH THEM

The different needs and perspectives of decision makers and intelligence officials guarantee conflict between them. For both political and psychological

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Trudi Osborne, “The (Really) Quiet American: Richard McGarrah Helms,” *The Washington Post*, 20 May 1973.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Nina Easton, “The Last Hawk: James Woolsey Wants Iraq’s Saddam Hussein Brought to Justice,” *The Washington Post*, 27 December 2001.

<sup>4</sup> “The Secretary’s Staff Meeting, October 8, 1975,” 42–43, accessed at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB193/HAK-10-8-75.pdf>, 4 April 2010.

reasons, political leaders have to oversell their policies, especially in domestic systems in which power is decentralized,<sup>5</sup> and this will produce pressures on and distortions of intelligence. It is, then, not surprising that intelligence officials, especially those at the working level, tend to see political leaders as unscrupulous and careless, if not intellectually deficient, and that leaders see their intelligence services as timid, unreliable, and—often—out to get them.

Although it may be presumptuous for CIA to have chiseled in its lobby “And ye shall know the truth and the truth will make you free,” it can at least claim this as its objective. No decision maker could do so, as the more honest of them realize. When Secretary of State Dean Acheson said that the goal of a major National Security Council document was to be “clearer than truth,” he understood this very well.<sup>6</sup> Some of the resulting tensions came out when Porter Goss became DCI and told the members of the CIA that they should support policymakers.<sup>7</sup> Of course, the job of intelligence is to inform policymakers and in this way to support better policy. But support can also mean providing analysis that reinforces policies and rallies others to the cause. The first kind of support fits with intelligence’s preferred mission, the one that decision makers pay lip service to. But given the political and psychological world in which they live, it is often the latter kind of support that decision makers seek. They need confidence and political support, and honest intelligence unfortunately often diminishes rather than increases these goods by pointing to ambiguities, uncertainties, and the costs and risks of policies. In many cases, there is a conflict between what intelligence at its best can produce and what decision makers seek and need.

Because it is axiomatic that a good policy must rest on an accurate assessment of the world, in a democracy policies must be—or at least be seen as being—grounded in intelligence. Ironically, this is true only because intelligence is seen as proficient, a perception that developed in the wake of the technologies in the 1960s, and the pressures on intelligence follow from its supposed strengths.<sup>8</sup> When Secretary of State Colin Powell insisted that DCI George Tenet sit right behind him when he laid out the case against Iraq before the United Nations Security Council, he was following this imperative in a way that was especially dramatic but not different in kind from the norm. It is the very need to claim that intelligence and policy are in close harmony that produces conflict between them.

<sup>5</sup> The classic statement is Theodore Lowi, *The End of Liberalism* (New York: Norton, 1969), chap. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years at the State Department* (New York: Norton, 1969), 375.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas Jehl, “New C.I.A. Chief Tells Workers to Back Administration Policies,” *The New York Times*, 17 November 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Immerman, “Intelligence and Strategy: Historicizing Psychology, Policy, and Politics,” *Diplomatic History* 32 (January 2008): 1–23.

In principle, it could be different. President George W. Bush could have said something like this: “I think Saddam is a terrible menace. This is a political judgment, and I have been elected to make difficult calls. While I have listened to our intelligence services and other experts, this is my decision, not theirs.” In other cases, the president could announce, “The evidence is ambiguous, but on balance I believe that we must act on the likelihood that the more alarming possibilities are true.” But speeches that clearly separate themselves from intelligence will seem weak and will be politically unpersuasive, and it is not surprising that leaders want to use intelligence to bolster not only their arguments, but their political standing.

### CONFLICTING PRESSURES

For reasons of both psychology and politics, decision makers want to minimize not only actual value trade-offs but also their own perception of them. Leaders talk about how they make hard decisions all the time, but like the rest of us, they prefer easy ones and will try to convince themselves and others that a particular decision is in fact not so hard. Maximizing political support for a policy means arguing that it meets many goals, is supported by many considerations, and has few costs. Decision makers, then, want to portray the world as one in which their policy is superior to the alternatives in many independent dimensions. For example, when a nuclear test ban was being debated during the Cold War, proponents argued not only that atmospheric testing was a major public health hazard but also that a test ban was good for American national security and could be verified. It would have undercut the case for the ban if its supporters had said, “We must stop atmospheric testing in order to save innocent lives even though there will be a significant cost in terms of national security.”

Psychological as well as political dynamics are at work. To continue with the test ban example, proponents who were deeply concerned about public health did not like to think that they were advocating policies that would harm national security. Conversely, those who felt that inhibiting nuclear development would disadvantage the United States came to also believe that the testing was not a health hazard. They would have been discomfited by the idea that their preferred policy purchased American security at the cost of hundreds of thousands of innocent lives. Decision makers have to sleep at night, after all.<sup>9</sup>

The run-up to the war in Iraq is an unfortunately apt illustration of these processes. In its most general form, the Bush administration’s case for the war was that Saddam Hussein was a great menace and that overthrowing him was a great opportunity for changing the Middle East. Furthermore, each

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion, see Robert Jervis, “Understanding Beliefs,” *Political Psychology* 27 (October 2006): 641–664.

of these two elements had several supporting components. Saddam was a threat because he was very hard to deter, had robust weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs, and had ties to terrorists, whom he might provide with WMD. The opportunity was multifaceted as well: the war would be waged at low cost, the postwar reconstruction would be easy, and establishing a benign regime in Iraq would have salutary effects in the region by pushing other regimes along the road to democracy and facilitating the resolution of the Arab–Israeli dispute. Portraying the world in this way maximized support for the war. To those who accepted all components, the war seemed obviously the best course of action, which would justify supporting it with great enthusiasm; and people could accept the policy even if they endorsed only a few of the multiple reasons. Seeing the world in this way also eased the psychological burdens on decision makers, which were surely great in ordering soldiers into combat and embarking on a bold venture. What is crucial in this context is not the validity of any of these beliefs but the convenience in holding them all simultaneously when there was no reason to expect the world to be arranged so neatly. This effect was so strong that Vice President Dick Cheney, who previously had recognized that removing Saddam could throw Iraq into chaos, was able to convince himself that it would not. There was no logic that prohibited the situation from presenting a threat but not an opportunity (or vice versa), or for there to have been threat of one kind—that is, that Saddam was on the verge of getting significant WMD capability, but not of another—for example, that he had no connection to al Qaeda. Logically, Cheney’s heightened urgency about overthrowing Saddam should not have changed his view on what would follow. But it did.

The contrast with the intelligence community (IC) was sharp. While it did believe that Saddam had robust WMD programs, because it did not feel the psychological need to bolster the case for war, it did not have to pull other perceptions into line and so gave little support to the administration on points where the evidence was to the contrary. And this is where the friction arose. Intelligence denied any collaboration between Saddam and al Qaeda, and it was very skeptical about the possibility that Saddam would turn over WMD to terrorists. So it is not surprising that here the administration put great pressure on intelligence to come to a different view and that policymakers frequently made statements that were at variance with the assessments. It is also not surprising, although obviously it was not foreordained, that the intelligence here was quite accurate.<sup>10</sup>

Intelligence also painted a gloomy picture of the prospects for postwar Iraq, noting the possibilities for continued resistance and, most of all, the difficulties in inducing the diverse and conflicting groups in the country to

<sup>10</sup> Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence on Postwar Findings about Iraq’s WMD Programs and Links to Terrorism and How They Compare with Prewar Assessments*, 109<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 8 September 2006.

cooperate with one another.<sup>11</sup> Because this skepticism did not receive public attention, these estimates were subject to less political pressure, although the fact that the administration not only ignored them but frequently affirmed the opposite must have been frustrating to the analysts. Fortunately for them, however, on these points, the administration was content to assert its views without claiming that they were supported by intelligence, probably because the judgments were of a broad political nature and did not rely on secret information. Later, when the postwar situation deteriorated and intelligence officials revealed that they had in fact provided warnings, the conflict heightened as the administration felt that intelligence was being disloyal and furthering its own political agenda.

It is tempting to see the browbeating and ignoring of intelligence as a particular characteristic of the George W. Bush administration, but it was not. Although available evidence does not allow anything like a full inventory, it does reveal examples from other administrations. Because Bill Clinton and his colleagues were committed to returning Haiti's Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power after he had been ousted in a coup, they resented and resisted intelligence analysis that argued that he was unstable and his governing would not be effective or democratic.<sup>12</sup> Neither the administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower nor that of John F. Kennedy, both of which favored a test ban agreement, was happy with analyses that indicated that verification would be difficult. Although on many issues liberals are more accepting of value trade-offs than are conservatives,<sup>13</sup> and many liberals like to think of themselves as particularly willing to confront complexity, once they are in power, they too need to muster political support and live at peace with themselves.

Intelligence does not feel the same pressures. It does not carry the burden of decision but "merely" has to figure out what the world is like. If the resulting choices are difficult, so be it. It also is not the duty of intelligence to build political support for a policy, and so even intelligence officials who do not oppose the policy will—or should—feel no compulsion to portray the world in a helpful way. In many cases, good intelligence will then point out the costs and dangers implicit in a policy. It will make it harder for policymakers to present the policy as clearly the best one and will nurture second thoughts,

<sup>11</sup> Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence on Pre-war Intelligence Assessments about Postwar Iraq*, 110<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., May 2007, 31.

<sup>12</sup> Steven Holmes, "Administration Is Fighting Itself on Haiti Policy," *The New York Times*, 23 October 1993; the title of this article shows the problem: intelligence is part of the administration but is committed to independent analysis; Treverton, *Reshaping National Intelligence*, 188–189; Treverton argues that given the sensitivity of the subject and the softness of the evidence, the assessment should not have been written, but rather policymakers should have been orally briefed.

<sup>13</sup> Philip Tetlock, "Cognitive Style and Political Ideology," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology: Personality Processes and Individual Differences* 45 (July 1983): 118–126; Philip Tetlock, "A Value Pluralism Model of Ideological Reasoning," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology: Personality Processes and Individual Differences* 50 (April 1986): 819–827.

doubts, and unease. It is not that intelligence usually points to policies other than those the leaders prefer, but only that it is likely to give decision makers a more complex and contradictory view than fits with their political and psychological needs. Ironically, it can do this even as it brings good news. One might think that Lyndon Johnson would have welcomed CIA telling him that other countries would not fall to Communism even if Vietnam did, but since his policy was justified (to others and probably to himself) on the premise that the domino theory was correct, he did not.<sup>14</sup>

#### RESISTANCE TO FALLBACK POSITIONS AND SIGNS OF FAILURE

The same factors that lead decision makers to underestimate trade-offs make them reluctant to develop fallback plans and inclined to resist information that their policy is failing. The latter more than the former causes conflicts with intelligence, although the two are closely linked. There are several reasons why leaders are reluctant to develop fallback plans. It is hard enough to develop one policy, and the burden of thinking through a second is often simply too great. Probably more important, if others learn of the existence of Plan B, they may give less support to Plan A. Even if they do not prefer the former, its existence will be taken as betraying the leaders' lack of faith in their policy. It may also be psychologically difficult for leaders to contemplate failure.

Examples abound. Clinton did not have a Plan B when he started bombing to induce Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic to withdraw his troops from Kosovo. Administration officials thought such a plan was not needed, because it was obvious that Milosevic would give in right away. In part, they believed this because they thought it had been the brief and minor bombing over Bosnia that had brought Milosevic to the table at Dayton, an inference that, even if it had been correct, would not have readily supported the conclusion that he would give up Kosovo without a fight. The result was that the administration had to scramble both militarily and politically and was fortunate to end the confrontation as well as it did. The most obvious and consequential recent case of a lack of Plan B is Iraq. Despite intelligence to the contrary, top administration officials believed that the political and economic reconstruction of Iraq would be easy and that they needed neither short-term plans to maintain order nor long-term preparations to put down an insurgency and create a stable polity.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> "Implications of an Unfavorable Outcome in Vietnam," 11 September 1967, in *Estimative Products on Vietnam, 1948–1975* (Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, 2005), 394–426; Richard Helms, with William Hood, *A Look over My Shoulder: A Life in the Central Intelligence Agency* (New York: Random House, 2003), 314–315; Robert McNamara, with Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1995), 292–293.

<sup>15</sup> Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Intelligence on Prewar Intelligence Assessments about Postwar Iraq*; Norah Bensahel, "Mission Not Accomplished: What Went Wrong with Iraqi Reconstruction," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29 (June 2006): 453–474.

Thinking about a difficult postwar situation would have been psychologically and politically costly, which is why it was not done.

Having a Plan B means little unless decision makers are willing to shift to it if they must, which implies a need to know whether the policy is working. This, even more than the development of the plan, involves intelligence, and so here the clashes will be greater. Leaders tend to stay with their first choice for as long as possible. Lord Salisbury, the famous British statesman of the end of the nineteenth century, noted that “the commonest error in politics is sticking to the carcasses of dead policies.”<sup>16</sup> Leaders are heavily invested in their policies. To change their basic objectives will be to incur very high costs, including, in some cases, losing their offices if not their lives. Indeed the resistance to seeing that a policy is failing is roughly proportional to the costs that are expected if it does. Iraq again provides a clear example. In early 2007, Senator John McCain explained, “It’s just so hard for me to contemplate failure that I can’t make the next step,” and President Bush declared that American policy in Iraq would succeed “because it has to.”<sup>17</sup> This perseverance in what appears to be a losing cause may be rational for the leaders, if not for the country, as long as there is any chance of success and the costs of having to adopt a new policy are almost as great as those for continuing to the bitter end.<sup>18</sup> An obvious example is Bush’s decision to increase the number of American troops in Iraq in early 2007. The previous policy was not working and would have resulted in a major loss for the United States and for Bush, and even a failed “surge” would have cost him little more than admitting defeat and withdrawing without this renewed effort. Predictions of success or failure were not central to the decision. In most cases, however, predictions are involved, and it is hard for decision makers to make them without bias.

Intelligence officials do not have such a stake in the established policies, and thus it is easier for them to detect signs that the policies are failing. The fact that the leaders of the Bush administration saw much more progress in Iraq than did the IC is not unusual.<sup>19</sup> President Johnson’s sentiments quoted at the start of this article rest on accurate observations. He probably was thinking about Vietnam, and appropriately so. The civilian intelligence agencies

<sup>16</sup> Lady Gwendolen Cecil, *Life of Robert, Marquis of Salisbury*, vol. 2 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1921), 145; of course, there is a selection effect at work here: if the country changes its policy, we will never know if continuing it would have yielded success.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Todd Purdum, “Prisoner of Conscience,” *Vanity Fair*, February 2007, 14; quoted in David Sanger, “Bush Adds Troops in Bid to Secure Iraq,” *The New York Times*, 10 January 2007.

<sup>18</sup> George Downs and David Rocke, *Optimal Imperfection? Domestic Uncertainty and Institutions in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), chap. 3; Hein Goemans, *War and Punishment: The Causes of War Termination and the First World War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Kim Rutenberg, “Parts of Iraq Report Grim Where Bush Was Upbeat,” *The New York Times*, 15 July 2007.

were quick to doubt that bombing North Vietnam would either cut the supply lines or induce the leadership to give in; they issued pessimistic reports on the pacification campaign and gave higher estimates of the size of the adversary's forces than the military or Johnson wanted to hear.<sup>20</sup>

Leaders are not necessarily being foolish. The world is ambiguous, and indicators of success are likely to be elusive. If it were easy to tell who would win a political or military struggle, it would soon come to an end (or would not start at all), and Vietnam is not unique in permitting a postwar debate on the virtues of alternative policies. Although it was a pernicious myth that Germany lost World War I because of a “stab in the back,” it could have gained better peace terms if the top military leaders had not lost their nerve in the late summer of 1918. Furthermore, leaders can be correct even if their reasoning is not. The classic case is that of Winston Churchill in the spring of 1940. He prevailed over strong sentiment in his cabinet for a peace agreement with Germany in the wake of the fall of France by arguing that Britain could win because the German economy was badly overstretched and could be broken by a combination of bombing and guerrilla warfare. This was a complete fantasy; his foreign secretary had reason to write in his diary that “Winston talked the most frightful rot. It drives one to despair when he works himself up into a passion of emotion when he ought to make his brain think and reason.”<sup>21</sup> Fortunately, Churchill's emotion and force of character carried the day; intelligence can get no credit. But regardless of who is right, we should expect conflict between leaders and intelligence over whether Plan B is necessary.

### CONFIDENCE AND PERSEVERANCE

We should perhaps not underestimate the virtues of perseverance, as pig-headed as it may appear to opponents and to later observers when it fails. Not a few apparently hopeless cases end well. This may prove to be true in Iraq, and despite widespread opinion to the contrary, the *mujahadeen* in Afghanistan were able to force the Soviets out of the country. Similarly, two scientists spent over 20 years working on what almost everyone else believed was a misguided quest to understand the workings of the hypothalamus, producing no results until they independently made the breakthroughs that

<sup>20</sup> A good summary by a former high-ranking CIA official is Harold Ford, *CIA and Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes, 1962–1968* (Washington, DC: CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998); also see Thomas Ahern, Jr., *Good Questions, Wrong Answers: CIA's Estimates of Arms Traffic Through Sihanoukville, Cambodia, During the Vietnam War*, February 2004, accessed at [http://www.foia.cia.gov/vietnam/4\\_GOOD\\_QUESTIONS\\_WRONG\\_ANSWERS.pdf](http://www.foia.cia.gov/vietnam/4_GOOD_QUESTIONS_WRONG_ANSWERS.pdf), 4 April 2010; the pattern in Iraq seems similar.

<sup>21</sup> David Reynolds, “Churchill and the British ‘Decision’ to Fight on in 1940: Right Policy, Wrong Reasons,” in Richard Langhorne, ed. *Diplomacy and Intelligence during the Second World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 147–167; the quotation is from Harold Evans, “His Finest Hour,” *New York Times Book Review*, 11 November 2001.

earned them Nobel Prizes.<sup>22</sup> Albert Hirschman points to the “hiding hand” in many human affairs. If we saw the obstacles in our path, we would not begin many difficult but ultimately successful endeavors.<sup>23</sup> For example, how many scholars would have started a dissertation had they known how long and arduous it would be?

Confidence is necessary for perseverance and for embarking on any difficult venture. While it can be costly, it also is functional in many situations, which helps explain why people are systematically overconfident.<sup>24</sup> Although it might seem that we would be better off if our confidence better matched our knowledge, it turns out that the most mentally healthy people are slightly over-optimistic, overestimating their skills and ability to control their lives.<sup>25</sup> This is probably even more true for decision makers, who carry heavy burdens. As Henry Kissinger says, “Historians rarely do justice to the psychological stress on a policy-maker.”<sup>26</sup> A national leader who had no more confidence than an objective reading of the evidence would permit probably would do little or would be worn down by mental anguish after each decision. Dean Acheson understood this when he told the presidential scholar Richard Neustadt, “I know your theory [that presidents need to hear conflicting views]. You think Presidents should be warned. You’re wrong. Presidents should be given confidence.”<sup>27</sup>

There is little reason to think that President Bush was being less than honest when he told Bob Woodward, “I know it is hard for you to believe, but I have not doubted what we’re doing [in Iraq].” He was aware that a degree of self-manipulation if not self-deception was involved: “[A] president has got to be the calcium in the backbone. If I weaken, the whole team weakens.... If my confidence level in our ability declines, it will send ripples throughout the whole organization. I mean, it’s essential that we be confident and determined and united.”<sup>28</sup> During the air campaign phase of the Gulf War, when CIA

<sup>22</sup> Nicholas Wade, *The Nobel Duel: Two Scientists’ 21-Year Race to Win the World’s Most Coveted Research Prize* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981).

<sup>23</sup> Albert Hirschman, “The Principle of the Hiding Hand,” *Public Interest* 13 (1967): 10–23.

<sup>24</sup> For a summary of the literature, see Richard Nisbett and Lee Ross, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 113–115, 119–120, 150–151, 292–293.

<sup>25</sup> Shelley Taylor and J. Brown, “Illusion and Well-Being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Illness,” *Psychological Bulletin* 103 (March 1998): 193–210; Shelley Taylor, *Positive Illusions: Creative Self-Deception and the Healthy Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); also see Dominic Johnson, *Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>26</sup> Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1979), 483.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in John Steinbruner, *The Cybernetic Theory of Decision* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 332.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Bob Woodward, *State of Denial: Bush at War*, part 3 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 325–326, 371; Robert Draper, *Dead Certain: The Presidency of George W. Bush* (New York: Free Press, 2007); but interestingly enough, Secretary of State Powell and his Deputy, Richard Armitage, believed that self-doubt was essential to doing a good job; Woodward, *State of Denial*, 325.

estimated that the damage being inflicted was well below what the Air Force reported and what plans said was needed to launch the ground attack, the general in charge, Norman Schwarzkopf, demanded that CIA get out of his business. His reasoning was not that CIA was wrong but that these estimates reduced the confidence of the men and women in uniform on which success depended.<sup>29</sup>

Of course there are occasions on which intelligence can supply confidence. The breaking of German codes in World War II not only gave allied military and civilian leaders an enormous amount of information that enabled them to carry out successful military operations but also provided a general confidence that they could prevail. At the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, Kennedy was given confidence by the report from his leading Soviet expert that Nikita Khrushchev would be willing to remove the missiles the Soviets had installed in Cuba without an American promise of a parallel withdrawal from Turkey. In most cases, however, intelligence is likely to provide a complicated, nuanced, and ambiguous picture.

When they are not prepared to change, leaders are prone not only to reject the information but to scorn the messenger, claiming that intelligence is unhelpful (which in a real sense it is), superficial (which is sometimes the case), and disloyal (which is rare). Intelligence may lose its access or, if the case is important, much of its role. Thus, in the 1930s, when a unit in the Japanese military intelligence showed that the China campaign, far from leading to control over needed raw materials, was draining the Japanese economy, the army reorganized and marginalized it.<sup>30</sup> Something similar was attempted in Vietnam by the U.S. military, which responded to the pessimistic reporting from the Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) by having Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara insist that INR should not be permitted to analyze what was happening on the battlefield.<sup>31</sup>

It might be comforting to believe that only rigid individuals or organizations act in this way, but what is at work is less the characteristics of the organization and the personalities of the leaders than the desire to continue the policy, the need for continuing political support, and the psychological pain of confronting failure. When the research arm of the U.S. Forest Service turned up solid evidence that the best way to manage forests was to permit if not facilitate controlled fires, the unit was abolished, because the founding mission and, indeed, identity of the service was to prevent forest fires.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Richard Russell, "CIA's Strategic Intelligence in Iraq," *Political Science Quarterly* 117 (Summer 2002): 201–207.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War: The Search for Economic Security, 1919–1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 170–175.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Hughes, "Experiencing McNamara," *Foreign Policy* 100 (Fall 1995): 154–157; Louis Sarris, "McNamara's War, and Mine," *The New York Times*, 5 September 1995.

<sup>32</sup> Ashley Schiff, *Fire and Water: Scientific Heresy in the Forest Service* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

## TOO EARLY OR TOO LATE

For intelligence to be welcomed and to have an impact, it must arrive at the right time, which is after the leaders have become seized with the problem but before they have made up their minds. This is a narrow window. One might think that early warning would be especially useful because there is time to influence events. But in many cases, decision makers will have an established policy, one that will be costly to change, and early warnings can rarely be definitive.

Intelligence about most of the world is irrelevant to leaders because they are too busy to pay attention to any but the most pressing concerns. Intelligence on matters that are not in this category may be useful for building the knowledge of the government and informing lower-level officials but will not receive a hearing at the top. This was the case with intelligence on domestic politics in Iran before the fall of 1978, when it became clear that the troubles facing the Shah were serious. Intelligence was badly flawed here, rarely going beyond the inadequate reports from the field or assessing the situation in any depth. But even better analysis would not have gained much attention, because the President and his top assistants were preoccupied with other problems and projects, most obviously the attempt to bring peace to the Middle East that culminated in President Jimmy Carter's meeting with President Anwar Sadat and Prime Minister Menachem Begin at Camp David. As one CIA official said to me, "We could not give away intelligence on Iran before the crisis." Almost as soon as the crisis hit, however, it was too late. Top officials quickly established their own preferences and views of the situation. This is not unusual. On issues that are central, decision makers and their assistants are prone to become their own intelligence analysts.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps intelligence can have the most influence if it operates on questions that are important but not immediately pressing. In the run-up to the war in Iraq, there was nothing that intelligence could have reasonably told President Bush that would have affected the basic decisions. But things might have been different if intelligence in the mid-1990s had been able to see that Saddam had postponed if not abandoned his ambitions for WMD. Had this been the standard view when Bush came to power, he and his colleagues might have accepted it because they were not then far down the road to war.

As a policy develops momentum, information and analyses that would have mattered if received earlier now will be ignored. This can be seen quite clearly in military operations, because it is relatively easy to mark the stages of the deliberation. At the start, the focus is on whether the operation can succeed, which means paying careful attention to the status of the adversary's forces and the possibilities of gaining surprise. But as things move ahead,

<sup>33</sup> For a similar argument, see Treverton, *Reshaping National Intelligence*, 183–185.

new information is likely to be used for tactical purposes rather than for calling the operation into question. The greater the effort required to mount it and the greater the difficulty in securing agreement to proceed, the greater the resistance will be to new information that indicates it is not likely to succeed.

A clear example is Operation Market Garden in the fall of 1944. After the leading British General, Bernard Montgomery, was rebuffed by Eisenhower in his arguments for concentrating all Allied forces behind his thrust toward Berlin, political as well as military reasons led Eisenhower to agree to a bold but more-limited attack deep into German-held territory, culminating at Arnhem. The need for allied unity and for conciliating Montgomery, combined with the fact that Eisenhower had been urging him to be more aggressive, meant that “once he was committed, retreat for Ike was all but impossible.”<sup>34</sup> Shortly before the attack was to be launched, code breaking revealed that the Germans had more and better-trained forces in the area than the allies had anticipated. Had they known this earlier, the operation would not have been approved. But once the basic decision was made, the political and psychological costs of reversing it were so high that the intelligence was disregarded, to the great cost of the soldiers parachuted onto the final bridge. The refusal or inability of a leading British general to heed the intelligence indicating that the British move into Greece in 1941 would almost surely fail can be similarly explained, as can the fact that pessimistic CIA assessments about the planned American invasion of Cambodia in 1971 were not forwarded to the President when DCI Helms realized that Nixon and Kissinger had made up their minds and would only be infuriated by the reports, which turned out to be accurate.<sup>35</sup>

#### IMPORTANCE OF COGNITIVE PREDISPOSITIONS

Intelligence often has its own strongly held beliefs, which can operate at multiple levels of abstraction, from general theories of politics and human nature to images of adversaries to ideas about specific situations. These need not be uniform, and the IC, like the policymaking community, often is divided and usually along the same lines. During the Cold War, some factions were much more worried about the USSR than were others, and the China analysts were deeply divided in their views about the role of Mao Zedong and about how internal Chinese politics functioned. In these cases, analysts, like policymakers,

<sup>34</sup> Harold Deutsch, “Commanding Generals and the Uses of Intelligence,” *Intelligence and National Security* 3 (July 1988): 245; for cases, see Brian Loring Villa, *Unauthorized Action: Mountbatten and the Dieppe Raid* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Guy Vanderpool, “COMINT and the PRC Intervention in the Korean War,” *Cryptologic Quarterly* 15 (Summer 1996): 1–26, declassified and available as document 21 at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB278/index.htm>.

<sup>35</sup> Deutsch, “Commanding Generals,” 206–207; Stansfield Turner, *Burn Before Reading: Presidents, CIA Directors, and Secret Intelligence* (New York: Hyperion, 2005), 128.

were slow to change their views and saw most new information as confirming what they expected to see. This is true on the level of tactical intelligence as well. A striking case was the accidental shooting down of an Iranian airliner by the *USS Vincennes* toward the end of the Iran–Iraq War. One of the key errors was that the radar operator misread his screen as indicating that the airplane was descending toward the ship. What is relevant here is that the *Vincennes's* captain had trained his crew very aggressively, leading them to expect an attack and giving them a mind-set that was conducive to reading—and misreading—evidence as indicating that one was under way. A destroyer that was in the vicinity had not been drilled in this way, and its operator read the radar track correctly.<sup>36</sup>

Differing predispositions provide another reason why decision makers so often reject intelligence. The answers to many of their most important questions are linked to their beliefs about world politics, the images of those they are dealing with, and their general ideas, if not ideologies. Bush's view of Saddam rested in large measure on his beliefs about how tyrants behave, for example. If intelligence had explained that Saddam was not a major threat, being unlikely to aid terrorists or to try to dominate the region, this probably would not have been persuasive to Bush, and not only because he was particularly closed-minded. This kind of intelligence would have been derived not only from detailed analysis of how Saddam had behaved but from broad understandings of politics and even of human nature. Here, it is not only to be expected but legitimate for decision makers to act on their views rather than those propounded by intelligence. It is often rightly said that “policy-makers are entitled to their own policies, but not to their own facts.”<sup>37</sup> Facts do not speak for themselves, however, and crucial political judgments grow out of a stratum that lies between if not beneath policies and facts.

Although it was not appropriate for a member of the National Security Council staff to ask whether the Baghdad station chief who produced a gloomy prognosis in November 2003 was a Democrat or Republican,<sup>38</sup> it would not have been illegitimate to have inquired as to the person's general political

<sup>36</sup> David Evans, “USS Vincennes Case Study,” accessed at <http://www.owl.net.rice.edu/~nava201/VCS/vincennes.pdf>, 4 April 2010; ironically, this tragic incident helped end the war because Iranian leaders believed the United States had done this on purpose as part of its anti-Iranian campaign, and they inferred that even worse punishment would likely be forthcoming unless the war was settled.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, George Tenet with Bill Harlow, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 317, 348.

<sup>38</sup> James Risen, *State of War: The Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 130; for a general discussion of the importance of analysts' worldviews, see David Muller, Jr., “Intelligence in Red and Blue,” *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 21 (Spring 2008): 1–12; also see Huw Dylan, “Britain and the Missile Gap: British Estimates on the Soviet Ballistic Missile Threat, 1957–61,” *Intelligence and National Security* 23 (December 2008): 794–796.

outlook, his predisposition toward optimism or pessimism, his general views about how insurgencies could be put down, and his beliefs about how difficult it would be to bring stability to a conflicted society. Not only is it comforting for decision makers to listen to those who share their general values and outlook, but it makes real sense for them to do so. They are right to be skeptical of the analysis produced by those who see the world quite differently, because however objective the analysts are trying to be, their interpretations will inevitably be influenced by their general beliefs and theories.

It is, then, not surprising that people are rarely convinced in arguments about central issues. The debate about the nature of Soviet intentions went on throughout the Cold War, with few people being converted and fewer being swayed by intelligence or competing analysis. Without going so far as to say that everyone is born either a little hawk or a little dove, to paraphrase Gilbert and Sullivan, on the broadest issues of the nature and intentions of other countries and the existence and characteristics of broad historical trends, people's beliefs are determined more by their general worldviews, predispositions, and ideologies than they are by the sort of specific evidence that can be pieced together by intelligence. The reason why DCI John McCone expected the Soviets to put missiles into Cuba and his analysts did not was not that they examined different evidence or that he was more careful than they were, but that he strongly believed that the details of the nuclear balance influenced world politics and that Khrushchev would therefore be strongly motivated to improve his position. Similarly, as early as February 1933, Robert Vansittart, the United Kingdom's Permanent Undersecretary in the Foreign Office, who was to become a leading opponent of appeasement, said that the Germans were "likely to rely for their military power ... on the mechanical weapons of the future, such as tanks, big guns, and above all military aircraft." Eighteen months later, when criticizing the military for being slow to appreciate the rise of Nazi power, he said, "Prophecy is largely a matter of insight. I do not think the Service Departments have enough. On the other hand they might say that I have too much. The answer is that I know the Germans better."<sup>39</sup> Although contemporary decision makers might not refer to intuition, they are likely to have deeply ingrained beliefs about the way the world works and what a number of countries are like, and in this sense, they will be prone to be their own intelligence analysts.

The discrepancy between the broad cognitive predispositions of the IC and those of political leaders explains why conflict has tended to be higher when Republicans are in power. With some reason, they see intelligence analysts as predominantly liberals. Their suspicions that intelligence has sought to thwart

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Donald Cameron Watt, "British Intelligence and the Coming of the Second World War in Europe," in Ernest May, ed., *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment before the Two World Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 268.

and embarrass the administration are usually false, but to the extent that the worldviews of most intelligence officers are different from those of the Republicans, the latter are justified in being skeptical of IC analysis on broad issues. For their part, intelligence analysts, like everyone else, underestimate the degree to which their own interpretations of specific bits of evidence are colored by their general predispositions and so consider the leaders' rejection of their views closed-minded and ideological. Although not all people are equally driven by their theories about the world,<sup>40</sup> there is a degree of legitimacy to the leaders' position that members of the IC often fail to grasp. President Ronald Reagan and his colleagues, including DCI Bill Casey, probably were right to believe that the IC's assessments that the Soviet Union was not supporting terrorism and was not vulnerable to economic pressures were more a product of the IC's liberal leanings than of the evidence. They therefore felt justified in ignoring the IC when they did not put pressure on it, which in turn led to charges of politicization, a topic to which I will now turn.

#### POLITICIZATION

Politicization of intelligence can take many forms, from the most blatant, in which intelligence is explicitly told what conclusions it should reach, to the less obvious, including demoting people who produce the "wrong" answer, putting in place personnel whose views are consistent with those of the top leaders, reducing the resources going to units whose analyses are troubling, and the operation of unconscious bias by analysts who fear that their careers will be damaged by producing undesired reports. Even more elusive may be what one analyst has called "politicization by omission": issues that are not evaluated because the results might displease superiors.<sup>41</sup> Also subtle are the interactions between pressures and degrees of certainty in estimates. I suspect that one reason for the excess certainty in the Iraq WMD assessments was the knowledge of what the decision makers wanted. Conversely, analysts are most likely to politically conform when they are uncertain about their own judgments, as will often be the case on difficult and contentious questions.

Only rarely does one find a case like the one in which President Johnson told DCI Helms, "Dick, I need a paper on Vietnam, and I'll tell you what I

<sup>40</sup> For meticulous research showing that those who are less theory-driven tend to make more-accurate predictions and to better adjust their views in the face of discrepant evidence, see Philip Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); also see Milton Rokeach, *The Open and Closed Mind: Investigations into the Nature of Belief Systems and Personality Systems* (New York: Basic Books, 1960).

<sup>41</sup> John Gentry, *Lost Promise: How CIA Analysis Misserves the Nation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993), 35–37; the best general analysis of varieties of politicization is Joshua Rovner, *Fixing the Facts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, forthcoming).

want included in it.”<sup>42</sup> Almost as blatant was Kissinger’s response when CIA experts told Congress that intelligence did not believe that the new Soviet missile with multiple warheads could menace the American retaliatory force, contrary to what policymakers had said. He ordered the reports to be revised, and when they still did not conform, told Helms to remove the offending paragraph on the grounds that it was not “hard” intelligence but merely speculation on Soviet intentions, a subject on which intelligence lacked special qualifications.<sup>43</sup>

Even this case points to the ambiguities in the notion of politicization and the difficulties in drawing a line between what political leaders should and should not do when they disagree with estimates.<sup>44</sup> Intelligence said that “we consider it highly unlikely [that the Soviets] will attempt within the period of this estimate to achieve a first-strike capability.”<sup>45</sup> This prediction was reasonable—and turned out to be correct—but it rested in part on judgments of the Soviet system and the objectives of the Soviet leaders, and these are the kinds of questions that the top political leadership is entitled to answer for itself. On the other hand, to demand that intelligence keep silent on adversary intentions would be bizarre, and indeed, when the hard-liners forced an outside estimate at the end of the Gerald Ford administration, the group of selected hawks who formed “Team B” strongly criticized the IC for concentrating on capabilities and ignoring intentions.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Ralph Weber, ed., *Spymaster: Ten CIA Officers in Their Own Words* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Books, 1999), 251; it is not clear, however, whether Johnson was dictating the subjects to be covered or the conclusions to be reached; there also is some ambiguity in the incident Helms described in *A Look over My Shoulder*, 339–340; for his discussion of political pressures in the later controversy over estimating the size of enemy forces in Vietnam, see *ibid.*, 324–329; for DCI Tenet’s views of the pressures by policymakers to conclude that there were significant links between al Qaeda and Iraq, see Tenet and Harlow, *At the Center of the Storm*, 349–350; for the claim that analysts at the World Bank are required to produce papers that support bank policy and specific projects, see Michael Goldman, *Imperial Nature: The World Bank and Struggles for Social Justice in the Age of Globalization* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 127.

<sup>43</sup> Turner, *Burn Before Reading*, 130–132; also see John Prados, *The Soviet Estimate: U.S. Intelligence Analysis and Russian Military Strength* (New York: Dial Press, 1982), 218–224, and Helms, *A Look over My Shoulder*, 386–388; for the (plausible) claim that political considerations led to the withholding of information on the status of Iran’s “moderates” during the period when the Reagan White House was trading arms for hostages, see the memorandum from an Iranian analyst to the Deputy Director of Intelligence, 2 December 1986, printed in Gentry, *Lost Promise*, 276–281.

<sup>44</sup> For an attempt to draw such lines, see the speech that Robert Gates gave to analysts when he became DCI after deeply contentious confirmation hearings pivoting on whether he had politicized intelligence when he was deputy to William Casey. Gates, “Guarding Against Politicization,” *Studies in Intelligence* 36 (Spring 1992): 5–13; also see Jack Davis, “Intelligence Analysts and Policy-Makers: Benefits and Dangers of Tensions in the Relationship,” *Intelligence and National Security* 21 (December 2006): 999–1021; and Richard Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), chap. 4.

<sup>45</sup> Turner, *Burn Before Reading*, 132.

So it is not surprising that arguments about whether politicization occurred are rarely easy to settle.<sup>46</sup> In some cases, the only people with firsthand knowledge will have major stakes in the dispute, and in others, even a videotape of the meeting might not tell us what happened. Was the office chief bemoaning the fact that an estimate would cause him grief with policymakers, or was he suggesting that it be changed? Was the DCI's assistant just doing his job when he strongly criticized a draft paper, arguing that the evidence was thin, alternatives were not considered, and the conclusion went beyond the evidence, or was he exerting pressure to get a different answer? When people in the Vice President's office and the office of the Secretary of Defense told the IC analysts to look again—and again—at the evidence for links between Saddam and al Qaeda and repeatedly pressed them on why they were discounting sources that reported such links, were they just doing due diligence?<sup>47</sup> Are analysts being oversensitive, or are leaders and managers being over-assertive? Winks and nods, praise and blame, promotions and their absence are subject to multiple causes and multiple interpretations. In many of these cases, I suspect that one's judgment will depend on which side of the substantive debate one is on, because commentators, as well as the participants, will bring with them their own biases and reasons to see or reject claims of pressure.

Ironically, while many of the critics of the IC's performance on Iraqi WMD highlighted the dangers of politicization, some of the proposed reforms (ones that appear after every failure) show how hard it is to distinguish a good intelligence process from one that is driven by illegitimate political concerns. It is conventional wisdom that good analysis questions its own assumptions, looks for alternative explanations, examines low-probability interpretations as well as ones that seem more likely to be correct, scrutinizes sources with great care, and avoids excessive conformity. The problem in this context is that analysts faced with the probing questions that these prescriptions imply may believe that they are being pressured into producing a different answer. The obvious reply is that consumers and managers must apply these techniques to all important cases, not just when they object to the initial answers. There is something to this, and it would make sense to look back at previous cases in which politicization has been charged and see whether only those estimates that produced the "wrong" answers were sent back for further scrutiny.

<sup>46</sup> When intelligence is most thoroughly politicized, evidence for this no longer appears; in an application of the familiar dynamic that power is most effective when it does not need to be applied openly, if an intelligence agency is filled with people who know and share the leader's views, intelligence will be supportive without leaving any fingerprints; Richard Russell, *Sharpening Strategic Intelligence: Why the CIA Gets It Wrong and What Needs to Be Done to Get It Right* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 121; John Diamond, *The CIA and the Culture of Failure* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 43.

<sup>47</sup> For a discussion of the later case by the national intelligence officer in charge, see Paul Pillar, "Intelligence, Policy, and the War in Iraq," *Foreign Affairs* 85 (March/April 2006): 15–28.

But even this test is not infallible. If I am correct that political leaders and top intelligence managers are entitled to their own broad political views, then they are right to scrutinize especially carefully what they think are incorrect judgments.<sup>48</sup> Thus, the political leaders insisted that the IC continually reassess its conclusion that there were no significant links between Saddam and al Qaeda not only because they wanted a different answer but because their feeling for how the world worked led them to expect such a connection, and they thought that the IC's assessment to the contrary was based less on the detailed evidence than on the misguided political sensibility that was dominant in the IC.<sup>49</sup> It is not entirely wrong for policymakers to require a higher level of proof from intelligence when the evidence cuts against their desired policy. This means that the greater probing of the grounds for judgments and the possible alternatives that are the objectives of good intelligence procedures may increase the likelihood both of politicization and of analysts' incorrectly levying such a charge.

#### CONCLUSION

Decision makers need information and analysis, and intelligence gets its significance and mission from influencing those who will make policy. But this does not mean that relations between the two groups will be smooth. The grievances of the IC are several but less consequential because it has much less power than the intelligence consumers. Members of the IC often feel that policymakers shun complicated analysis, cannot cope with uncertainty, will not read beyond the first page, forget what they have been told, and are quick to blame intelligence when policy fails. In response, members of the IC grumble a great deal among themselves and, when sufficiently provoked, leak their versions to the media.

For their part, policymakers not only overestimate the subversive activities of intelligence, but often find it less than helpful. This is true in two senses. First, they find that only on a few occasions can intelligence light a clear path. The evidence that can be gathered by other than supernatural methods is limited and ambiguous, and in many significant cases, other states may not even know what they will do until the last minute. Even when intentions are long-standing, they and the associated capabilities often can be disguised, and the knowledge that deception is possible further degrades the available

<sup>48</sup> It is the job of top IC officials to shield their subordinates from political pressures; but if there is any chance that intelligence will be listened to, they must also scrutinize unpopular assessments with great care, trying to see that all objections have been met and that excessive claims have been avoided; to subordinates, this scrutiny may appear as illegitimate political pressure, and indeed in one sense it is.

<sup>49</sup> Douglas Feith, *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

information. Even without this problem, it is difficult for intelligence officials to see the world as others see it and to penetrate minds that think quite differently than they do. This is especially true when the other side has beliefs and plans that, even when they become known later, make very little sense.

Leaders find intelligence less than completely helpful in another sense as well. Leaders want to understand the world in which they are operating, but above all, need to act and sustain themselves psychologically and politically. These requirements often conflict with the sort of analysis that intelligence is likely to provide. Leaders need confidence and political support, and all too often, intelligence undermines both. In many cases, intelligence will increase rather than reduce uncertainty as it notes ambiguities and alternative possibilities. Even worse, intelligence can report that the policy to which the leader is committed is likely to entail high costs with dubious prospects for success. Occasionally intelligence can point to opportunities that the country can seize or to signs that the difficulties confronting a policy are only temporary. But more often, it will indicate that the preferred path is not smooth, and may be a dead end.

No leader can have risen to the top without having frequently taken risks that others would shun and found success where others expected failure. Experience will have taught them to place faith in their own judgments. But they will still seek sources of reassurance. Psychologically, they will not want to face the full costs and risks of their policies lest they become fearful, inconsistent, and hesitant. The political problems are even greater, as they need to rally others at home and abroad. The exposure of the gaps in the information, the ambiguities in its interpretation, and the multiple problems the policy is likely to confront will not be politically helpful.

The frictions between particular American presidents and the IC are often attributed to special circumstances or the personality quirks of the former and the intellectual failures of the latter. These all do abound, but the problem goes much deeper. The needs and missions of leaders and intelligence officials are very different, and the two groups are doomed to both work together and to come into conflict.