Policy-makers and intelligence analysts: Love, hate or indifference?

Richard K. Betts

To cite this article: Richard K. Betts (1988) Policy-makers and intelligence analysts: Love, hate or indifference?, Intelligence and National Security, 3:1, 184-189, DOI: 10.1080/02684528808431934

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02684528808431934

Published online: 02 Jan 2008.
Policy-Makers and Intelligence Analysts: Love, Hate or Indifference?

RICHARD K. BETTS

Policy-makers are sometimes dissatisfied with what they get from intelligence analysts, and analysts are sometimes frustrated by the apparent misuse or disuse of what they produce. Sometimes these feelings are due to the normal sort of confusion or problems in communication that afflict all governmental activity. But sometimes it is due to inherent differences in the constraints and incentives that determine the work of people in both groups. The following remarks consider this point, and are sometimes overstated in order to keep the point clear.

ACCURACY VS. INFLUENCE

One way to capsulize the problem is that there are contradictions between the dynamics of the analytical process and the decision process, between professional norms and political utility, or between the qualities required for accuracy in analysis and those required for influence. The analyst’s professional imperative is to produce a paper that faithfully reflects reality in all its complexity and ambiguity, that does not distort the facts by oversimplifying them, and that reveals the broad range of possible futures left open by circumstances. The policy-maker’s political imperative is to make decisions, to act quickly and with confidence. Complexity and uncertainty impede decision, and digesting careful analysis increases the time and thought involved. A policy-maker is more likely to prefer papers that are simple, punchy and conclusive; attention will usually focus on the question, ‘What’s the bottom line?’

Accurate analysis should be balanced, distinguishing facts from their implications, and admitting as many reasonable interpretations as the facts permit. Balance in this sense promotes papers or estimates of two types, neither of which is ideal from the policy-maker’s viewpoint. One type is lengthy and ambivalent, as the product attempts to include all relevant arguments and bobs back and forth between majority interpretations and registered dissents. The other type suppresses those qualities by co-ordinating the draft down to the mushiest least
common denominator. The former type may be too much for a busy official who has too much stacked up in his in-box; the latter may tell him little that he does not already know. He is likely to prefer papers that are short and decisive, that offer 'the answer' – and such papers may be more tendentious than balanced.

Careful, balanced, accurate papers usually take a long time to produce – extra time at each stage for writing, co-ordination and revision. Such delays do not harm a long-range estimate. Policy-makers, however, are more interested in papers that are turned out fast, that offer quick responses to help them put out fires in the near term. They care about the long term, and wish they had more time to think about it, but a temporal Gresham's Law normally operates in decision-making: immediate problems drive out distant problems.

There are of course exceptions to this characterization of high-level policy-makers (for example, perhaps, Henry Kissinger or James Schlesinger, who were professional analysts themselves). But the dominant problem of policy-makers, in terms of using intelligence, remains time. However interested they may be in accurate or long-term estimates, they never have enough time to read as much as they would like. Only rarely is this due to laziness (although that phenomenon is not unknown at the top). The higher one rises in the policy hierarchy, the wider the range of issues for which one is responsible, and the larger the proportion of each working day (and night) that one spends in meetings, on the phone, or travelling. The higher one rises, as well, the more one becomes dependent on oral briefings as opposed to written material. This is a particularly pernicious trend, since (1) it takes much longer to hear a given presentation than to read it, thus further reducing the effective use of limited time; (2) psychologically, mediocre analysis appears better when dressed up with pictures and a confident voice.

COMBINING FUNCTIONS

These contradictions I have posed cannot be resolved by revising the analytical process. The problem boils down to the fact that top policy officials rarely have the time or inclination to appreciate 'good' (accurate and balanced) intelligence. It would be no solution to dispense with analytic norms and simply pander to the market for shorter, pithier products. For one thing, of course, high-level policy-makers are not the only, or even the most important, set of customers. Direct influence at the top is not the principal criterion for utility of finished analyses; as in any sort of educational process, the indirect and untraceable forms of influence – percolating through mid-level officials and special assistants in line agencies, or through other members of the
intelligence community – can be just as important. Yet analysis must still serve both – those at the top as well as the bureaucratic hordes.

Serving both audiences suggests that any long estimate or paper should be a two-tier exercise – a thorough treatment, and a useful executive summary – with both parts of nearly equal importance. This puts a high premium on the crafting of the summary. For most policy-makers, a literal summary – one that touches the tips of all the icebergs in the full paper – is not useful, because at that level of generality it is hard to say much that is not obvious to all but a neophyte. More useful is a selective summary that highlights which pages within the full text reveal facts or ideas that are (1) new, (2) unexpected, or (3) significant in terms of policy options.

In large part the 'Key Judgements' sections of estimates aim to perform this task. (And in effect this adds a third tier, on top of the summary. For estimates as voluminous as, say, those on Soviet strategic capabilities, for which the summary is a weighty tome in itself, this is vital.) Sometimes, though, 'Key Judgements' can have the flavor of a summary-of-the-summary, and are genuinely informative only to one who has given little attention to the subject. This is a potential problem mostly in relation to long documents revised on a regular basis. Hardly anyone at the Deputy Assistant Secretary level, and certainly no one above, will find the time to read the tens or even hundreds of pages of full text of the longest estimates. Many of them will read the executive summary, even if it is very long. But they are unlikely to do that two years in a row, since they know much of the contents will be familiar. What they want to know about the estimate in their second year in office is what is in it that was not there the year before? This might suggest adapting or supplementing the 'Key Judgements' section to emphasize 'Key Differences'. And since officials need intelligence to make policy, they ought to know which uncertainties have not been resolved by experts – that is, the questions on which political judgement has to arbitrate between professional disagreements. Rather than having to plough through a lengthy text looking for italics or footnotes, an official (at least a sensible one) would probably welcome a 'Key Disputes' sub-section of the summary. Especially on this, but also in regard to all aspects of the summary, it would be desirable to include cross references to page numbers in the full text where the summarized point or disagreement is explained in detail. In this way the summary can function not just as a table of contents to a book, but as an index as well.
MANAGING POLITICIZATION

Some policy-makers in recent years have urged analysts to be ‘judgmental’. This is important, and also dangerous. A paper that offers facts without judgements is reporting, not analysis. What a policy generalist needs is expert evaluation that changes his mind about something, either in the sense of alerting him to a new problem or revising his understanding of an old one. If he reads a paper that does not do this he may be pleased because it confirmed his opinion or be irritated that he wasted his time on something he had already settled. The most useful analysis, however, is that which helps to make policy something other than it would have been in the absence of the analysis (this can include maintaining the same policy, if analysis derails proposals for change).

If implications for policy are clear and controversial, the specters of ‘politicization’ or ‘bias’ in intelligence rear their heads. This is inevitable to some degree on all the most critical issues. If an issue is uncontroversial, it is not a first-order intelligence problem. And ‘bias’, except in extreme forms, is hard to distinguish from ‘wisdom’ – that is, the store of assumptions one builds up through experience and study about how politics, economics, or military strategy and technology work; which factors are most important; and which interpretations should require a higher standard of proof than others. Does the Soviet leadership believe that civil defense programs are a meaningful basis for war survival? Is Soviet, Cuban or Nicaraguan aid a significant source of leftist guerrillas’ strength in El Salvador? Does US policy toward Israel damage Saudi Arabia’s security? Could an antisatellite (ASAT) arms control agreement be verified ‘adequately’? These are the sorts of questions on which intelligence judgement is both most vital and least easily segregated from political assumptions.

If policy-makers keep their minds as open as they should and intelligence managers take care to organize and balance the confrontation of different biases, this need not be a problem. Both conditions are difficult to achieve, so analysts have to be ready for readers who see their product as second- or third-rate because they dislike the assumptions that seem to go with it or the policy implications that seem to flow from it. It is next to impossible for most readers to differentiate ‘good’ analysis from correct conclusions.

There is no way out of this problem, through refined standards of analysis or reorganized procedures, and there is no way for analysts to avoid criticism unless they pander to the audience – in which case they will be more popular with policy-makers but less useful to policy-making. In contrast to simple reporting, the best function of analysis,
after telling policy-makers what they don’t already know, is telling them what they don’t want to hear – either because it challenges the premises of policy or complicates decisions about options. If it does neither, intelligence may be interesting but it is superfluous.

Purveying an impression of politicization of course is dangerous. It may lead policy-makers to ignore certain analysts and reach out to those who offer confirmations of their own prejudices. If lucky, analysts can avoid this by some finesse in style, without compromising substance. But the alternative – corrupting the product to satisfy the customer – is not only illegitimate but ultimately self-defeating. The problems are likely to be worst in administrations that are highly ideological, or have ambitious goals for changing policy, or are populated by fools or fanatics in responsible positions. All the best analysis in the world will be useless if it is summoned to support a stupid policy, but there is nothing analysts can do to avert that problem.

MARKETING

Part of the intelligence problem for policy-makers, especially in the first year of a new administration, is simple ignorance of what products are available or how they can put analysts to work for them. They may even have, without realizing it, a number of useful papers in their own files, or in the middle of a stack on the corner of the desk – one of the stacks busy officials never get to. The managerial level of the analytical bureaucracy can perform some of the ‘resource alerting’ function, but it can sometimes best be done by analysts themselves. Having lunch with, say, the appropriate NSC staff member is one way for an analyst to promote dissemination of papers beyond the ranks of other analysts. It also provides a chance to suggest issues to which the policy-maker ought to give more thought – which could result in levying of more requirements upon the analysts.

The only questions on this score are whether the appropriate mid-level officials are approachable by analysts, and whether the analysts are encouraged by their superiors to go about hawking their wares. The first question can only be resolved on a case by case basis – it depends on personalities and workloads. Line staffers are likely to be amenable to such approaches if they are infrequent, and if they do not come at peak periods of activity, but they will be justifiably unresponsive to a deluge of calls from enterprising analysts. On the second, I have heard conflicting reports from professionals. Some analysts say their bosses don’t like them to go off on their own to deal with policy officials (sometimes with good reason – too much individual marketing effort could lead to pandemonium). Some bosses say their analysts are
reluctant to venture out of the cocoon at their home base. Somewhere between those inclinations lies a reasonable norm for informal interaction.

Such interaction can also provide intelligence ‘collection’ opportunities for analysts – that is, occasions on which to get a better sense of what policy people are doing or thinking, which is helpful in framing the presentation of analytical products to make them more clearly relevant. Many policy-level officials are blithely unaware of the importance of the top-down dimension of intelligence – the need for analysts to be aware of developments in our own policy in order to estimate and interpret developments in the countries targeted by that policy.

NOTE

1. The author has been an occasional consultant to the US Central Intelligence Agency. Drawing on his earlier experience on the staffs of the U.S. Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (the Church Committee) and the National Security Council, he delivered these remarks in a panel discussion at a conference for CIA analysts in the first year of the Reagan administration. They represent his views alone and should not be attributed to the CIA or any agency of the US government.