CHAPTER 6, The Policymaker's Perspective: Transparency and Partnership

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Policymakers crave good intelligence. Why? Because they believe it can and should make the crucial difference between success and failure, at both the policy and personal levels. This should be the recipe for a match made in heaven between the intelligence analyst and the policymaker. Yet the reality, as many of the contributors to this volume show, is often quite different. Analysts typically feel under appreciated, ignored, or misused by policymakers, while policymakers in turn often feel misled or underserved by intelligence.

Why Is There a Problem?

This chronic tension has flared into the public spotlight in the past six years as a result of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the Iraq War. Why, ask the policymakers—and the public—did the intelligence community fail to warn us about the possibility that terrorists would use airliners as flying bombs? Why did they overestimate Saddam Hussein's capability for weapons of mass destruction (WMDs)? Why, ask the analysts, did the policymakers ignore our warning about the risks and dangers of an occupation of Iraq? Why did they set up alternative analytic units to hunt for links between Saddam and al-Qaeda when the established intelligence community repeatedly concluded that none existed?

The result of these two deeply unsettling experiences has led to a rash of proposals for reform of the intelligence community, some welcome and overdue, some merely solving yesterday's problems but of questionable value in meeting the yet unknown problems of the future. Yet few of these efforts have focused on the complex interaction between the policymaker and the analyst. For example, the Silberman-Robb WMD Commission's mandate explicitly excluded the question of how the policymakers used—or misused—the intelligence with which they were provided. And the 9/11 Commission treaded lightly on the question of why the national security adviser could claim—with all sincerity—that no one had warned her about the possibility of terrorist attacks by airplanes, when the Central Intelligence Agency itself had been threatened with just such an attack only six years earlier.

To some extent the reluctance to delve into these uncomfortable questions comes from a healthy desire to avoid the "blame game." Given the enormous consequences of the evident breakdowns apparent in both the September 11 and Iraq events, however, it is vital that practitioners on both sides try to understand the challenges inherent in the policy–intelligence interaction and how to overcome the gulf and suspicion that haunts this critical relationship. In chapter 5, John McLaughlin, one of the consummate intelligence professionals during the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush presidencies, gives us vital insights from one side of the divide. In this chapter I try to complement his analysis and recommendations from the perspective of someone who has served in both the intelligence and the policy communities.

Sources of the Problem

There are a number of reasons for the disaffection between policymakers and intelligence analysts. To an important degree, the problem arises because policymakers want something that intelligence analysis cannot provide: certainty. But the disaffection is also a product of each community's failure to understand what the other has to offer and to work as an organic whole, rather than as two opposing teams volleying a ball back and forth over a high and opaque wall. Helping each side understand the other's needs, capabilities, and limitations is critical to assuring that intelligence analysis can play its rightful, important place in policymaking.

As mentioned above, policymakers crave certainty and abhor surprise. They come to office with more or less defined policy objectives that they hope to attain. They want to work on their priority agenda, not be sidetracked or deflected by unanticipated events. They look to the permanent civil service bureaucracy of government, including the intelligence community, to help them achieve those goals and feel let down that they do not get more help. Why? There are three main reasons.

First, and most important, policymakers harbor unrealistic expectations. There is a tendency among some policymakers to hold the intelligence community to a standard of omniscience and to be let down if the answer is "I don't know." They believe that the enormous sums of money the nation invests in technical and human intelligence collection and in an army of analysts should produce strong, reliable results, and they fault managers and analysts when they do not do so, rather than looking to the inherent limitations of what can be known. At the same time, policymakers are equally vexed if the analyst expresses confidence but his or her judgment is subsequently proven to be wrong.

Second, there is a perception by policymakers that the analytic community views its role as one of cautioner (or worse, naysayer) rather than a support to policy. McLaughlin refers to this as the policymakers' culture of optimism versus the analysts' culture of skepticism. Another way of thinking about this is that policymakers rarely have the luxury of throwing up their hands and saying "too hard" or deferring decisions until the intelligence becomes clearer. Often they must act even if the choices are muddy and the consequences are unpredictable.

Policymakers look to the intelligence community to uncover the facts that will help them achieve their goals. Contrary to the views of some critics, most policymakers do not resist bad news if it is reliable and timely, because they know they cannot succeed by sticking their heads in the sand and pretending that adverse developments will go away if they simply ignore or dismiss them. But often policymakers feel that the intelligence community views its mission as solely being the bearer of bad news or "warning"—that is, telling the policy community about

all the obstacles to achieving their objectives, rather than identifying opportunities and how to make the best of the situation to achieve them. Yet for many analysts such a role is tantamount to "supporting" the policy and thus violating the most sacred canon of analytic objectivity and policy neutrality.

Third, policymakers often sense that the analytic community is too insulated from the "on the ground" reality that provides the context for policy. These officials live in the world that they are trying to shape: they meet with leaders of foreign countries and other important actors, travel to trouble spots to observe challenges with their own eyes, and confer with experts in and out of government. Many have also built a considerable body of experience and expertise from their work before assuming office. They believe they have important insights that can inform the analytic process and assess the reliability of other intelligence inputs. By contrast, many intelligence community analysts have had little or no firsthand experience with the problems and people at issue, a product of the recruitment and retention policies in the intelligence community and fears of compromising security. Yet policymakers believe that analysts and intelligence managers resist incorporating their views into the estimative process for fear of "tainting" the product.

No Panaceas

There are no surefire cures for these difficulties. Many are inherent in the nature of policymaking, yet there are a number of things that both the policy community and the intelligence community can do to reduce the frictions and build a more constructive, collaborative relationship that preserves the integrity of the analytic process while enhancing its utility.

Let us look briefly at four main things that can be done in this vein.

First, the policymaker needs, and is entitled to, the intelligence community's best judgment. Most policymakers understand that many things are hard to know, and some things are inherently unknowable. Even policymakers know (or can be educated to know) the difference between a puzzle and a mystery. But what is

important for policy-makers to understand is the degree and nature of uncertainty and, where possible, what steps might be taken to reduce that uncertainty. To take the Cuban Missile Crisis example discussed in chapter 1 , the number and state of readiness of the Soviet missiles was a fact that was knowable but difficult to know with absolute certainty. Steps were taken (such as overflights and human intelligence activities) that helped reduce that uncertainty. What Nikita Khrushchev would do in response to various US policy alternatives was inherently unknowable—because it was contingent on actions by others, as well as his own assessment of the Soviet Union's interests. Yet even with respect to future intentions, the intelligence community may be in a position to help policymakers. For example, in the case of the Cuban Missile Crisis, there could have been intercepts of Soviet officials discussing various policy options or prior analogous examples of how Khrushchev had faced other tests of wills.

Analysts are often reluctant to venture onto this treacherous ice. To some extent it is a product of their training, which repeatedly emphasizes the uncertainty around the intelligence exercise, a worthy caution. Unfortunately, sometimes it is a product of a desire to escape accountability—making assessments so hedged that they are incapable of being proven wrong. The collective nature of many intelligence "community" judgments tends to further blur assessments, in the effort to achieve consensus at the expense of crispness. Rather than blurring conclusions to achieve broader acceptance or relegating non-majority views to footnotes, finished analysis should highlight the alternative views within the intelligence community (including in executive summaries, which are the products most frequently read by policymakers) and prominently feature the proponents' underlying arguments for their conclusions.

Some try to bound the problem of uncertainty by assigning probabilities to facts or outcomes. I am somewhat skeptical of what I believe is a false sense of concreteness implied in assigning numerical probabilities to individual events, particularly contingent outcomes that depend on choices others have yet to make. But some sense of the degree of confidence (likely, unlikely, hard to judge, and so forth) can give a feel for the degree of uncertainty. More helpful is providing some insight into alternative pathways that might be consistent with the data, along with an explication of why the analyst believes one path is more likely than the

alternatives. Second, as other chapters suggest, the policymaker needs and is entitled to analytic transparency from the analyst. Why was the judgment reached? What assumptions lie behind it? What are the sources of uncertainty? This transparency is the necessary complement to the judgment. By providing transparency, the analysts should feel more comfortable with providing a bottom line or best guess, and the policymaker should feel more comfortable in either accepting or challenging it. Although there is constant pressure from policymakers to "keep it short" given the demands on their time, the intelligence community has an obligation not to let this legitimate consideration lead to products that are misleading by omission. Because this approach will lead to better policymaking, I believe that the policy community will be open to somewhat lengthier analytic products.

One important but controversial element of transparency concerns sources. The intelligence community is rightly concerned about protecting intelligence sources and methods. Compromises can destroy the value of enormously expensive technical collection tools and, in the case of human assets, not only wipe out years of patient cultivation but also endanger lives. The policy community is the ultimate loser from leaks because the loss of the sources will over time lead to less intelligence and so to less well-informed policy. The track record of protecting such vital sources and methods secrets is unacceptably poor. Although policymakers are responsible for the lion's share of such disclosures, the intelligence community is not without blame. Nonetheless, as the Iraq WMD experience suggests, opaqueness about sources can lead to over reliance on highly questionable sources with their own motivation to "influence," as well as inform. Although the intelligence community should continue to have the primary responsibility for evaluating the reliability of intelligence and the sources that provide it, the policymaker's stake—as well as the insight that the policymakers themselves can bring to assessing the value of sources—requires more transparency than the intelligence community has traditionally been comfortable providing.

Third, the policymaker needs indicators from the analysts that will help assess the validity of any judgment going forward. If the judgment is correct, what should we expect to see in the future? More important, what future developments might

undermine the validity of the judgment and/ or support one of the alternative hypotheses? Disconfirming facts are a far more important, but an often overlooked, part of the analysis process. They are important not only because they have stronger probative value but also because they are the best antidote to the structural problem of wishful thinking or "cherry picking" that infects even the most conscientious policymaker's approach to intelligence. This kind of support is crucial for policymakers to be able to make mid-course corrections or even reverse course if a key assumption turn out to be false.

Fourth, a closely related need is for the analytic community to provide peripheral vision and temporal perspective. How might a US action, which looks well suited to deal with a pending specific problem, affect other US policy actions or foreign actors elsewhere? What will be the likely longer-term effects—the second and third moves by others—if the policy is implemented? The stove-piped and time-constrained nature of the policy process too often precludes such examinations. The intelligence community is uniquely well placed to think about linkages and knock-on effects that might change policymakers' calculations about the costs and benefits of different courses of action. This is true of both horizontal and vertical/ temporal linkages. In producing finished analysis, the intelligence community can include analysts who specialize in geographical regions other than the area or country that is the obvious focus of the problem at hand, as well as those with a broad range of functional expertise. Ideally, similar efforts to expand the circle would take place in the policy community as well, but for reasons of time and turf this often proves impracticable. Long-range planning would also benefit from regular meetings between key intelligence community analysts and the leading policy planners in the executive branch.

How Policymakers Can Help

If the relationship is to work successfully, policymakers must take on at least four main types of obligations and responsibilities toward the intelligence community if they expect that community to do a better job of supporting policy.

First, the policy community needs to understand what intelligence can and cannot do. As analysts often say, intelligence is not fortune-telling. McLaughlin and other

practitioners rightly stress the importance of educating policymakers about the intelligence process. His chapter notes that this is hard to do the moment new officials come into office. However, the intelligence community could do a better job of identifying those who are likely to hold such roles in the future and begin exposing them to these issues even before they come to office. Stronger partnerships with professional schools and graduate programs, as well as outreach to emerging leaders (such as the American Assembly's Next Generation Program) are fertile grounds for such an effort. For current holders of policy jobs, regular briefings on intelligence capabilities and shortfalls are essential.

Second, the policymaking community needs to clearly communicate its goals, priorities, and needs. Analysts are not mind readers; they have limited resources and must make judgments about how to use them most productively. They need to know what is important to the policymaker. A formal requirements process—such as the procedures for identifying and ranking collection priorities that were established by Presidential Decision Directive 35 (PDD-35) issued by the Clinton administration—is a useful and important way to align policy and intelligence collection/ analysis priorities, but it is not sufficient. These exercises tend to be static and over inclusive, and they sometimes fail to convey what is really on the policymaking community's mind. Of course, the analytic community's work cannot be confined solely to the policymakers' current agenda—there is a need to think about problems and opportunities that have not yet crossed the policymakers' radar screen.

Third, policymakers need to recognize their value to the intelligence community as sources in their own right and thus keep analysts informed of information and impressions drawn from their own experience. Information sharing is a two-way street. Just as analysts tend to carefully shield their sources from exposure to the policy community, policymakers also tend to fear disclosure to the intelligence community of sensitive diplomatic negotiations and other policy maneuvers. The result is not only inferior analytic product but also one that appears largely irrelevant to a policymaking community, which is working on the basis of a different set of facts and assumptions.

Fourth, and closely related to the third measure, is the need for policymakers to keep intelligence representatives "in the room" when policy is debated. Although analysts rightly take a vow of silence with respect to policy prescriptions, they need to hear the underlying assumptions and beliefs that inform policy, both to correct errors of fact that may creep into policy and to provide policymakers with insights into the factors that might lead them to question or change those assumptions as events unfold. The real danger in the ongoing debate about the danger of "politicizing" intelligence is that both sides will overreact and create a "Chinese wall" that cuts off the analysts from firsthand access to policy debates. McLaughlin suggests one way to achieve this goal—namely, to embed more analysts in policymaking units, not as policymakers themselves but as part of the day-to-day activities of key agencies. For policymakers to gain the benefit of such embedded analysts, they need to appreciate and respect the fact that these analysts are different from other members of the policymaking team and thus should not be subject to the same tests of loyalty or ideological affinity that may be appropriate for "political" appointees—and even more, should not be punished or ignored for putting forth skeptical perspectives or inconvenient truths.

These four suggested measures are even more important in today's national security policy environment, where the challenges are more fluid, the actors (especially nonstate actors) are more diverse and unpredictable, and the sources and quantity of information are growing exponentially. Two key post-9/ 11 insights —the importance of information sharing and the need to form flexible, horizontal communities for collaboration that can adapt to fit changing problems—are as relevant to the policymaking–intelligence interaction as they are to the intelligence community itself. In its 2002 report, the Markle Foundation Task Force on National Security in the Information Age (on which I served) stressed the importance of taking into account the needs and unique problems of integrating the policymaker into the newly emerging information-sharing environment mandated by the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004.

Structural Fixes: Two Modest Proposals

Many of the prescriptions I have offered here are primarily a matter of educating both policymakers and analysts to each other's needs, limitations, and capabilities,

and of breaking down the barriers between the two cultures. But two structural reforms that would facilitate a better working relationship are worth adopting.

Perhaps most important is the crucial role that the Intelligence Directorate at the National Security Council can and should play to facilitate building the "cross-cultural" community advocated here. Because of the Intelligence Directorate's proximity to key policymakers (including the president) and its ability to participate in all interagency deliberations irrespective of subject matter, it can provide a vital bridging role, thus facilitating the transmission of policymakers' needs to the intelligence community and of intelligence capabilities, limitations, and insights to the policymakers. The directorate can also serve as a translator, particularly in helping policymakers with limited experience in the intelligence world understand the value (and limits) of what the intelligence community has to offer. In recent years this crucial function has largely been abandoned. The Intelligence Directorate should be given an ongoing seat in the interagency process, not simply be confined to intelligence community matters (for example, resources, requirements, and covert action).

A second important structural development is one that has begun to be implemented through the National Counterterrorism Center, which is a novel blending of intelligence and policy planning roles that brings both functions into one organization while retaining two distinct reporting lines—to the director of national intelligence for intelligence and to the president through the Homeland Security Council and the National Security Council for policymaking. This reporting arrangement is uncomfortable to some who fear that it will blur roles and accountability, but it is an appropriate reflection of the need to integrate the policy and analysis function in an area where policy is crucially dependent on both tactical and strategic intelligence.

Minimizing the Risks of Politicization

The approach I have suggested here will seem perilous to some. The traditional arm's-length relationship between policy and intelligence protects against politicization and enhances the protection of sources and methods but at a high cost of irrelevance. Policymakers need to rigorously engage analysts if they are

going to have confidence in their judgments. Analysts, in turn, must be prepared to respond to the probing and challenges raised by policymakers; otherwise their work can be too easily dismissed as irrelevant or flawed. Strong internal protections within the intelligence community are the best way to minimize the politicization risk, starting with a director of national intelligence who is seen as a nonpartisan professional with real experience in intelligence and not as someone who is selected by virtue of policy loyalty. Both rigorous oversight by Congress and internal inspector-general procedures need to be maintained to protect analysts from the danger of abuse. However, a failure to establish the deep engagement between the two communities would run the even greater danger that we will fail to marshal all the hard-won intelligence and analytic resources available to us as a nation to address the daunting challenges of the future. The cost of this outcome would be less well-informed policymaking when exactly the opposite should be our highest priority.

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