Intelligence Failures: What Are They Really and What Do We Do about Them?

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Intelligence Failures: What Are They Really and What Do We Do about Them?

MARK A. JENSEN*

ABSTRACT Intelligence failures occur for more reasons than just sloppy tradecraft and are often attributable to decision-makers as well as to the intelligence community. Before exploring the subjective nature of intelligence failures, this article first discusses three foundational concepts underlying them: process vs. product, fact vs. judgment, and prediction. It then outlines major components of intelligence failures: accuracy, surprise, and the role of decision-makers, particularly unrealistic expectations and the use or non-use of intelligence. The article concludes with a discussion of what the intelligence community and decision-makers can do to deal with these three components.

How often is the trite statement repeated: there are only two possible outcomes in national security matters: policy successes and intelligence failures? Even if there happen to be policy failures, faulty intelligence is often cited as a major cause for those unsuccessful policies. Intelligence failures seem to be ubiquitous. Volumes have been written about intelligence failures, a subject that is ‘perhaps the most academically advanced field in the study of intelligence’. Even multi-day conferences have been devoted to the subject. We seem to be fascinated by the

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Some examples include Operation Zapata in 1961 (Bay of Pigs invasion), Operation Eagle Claw in 1980 (Iranian hostage rescue attempt), and Operation Continue Hope in 1993 (attempt to subdue Aidid-led guerrilla attacks in Somalia).


For example, ‘Military Intelligence Failures’, University of California, Davis, 9–11 June 2005 and ‘Intelligence Failures and Cultural Misperceptions: Asia, 1945 till the present’, Netherlands Intelligence Studies Association, 27–28 September 2008. An example of a panel on the subject in a larger conference is ‘American Intelligence Failures and Successes: The Lessons for the
subject. Even President John F. Kennedy, speaking to a CIA audience, has acknowledged: ‘It is not always easy. Your successes are unheralded – your failures are trumpeted.’

It is no wonder that the intelligence community (IC) often seems on the defensive about what it does. True, intelligence activities, as typical of all human endeavors, rarely achieve perfect results. But with so much riding on the success of this critical element of national security, one would hope that failure would be the exception.

Besides shoddy tradecraft, a major source of intelligence failures stems from a disconnect between what the IC can legitimately provide and what some decision-makers or vocal journalists expect. Contrary to what may be desired, omniscience about the past and present and clairvoyance about the future are not legitimate expectations of the IC. Although this seems like common sense, a major method for dealing with and minimizing intelligence failures is the establishment of a clear and common understanding of reasonable expectations of intelligence among the IC and decision-makers – and as secondary consumers, the media and the public. Failure to meet this standard would legitimately constitute an intelligence failure. Therefore, one the IC’s primary missions has to be the education of the decision-makers it serves about intelligence capabilities and limitations.

This article focuses exclusively on failures of analysis and the preparation and delivery of intelligence products to decision-makers, not the myriad of other activities in which the IC engages such as collection, counterintelligence, covert action, and enterprise management. It first outlines three foundational concepts that underlie the discussion of intelligence failures: process vs. product, fact vs. judgment, and prediction. Understanding the ramifications of the latter concept is particularly important because so many citizens and consumers of intelligence believe prediction is the primary function of the IC. A discussion of the nature of intelligence failures follows to include three major components of failure: accuracy, surprise, and IC interaction with decision-makers. The article concludes with recommendations on what the IC and decision-makers can do about intelligence failures.


5Other terms often used to designate users of intelligence who are outside of the IC include policymaker, consumer, customer, client, warfighter, or law enforcement officer. Users inside the IC are intermediate consumers, who use intelligence information provided to them to craft other products for the ultimate consumers – those outside the IC. For simplicity purposes, the term ‘decision-maker’ will be used throughout this article to refer to individuals outside the IC who use intelligence products.
What are Intelligence Failures?

What are intelligence failures? Why do there seem to be so many? What causes them? Most importantly, what do we do about them? Certainly the answers to these questions should be of utmost importance to the IC. There are numerous examples throughout history of events that are frequently decried as intelligence failures, e.g. the detonation of the first Soviet atomic bomb in 1949, the launch of Sputnik in 1957, the Tet Offensive in 1968, the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran in 1979, the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Al Qaeda attacks on the US homeland in 2001, and the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt in 2011. Undoubtedly many US decision-makers and even some intelligence professionals were surprised by some of the foregoing. Because of the shock some of these surprises have caused both to national security professionals and to the public in general, the nation’s senior leaders often establish high-level commissions to investigate the sources of these failures. Naturally many others, including Congress, have declared their views on causes, impact, and remedies in various books, reports, and periodicals.6

Yet, with all this study and attention on intelligence failures, why can we not eliminate them? Are they simply a product of human frailty or are there still major systemic issues hindering this goal? Before we can reduce these failures, we at least must understand their nature and causes. From the perspective of a decision-maker seeking clarity, an intelligence failure results simply when the intelligence input into the decision-making process is lacking or unsatisfactory. Of course, what is deemed satisfactory depends on the individual decision-maker and the specific situation at hand. Hence, intelligence professionals must understand the needs and preferences of those to whom they provide intelligence products.

However, some decision-makers, or other authors writing on their behalf for public consumption, seem to find fault incessantly with the IC and deem any intelligence short of omniscience and clairvoyance to be unsatisfactory.7 This especially seems to be the case if there is an associated policy that does not appear to be succeeding. For other than divine intelligence officers, this standard is incredibly high and in fact impossible to meet. Before discussing a legitimate standard, however, we must review three important

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7For example, the IC was severely criticized because it did not discover the ‘Christmas bomber’ until after he had boarded a transatlantic flight on 25 December 2009 and attempted to ignite explosives hidden in his underwear. The IC has also been denounced for numerous National Intelligence Estimates (NIE), although often for perceived politicization (e.g. the 1995 NIE on the ballistic missile threat or the 2007 NIE on Iranian weapons of mass destruction (WMD)).
foundational concepts related to intelligence failures: 1) process vs. product, 2) fact vs. judgment, and 3) prediction.

Foundational Concepts

Process vs. Product

Kristan Wheaton discusses extensively the concept of intelligence process and product and explains that process is more important because it can influence multiple products.8 Although this logic makes sense, it will not make decision-makers happy if the product does not meet their needs. It is disingenuous and self serving for the IC to claim it did its work right and hence no failure can result, regardless of the utility of the product.

Intelligence failures ascribed to analytical process can be categorized into areas such as: lack of creativity, unconfirmed assumptions, groupthink, faulty evidence weighting, data misinterpretation or erroneous linkages, insufficient source validation, signal-to-noise problems, negligence in considering denial and deception, mirror imaging, overlooked gradual trends, over/underestimation, etc.9 Human error is often the source of process failures, although systemic or organizational flaws can be culpable, despite the IC’s decades of experience trying to set the proper environment for effective analysis. Although the IC cannot eliminate all intelligence failures as thoroughly described in Richard K. Betts’ seminal work on the subject,10 at least the IC can strive to minimize them as much as possible.

The Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 stipulated that the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) ‘assign an individual or entity to be responsible for ensuring that finished intelligence products produced by any element or elements of the intelligence community are timely, objective, independent of political considerations, based upon all sources of available intelligence, and employ the standards of proper analytic tradecraft.’11 Tradecraft standards naturally call for processes that lead to attributes expected of any written product, i.e. clarity and completeness, with well reasoned and supported arguments. Analytical intelligence products, however, must also be relevant to needs of decision-makers and delivered on a timely basis. More importantly, they must characterize the

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nature of uncertainty, describe the reliability of key sources, state confidence levels in judgments, and clearly distinguish them from assertions of fact. The absence or inadequacy of any of these attributes would make an intelligence product less useful and subject to an accusation of intelligence failure. Accuracy is another important attribute, but because it is often at the heart of success or failure, it requires a separate discussion below. The DNI has set up an office to review analytic products and take steps to minimize analytic process failures. In addition, most IC organizations have set up a lessons learned function to identify and retain best practices and correct errors from the past to benefit the present and future.

Typically poor products, whether written or oral, result from bad or poorly executed processes. However, decision-makers can still deem products useless regardless of how flawlessly they were prepared. These include products that are irrelevant, late, or do not directly answer their questions or provide insight desired. One senior analyst has concluded that ‘failing to identify a specific audience and an intelligence question up front is often at the root of the weakest analytic efforts’. Decision-makers also deem intelligence products to be failures if they provide little value added beyond what is available elsewhere, particularly from open sources.

A product should not be considered a failure solely because its content does not support a decision-maker’s policy preferences. Politicization, the practice of intelligence professionals bending intelligence to meet decision-maker needs or decision-makers focusing on selected intelligence products or passages thereof for their own political purposes, is unacceptable, but unfortunately still occurs. However, this topic is the subject of a different article, many of which have already been written.

Figure 1 summarizes a decision-maker’s view of intelligence processes and products. Ideally, a decision-maker should not have to know much or care about the processes employed; credible and useful products are of greatest

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12 Similar words are often used interchangeably to express the same thought about analytical conclusions, e.g. estimate, inference, assessment, opinion, or judgment. Critics would also words such as guess, conjecture, speculation, or assumption. ‘Estimate’ is often used in connection with products about the future, e.g. National Intelligence Estimate. For purposes of this article, the word ‘judgment’ will generally be used to describe analytical conclusions about the past and present; ‘estimate’ will be used for judgments about the future.


concern. However, as noted in Figure 1, only when the process and product are both good is the decision-maker fully satisfied. In today’s age of ubiquitous information, “getting the answer right is not enough; analysts must also “show their work” in order to demonstrate that they were not merely lucky’. The figure depicting subjective categorizations of process and product is of course an oversimplification of the complex intelligence environment.

**Fact vs. Judgment**

Another fundamental concept pertinent to understanding intelligence failures is that judgment is an integral part of intelligence products. Intelligence analysts attempt to describe and explain past and present situations to the best of their ability and to the extent of their collection holdings. They also legitimately fill in some gaps with reasonable inference about the truth. These judgments are not necessarily truth, but may be. Hence the phrase ‘speaking truth to power’, demanded so often of intelligence seniors by congressional overseers, is in fact a misnomer because intelligence consists not only of known truth, but also judgments about the truth.

Analysts also make judgments about future situations, typically called estimates. Although situations about the past and present are theoretically knowable, there are no facts about the future. Although past collection and analysis may be able to give insight about the future, discontinuities may cause the future to look very different from the past and present. Estimates

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**Figure 1. Decisionmaker View of Intelligence Processes and Products.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROCESS GOOD</th>
<th>PROCESS BAD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRODUCT GOOD</strong></td>
<td>Decision-maker satisfied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRODUCT BAD</strong></td>
<td>Decision-maker dissatisfied, but not as much as if the process is also wrong</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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17For products dealing with the past and present, certainty is theoretically possible. However, truth may not be knowable in a practical sense. Insufficient funds, personnel, time, or access may preclude the IC from obtaining the answer in sufficient time to impact a decision. In addition, unwillingly adversaries may employ denial and deception techniques to prevent collection.
about the future are largely the domain of the National Intelligence Council (NIC), but other IC organizations also concern themselves with the future and attempt to describe it. Estimating adversaries’ intentions for future action is clearly an intelligence function.\textsuperscript{18}

Language used to make judgments about the past or present or estimates about the future can be ambiguous, so analysts make great efforts to define the terms they use to minimize potential misunderstanding. Unfortunately there are numerous words along the ‘likelihood continuum’ to describe the future that have different meanings to different people. Some of these terms are general in nature, e.g. horizon/environmental scan, prospects, outlooks, possible outcomes, or anticipated situations. Others describe possible futures with varying degrees of certainty about any one state: speculations, alternate futures, projections, or forecasts. Still another is based on probabilities\textsuperscript{19} and implies a greater degree of quantifiability: prediction. It is this latter term that seems to cause the most problem for the IC.

\textit{Prediction}

Prediction is a specific type of judgment about the future, which many citizens seem to believe is a primary purpose for the IC. Prediction in general is a difficult task, whether establishing odds for sporting events, projecting future revenue streams in business ventures, or anticipating the future in the national security domain. As Yogi Berra sagely observed: ‘It’s tough to make predictions, especially about the future.’\textsuperscript{20} Every year many odds-makers with years of experience and extensive data inaccurately estimate which team will win the Super Bowl, which is just a simple binary prediction. Because prediction is so difficult, one could even question whether the IC should be in the business of predicting. Asking the IC to assume the role of soothsayers increases the likelihood of intelligence failure. Despite this risk, the answer to the question simply depends on whom one asks.

‘Did the CIA Blow the Call?’\textsuperscript{21} is the title of an article that implies CIA’s job was to predict 9/11 and may have erred. Nearly a decade later, President Barack Obama stated that he was “disappointed with the intelligence community” and its failure to predict the unrest that led to the ouster of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia. Emphasizing that policy decisions by the president and Congress depend on timely intelligence analysis, Senator Diane Feinstein [chair of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence] bluntly stated, “I have doubts whether the intelligence

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\footnote{For a useful discussion on probabilities, see Joab Rosenberg, ‘The Interpretation of Probability in Intelligence Estimation and Strategic Assessment’, \textit{Intelligence and National Security} 23/2 (2008) pp.139–52.}
\footnote{Dusko Doder, ‘Did the CIA Blow the Call?’ review of: \textit{Breakdown: How America’s Intelligence Failures Led to September 11}, by Bill Gertz, \textit{The Nation}, 4 November 2002.}
\end{footnotesave}

community lived up to its obligation in this area’’. Numerous other articles describe the IC’s role as a predictor. Even the CIA director discusses the IC’s prediction function. In the annual threat assessment hearing before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence (HPSCI), Director Leon Panetta admitted regarding the turmoil in Egypt before Mubarak stepped down as president: ‘The intelligence community has to do a better job collecting information that will predict uprisings like those going on in Egypt’. He was castigated at that same hearing for also claiming that there was a ‘strong likelihood’ that Mubarak would step down before day’s end. Mubarak did not, contrary to Panetta’s assertion. Ironically he was vindicated when Mubarak did step down the following day, even though his ‘prediction’ was off by a day.

At the same hearing, the DNI, James Clapper stated in seeming contradiction to Panetta: ‘We can reduce uncertainty, but cannot eliminate it. We are not clairvoyant’. Panetta subsequently softened his earlier statement before the HPSCI by comparing the prediction of political unrest to earthquakes:

People can tell you where the tremors are, they can tell you where the fault lines are, they can tell you what the past is, they can even tell you that the threat of something happening is close. But they can’t tell you exactly when an earthquake is going to take place. Those are the kinds of things that are obviously very tough for intelligence to predict. But I think our job is to collect as much as we can to know those triggers.

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27 Daniel, ‘Panetta’. Earthquakes, like weather, are caused almost exclusively by the forces of nature and the principles of physics. They should be theoretically easier to predict than human action, which is subject to the whims of people who may change their minds at any
Although the IC can help decision-makers understand impending events, it cannot predict them. ‘As Director Clapper stated at his confirmation hearing [in July 2010], the intelligence community is not in the prediction business.’ Furthermore he declared: ‘I think too often, people assume that the intelligence community is equally adept at divining both secrets (which are theoretically knowable) and mysteries (which are generally unknowable) … but we are not. The best that intelligence can do is to reduce uncertainty for decisionmakers … but rarely can intelligence eliminate such uncertainty’. Even a prime consumer of intelligence products, Representative Mike Rogers, HPSCI chairman, recognizes: ‘nobody can read a crystal ball’. A MITRE study commissioned by the Defense Department has concluded that ‘it is simply not possible to validate (evaluate) predictive models of rare events [e.g. a terrorist attack using a weapon of mass destruction (WMD)] that have not occurred, and unvalidated models cannot be relied upon. An additional difficulty is that rare event assessment is largely a question of human behavior, in the domain of the social sciences, and predictive social sciences models pose even greater challenges than predictive models in the physical sciences.’ Philip Zelikow, executive director of the 9/11 Commission, has also stated: ‘It’s a sucker’s game to predict the future; the IC should just coach the jockey, not set the odds.’ Lastly Jim Steinberg, Deputy Secretary of State, similarly quipped, but with a serious message: if intelligence professionals could predict accurately, they would probably be in Las Vegas getting rich.

Predicting wrongly can certainly make one look stupid. Just ask any soccer goalie who erroneously guesses into which corner the ball will be kicked on a penalty kick and looks foolish when he lunges to one side when the ball is kicked to the other side. Without substantial and credible evidence, the IC treads on shaky ground when it starts predicting individual events. Forecasting possible futures, even with estimates of likelihood, and
otherwise peering into the future are appropriate IC functions; prediction is not.\footnote{See also Paul R. Pillar, ‘Predictive Intelligence: Policy Support or Spectator Sport?’ SAIS Review 28/1 (2008) pp.25–35.}

The Nature of Failures

In general, intelligence failures result when analytic judgments turn out to be ‘inaccurate’ in a material way or a significant surprise has occurred.\footnote{This is consistent with the definition of intelligence failures provided by Ehud Eiran, ‘Preventing the “Next Intelligence Failure”? The Three Tensions of Investigating Intelligence Failures’, paper presented at the 46th Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, Honolulu, Hawaii, 1–5 March 2005, p.4. Parenthetically, the three tensions are time, purpose, and process.}

Accuracy, as noted above, is a desirable attribute for intelligence products. If a product turns out to be inaccurate compared with subsequently discovered truth, then the ‘failure’ is attributable to a problem with judgment. Naturally, a shortage of credible collected evidence or even a glut of contradictory evidence contributes to the erroneous judgment, but the analyst nonetheless felt sufficient data were available to make a judgment, tenuous though it may have been.

Surprise can occur when gaps on any one topic are too large and no judgment can be rendered. More often, it occurs when substantial differences between judgments and truth are discovered. The two most significant surprises in US history, Pearl Harbor and 9/11, fall into this latter category. Prior to these events, the intelligence system was aware of possible threats of the nature eventually carried out, but did not have adequate detail in advance of the attacks.

Regardless of how well the IC does its job, intelligence failures to some degree are caused by decision-makers’ unrealistic expectations about intelligence and their use or non-use of intelligence. Decision-makers are the ones in the end who ‘consume’ the intelligence and either cause action or inaction based on the information provided. However, just because they deem a situation an intelligence failure, does not necessarily make it so.

Each of these three areas, accuracy, surprise, and the decision-maker role in intelligence failures, is discussed in greater detail below.

Accuracy

It seems intuitive that accuracy is an indispensible quality for intelligence products; basing national security decisions on fiction is nonsensical. Statements of fact in intelligence products about the past and present can be disputed, but should be able to be resolved with existing knowledge. The IC should have the highest confidence in the veracity of information that it asserts is fact. Of course, accuracy depends on the reliability of source information.
The accuracy of judgments in intelligence products, on the other hand, must be viewed differently because they cannot be confirmed or refuted until after an intelligence product has been delivered to decision-makers. It is possible that judgments about past, present, or future situations may prove to be accurate, but this determination may arrive too late for this new information to be relevant to the decision at hand. It is likewise possible that the accuracy of these judgments can never be ascertained.

Specificity
A subset of accuracy, often erroneously used interchangeably with it, is the concept of specificity. It describes the precision or granularity of detail about a statement of fact or a judgment, e.g. located in a city, neighborhood, or building; or to the nearest month, day, or hour. Most decision-makers would naturally prefer intelligence as specific as possible, especially when being warned; of course this is not always possible. If a judgment is essentially right, but the granularity is too coarse, one might question whether this is an intelligence failure. The answer has to depend on the needs of the decision-maker and the purpose for which the intelligence is being used.

For instance, the IC did warn about potential domestic airline attacks prior to 9/11, but obviously did not specify exactly when or where, a most difficult task. The Senior Executive Intelligence Brief (SEIB) contains similar information to the President’s Daily Briefing less some of the most sensitive information. The 9/11 Commission reviewed a number of these SEIBs written in the spring and summer of 2001 with titles such as: ‘Bin Ladin Attacks May Be Imminent’ (23 June); ‘Bin Ladin Planning High-Profile Attacks’ (30 June); ‘Planning for Bin Ladin Attacks Continues, Despite Delays’ (2 July).36 These documents did foreshadow an impending attack, but since they did not specify when or where, policymakers could not effectively prepare. Hence, because many policymakers and the public were surprised when the attacks did occur, they concluded there was an intelligence failure. Details of the warnings were not sufficiently granular.37

Track Record
If ‘Monday-morning quarterbacks’ wish to compare IC judgments to subsequent ground truth, they will undoubtedly find that in many cases one or more components of these judgments will turn out to be inaccurate (e.g.

37In this specific case, the execution of intelligence processes could have been better and some authors have concluded the attacks could have been prevented had the IC exercised more due diligence in following up leads and sharing information more widely; see for example Bob Graham and Jeff Nussbaum, Intelligence Matters: The CIA, the FBI, Saudi Arabia, and the Failure of America’s War on Terror, Reprint ed. (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas 2008).
how, where, when). 38 How one evaluates the accuracy of a judgment with so many components is a difficult task. Assigning ‘partial credit’ to a judgment for being accurate about some components hardly seems satisfying or useful. One truth is certain: ‘in a contest of predictive accuracy, hindsight will win every time’. 39

Sometimes the IC’s ‘track record’ of how accurately it judges or estimates is compared to baseball batting averages, 40 where success in three of ten attempts is considered commendable. Others state that the fielding average is a much better comparison where a 98 per cent success rate is more the norm. 41 Such analogies, however, are not suitable because these metrics for both professions are not comparable. In the case of baseball, players fail when they make mental or physical mistakes in applying the laws of physics and opposing players do not make a mistake. 42 In the case of intelligence, analysts may perfectly execute all analytic processes and still make judgments that end up not being true when compared to subsequent ground truth. The lack of accuracy in this case is due to inaccurate, incomplete, or conflicting information available, which is beyond the control of analysts. Collectors certainly attempt to provide as much reliable information as possible for analysts to consider. However, because of constrained resources, the nature and ‘knowability’ of needed data, or for other reasons, analysts will never have all the relevant information they desire. So they make judgments when facts are scarce.

Omniscience about the past and present and clairvoyance about the future (i.e. perfect accuracy) cannot be the standard by which judgments are evaluated. There are essentially an infinite number of details about the IC’s record and against which it could be scrutinized. Furthermore, ‘accuracy rate’ cannot be the right metric for analysis. Establishing such a metric would be counterproductive for several reasons. First, achieving total accuracy is beyond the control of analysts. Second, two or more analysts can make different judgments based on the same set of facts. Third, such a metric would convey the wrong message to decision-makers about how they should evaluate the utility of the intelligence they receive. Fourth, pressure to eliminate inaccurate judgments would make analysts gun shy about making

42 An opponent’s mistake here means more than just what is scored as an official error. These mistakes can include pitching too close to the center of the plate, positioning oneself defensively without considering a batter’s hitting tendencies, overrunning a base, or turning the wrong way to pursue a fly ball, etc.
them for fear of being wrong. This in turn would lead to more generic and worthless judgments, certainly in the eyes of decision-makers. Fifth, judgments acted upon which modify the threat could result in charges that the original judgments were in error (i.e. warning paradox). Lastly, ‘referring to intelligence as being “right or wrong” makes no sense. Such an appraisal is overly simplistic and omits critical evaluative information’.43

If decision-makers insist on using accuracy as benchmark for success of intelligence, they will always be able to find examples of failures. There are however other ways of dealing with the concept of accuracy, as will be discussed below.

**Surprise**

Warning has been an intelligence function for millennia. It is similar to, but not the same as predicting. It consists of providing an alert to decision-makers so that they are not surprised and can make preparations, time permitting.44 The IC can strive to minimize surprises, but cannot completely eliminate or prevent them; again, clairvoyance is not an IC capability.

They often occur when intelligence products contain insufficient detail or are determined to be materially inaccurate when eventual truth is learned, especially on a topic about which a decision-maker has urgent information needs.

When warning includes an assessment of likelihood, it ventures into forecasting mode, perhaps even close to prediction, depending on the specificity of the warning. A warning ideally answers at least the ‘what’ and ‘how’ strategic-level questions. The more difficult, tactical questions to be answered are the ‘where’ and the ‘when’. A warning without knowing both the ‘when’ and ‘where’ is naturally dissatisfying to decision-makers and makes policy planning difficult. Other factors influencing whether a warning is considered adequate and not a failure include: how far in advance was a warning issued before the anticipated event of interest, how detailed was the warning, who specifically was warned, and whether the media/public was also informed. Furthermore, the difference between tactical and strategic warning influences whether a failure truly occurred. Decision-makers knew of impending threats prior to Pearl Harbor and 9/11; what failures there were must be considered tactical, not strategic. Of course, warning about every conceivable threat is not realistic or useful. ‘Officials cannot expect intelligence warnings to be precise or unequivocal, except in the area of last-minute tactical warning’.45

Regarding unrest in the Middle East in early 2011, a White House spokesman asserted: ‘For decades, the intelligence community and the State

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43 Wheaton, ‘Evaluating Intelligence’, p.618.
44 James P. Finley, ‘Nobody Likes to be Surprised: Intelligence Failures’, *Military Intelligence* 20/1 (1994) pp.15–21, 40.
Department have been reporting on simmering unrest in the region. Did anyone in the world know in advance that a fruit vendor in Tunisia was going to light himself on fire and spark a revolution? No.\footnote{Ambinder, ‘An Intelligence Failure in Egypt?’ The article’s author goes on to muse: ‘If the CIA thought that Ben Ali [former Tunisian president] would be deposed in, say, a week instead of 48 hours, does that count as a botched call?’} Despite the difficulty for the IC or for anyone to anticipate and warn about this trigger and the resultant instability that spread into Egypt, Senator Feinstein complained that ‘intelligence agencies gave policymakers “no real warning” about the unrest that has threatened to topple the regime of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak’\footnote{Josh Gerstein, ‘Feinstein: U.S. Intelligence Offered “No Real Warning” on Egypt’, Politico, 8 February 2011, <http://www.politico.com/blogs/joshgerstein/0211/Feinstein_US_intelligence_offered_no_real_warning_on_Egypt.html> (accessed 27 April 2011).}

Warning about a single event will rarely include the level of detail that decision-makers crave, especially the timing of catalysts for surprise events. The best the IC can do is to estimate. Of course the estimate is more likely to be accurate when the historical track record is longer, the target is more stable over time, and more data about the target are available. Anticipating and warning about fluid issues, however, is most difficult, if not impossible. Furthermore, warning about a single individual who may be carrying explosives is much more difficult than anticipating an attack by dozens of Soviet motorized rifle divisions. Intelligence failures due to surprise seem to be in the eye of the beholder; when anything startling happens, some choose to immediately play the intelligence failure card, a convenient scapegoat to account for the vicissitudes of life. Unfortunately, ‘the public too often assumes that the intelligence community is some sort of Department of Avoid Surprises and consequently blames it for every unexpected event’.\footnote{Paul R. Pillar, ‘Don’t Blame the Spies’, Foreign Policy, 16 March 2011, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/03/16/dont_blame_the_spies> (accessed 26 May 2011).}

### Intelligence Failures and Decision-makers

Besides intelligence failures related to poorly executed intelligence processes or unsatisfactory intelligence products, intelligence failures may occur because of decision-makers. In fact, one could argue whether situations often touted as failures by the IC are really intelligence failures, policy failures, a combination of both, or neither.\footnote{Gentry, ‘Intelligence Failure Reframed’, pp.255–61. Gentry devotes an entire section of the article to ‘Policymaking and Leadership Failures’ and specifically addresses expectations.} According to Richard Betts, ‘it is usually impossible to disentangle intelligence failures from policy failures’.\footnote{Betts, ‘Analysis, War, and Decisions’, p.39.} Former Director of Central Intelligence and Defense Secretary James Schlesinger, both a senior intelligence officer as well as a senior decision-maker, has also stated that ‘many intelligence “failures” are not the fault of the security or intelligence services at all. “Intelligence tends to be the favorite scapegoat of
politicians’, he noted, who “frequently ascribe to the intelligence community failures which are really failures of policy”. Prillaman and Dempsey similarly argue: ‘The perception of what constitutes an intelligence success or failure sometimes is a normative or political judgment rather than an indisputable fact; observers working with the same set of evidence will differ over the answer and what some view as an “intelligence failure” may instead reflect a “policy failure”’. This is undoubtedly a primary reason why there seem to be so many intelligence failures – there are many policy failures.

Decision-maker Expectations

Intelligence failure may be the fig leaf that some decision-makers use to cover their policy failures, but there is a less self-serving reason why decision-makers first consider intelligence as the source of policy problems: unrealistic expectations. Intelligence failures ultimately result when decision-makers’ expectations for intelligence information exceed what the IC can provide. Decision-makers who do not understand intelligence often ascribe ‘pie-in-the-sky’ capabilities to the IC and resultant omniscience, such as the ‘absurd expectations heaped on the intelligence community during the recent [2011] Arab uprisings’. Often these expectations stem from unrealistic portrayals of intelligence in movies or on television. The following two quotes highlight the tug-of-war decision-makers often face when dealing with intelligence: the great desire for valuable intelligence that must be tempered by an understanding of what intelligence really can do.

Far from being disrespected as they once were, intelligence gathering and analysis are now considered such indispensable government functions – and so much is expected of them – that their inability to disperse the fog of war or of international politics causes outrage. The irony is that even though intelligence has come of age, it will inevitably fall short of the public’s expectations, no matter what resources and attention it receives, because of the irreducible unpredictability of its targets. And no matter how accurate intelligence is, it will be useless if ignored.

Policymakers who knew how to use intelligence generally had a realistic view of what it could and could not do. They understood, for example, that intelligence is almost always more helpful in detecting trends than in predicting specific events. They knew how to ask questions that forced intelligence specialists to separate what they

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53Pillar, ‘Don’t Blame the Spies’.
actually knew from what they thought. They were not intimidated by intelligence that ran counter to the prevailing policy but saw it as a useful job to thinking about their courses of action.\textsuperscript{55}

**Decision-maker Use of Intelligence**

Once they are provided intelligence, decision-makers have basically two choices on what to do with it: 1) use it in their decision-making process, or 2) ignore it, with or without prejudice.\textsuperscript{56} Benignly ignoring intelligence for whatever reason or rejecting it outright because it is perceived as erroneous, irrelevant, or does not support the decision-maker’s policy preferences all have the same effect – intelligence did not help the decision. This is counter to the DNI’s guidance to the IC in Intelligence Community Directive (ICD) 208, *Write for Maximum Utility*, which has an obvious intent.\textsuperscript{57} If decision-makers wish to benefit from intelligence, they need to include it alongside other inputs in their decision-making process and consider it in the light for which it was provided. Of course their objective is the formulation and execution of policy, not necessarily the minimization of intelligence failures, which sometimes result after their neglect of the intelligence available. For example,

the case of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan does not seem to be one of traditional ‘intelligence failure.’ US leaders were not surprised by the invasion because they lacked clear evidence of Soviet military preparations and movements in and around Afghanistan prior to the invasion. As the historical record unequivocally demonstrates, such intelligence was regularly reported to top US policymakers. Rather, a combination of mindsets, wishful thinking, political divisions in the policy community, and Administration preoccupation with other issues helped preclude a discussion of alternative US policy options vis-à-vis Soviet involvement in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{58}

Even the attacks on 9/11, an event most Americans probably consider as one of the most egregious intelligence failures in US history, has been described


\textsuperscript{57} Intelligence Community Directive 208, *Write for Maximum Utility*, Director of National Intelligence, 17 December 2008.

by at least one author as a policy and not an intelligence failure, largely because of how decision-makers did and did not use intelligence. 59

Decision-makers can turn an adverse situation into an intelligence failure by not: 1) taking the time to thoughtfully consider or even review intelligence provided to determine how it may help the decision at hand, 60 2) bothering to inform intelligence personnel on how they should better tailor their products and make them more useful, 3) understanding the limits of intelligence and hesitating to decide, hoping more concrete intelligence will appear, or 4) taking precautions when warned.

Policy and Intelligence – Successes and Failures

The utility of intelligence depends not only on product content, but also on how decision-makers use it. The resulting decisions and actions by the decision-maker ultimately end up as policy successes or failures or somewhere in between. Naturally the characterization of policy results is subjective and depends on the timeframe, whether short or long term. 61

Further, the evaluation of intelligence may or may not correspond with the evaluation of policy. Figure 2 summarizes the relationships among policy successes and failures and the role of intelligence. ‘Good’ and ‘bad’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POLICY SUCCESS</th>
<th>POLICY FAILURE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GOOD INTELLIGENCE ACCEPTED</td>
<td>Best solution; intelligence probably contributed to positive results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOOD INTELLIGENCE REJECTED/IGNORED</td>
<td>Intelligence did not matter, but shame on the decision-maker for not using it; the results might have been even better</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAD INTELLIGENCE ACCEPTED</td>
<td>The decision-maker was fortunate despite intelligence or intelligence did not matter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAD INTELLIGENCE REJECTED/IGNORED</td>
<td>Intelligence did not matter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Policy Success/Failure and the Role of Intelligence.

61The United States viewed its overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mossadegh in 1953 at the time as a success. In light of the Iranian revolution in 1979 and seizure of the US embassy, one could question the long-term success of the policy.
intelligence, though highly subjective and generalized, refers to the adequacy and utility of the content.

What Do We Do About Intelligence Failures?

Even though intelligence failures are likely inevitable, there are some measures that the IC and decision-makers can take to minimize them. Naturally when the IC executes its prescribed processes as flawlessly as possible, it makes a major effort towards reducing the number of potential failures. Of course, with normal personnel turnover and changing circumstances, the IC has to continuously improve and learn since ‘lessons learned do not stay learned’.62

The recommendations below may seem like common sense. Each is probably ongoing to some degree; however consistent effort is required. They fall into three areas: 1) understanding the role of accuracy, 2) preparing for surprise, and 3) improving IC/decision-maker interaction.

Understand the Role of Accuracy

Certainly intelligence analysts want as many of their judgments as possible to prove accurate, which would give decision-makers more confidence in the products they prepare. Given the complexity and danger in today’s strategic world, ‘the consequences of getting analysis wrong are much greater now’.63 Despite the desirability of accurate judgments, though, this cannot be the overarching goal of analysis. Analysts can only be as accurate as the data they are provided plus their sense or gut feel regarding a situation. Processes are already in place to enhance the ‘likelihood’ of being accurate: alternative analyses, red teaming, use of structured analytic techniques, etc.64 Besides improving and executing processes correctly to minimize failures, the question remains about what else can be done about accuracy.

When considering accuracy, it is important to keep in focus the overall goal of analysis: clarifying a decision-maker’s understanding of the situation and providing insight for decisions. Analysts can do so even when some of their judgments prove wrong.65 Accuracy is just one of many attributes of analysis. Although inaccuracies will inevitably appear, overall failure does not have to be the result. ‘Policy makers may have to accept the fact that all

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63 Petersen, ‘What I Learned in 40 Years of Doing Intelligence Analysis for US Foreign Policymakers’, p. 19.
64 Two excellent works outlining ways to improve intelligence analysis are: Richards J. Heuer, Jr., Psychology of Intelligence Analysis (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence 1999) and Rob Johnston, Analytic Culture in the US Intelligence Community (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence 2005).
intelligence estimators can really hope to do is to give them guidelines or scenarios to support policy decisions, and not the predictions they so badly want and expect from intelligence.66 Decision-makers will be better served if they are encouraged to focus on threads of analysis over time and not on a single event.

The following illustrates a proper view of accuracy:

If an analyst’s reputation were to hinge on a single prediction for the year, he would have been reckless to say the event [OPEC raising its oil prices in late 1973] would happen. If he were to be judged, however, by how well he flagged dangerous possibilities rather than by whether he was always ‘right,’ a strong warning about a price rise in the near term would have been warranted even several years earlier.67

Although putting the attribute of accuracy into perspective does not necessarily reduce the number of inaccurate judgments, it does redirect decision-makers’ attention away from analytical track records and towards the proper way to view intelligence analysis, accepting it for what it can do, and not criticizing it for what it cannot do.

Prepare for Surprise

Since avoiding surprise has been a long-standing intelligence function, numerous articles have been written on how to minimize and remedy it.68 Most of these articles deal with improving analytic processes. Some of the more significant measures the IC can take to reduce surprise are summarized as follows: adhere to the prescribed analytic standards to the highest degree possible under the circumstances; learn from past failures, whether attributable to process or product; continue to educate the IC on these standards and past lessons; make efforts to characterize wildcards, drivers, and triggers for potential unexpected events; monitor issues that decision-makers are not following and warn as necessary; avoid deadening decision-makers’ attentiveness by subjecting them to incessant warnings of a general nature (‘Chicken Little’ or ‘Cry Wolf’ syndromes); educate decision-makers to consider situations holistically over time and not just point to single surprising events; set the intellectual threshold properly by seeking to avoid significant surprise, not necessarily all surprise.

67 Betts, ‘Intelligence for Policymaking’, p.121.
As much as the IC tries to limit surprise, it will not always succeed. However, there is something else that the IC and decision-makers can do in light of inevitable surprises: prepare to be surprised. Both should anticipate the unexpected. Of course one cannot be fully prepared for every eventuality, but should look at possible events that are most devastating. Both the IC and the supported decision-makers must be sufficiently agile to respond, so that when they are surprised they will not be totally caught off guard nor paralyzed by the shock. In dealing with possible future threats, Phillip Zelikow has outlined the way the IC should deal with them: 1) determine potential catastrophic threats, 2) determine the indicators for these threats, 3) determine whether these indicators can be collected, 4) determine what to do to counter the threats (in concert with decision-makers). Being prepared will not necessarily limit surprises, but it will make them relatively less catastrophic.

**Improve IC/Decision-maker Interaction**

Improving interaction between the IC and the various decision-makers it serves is one of the most important tasks for dealing with intelligence failures. Each group must not only interact, but understand each other and their roles, despite political motivations behind policy. The IC should adopt a mentality of service and work with decision-makers so that it can come up with tailored and relevant insight and products. The following are some suggestions on how both the IC and decision-makers can improve their relationship to minimize intelligence failures.

**Intelligence Community Responsibilities**

The best way for intelligence analysts to build trust and establish credibility with decision-makers is by delivering reliable and useful products. This is more likely to happen when analysts seek out and clearly understand decision-makers’ information needs and tailor products to meet them. They must also ensure that decision-makers clearly understand the distinction among facts, judgments, and gaps and the important role of judgments. More importantly analysts should discuss with decision-makers to the extent

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69Fareed Zakaria agrees when he states: ‘The goal should instead [of trying to predict events] be preparedness. Government agencies should be readying policymakers and bureaucrats for sharp changes in international, regional and national patterns. They should be imaginative about the possibilities of sudden shifts and new circumstances and force policymakers to confront the scenarios in advance. That is what has distinguished the most successful private-sector firms in managing crises.’ Fareed Zakaria, ‘Risk Management’, *Washington Post*, 28 April 2011, p.17.

70Zelikow, ‘20th Century and the Onset of the Cold War’.

71For further discussion on service to decision-makers see Josh Kerbel and Anthony Olcott, ‘Synthesizing with Clients, Not Analyzing for Customers’, *Studies in Intelligence* 54/4 (2010) pp.11–27.
possible the basis of judgments and the related confidence levels. Above all they should resist the temptation to curry favor by politicizing intelligence.

In order to build appropriate expectations, the IC must take seriously its responsibility to educate decision-makers about IC capabilities and limitations, especially regarding accuracy and surprise.\textsuperscript{72} Naturally getting on their busy calendars will be a daunting challenge, but it is critical to maximizing the value of intelligence. The IC, however, must not overpromise its ability to deliver truth. To a lesser and unclassified degree, the IC also needs to educate the media and public about the same.\textsuperscript{73} Further, if a decision-maker or the media publically castigates the IC for not being able to predict, then the IC must selectively, but publically correct the misperception that the IC has a prediction mission.

One policymaker clearly expressed his legitimate expectations of the intelligence community as follows:

- ‘Intelligence should not be politicized – but should be policy relevant
- Intelligence should not just inform – but also challenge policymakers
- Intelligence should not just be descriptive – but should also be actionable
- Help policymakers understand and use the Intelligence Community’.\textsuperscript{74}

\textbf{Decision-maker Responsibilities}

Decision-makers will find that the IC will serve them better when they engage in a vibrant dialogue. Information flowing from decision-makers to the IC should include: clearly articulated information needs, priorities, and issues under consideration as well as constructive comments on intelligence products previously provided. Decision-makers must also understand IC capabilities and recognize that omniscience and clairvoyance are not among them. They also need to accept the fact that some judgments will be ‘inaccurate’ and that surprises will occur; they must suppress the urge to mask policy failures as intelligence failures.

By accomplishing the foregoing, decision-makers can have realistic expectations of intelligence such as the following: the IC will do its best to provide what is needed but cannot exceed its capabilities regardless of how intensely the information is desired; intelligence will clearly delineate between facts and judgments; the IC will weigh opportunity costs, consider


\textsuperscript{74}Gregory L. Schulte, ‘From the Balkans to Iran – Coupling Policy and Intelligence to Address the World’s Complex Problems’, Lessons learned presentation, McLean, VA, 2 December 2009. Ambassador Schulte is the former executive secretary of the National Security Council.
the desires of multiple decision-makers, and accept risk in some areas because of constrained resources; the IC will shy away from providing a single prediction of what is going to happen – if demanded, the prediction may not happen as described; only in rare cases will warning include all the details desired, such as specifically when or where an event may occur.

Intelligence failures may occur more often that we would like. Realistic expectations of the IC are important to understand them. With good tradecraft and effective interaction between the IC and decision-makers, they can be minimized. Good decision-makers do not ask the IC to do more than it is able; good intelligence officers do not overpromise on what they can deliver.

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