



GUIDE TO THE STUDY OF INTELLIGENCE

My Perspective on Intelligence Support of Foreign Policy

by Carl Ford¹

The key to providing intelligence support to our foreign policymakers is delivering timely, relevant, and persuasive information. Sounds simple. Especially as we devote so many billions of dollars to the Intelligence Community (IC). In practice, however, the job of foreign intelligence analysts writing for the President's Daily Brief (PDB) and other assessments for senior officials is anything but straightforward. Foreign policy focused analysts must contend with a collection system geared primarily to military issues that produces little new information germane to the immediate requirements of policymakers including the President. Instead, reporters of current intelligence related to foreign policy matters depend largely for their insights on open sources, a few well-placed human assets, a smattering of signals intelligence, and bits and pieces of imagery. For the foreign policy focused analyst, squeezing as much as possible out of an imperfect collection system becomes the true measure of success.

Most of the intelligence budget goes to supporting the Defense Department and its combatant commands. This is not to suggest that foreign policy concerns are less important than military interests. The information the collection systems produce is often extremely detailed and designed specifically for military support purposes, not civilian foreign policy officials in Washington. As a result, most of the raw material available for foreign policy focused analysts is derivative and not specifically collected to support foreign policy.

The US's intelligence collection system has its own style, its own rhythm, and policymakers' priorities are not necessarily at the top of the list. The abil-

ity to target the vast collection system in a laser-like manner on a specific foreign policy related requirement is extremely limited. It is more appropriate to think of these systems in terms of having built a giant baseball catcher's mitt. One can point it where one thinks information may come from, but one has little control over when the balls are thrown and their exact direction of flight. As a result, we miss far more than we catch, and the timing of what we do catch rarely coincides with the publication schedule of the PDB.

The scatter-shot nature of intelligence collection also makes it easy for analysts to fall into the "connecting the dots" fallacy. Just because one has a dot does not mean it is, or can be, connected to other dots. It is the same story with the best human source reporting. It rarely, if ever, provides a complete picture. Sources are human. They make mistakes and are plagued with biases. The same is true for communications intercepts. Since when can a couple of telephone conversations and a few dozen e-mails be enough to tell much about someone, or what they stand for? This goes as well for overhead imagery. Although the US possesses the world's most capable system for collecting intelligence it doesn't give analysts x-ray vision or an ability to see what someone is thinking.

It does not help that intelligence managers are prone to define success in terms of speed; the time it takes for a piece of newly collected information to reach a senior official. In order to speed up this process, very sensitive "eyes only" information is sometimes sent directly from collectors to the senior policy-makers, leaving all-source intelligence analysts out of the loop. The item might be important, but it also might be misleading or completely wrong. As if that were not enough, relevance, in the managers' minds, is often simply that the information is classified and comes from the IC.

This leads many managers in the IC to believe that policymakers consider the news delivered by the IC their highest priority, and the analysts' most important contribution. When, in fact, from my experience, it demonstrates how little contact most intelligence officers have with policymakers. Of course, news of fast breaking events or new situations interests senior policymakers, including the President, but it is not all they want or need. Indeed, I do not think I have ever met a policymaker who was satisfied with the intelligence they were receiving — just the opposite. They complain loudly, especially when they think there are no intelligence officers around. The IC's overreliance on producing "news" only exacerbates the problem.

1. The author was the Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research from 2001 to 2003.

INR's Scheduled-based Reporting

At the Department of State, analysts in the Bureau for Intelligence & Research (INR) attempt to take these factors into consideration by building their approach around the policymakers' schedule — not the collection cycle. INR has been, and always will be, a current events reporting agency, if only because of its small size — 150 or so analysts. Basic, long-term, and directed research is beyond its means. Only CIA and DIA have the manpower resources necessary for this sort of heavy lifting. What INR was designed for, however, it does very well. Historically, its analysts have stayed focused on a region or issue much longer than those in other analytic offices, and the venerable INR Daily Brief they produce is widely admired for its style and substance. The people in INR are truly a national treasure; their level of expertise is something for other organizations to match.

During my time at INR,² I was fortunate to work for Secretary Colin Powell.³ He appreciated the value of intelligence and emphasized his support for INR to his top policy advisors. His instructions to me were clear. He looked to INR for more than the news. High on his list was the expectation that INR would provide more detailed answers to his most pressing concerns, usually a mirror image of the President's priorities. He also wanted to know when INR's views differed from those of other agencies, and, given his military background, he expressed a preference for us including a bit more from the military side of things in his daily briefing package.

From my perspective as Director of INR, I could see that the Secretary already received more intelligence every day than he or any other top official could plow through in six weeks. It came in the form of the PDB, regular contact with senior US and foreign officials, INR's Daily Brief, and a fair amount of sensitive "eyes only" material from the National Security Agency (NSA). In addition, he regularly read news directly from the Internet, received an oral briefing from INR at each morning's staff meeting, and received updates throughout the day from his senior policy officers. In short, he did not lack for news. It was clear to me that much of the material he received was duplicative and infringed on the little time he had to think.

Instead of always trying to match the PDB's cov-

erage, INR emphasized topics especially relevant to the Secretary. If another agency's product was as good, or better, than we could provide on a current event, it was added to our own material sent to the Secretary. In cases where INR held a different opinion, we explained why and how in a note. We continued to supply INR's Daily Brief, and added a copy of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs' morning briefing courtesy of DIA's representative to INR.

For INR, scheduled-based reporting meant determining which questions to ask and making time for the answers needing the most attention. In both cases better planning was key. The deputy assistants took responsibility for mapping out the Secretary's schedule as best they could, and, whenever possible, sought advance notice of the President's upcoming events. At the same time, each INR office provided a list of priority questions they anticipated in their area of expertise. They also looked for opportunities to deliver their products at times that would maximize their relevance. This was especially important for matters not regularly making the headlines.

Managing such an approach required knowing a good deal about the policymaker's priorities and schedule. This type of information, admittedly, was not always easy to obtain. It started with INR taking the initiative to reach out to individual policymakers throughout the Department of State each morning to provide a personalized intelligence briefing, and following up as necessary throughout the day. The policymaker's priorities — what was on the schedule — were addressed first, followed by new developments in their area of interest. INR's and the IC's full range of products was always available for the policymakers who liked to keep up with events outside of their immediate area of responsibility.

For the briefer, it was an opportunity to develop a face-to-face relationship with a policymaker and for gaining insights into priorities and upcoming events. INR analysts were instructed to leave policy formulation to the policymakers and concentrate on identifying the key questions — the things policymakers do not have the time or knowledge to do themselves. It is the policymakers' job to decide on the policy direction to take, and ideally the IC's analytical expertise helps them understand the problems and challenges they will face. When an analyst strays off course into recommending policy choices, however, his or her relevance and acceptance by policymakers suffers.

Adopting a schedule-based system requires more work. In-depth assessments are much harder to produce than reporting the news and do not lend

2. From May 2001 to October 2003.

3. Colin Powell served in the US Army from 1958 to 1993 retiring as a general and Chairman, Joints Chiefs of Staff. He served as Secretary of State from January 2001 to January 2005.

themselves to the short timelines of the PDB and other daily reporting. Producing quality analyses takes time. Unless one can anticipate important questions sufficiently in advance, analysts do not have time to prepare a proper and useful answer. Thinking ahead is key.

Sometimes the valuable input to the policymaker can be as simple as preparing information in advance about the size and frequency of past anti-America demonstrations in the Middle East. This helps put new events into perspective as they happen. During the run up to the Iraq War, senior officials were particularly interested in the “Arab Street’s” reaction to US policy. Instead of just reporting an anti-American demonstration had happened somewhere in the region, INR wanted to provide a more useful answer. It asked: Was the event a regular occurrence or was it about average? Was it larger, or smaller in size, and what had prompted the event— Iraq, the Israel-Palestinian issue, or other complaints? In one instance, the lead article in most current reporting from the Intelligence Community highlighted increased opposition in the region to the US policy on Iraq. The reports were based on evidence from two separate demonstrations. It turned out in both instances that the size of each demonstration was well below average levels for those cities. One of the demonstrations was focused on US support for Israel; the other on a local issue unrelated to anti-American activities. Judging strong opposition to US Iraq policy was a reasonable “guess” at the time, but using the demonstrations cited as evidence, was sloppy and wrong.

Another example of focused INR analysis involved a trip to Russia by the President and the Secretary of State. A senior INR Russia analyst, learning of the trip, took the initiative to call on the services of a colleague outside INR for help. His friend, a Foreign Service Officer (FSO), had worked almost daily with the then more junior Vladimir Putin while both were stationed in St. Petersburg. Thinking that the FSO’s recollections and impressions would help him in preparing for the upcoming trip, INR’s analyst asked his friend to jot down his experiences on paper. He agreed. A few weeks later a lengthy report arrived, all 50 or 60 pages of it, so well written that we decided to send the entire manuscript to the Secretary, adding only a note from INR summarizing the paper’s findings. It turned out the Secretary read the entire paper, not just the summary, and he decided to take the report with him on the trip. At some point, he shared the report with the President. The President’s notes in the margin suggested he read most, if not all of the paper on the airplane. Moreover, the President’s asking the

Secretary to pass on his thanks to the author suggests he liked what he read. “Atta boys” are rare in the intelligence business, making this one all the more special. For the report writer, my Russian analyst, and the entire Bureau, it was an unexpected, but gratefully accepted compliment.

That occurrence argues against the conventional wisdom in the IC that senior officials do not have time to read long, detailed pieces, and that it is better to provide them with just the highlights. True, we mostly send summaries to our consumers, but not necessarily because that is what they want from us. I have found that when policymakers are preoccupied with an issue, they are eager to receive anything we can give them. They read more, get quickly up to speed on what current reporting has to offer, and cast about for more details. Continuing to offer up short, summary articles leaves them frustrated and unsatisfied.

What policymakers are looking for most is “good” intelligence, meaning intelligence that is timely and relevant to their top priority of the moment. Short and sweet may suffice in the early stages of a policy challenge, but as a problem wears on, the policymaker’s requirements evolve. Details become more important. They start asking questions, wanting more in-depth answers. Opinions, even those of the IC’s experts, are not what they expect to hear. Once they become engaged fully in an issue, only new evidence and the rationale for the conclusion suffices.

Even then, analysis may only serve to force them to question their own views, not buy another’s ideas hook, line, and sinker. Actually influencing a policymaker’s views — the intelligence officer’s Holy Grail — depends almost entirely on the strength of the evidence. Even if one is the world’s expert on a topic, don’t expect the policymaker to take your word for it. Information is not useful intelligence until the policymaker is persuaded it makes sense.

Much of the persuasion must be done on paper, making the job all that much harder. Policymaker’s face-to-face interactions with intelligence officers are usually brief, and often the information is presented by non-experts. A better approach, but difficult to implement, is giving the policymaker direct contact with analysts.

Deputy Secretary of State, Richard Armitage, was a good example of a policymaker who has learned the value of the face-to-face format. Knowing he had been tasked by the President to deliver an important message to a foreign leader, I once suggested he meet with INR analysts before his departure. Even though his trip was only days away he agreed to a short meet-

ing (fifteen minutes) with the analysts, working the session into an already jam-packed schedule. I chose five or six true experts from various INR offices. The lead briefer, a political analyst considered by his peers to be a world-class expert, had met with the foreign leader on several occasions; rounding out the team were experienced analysts in military affairs, economic issues, nuclear weapons, and terrorism. Each was given a brief opportunity to introduce themselves and to share their expertise.

Secretary Armitage then began the back-and-forth with a question; followed by INR's responses; and then by a number of follow up questions. The session lasted almost an hour (despite repeated attempts by his administrative assistant to end it). Not long after he returned from his trip, he asked me to bring the team back for a debrief. Armitage included a summary of his mission, what information from the analysts had been most useful, and his personal assessment of the foreign leader. Although this sort of debrief is not always possible, the experience was an especially rewarding for the analysts. Ideally, this should be the norm, not the exception.

I believe INR's scheduled-based reporting — focusing on the policymaker's top priorities and daily schedule not just the daily collection intake — has paid dividends. The INR analysts' work was more relevant to the work of the Department, without sacrificing the news cycle or becoming its slave. The guiding philosophy was to satisfy what the Secretary and those supporting him most needed each day, not just report the serendipitous intelligence inherent in the collection cycle. For me that is what delivering timely, relevant, and persuasive information to the policymakers is all about.

READINGS FOR INSTRUCTORS

There are few studies specifically focusing on the IC's support for foreign policy. The voluminous works on analytical tradecraft contain much relevant material, and several of the best introductory texts dedicate whole chapters to the topic such as:

"The Analyst and the Customer," pp. 277-293, Chapter 15 in Robert M Clark's *Intelligence Analysis: A Target-Centric Approach*, (CQ Press, Washington, DC, 2007).

"The U.S. Intelligence Community and Foreign Policy: Getting Analysis Right," a Brookings Foreign Policy Paper Series, Number 18, September 2009, monograph by Kenneth Lieberthal. http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2009/9/intelligence%20community%20lieberthal/09_intelligence_community_lieberthal.pdf.

"Part Two: The Policy-Analyst Relationship," pp. 71-106, in *Analyzing Intelligence: Origins, Obstacles, and Innovations*, ed. by Roger Z. George and James B. Bruce.

"Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures are Inevitable," a Research Article by Richard Betts, pp. 61-80, *World Politics*, Brookings, October 1978. <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=7629164&fulltextType=RA&fileId=S0043887100010182>.

For a behind the scenes look at the interaction of foreign policy and intelligence none are better than Bob Woodward's:

Bush at War. Simon & Schuster, New York, 2002.

Plan of Attack. Simon & Shuster, New York, 2004.

Covert Action is one of the most complicated aspects of intelligence and foreign policy. The best explanations I have found is "Covert Action," pp. 165-179, Chapter 8, in Mark Lowenthal's *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy*, (CQ Press, Washington, DC, 2009).

CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence, is the best source for how the IC covers foreign policy analysis:

"Analytic Professionalism and the Policymaking Process: Q&A on a Challenging Relationship" CIA. <https://www.cia.gov/library/kent-center-occasional-papers/pdf/OPV2No2.pdf>.

The Sherman Kent Center for Intelligence Analysis, Occasional Papers: Volume 2, Number 3, Sherman Kent's Final Thoughts on Analyst-Policymaker Relations, Jack Davis. <https://www.cia.gov/library/kent-center-occasional-papers/pdf/OPV2No3.pdf>.

Intelligence Community and Policymaker Integration, Intelligence Community and Policymaker Integration: A Studies in Intelligence Anthology, 2013. <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/intelligence-community-and-policymaker-integration/index.html>.

Intelligence and Policy: The Evolving Relationship, Roundtable Report, June 2004, Center for the Study of Intelligence. https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/IntelandPolicyRelationship_Internet.pdf.

Intelligence, Policy, and Politics: The DCI, the White House, and Congress: A Symposium, CIA, 2013. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/historical-collection-publications/intel-policy-and-politics/index.html>.

President Nixon and the Role of Intelligence in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. Center for the Study of Intelligence Presidential Series, 2013. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/historical-collection-publications/arab-israeli-war/nixon-arab-israeli-war.pdf>.

Strategic Warning & The Role of Intelligence: Lessons Learned from the 1968 Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia, CIA Historical Collection Division. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/historical-collection-publications/>

[czech-invasion/soviet%20-czech-invasion.pdf](#).

CIA, The Center for the Study of Intelligence, is also the best source for studying the policymakers' perspective on intelligence:

"Insightful Interviews: A Policymaker's Perspective On Intelligence Analysis," Jack Davis, 1993. <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol38n05/pdf/v38i5a02p.pdf>.


"A Policymaker's Perspective on Intelligence Analysis, CIA. <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kentcsi/docs/v38i5a02p.htm>.

Intelligence Analysis and Policymaking: The Views of Ambassador Herman J. Cohen, Jack Davis, *Studies in Intelligence*, 1995. <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/davis-pdfs/the-views-of-ambassador-herman-j-cohen-davis-1995.pdf>.

The Challenge of Managing Uncertainty: Paul Wolfowitz on Intelligence Policy-Relations, Jack Davis, 1995. <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol39n05/pdf/v39i5a05p.pdf>. ✎

Mr. Ford has served for over 40 years in a variety of military, intelligence, policy and academic positions. As an Army intelligence officer he served two tours in Vietnam and another in the Defense Intelligence Agency as a China analyst. He joined CIA's Office of Strategic Research in 1974. In 1978 he was selected as a Congressional Foreign Affairs Fellow for Senator John Glenn focusing on arms control and foreign policy. The following year he became a professional staff member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He returned to CIA as the National Intelligence Officer for East Asia in 1985. In 1989 he was seconded to the Department of Defense to be the principal deputy assistant secretary for international security affairs until 1993. Upon retiring from CIA that year he consulted until appointed by the President in 2001 as the Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research. He retired from the Department of State in October 2003. He has since taught at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and George Mason University. He has a BA in Asian Studies and a MA in East Asian Studies from Florida State University.

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