This paper is put together from chapters 3 and 4 of my book, *Why Intelligence Fails*, to which I have added some extensions. It may thus read a little strangely, and for this I ask your indulgence. My topic is the interrelationships between foreign policy and intelligence in the US (we have much less information on other countries, although for France there is Douglas Porch, *The French Secret Services: From the Dreyfus Affair to Desert Storm*, and Peter Jackson, *France and the Nazi Menace*; for Britain we have books and articles by Richard Aldrich, Christopher Andrew, Philip Davies, Michael Herman, and Nigel West, to list just a few). I am going to do this first by looking at the Iraq WMD case, in which politics played a much smaller role than is often believed, then by briefly commenting on the (in)famous November 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on the Iranian nuclear program (material not included in my book), then turning to a general discussion, before concluding with a few new remarks. All this makes for a quite long and unwieldy paper, but those of you familiar with the book (and even others) can move through it quite quickly.

Most popular opinion and some scholarship attributes the intelligence community’s (IC’s) stunning error in the Iraq WMD case to political pressures. I can understand why this is so, and indeed I began my research (which originated in classified research done for the government) with this proposition in mind. In retrospect, the intelligence error seems otherwise inexplicable, the political pressures were enormous, and those who distrust coincidence are likely to find the argument for political pressures
(what is awkwardly none as politicization) compelling. But in this case there is another
factor drawing many of us to this explanation – most members of the academic
community are Democrats and did not like the Bush administration. This puts it too
mildly; almost all of us despised the policies of the administration, much as we were
friends with certain distinguished academics who served in lower-level – but still very
important – positions. For years I have tried with little success to interest members of the
discipline in the question of whether our political outlooks and preferences affect our
scholarship (see the roundtable on the newly-formed International Security Studies
although cannot prove – that if most people approved of the war or liked the Bush
administration, the politicization explanation would be much less popular. Here, as in so
many areas, people’s beliefs display overkill in that they find all sorts of independent
factors pointing in the same direction, in this case toward policymaking that was
misguided at best.

Much as I disapprove of the Bush administration, I do not think that it can be
blamed for the WMD intelligence failure. Before elaborating, let me note that this
failure, interesting as it is, cannot explain the US policy. At best, intelligence could have
said that there was no firm evidence that Saddam had stockpiles of chemical and
biological weapons or was actively pursuing nuclear bombs. It could not have said that he
had ceased his efforts. Even the much-praised verdict of the State Department’s Bureau
of Intelligence and Research on Saddam’s nuclear program was that the evidence was
insufficient to establish that he was reconstituting it, not that he was not doing so.¹
Furthermore, intelligence could not have said that Saddam would not resume pursuit of
WMD at some point in the future. The only way intelligence could have mattered for
Bush would have been if before September 11, and probably before he assumed office, it
had been more accurate. In this case Bush and others might not have brought with them
an image of Saddam’s regime as strong and threatening. There would have been a greater
burden on those calling for war, and the entire tone of the discussions might have been
different. This possibility aside, the intelligence failure was not responsible for the
invasion. But it is worth exploring in its own right.

POLITICIZATION

In looking at the Iraq WMD case, people who see politicization make some of the
same methodological errors that plagued contemporary analysis. The critics, like the
analysts, ignored standard social science methods, especially the comparative method.

This is not to say that there was no politicization in the form of leaders giving
inaccurate accounts about intelligence in order to garner political support. Most
famously, the president said that the British reported that Saddam had sought uranium
from Africa (true, but the implication that American intelligence agreed was not), the
vice president and the secretary of defense said that there was solid evidence for
connections between Iraq and al Qaeda, and many policymakers insisted that the WMD
threat was “imminent.” The intelligence community disagreed, and Tenet testified that he
had privately rebuked the vice president for claims like these. \(^2\) But this kind of twisting
of evidence by policymakers is a substitute for politicization in that it was necessary only
because the IC did not provide decision makers with the messages they wanted the public
to believe. \(^3\)

Officials also engaged in “cherry-picking” and “stovepiping.” The former is
highlighting reports that support the policy to the exclusion of contradictory ones that are
more numerous and better established; the latter in this context refers to the delivery of selected bits of raw intelligence to policymakers, bypassing intelligence analysts who could critically evaluate them. These practices can be defended as within the prerogatives and even the duties of top officials to reach their own conclusions, but when used to justify policies to the public they incorrectly imply the backing of the intelligence community.

In some cases, the line between distortion and legitimate if questionable emphasis is hard to draw, as I will discuss further in chapter 4. The most striking case is Tony Blair’s use of intelligence that Saddam could employ chemical weapons within forty-five minutes of deciding to do so. He not only implied that the information was solid (blame on this point must be shared with British intelligence) but left the impression that these weapons could reach the entire region and so showed that Saddam was a great menace with evil intent. Blair omitted the crucial point that these were short-range battlefield weapons, which actually pointed to Saddam’s defensive orientation because such readiness would have had value only as a safeguard against a swift attack on him.

Most central here, however, is the claim for politicization in the form of pressure on the IC to provide analysis that supports decisions. The head of Britain’s MI6, Richard Dearlove, came back from a trip to Washington in July 2002 convinced that “Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and the facts were being fixed around the policy.” This often-repeated quotation at first seems to provide good evidence for politicization but on closer examination does not: it refers to intelligence on the links to al Qaeda, not to WMD programs. On the former topic, while some decision makers saw or claimed a link, the American IC did not, and on WMD British and American intelligence were in almost complete agreement. Dearlove could hardly have claimed that political pressures were being put on U.S. intelligence to reach a conclusion that the British felt was justified.
A second bit of testimony is the exchange between a member of SSCI’s staff and Richard Kerr, who headed one of CIA’s internal reviews:

Mr. Kerr: “There’s always people who are going to feel pressure in these situations and feel they were pushed upon.”

Committee Interviewer: “That’s what we’ve heard. We can’t find any of them, though.”

Mr. Kerr: “Maybe they are wiser than to come talk to you.”

A great line, but Kerr’s own report does not stress this factor, and it appears that almost everyone involved in the estimates was interviewed by the investigating committees. Another possibility, even harder to detect, is that dissenters and potential dissenters were taken off the Iraq case. Those who remained were not pressured or politicized, but the entire process was. The WMD Commission, although downplaying politicization as a central explanation, asserts that this happened, but its account is lacking in detail.

I cannot dismiss these two claims, but while my confidential interviews with IC officials at several levels of the hierarchy did yield hints that some people were transferred, I did not find anyone attributing his or her errors to political pressure. Of course they might have felt that admitting to having given in was worse than having been honestly mistaken, and as I noted earlier, people are often unable to understand how they reached their judgments. As an analyst put it at the Senate hearings to confirm Robert Gates as DCI, “[P]oliticization is like fog. Though you cannot hold it in your hands, or nail it to a wall, it does exist, it is real, and it does affect people.” Indeed, what one person interprets as probing questions another will feel as pressure.

The crudest form of politicization is easy to dismiss: superiors did not change the papers coming up to make them conform to policy. Less direct forms are harder to judge, especially the subtle form of politicization in which the desire to avoid the painful value trade-off between pleasing policymakers and following professional standards created
what psychologists call “motivated bias” in favor of producing estimates that would support, or at least not undermine, policy. Analysts come to believe what they say, but the ultimate cause is the political environment. This is not unusual. In Britain during the 1930s, even without explicit pressure, estimates of the balance of power with Germany shifted in the wake of policy shifts. 10 But on Iraq many of the incorrect beliefs formed before the issue became politically salient, and evidence that analysts and policymakers really believed that Saddam had active and advanced programs is provided by the measures taken to protect the soldiers from WMD attacks and, even more, by the uniform surprise—indeed disbelief—in the IC over the results of the postwar search and the slow and grudging acceptance of the truth.11

<h3>Evidence from Comparisons</h3>

Better evidence may be provided by relevant comparisons. It appears that the belief that Iraq had active WMD programs was held by all intelligence services, even those of countries that opposed the war. 12 While this does not mean that the U.S. and U.K. ICs were not affected by the political atmosphere, it does show that they did not need political pressure to reach their conclusions. The failure of the commentaries to discuss this fact is an instance of how the neglect of standard social science methodology lowered the quality of the public understanding of the intelligence failure, just as it weakened contemporary intelligence.

Other comparisons are also important and neglected, most obviously the fact that on two key aspects of Iraq the American IC resisted strong administration pressures. Although not asked for its assessment, it warned that the aftermath of the invasion was not likely to be easy and that invading might increase support for terrorists, thereby contradicting the rosy picture painted by the administration and implicitly weakening the case for war. 13 Even more strikingly, although the IC did say there were “senior level contacts between Iraq and al-Qa’ida,” it consistently denied that there was credible
evidence of Saddam’s role in 9/11, of a collaborative relation with bin Laden, or of a significant chance that Saddam would turn over WMD to al Qaeda. It held to this position in the face of administration statements to the contrary, repeated inquiries and challenges that can only be interpreted as pressure, and the formation of a unit in the Defense Department dedicated to finding such connections.\footnote{The administration’s pressure was illegitimate, but the lack of success not only speaks to the integrity of the intelligence officials but also undermines the claim that the WMD analysis was biased by the desire to please. It is also interesting that intelligence judgments were more accurate when they cut against administration policy than when they were supportive, although this may be only a coincidence.}

Comparing positions taken by different parts of the American IC also casts doubt on the politicization thesis. The State Department’s INR was the most skeptical member of the community about nuclear weapons, and Air Force intelligence dissented on the UAVs, yet State and Defense were the two most policy-oriented agencies. The Department of Energy (DOE) dissented on the aluminum tubes, and there is no evidence that political pressure was exerted in response. In reply it can be argued that Secretary Powell’s standing permitted him to shield his intelligence officers (even as he rejected their arguments), and the fact that for much of the country intelligence is equated with CIA may have meant that the latter, perhaps because it was ostensibly removed from politics, in fact bore the brunt of the pressure.

A final comparison is with the Clinton-era estimates. There were differences, especially in the claim that Saddam had reconstituted his nuclear program, was increasing his stockpiles of chemical weapons, and definitely had mobile biological laboratories. But the latter possibility emerged in 2000 as detailed (but erroneous) reports started coming in, and indeed, it was in this period that CIA accepted the claim that Saddam had developed the ability to prepare and spread dried, and thus highly potent, biological agents.\footnote{The changes in the nuclear and chemical assessments also corresponded to new}
information, and the alarming and flawed analysis of the aluminum tubes, discussed in more detail below, began in the spring of 2001 i.e., before there was significant pressure on intelligence. Thus much of the gap between the Bush and Clinton estimates can be explained in terms of reports from the field, and the gap between the two sets of estimates is less than that which separated their conclusions from what we now believe to have been true.

This does not mean that political pressure had no role. At the very least, it created an atmosphere that was not conducive to critical analysis, encouraged excessive certainty, and eroded subtleties and nuances. Analysts and intelligence managers knew that any suggestion that Saddam’s capabilities were limited would immediately draw fire from their superiors. In this climate it would have been hard for anyone to reexamine the conventional wisdom. The vehemence and certainty with which the policymakers, especially Vice President Cheney, expressed themselves may also have had an impact. Thomas Ricks quotes a senior military intelligence official as saying, “When the vice-president stood up and said ‘We are sure’ well, who are we to argue? With all the compartmentalization, there’s a good chance that a guy that senior has seen stuff you haven’t” (which actually was the case, although much of this information was incorrect). It may well be that this kind of stance at the top would not inhibit analysts when they were sure of their judgments but would have an effect when they were less certain. At bottom, however, political pressures cannot explain the intelligence failure.

<h3>Politicization Late in the Day</h3>

Perhaps the best evidence of politicization has received little attention, probably because it was something that did not happen: the ICs did not make any reassessments once UN inspections (UNMOVIC, United Nations Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission) resumed and found no traces of WMD. One reason may be that analysts believed that UNMOVIC had not visited the right sites. The
Butler report says that the inspectors had time to follow up only half the leads provided by the British government, and the United States may not have given them all the information it had, which meant that UNMOVIC’s reports could not be definitive.\textsuperscript{18}

Nevertheless I think the Butler Commission was right to note that the lack of interest in what UNMOVIC found\textsuperscript{M} or rather did not find\textsuperscript{M} was “odd,” and it is interesting that Tenet says little about this period in his memoirs.\textsuperscript{19} Especially striking is the lack of reaction when UNMOVIC found nothing at what was supposed to be a key biological weapons facility and saw the aluminum tubes being used as parts of artillery rockets, although it is not clear how much detail the inspectors gave to CIA.\textsuperscript{20}

I suspect that the explanation is that once people came to see that the United States and United Kingdom were committed to overthrowing Saddam, they understood that reevaluations would be unacceptable and stopped examining the evidence with much care.\textsuperscript{21} This may be another reason for the insufficient scrutiny of Powell’s UN speech, discussed more below. When an agent questioned the use of information in the speech from a key source named Curveball, his boss replied: “[L]et’s keep in mind that this war’s going to happen regardless of what Curveball said or didn’t say, and that the Powers That Be probably aren’t very interested in whether Curveball knows what he’s talking about.”\textsuperscript{22} I think that different people and parts of the IC shut down at different times, depending largely on their assessments of the administration’s commitment to war. When critics level the charge of politicization, they usually point to evidence in the winter of 2002\textsuperscript{<N>3} but imply that it characterized intelligence throughout.\textsuperscript{23} The entire period should not be homogenized.

In response to reviews and comments on my book, I have given a bit more thought to this last period, although I cannot come to much more of a conclusion. Many of the secondary accounts blur the question of the time period being referred to, there are
few specific accounts of intelligence after the inspectors went in, and my own research
did not go into this in depth. I am now looking back at the public record, but a quick look
indicates that the New York Times and Washington Post noted the absence of evidence,
but did not make a big deal out of it. None of the official reports quote intelligence in the
post-inspection period, although Senator Levin’s dissent does raise the issue, and
indicates--correctly I believe--that not all the suspected sites were visited. The decisions
on what information the US would pass to UNMOVIC were made not by the IC, but by
the White House, and even if there were possible sites that remained uninspected (and
even if the White House made sure that this was the case), there was sufficient negative
evidence to have warranted the IC sending up warning flags. My sense is that it did not
do so, a conclusion I reach largely because I doubt that this could not have been kept
secret, certainly not after we learned that Iraq did not have WMD. Describing, let alone
explaining, what happened in this period is important, but doing so would require the
declassification of the relevant documents, probably supplemented by interviews, and I
do not think anyone in power has the incentives to push for this, which means that the
puzzle will remain.

I suspect that part of the reason for what I think is the inactivity is exhaustion: the
analysts had been working non-stop for over a year, and then had sprinted to complete the
NIE in a small fraction of the time usually allotted. Perhaps more importantly, I also
suspect that they shifted their attention to supporting the military planning for invasion.
The soldiers had to be ready to confront chemical and biological weapons, and
intelligence assets and analysis had to be turned to giving them all possible relevant
information. Lives could depend on it, even if in the event they did not. Most
importantly, I continue to believe that as it became more and more obvious that the administration was committed to going to war, the analysts lapsed into passivity through motivated bias and defensive avoidance. But I cannot be sure that this is correct.

Should the IC have behaved differently? Certainly. It is not only hindsight that leads me—and everyone else—to argue that it should have at least weakened its judgments if not embarked on a full-scale reexamination. Although the standard application of Bayesianism to intelligence is simple-minded, its general point is valid. We should remember, however, that failures to update are much more common than the normative models imply, and so one explanation for the lack of change is purely cognitive—the assimilation of new and discrepant information to pre-existing beliefs. But even given my biases I think there is more to it than that. The failure to confirm Curveball’s reports about the loading station for biological weapons should have been particularly disturbing, although of course there were convoluted ways of squaring this evidence with the conclusion that Saddam was producing biological agents. Did analysts begin to have doubts, and if so did they express them in writing? We simply do not know. Working-level analysts rarely leak, and so it is possible that there were doubts that have not surfaced in the public record.

Given the political atmosphere, however, I do not think it would be surprising if disturbing reports were not written. So I think we can say that while the IC as a whole and individual analysts fell short of the high standards we think the government should live by, I am not sure we would want to punish them or judge them severely. But clearly these are questions that go beyond empirical research (which does not mean they are unimportant).
Let me now turn to the general question of politicization, taking what I wrote in the concluding chapter.

POLITICIZATION IN GENERAL

This does not mean that politicization is not real. It can take many forms, from the most blatant in which intelligence is explicitly told what conclusions it should reach to the less obvious, including demoting people who produce the “wrong” answer, putting in place personnel whose views are consistent with those of the top leaders, reducing the resources going to units whose analyses are troubling, and the operation of unconscious bias by analysts who fear that their careers will be damaged by producing undesired reports. Even more elusive may be what one analyst has called “politicization by omission”: issues that are not evaluated because the results might displease superiors.\(^\text{24}\)

Also subtle are the interactions between pressures and degrees of certainty in estimates. I suspect that one reason for the excess certainty in the Iraq WMD assessments was the knowledge of what the decision makers wanted. Conversely, analysts are most likely to politically conform when they are uncertain about their own judgments, as will often be the case on difficult and contentious questions.

Only rarely does one find a case like the one in which President Johnson told DCI Helms, “Dick, I need a paper on Vietnam, and I’ll tell you what I want included in it.”\(^\text{25}\) Almost as blatant was Kissinger’s response when CIA experts told Congress that intelligence did not believe that the new Soviet missile with multiple warheads could menace the American retaliatory force, contrary to what policymakers had said. He ordered the reports to be revised, and when they still did not conform, told Helms to remove the offending paragraph on the grounds that it was not “hard” intelligence but merely speculation on Soviet intentions, a subject on which intelligence lacked special qualifications.\(^\text{26}\)
Even this case points to the ambiguities in the notion of politicization and the difficulties in drawing a line between what political leaders should and should not do when they disagree with estimates. Intelligence said that “we consider it highly unlikely [that the Soviets] will attempt within the period of this estimate to achieve a first-strike capability.” This prediction was reasonable and turned out to be correct but it rested in part on judgments of the Soviet system and the objectives of the Soviet leaders, and these are the kinds of questions that the top political leadership is entitled to answer for itself. On the other hand, to demand that intelligence keep silent on adversary intentions would be bizarre, and indeed, when the hard-liners forced an outside estimate on the IC at the end of the Ford administration, the group of selected hawks who formed “Team B” strongly criticized the IC for concentrating on capabilities and ignoring intentions.

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

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

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

Finally, it should be noted that some phenomena labeled politicization actually are substitutes for it. In the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq, administration leaders were often criticized for politicizing intelligence, and the proof offered was that they distorted what intelligence said and engaged in cherry-picking in the form of selectively publicizing those reports that supported their policy. But such acts, inappropriate as they are, show the lack or failure of politicization rather than exemplifying it. If intelligence had bent to the administration’s will, then there would have been no need to cherry-pick or distort, since an accurate portrayal of what intelligence was saying would have served the administration’s purposes. It is only when intelligence does not yield that policymakers may have to misreport what it is saying.

I have only one additional thought on this subject. This is to emphasize the importance of the possibility that individuals are placed in positions of responsibility within the IC because policy-makers know and agree with their general outlooks. Thus it is quite possible that the NIO for WMD was given this job (something that happened that happened under Clinton) because it was known that he took a more alarmist (or a less relaxed) view of proliferation than did some others. It is also possible that some people were moved on or off the Iraq case because of their views. Tracking this, let alone probing the motives involved, is difficult. Furthermore, as I noted, there is room to debate the legitimacy of such actions.

EXPLAINING THE IRAQ CASE

Let me turn to what I think were the major causes of the Iraq WMD failure, taking selected portions of my book chapter.
The Importance of Plausibility

The fundamental reason for the WMD intelligence failure in Iraq was that the inferences were very plausible, much more so than the alternatives. Saddam had vigorously pursued WMD in the past, had used chemical weapons to good effect, had powerful incentives to rebuild his programs, had funds, skilled technicians, and a good procurement network at his disposal, and had no other apparent reason to deceive and hinder the inspectors. The UNSCOM inspectors, who provided so much information to U.S. and British intelligence, had left a vivid impression of Saddam’s commitment to his WMD programs. Important also were beliefs that extended beyond Iraq. According to INR’s biological weapons specialist, one reason why the IC was quick to accept the evidence that Iraq was developing mobile labs was that “the U.S. BW [biological warfare] analysts generally think that BW programs historically have shifted [away] from large-scale fixed facilities.”

There are other indications that plausibility played a central role in the inferences, starting with the fact that other countries, who had different bits of specific information than did the United States and the United Kingdom, reached the same general conclusion, although perhaps with less confidence. Differences in inferences within the U.S. IC are also better explained by different views of what was likely rather than by different information. Thus while INR is to be praised for rejecting the reports that Iraq was making a serious effort to buy uranium from Niger, the explanation is not that their analysts read the evidence more carefully but that they found the whole idea implausible because Iraq would not “risk such a transaction when they were ‘bound to be caught.’” In the same way, those in air force intelligence who dissented from the judgment that the procurement of mapping software covering the United States meant that Iraq might be planning to use UAVs against the American homeland did so “because they did not believe that the UAVs were intended for CBW [chemical and biological weapons] delivery use and, therefore, Iraq would have no need to use the UAVs in the
For the majority, the inference that the UAVs were being configured to deliver chemical and biological agents was made compelling by the fact that this had been Iraq’s intent in the past, although these analysts probably failed to understand that the history weighed on them so heavily. In this light it is not surprising that CIA analysts (rightly) inferred that there was no close and collaborative relationship between al Qaeda and Iraq since such ties did not fit with how they believed the regime saw its self-interest. While information pointing to a connection was unreliable, there were enough scattered reports that someone who had a different reading of the regime could have placed more faith in them, as the vice president and many civilians in the Defense Department did. In fact, because of differences in background beliefs, terrorism analysts in the IC were more prone to see links than were those with regional expertise.

For all groups, it did not make sense that Saddam had nothing to hide. If before the war someone had produced studies of Iraq like the postwar Duelfer Report or the parallel analysis by Woods and his colleagues, they would no doubt have been praised as imaginative but would not have come close to persuading. Who would have believed that the reason why Saddam’s scientists would not account for much of the missing anthrax was that they feared his anger if he learned that they had dumped it near one of his palaces? Did it make any sense that “by late 2002 Saddam had persuaded himself . . . that the United States would not attack Iraq because it already had achieved its objectives of establishing a military presence in the region,” that private meetings between the inspectors and scientists were resisted because “any such meeting with foreigners was seen as a threat to the security of the Regime,” and that “Iraq did not want to declare anything that documented use of chemical weapons [in the war with Iran] for fear the documentation could be used against Iraq in lawsuits”? A bit more understandably, Saddam feared that unlimited inspections would allow the United States to pinpoint his location and assassinate him, and we can now see that the combination of fear, incompetence, and corruption explains many of the suspicious ways in which equipment
was purchased. Thus one reason why the aluminum tubes had such precise specifications was that the Iraqi engineers needed to compensate for problems that could not be addressed more directly because that would have involved quarreling with one of Saddam’s cronies who was in charge of the rocket program.

More generally, Duelfer and Woods tell us that Saddam sought to maintain the appearance of WMD in order to keep power at home and deter Iran. The United States was a secondary concern. Indeed, Saddam told a postwar interrogator that while he opposed American policies, he did not consider the United States an enemy! It appears that he hoped first to end sanctions and inspections and then to reconstitute his programs, all the while keeping his real and perceived adversaries at bay. “This led to a difficult balancing act between the need to disarm to achieve sanctions relief while at the same time retaining a strategic deterrent. The Regime never resolved the contradiction inherent in this approach.” This is putting it mildly. The sanctions regime might decay over time but (especially after 9/11) would be lifted only if he showed that he had abandoned his WMD programs. Even in retrospect, it is hard to understand the priority he placed on maintaining his WMD bluff: the fear of such weapons could not prevent an American attack, and Iran was hardly spoiling for a fight and in any event could not have assumed that the West would stand aside while it greatly increased its influence by moving against Iraq. Furthermore, even if nuclear weapons would deter Iran, it is hard to see how a nuclear program could do so. Saddam’s policy, then, was foolish and self-defeating, and this goes a long way to explaining the intelligence failure. When the situation is this bizarre, it is not likely to be understood.

In many previous cases behavior that was puzzling comes into focus when one understands the other’s situation and strategy. Thus the United States and Israel were surprised by Egypt’s attack in 1973 because they failed to appreciate that Egyptian president Anwar Sadat thought that what was needed was not a massive military victory but enough of an effort to convince Israel that the status quo was untenable and to bring
in the United States as a broker. Here empathy would have been difficult but not out of the question. In other cases the adversary’s plans and perspectives are hard to grasp because they are a product of motivated bias—i.e., the adversary has come to believe quite improbable things because doing so meets pressing political and psychological needs. Although this layer is hard to penetrate, in many cases this can be done. But Saddam’s behavior was even harder to understand, even with the information now at our disposal. While it is true that rampant corruption and fear of coups and of a neighbor with whom he had fought an eight-year war should not have seemed so unlikely, the way Saddam’s regime functioned and how he saw the world were outside the normal range and particularly hard to understand.

The claim that the contemporary inferences made a great deal of sense is contrary to most discussions of the failure, although it is hinted at by the WMD Commission and the Butler Report. Such a conclusion is politically unacceptable to most people, who want to believe that such a gross misjudgment must stem from flagrant and correctable errors. As I will discuss further in chapter 4, few members of the elite have incentives to understand either the utility or the limits of intelligence, and it is frustrating to believe that incorrect conclusions may be warranted. In this case, even if there had been no errors in tradecraft, I believe that the analysts would and should have judged that Saddam seemed to be actively pursuing all kinds of WMD and probably had some on hand. The assessment should have been expressed with much less certainty, the limitations on direct evidence should have been stressed, and the grounds for reaching the conclusion should have been explicated. But while it would be comforting to believe that better analysis would have led to a fundamentally different conclusion, I do not think this is the case.

This does not mean that the analysis was as good as it should have been. The central analytical error was not that inferences were driven by their plausibility as established by previous Iraqi behavior and the sense they made of what Saddam appeared to be doing but that the analysts did not make this clear, in part because they did not
understand their own thinking. The ICs should have tried to separate the role of plausibility from the impact of the specific reports, and they should have done more to understand and communicate how they reached their final judgments. This also helps explain what SSCI means when it says that many IC conclusions were “not supported by the intelligence” and instead were the products of “analytical judgments.” This is correct but is misguided in implying that the latter are somehow illegitimate—in fact, they are the bread and butter of intelligence analysis. Direct reports that are valid and unambiguous are rare. To tell the IC to shy away from analytical judgments would be to condemn it to silence, just as a similar prescription for science would stymie any comprehension of our world. Deductions and indirect inference are central to the enterprise of understanding. The real problem was that the ICs and policymakers were unaware of the extent to which the conclusions rested on these kinds of judgments.

To say that inferences are drawn because they are plausible may seem circular, but it is not. The point is that the interpretation of individual bits of information depended less on their content than on more general ideas and images that were off the paper. Analyses of the aluminum tubes and the mobile biological weapons laboratories rarely mentioned Saddam’s previous behavior or his refusal to cooperate with inspectors. These were well known and could also be seen as irrelevant to the narrower task at hand, but in fact they were crucial in predisposing people to seeing the new evidence as pointing to active WMD programs. Thus if the reports about removing all traces of WMD that Secretary Powell quoted in his UN speech had been received about Canada, very different inferences would have been drawn, and with good reason. Intelligence strives to follow the scientific method, and every day scientists see results that contradict basic scientific laws, which they react to not by rushing to publish but by throwing out the data because they know that it cannot be right.

Of course, in science as in intelligence, being strongly influenced by plausibility can be criticized as being closed-minded or assumption-driven. But this is a powerful and
legitimate habit of the mind, necessary for making sense of a complex and contradictory world, and although it was responsible for the WMD failure, most of the inferences it produces are right. Richard Betts makes the important point that while the implicit theories of the world that we bring to cases usually are correct and most of the time we are better off being guided by them rather than adopting exotic alternatives, we will be misled and surprised when the other’s behavior is extraordinary.50 If we are more imaginative in the latter cases, we may get them right; but if we are generally more imaginative, we will be wrong in many standard cases. Of course, what we want is a way of determining when the normal patterns will hold and when they will not, and perhaps this is the main task of intelligence. But without some magic key, we must live with the conundrum that many of the same ways of thinking that produce an accurate picture of normal behavior will fail when the country or situation is odd.

For the IC to have explained more carefully why judgments were reached would have had multiple benefits, however. It would have alerted consumers to trains of reasoning that they could question; it would have told consumers and analysts what evidence, direct and indirect, was being relied on; it would have sensitized analysts to instances in which they not only see evidence as consistent with established views because of the latter’s plausibility but take this evidence as an independent reason to accept these views. This bootstrapping is a form of circular thinking that leads to excessive confidence, as I will discuss further in the next chapter. For example, the only reason why the analysts were impressed by the admission of Iraq officials that they had considered (but rejected) the idea of producing BW in trucks was that they expected this kind of activity. 51

<h1>Confirmation Bias, Negative Evidence, and the Comparative Method</h1>

<txt>Related to the analysts’ failure to understand the role of plausibility was their falling victim to the propensity for people to seek information that confirms their
beliefs and to fail to see the significance of evidence whose absence is diagnostic. In early 2002, CIA agents around the world were told to seek information about Iraq’s WMD programs. This made sense but inadvertently was dangerous because asking people to be on the lookout for something increases the chance that they will find it whether it is there or not. During World War II, British intelligence understood this trap, and when it received preliminary reports about a new German weapon, it was careful to phrase inquiries to other agents in neutral terms that did not disclose what it believed the Germans might be developing. It appears that CIA did not take this precaution.

Even more strikingly, intelligence failed to see the significance of the lack of confirming information where there was reason to expect it to be present. “Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence,” Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld tells us. Like many mantras, there is quite a bit to this, but it disguises quite a bit as well. There are indeed numerous cases in which an adversary’s action or capabilities were not preceded by any detectable signs, and it is chastening to note that for years the West was unaware that the USSR<sup>1</sup> and then Russia<sup>1</sup> continued BW programs despite having signed a treaty banning them and that Albania’s chemical weapons program went undetected. But presumably even Rumsfeld would acknowledge that absence of evidence can be significant. If it were not, one would have to argue that lacking positive evidence that a country is not pursuing WMD (and it is not clear what this could be), we should assume that it is.

It was rare for negative information to be solicited, reported, or noticed, however. CIA officers were not likely to press their sources on what they did not see or for the field to report that various sources did not have any information that Saddam was actively pursuing WMD even if these people were well placed. Had such messages come in, I doubt that they would have been passed on to the analysts, and it appears that any negative reports that made their way to the analysts stopped there instead of being reflected in finished intelligence. The fact, glaringly significant in retrospect, that the
increased collection efforts yielded little was not considered noteworthy. Similarly, in
the debate over whether Saddam had meaningful links to al Qaeda, no one seems to have
noticed that he never opened an embassy in Kabul after the Taliban took power. By its
nature, positive evidence is much more striking than its absence, and vivid information
has an impact out of proportion to its diagnostic content because it stands out. Negative
evidence and things that do not happen tend to be overlooked. Often they should not be,
and it is disturbing but not surprising that the IC found it hard to comply with SSCI’s
request that it turn over this kind of evidence because there is no simple way to retrieve it
from memory or files.

What the IC failed to appreciate was that instances in which specified behavior
does not occur or evidence is absent are highly significant if this contradicts an important
proposition or argument. Political scientists refer to this kind of evidence as “dogs that do
not bark,” borrowing a concept from Sherlock Holmes, who realized that the dogs’
failure to bark on the night of the crime showed that the perpetrator was an acquaintance.
It is not that negative evidence and events that do not occur are automatically or
uniformly important; their significance arises when the claim under consideration implies
that they should be present. A heightened awareness of this logic and the attendant
research design of focusing on negative cases have greatly improved social science over
the past decade. But intelligence (and the postmortems as well) did not see this, just as
Watson, Holmes’s assistant, did not, even though he was very smart. What is required in
such a case is thinking in a counterintuitive way that comes from an explicit
consideration of the hypothetico-deductive method. We move naturally from evidence to
inference, but it takes greater self-consciousness to see that testing our propositions
requires us to ask what events should occur and what evidence should be observable if a
particular argument or explanation is correct.

In the Iraq case, doing so would have helped in four ways. First, an explicit focus
on the importance of negative information could have restrained the confirmation bias in
collection. Headquarters in both the United States and the United Kingdom could have instructed their agents to look for and report not only what sources were claiming they knew about WMD activities but also cases in which people who might have known about them if they were occurring in fact saw nothing. Second and relatedly, sensitivity to absence could have corrected for the propensity to note only corroborating facts. Thus although intelligence pointed to the use of code words as evidence that some activities were likely to be related to BW, it appears to have missed the fact that code words were not used to “conceal acquisition of BW-related equipment, and impair Western measures to monitor Iraqi technology acquisition.”61 Third, if the IC had asked, “If Iraq has reconstituted its nuclear and biological programs, what would it have to do?” inquiry might have been pointed to areas that should have been probed more deeply, such as the lack of evidence that Iraq was seeking centrifuge components other than tubes and the absence of safety measures that would have been expected to accompany mobile facilities that were manufacturing biological weapons.62 Fourth, the ICs would have had to think harder about the meaning of the negative results from the major effort to probe relevant Iraqi scientists around the world (and even in Iraq itself). Of course these people could have been lying or the WMD programs could have been run by a network that was unknown to the ICs, but proper methodology would have meant that these claims would have been made explicitly and that the negative evidence would have been discussed in the NIE.

Analysts similarly did not utilize the standard social science comparative method to probe either the significance of specific bits of information or the relative validity of alternative explanations. They failed to realize that some evidence that was consistent with their interpretation was consistent with other views as well. Indeed, analysts often seemed to incorrectly assume that anything that fit with their views contradicted the alternatives, which meant that they were engaging in bootstrapping. For example, Iraq’s use of fronts and other surreptitious means of obtaining dual-use material was taken as
evidence that it was pursuing forbidden programs. While this inference was consistent with the behavior, it neglected “the fact that Iraq typically used front companies and evaded UN sanctions for imports of purely legitimate goods.” More specifically, the majority of the IC believed that the fact that Iraq used intermediaries to procure the aluminum tubes meant that they were intended for uranium enrichment. But, as DOE noted at the time, Security Council resolutions prohibited Iraq from importing such material for conventional military uses, which meant that the behavior did not discriminate between the two main hypotheses. More generally, because it was believed that Saddam had active programs, multiple bits of evidence were seen within this frame without much consideration of alternatives that could have been the explanation and in retrospect were. Thus many analysts saw the presence of special tanker trucks at suspicious sites as indicating chemical weapons without considering that they were likely to be deployed around conventional munitions, which also pose safety risks, or even to be deployed for routine activities. While the analysts were correct to infer from the fact that these trucks had been associated with chemical weapons during the Gulf War that they would likely accompany the movement of chemicals thereafter, they failed to consider that the trucks might be put to other uses as well. Indeed, if the Iraqis were not producing chemical weapons, they would need to find some other ways to employ them.

THE NOVEMBER 2007 IRAN NUCLEAR NIE

The story of the November 2007 Iranian nuclear NIE illustrates several interesting points. Its Key Judgments (KJs) were made public right after they were agreed upon (www.dni.gov/press_releases/20071203_release.pdf). On substance, I believe that these judgments were not only justifiable at the time, but have largely come to be accepted as true. Indeed, it appears that even the Israelis agree, at least on their general outlines. What is particularly important is the claim that Iran can be influenced. Although this
might appear to be a truism, it stands in opposition to the view that Iran is completely irrational and/or is committed to possessing nuclear weapons as soon as possible and cannot possibly be deflected from this path by some combination of threats and diplomacy. (This is not to say that the NIE or any of us know exactly what combination would work or whether there is an arrangement that is acceptable to both Iran and the US, although my personal view is that there is one – and one that even Israel would reluctantly prefer to striking Iran’s known nuclear facilities.)

What is most important here is the story of how these KJs were written and released. As everyone knows, they were greeted with a mixture of surprise and horror, being seen as undercutting the American campaign to tighten the sanctions, if not as totally out of touch with reality. Furthermore, critics argued that they were both incompetent and politicized: incompetent in that they implied that the Iranian nuclear program had halted when one had to read the fine print to see that the putative halt was “only” of the warhead design and manufacture; politicized in that the judgment were the product of the IC’s desire to thwart what it believed was a misguided belligerent administration policy. The true story in fact is much simpler, although in many ways is disturbing. My account is largely based on personal experiences and interviews, and so I realize cannot constitute fully acceptable evidence. But it is better than nothing – a good deal better, I think.

I do not believe the estimate was politicized. The people who wrote it are sufficiently low in the food-chain to be shielded from political pressures and, more importantly, to be so deeply immersed in the detailed, difficult, technical aspects of their jobs that they would not push the evidence around to make it conform to whatever
political preferences they might have. Furthermore, the estimate was not altered or manipulated by people who were high enough up to take a broad political view. Indeed, public accounts indicate that the estimate originally came to quite different conclusions, and was changed only after startling new information came in that indicated that Iran had halted a part of its project. This evidence was scrutinized extremely carefully before the IC was willing to come to its conclusions. Perhaps deeper research would indicate politicization, but I doubt it.

But it is true that the KJs were badly crafted. Or, to be more precise, they were badly crafted for public release. And that is the point. They were not originally written to be released in public. Indeed, DNI McConnell had said that the KJs would not be released. So they, like the other parts of the estimate, were written only for insiders who were fully up on the issue. Indeed, the explicit instructions to the IC were to write the estimate to focus on what had changed. The enrichment program had not changed; the news was the halt in the warhead design and fabrication. Anyone who was following the program loosely knew this, and could read the KJs fairly well. (I think they could have written a bit better even for the insider office, but that is not crucial here.)

So the question is why they were released, and here the Iraq case, or rather its impact on the US government, was very important. Those who were writing the estimate followed McConnell’s guidance and didn’t think the KJs would be released. When the finished estimate arrived at the White House, it was scheduled to be “published” a few days later. This meant it would have to be briefed to Congress, and probably to other countries as well, and White House officials (I am not sure exactly who) realized that the estimate was enough of a change from what had been previously believed that it was sure
to leak. They immediately concluded that here as elsewhere preemption was a good policy. But they had no time to work with the IC to craft a short document that would serve this purpose. And had they done so, they might well have been accused of manipulating or politicizing the intelligence. So they decided to simply release the KJs, to the surprise and horror of those who had written them.

The political puzzle is why some people did not realize ahead of time that the NIE was explosive and would leak. Had they done so, they might have be able to produce a document that would have been less explosive and more useful to non-experts in stressing that the enrichment program continued and that it was not clear that the delay in the other aspects of the program would slow Iran’s progress toward a bomb. This still would have been difficult for the reasons I mentioned previously, but it didn’t even occur to anyone. This I think was a significant failure of the process, and in the absence of firm evidence I attribute it to the few people who knew about what the estimate was going to say but were high up enough to have – or should have had – the political sense to understand what needed to be done. This should have been DNI McConnell, National Security Advisor Hadley, and perhaps Thomas Fingar, Chair of the National Intelligence Council. I cannot explain their failure to grasp the situation, but the press of overwork is one obvious possibility.

Political pressures, the anticipation of them, and the reaction to the Iraq failure may have played a role here. It appears that as the NIE was being re-written on the basis of the new information, it was not being thoroughly briefed to policy-makers. If this was the case, I think the reason is at least partly that the IC felt badly burned both by the errors it made in the Iraq case and the charges of politicization. The former led it to be
quite cautious in reaching judgments and to want to wait until the new evidence had been thoroughly and critically analyzed before “taking it downtown”; the latter meant that it wanted to make sure that no one could level the charge of politicization. So some of the problems (although not the substance of the judgment) were attributable to the great increase in tensions between the IC and policy-makers that followed from the Iraq fiasco. And this episode itself increased these tensions to the point where people on both sides of the divide referred to relations between them as “poisonous.”

**DECISION-MAKERS’ NEEDS AND HOW INTELLIGENCE CONFLICTS WITH THEM**

The different needs and perspectives of decision makers and intelligence officials guarantee conflict between them. For both political and psychological reasons, political leaders have to oversell their policies, especially in domestic systems in which power is decentralized, and this will produce pressures on and distortions of intelligence. It is, then, not surprising that intelligence officials, especially those at the working level, tend to see political leaders as unscrupulous and careless, if not intellectually deficient, and that leaders see their intelligence services as timid, unreliable, and often out to get them.

Although it may be presumptuous for CIA to have chiseled in its lobby “And ye shall know the truth and the truth will make you free,” it can at least claim this as its objective. No decision maker could do so, as the more honest of them realize. When Secretary of State Dean Acheson said that the goal of a major National Security Council document was to be “clearer than truth,” he understood this very well. Some of the resulting tensions came out when Porter Goss became DCI and told the members of the CIA that they should support policymakers. On the other hand, the job of intelligence is to inform policymakers and in this way to support better policy. But support can also mean providing analysis that reinforces policies and rallies others to the cause. The first
kind of support fits with intelligence’s preferred mission, the one that decision makers pay lip service to. But given the political and psychological world in which they live, it is often the latter kind of support that decision makers seek. In light of the charges that CIA had previously undercut President Bush’s policies, it is not surprising that many people thought Goss was using the term in the latter sense. Decision makers need confidence and political support, and honest intelligence unfortunately often diminishes rather than increases these goods by pointing to ambiguities, uncertainties, and the costs and risks of policies. In many cases, there is a conflict between what intelligence at its best can produce and what decision makers seek and need.

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

In principle, it could be different. Bush could have said something like this: “I think Saddam is a terrible menace. This is a political judgment, and I have been elected to make difficult calls. While I have listened to our intelligence services and other experts, this is my decision, not theirs.” In other cases the president could announce, “The evidence is ambiguous, but on balance I believe that we must act on the likelihood that the more alarming possibilities are true.” At times in the run-up to the war in Iraq and other cases, policymakers indicated that they were expressing their own convictions, not an intelligence assessment. But the line often is a thin one, and speeches that clearly separate themselves from intelligence will seem weak and be politically unpersuasive.
Indeed, in the years since the Iraq debacle, while Britain has renounced its experiment with issuing public intelligence papers, the United States has moved in the opposite direction, releasing the key judgments of several estimates, especially on Iran and Iraq. It can be argued that this is appropriate for a democracy and in today’s climate the information would be leaked in any event but the results are to increase the pressures on intelligence.

<h2>Conflicting Pressures</h2>

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

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

The run-up to the war in Iraq is an unfortunately apt illustration of these processes. In its most general form, the Bush administration’s case for the war was that Saddam was a great menace and that overthrowing him also was a great opportunity for changing the Middle East. Furthermore, each of these two elements had several supporting components. Saddam was a threat because he was very hard to deter, had robust WMD programs, and had ties to terrorists, whom he might provide with WMD. The opportunity was multifaceted as well: the war would be waged at low cost, the postwar reconstruction would be easy, and establishing a benign regime in Iraq would have salutary effects on the region by pushing other regimes along the road to democracy and facilitating the resolution of the Arab-Israeli dispute. Portraying the world in this way maximized support for the war. To those who accepted all components, the war seemed obviously the best course of action, which would justify supporting it with great enthusiasm; and people could accept the policy even if they endorsed only a few of the multiple reasons. Seeing the world in this way also eased the psychological burdens on decision makers, which were surely great in ordering soldiers into combat and embarking on a bold venture. What is crucial in this context is not the validity of any of these beliefs but the convenience in holding them all simultaneously when there was no reason to expect the world to be arranged so neatly. This effect was so strong that Vice President Cheney, who in previous years had recognized that removing Saddam could throw Iraq into chaos, was able to convince himself that it would not. There was no logical reason why the situation could not have presented a threat but not an opportunity (or vice versa), or for there to have been threat of one kind<i.e., that Saddam was on the verge of getting significant WMD capability>but not of another<i.e., that he had no connections to al Qaeda. Logically, Cheney’s heightened urgency about overthrowing Saddam should not have changed his view on what would follow. But it did.
As we saw in the previous chapter, most members of the American intelligence community did believe that Saddam had robust WMD programs. As far as we can tell, intelligence said little about how difficult Saddam was to deter, which was unfortunate because this was a central part of the justification for the war (which is probably why intelligence did not analyze it). But because the IC did not feel the psychological need to bolster the case for war, it did not have to pull other perceptions into line and so gave little support to the administration on points where the evidence was to the contrary. And this is where the friction arose. Intelligence denied any collaboration between Saddam and al Qaeda, and it was very skeptical about the possibility that Saddam would turn over WMD to terrorists. So it is not surprising that here the administration put great pressure on intelligence to come to a different view and that policymakers frequently made statements that were at variance with the assessments. It is also not surprising, although obviously it was not foreordained, that the intelligence here was quite accurate.

Intelligence also painted a gloomy picture of the prospects for postwar Iraq, noting the possibilities for continued resistance and, most of all, the difficulties in inducing the diverse and conflicting groups in the country to cooperate with one another. Because this skepticism did not receive public attention, these estimates were subject to less political pressure, although the fact that the administration not only ignored them but frequently affirmed the opposite must have been frustrating to the analysts. Fortunately for them, however, on these points the administration was content to assert its views without claiming that they were supported by intelligence, probably because the judgments were of a broad political nature and did not rely on secret information. Later, when the postwar situation deteriorated and intelligence officials revealed that they had in fact provided warnings, the conflict heightened as the administration felt that intelligence was being disloyal and furthering its own political agenda.

It is tempting to see the browbeating and ignoring of intelligence as a particular
characteristic of the George W. Bush administration, but it was not. Although available evidence does not allow anything like a full inventory, it does reveal examples from other administrations. Because Bill Clinton and his colleagues were committed to returning Haiti’s Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power after he had been ousted in a coup, they resented and resisted intelligence analysis that argued that he was unstable and his governing would not be effective or democratic.\textsuperscript{75} Neither the Eisenhower nor the Kennedy administration, both of which favored a test-ban agreement, was happy with analyses that indicated that verification would be difficult. Although on many issues liberals are more accepting of value trade-offs than are conservatives,\textsuperscript{76} and many liberals like to think of themselves as particularly willing to confront complexity, once they are in power, they, too, need to muster political support and live at peace with themselves.

Intelligence does not feel the same pressures. It does not carry the burden of decision but “merely” has to figure out what the world is like. If the resulting choices are difficult, so be it. It also is not the duty of intelligence to build political support for a policy, and so even intelligence officials who do not oppose the policy will or should feel no compulsions to portray the world in a helpful way. In many cases, good intelligence will then point to the costs and dangers implicit in a policy. It will make it harder for policymakers to present the policy as clearly the best one and will nurture second thoughts, doubts, and unease. It is not that intelligence usually points to policies other than those the leaders prefer, but only that it is likely to give decision makers a more complex and contradictory view than fits with their political and psychological needs. Ironically, it can do this even as it brings good news. One might think that Lyndon Johnson would have welcomed CIA’s telling him that other countries would not fall to Communism even if Vietnam did, but since his policy was justified (to others and probably to himself) on the premise that the domino theory was correct, he did not.\textsuperscript{77}

We like to think that more information and better analysis will yield a clearer picture. But this is often not the case. To the extent that good intelligence will remain
open to alternative interpretations and sensitive to discrepant information, it will be problematic for political leaders. As we saw in the previous chapter, in the Iraq WMD case better intelligence would have produced judgments that were less, not more, certain, and some of the subsequent reforms were designed to ensure that the excess certainty would not be repeated. These reforms are valid and useful but decision makers are likely to be happy with this change only when intelligence contradicts their preferred policy, in which case the greater modesty of the assessments will reduce their impact.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I don’t have many conclusions or even good social science propositions, but here are a few points.

Intelligence is not much studied in the academy. Part of the reason is that gathering information and covert action are dirty businesses, but part is that until fairly recently relatively little information was available. We are still far short of what we would like to have, but quite a bit of analysis (not raw reporting) is available on CIA’s CREST system at the national archives, and, thanks to one of Obama’s executive order, will soon – well, eventually – be available on the internet. Many other documents are available on the CIA’s website or that of the National Security Archives. I believe that a fair amount of Cold War history will have to be re-written on the basis of this information, just as an understanding of Ultra and the Double Cross system has required us to re-write a lot of the history of World War II. We don’t yet have a full picture of what information each state’s leaders had about the other, and my guess is that when we’re through (of course we never are), we will find an interesting landscape of amazing knowledge (there was a lot of codebreaking, spying, and electronic intelligence going on)
and astounding ignorance and mistaken beliefs. Cross-walking this information with arguments about private information, credibility, and signaling will be interesting.

For much of this, the “bottom line” is whether and how intelligence influences policy. I despair of making good generalizations. Despite what I said at the end of the previous paragraph, firm judgments here are difficult. Richard Immerman and John Gaddis have made good arguments that intelligence did not matter much. On the other hand, there are good arguments that intelligence played a crucial role at the start of the Cold War in convincing the top leaders that the Soviet Union was not bent on war, that it could be deterred, and that with proper policies the US could manage the challenges. Furthermore, with the big exception of the first Soviet atomic test, intelligence was able to give decision-makers warning of all new Soviet weapons systems and to give them quite a bit of confidence that there could not be a successful surprise attack.

In this and other cases, my general sense is that intelligence has contributed less on the biggest questions of whether another country is a threat or not and much more on more specific questions. For the former, decision-makers (and the rest of us) are much more driven by our general political predispositions and ideologies than by any secret information that intelligence can glean or steal. Thus it is not surprising that almost no one changes his or her mind on the biggest questions when first entering the government and reading the treasure trove of intelligence reports and analysis. On more specific issues, intelligence is likely to have more impact. Thus once Chamberlain and his colleagues became convinced that Nazi Germany was a major menace, they were prompted to give security assurances to states in East and Central Europe on the basis of intelligence reports (often false) of coming German threats. American analyses of
Iranian capabilities and, to a lesser but still considerable extent, intentions were influenced by intelligence, as I noted earlier. Throughout the Cold War, American military hardware and plans were strongly influenced by intelligence. On the other hand, debates about the crucial issue about whether “the Soviets thought they could fight and win a nuclear war” (to use the title of Richard Pipe’s famous article) were much less influence by intelligence, as people on either side drew on highly classified information to support their conflicting conclusions. (Pipe’s important and general section of the Team B report could have been written before he read any classified material.)

Intelligence and policy often – but not always – move in parallel. When this happens, a central question is the direction of the causal arrow: was intelligence influential or was it politicized, reflecting rather than affecting policy? Answering this question often requires a close tracking of timing, which is difficult because in many cases both intelligence and policy change incrementally. This question is raised, for example, in British intelligence and policies in the 1930s. Levy and Ripsman’s 2010 APSA paper argues that intelligence affected rather than following policy, but I believe that the evidence is not precise enough to establish the chronology that they assert.

For a whole host of reasons discussed in my book and by many others, including my colleague Richard Betts, intelligence can be extremely difficult and states will always suffer surprises. This means that I can continue to supplement my salary by writing post-mortems. Some improvements are possible, however, and I discuss them in the second half of the concluding chapter of my book. It would certainly help if intelligence analysts and the IC were more self-conscious about good social science methodology. Sherman Kent, the “father of American intelligence”, put it well: “The main difference between
professional scholars or intelligence officers on the one hand, and all other people on the other hand, is that the former are supposed to have had more training in the techniques of guarding against their own intellectual frailties.” The operative phrase is “are supposed to have had.”

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1 INR “believes that Saddam continues to want nuclear weapons and that available evidence indicates that Baghdad is pursuing at least a limited effort to maintain and acquire nuclear weapons-related capabilities. The activities we have detected do not, however, add up to a compelling case that Iraq is currently pursuing what INR would consider to be an integrated and comprehensive approach to acquire nuclear weapons. Iraq may be doing so, but INR considers the available evidence inadequate to support such a judgment.” SSCI, pp. 86–7.

2 Douglas Jehl, “C.I.A. Chief Says He’s Corrected Cheney Privately,” New York Times, March 10, 2004; for further discussion see Tenet, At the Center of the Storm, pp. 315–17, 341. Tenet reports one occasion on which the vice president canceled a speech because he told the president it distorted intelligence. Ibid, pp. 356–57. For a compilation of relevant statements by policymakers and intelligence and a partisan but informative debate about what they mean see Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Report on Whether Public Statements Regarding Iraq by U.S. Government Officials Were Substantiated.

3 For further discussion, see Josua Rovner, Fixing the Facts (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, forthcoming).

4 Butler report, pp. 125–27, which concludes that the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) “should not have included the ‘45 minute’ report in its assessment and in the
Government’s [public] dossier without stating what it was believed to refer to”; for related U.S. intelligence, see SSCI, pp. 251–52.

5 July 23 memo from Matthew Rycroft to David Manning, which is printed in many places, for example, New York Review of Books, June 9, 2005, p. 71. Tenet reports that Dearlove later told him that the memo had misquoted him. At the Center of the Storm, p. 310.

6 SSCI, pp. 484–85; also see Risen, State of War, p. 111; Isikoff and Corn, Hubris, pp. 135–36, 140.

7 Kerr et al., “Issues for the US Intelligence Community.”

8 WMD Commission, pp. 191–94.

9 Quoted in Gentry, Lost Promise, p. 243.


11 One point on the other side is that the United States did not allocate sufficient forces to the mission of safeguarding the expected WMD sites. But this is probably explained by the small size of the force and the general incompetence of the planning for the postwar environment. For discussions, see Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq (New York: Pantheon, 2006), pp.
78–83, 156; Richard Shuster, “The Iraq Survey Group,” Journal of Strategic Studies, vol. 31, April 2008, pp. 231–33. The military was more concerned with seeing that WMD were not used against the soldiers than with securing them from theft, and General Franks seems to have thought that once American troops moved into Iraq, people would simply direct them to the sites. Ricks, Fiasco, p. 100.

For the claim that French intelligence was skeptical, see Brigitte Rossigneux, “French Intelligence Lectures the Yankees,” Le Canard Enchaine, September 25, 2002, although if this story is correct the contrast was achieved in part by distorting what the American and British ICs believed. There also are some indications that Canadian officials were skeptical. “PM Wants Proof before Backing Attack on Iraq,” CBC News, September 6, 2002, http://cbc.ca/story/news/national/2002/09/05iraq_pm020905.html. The Germans and Russians may also have doubted that Saddam had restarted his nuclear program. A few scattered individuals dissented. According to Hans Blix, France’s president Jacques Chirac was one of them, remarking on the propensity of intelligence services to “intoxicate each other” (a claim that implicitly denies that French intelligence was much different from the American judgment). Blix, Disarming Iraq (New York: Pantheon, 2004), p. 129. The former UN weapons inspector also dissented, and with better reasons than he was credited with at the time. William Rivers Pitt with Scott Ritter, War in Iraq: What Team Bush Doesn’t Want You to Know (New York: Context Books, 2002).

Comparing the views of different national intelligence services can shed light on other cases as well. Thus the common claim that Stalin was taken by surprise by Hitler’s attack because of the particular infirmities of his intelligence system, although partly correct, needs to be reconsidered in light of the fact that Soviet and British estimates were closely parallel until the last weeks. Gabriel Gorodetsky, Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), esp. pp. 264–65, 281.

Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Report of the Select Committee on

Letter from George Tenet to Senator Robert Graham, Congressional Record, October 9, 2002, p. S10154; for some evidence about pressure on Iraq’s links to terrorism but a muddy interpretation, see SSCI, pp. 357–65; for more detailed discussion of what the IC said and how this compares with what we now believe, see SSCI, Postwar Findings about Iraq’s WMD Programs. For a discussion of the background to the establishment of a Pentagon office that was designed to show links between Saddam’s regime and al Qaeda, see Maria Ryan, “Filling in the ‘Unknowns’: Hypothesis-Based Intelligence and the Rumsfeld Commission,” Intelligence and National Security, vol. 21, April 2006, pp. 286–315. The Department of Defense’s Inspector General report on this operation can be found at http://www.fas.org/irp/agency/dod/ig020907-decl.pdf.


Ricks, Fiasco, p. 51.

Butler report, p. 91; SSCI, pp. 404–422.


In a break from this pattern, in the fall of 2002 new evidence did lead CIA to pull back
from its previous position that the software package purchased for Iraq’s UAVs indicated an intent to develop the ability to strike the United States. WMD Commission, pp. 139-41. Perhaps the fact that this issue was less important than others explains the willingness to change, but I can only speculate.

22 SSCI, p. 249; also see WMD Commission, pp. 189-91. Drumheller’s firsthand reports of CIA’s dismissal of doubts about Curveball similarly come from December 2002. On the Brink, pp. 82-83, 260-64.

23 See, for example, Risen, State of War, pp. 79-80.


25 Quoted in Ralph Weber, ed., Spymaster: Ten CIA Officers in Their Own Words (Wilmington: DE: Scholarly Resources Books, 1999), p. 251. It is not clear, however, whether Johnson was dictating the subjects to be covered or the conclusions to be reached. There also is some ambiguity in the incident Helms described in A Look over My Shoulder, pp. 339-40. For his discussion of political pressures in the later controversy over estimating the size of enemy forces in Vietnam, see pp. 324-29. For DCI Tenet’s views of the pressures by policymakers to conclude that there were significant links between al Qaeda and Iraq, see At the Center of the Storm, pp. 349-50. For the claim that analysts at the World Bank are required to produce papers that support bank policy and specific projects, see Michael Goldman, Imperial Nature: The World Bank and Struggles for Social Justice in the Age of Globalization (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 127.

26 Stansfield Turner, Burn before Reading, pp. 130-32; also see John Prados, The Soviet Estimate: U.S. Intelligence Analysis and Russian Military Strength (New York:
For the (plausible) claim that political consideration led to the withholding of information on the status of Iran’s “moderates” during the period when the Reagan White House was trading arms for hostages, see the memorandum from an Iranian analyst to the deputy Director of Intelligence, December 2, 1986, printed in Gentry, Lost Promise, pp. 276\(\text{N}\)81.

27 For an attempt to draw such lines, see the speech that Robert Gates gave to analysts when he became DCI after deeply contentious confirmation hearings pivoting on whether he had politicized intelligence when he was deputy to William Casey. Gates, “Guarding against Politicization,” Studies in Intelligence, vol. 36, no. 5, 1992, pp. 5\(\text{N}\)13. Also see Jack Davis, “Intelligence Analysts and Policy-Makers: Benefits and Dangers of Tensions in the Relationship,” Intelligence and National Security, vol. 21, December 2006, pp. 999\(\text{N}\)1021. Richard Betts, Enemies of Intelligence (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), chap. 4, points out that the IC has two models\(\text{M}\)one based on the philosophy of one of its founding analysts, Sherman Kent, that stresses the need for distance from policymakers, and the other developed by Robert Gates when he was DCI, which stresses the need for intelligence close to them to be able to speak to their concerns. The first runs the danger of irrelevance, the second of politicization. Betts also points out that for important issues “any relevant analysis will perforce be politically charged because it will point at least implicitly to a conclusion about policy” (p. 75). Also see Gregory Treverton, “Intelligence Analysis: Between ‘Politicization’ and Irrelevance,” in George and Bruce, Analyzing Intelligence, pp. 91\(\text{N}\)104, and Jack Davis, “The Kent-Kendall Debate of 1949,” Studies in Intelligence, vol. 36, no. 5, 1992, pp. 91\(\text{N}\)103.

28 Turner, Burn before Reading, p. 132.

29 For good discussions, see the sources in note 31 in chapter 3. Furthermore, when intelligence is most thoroughly politicized, evidence for this no longer appears. In an
application of the familiar dynamic that power is most effective when it does not need to be applied openly, if an intelligence agency is filled with people who know and share the leader’s views, intelligence will be supportive without leaving any fingerprints. Richard Russell, Sharpening Strategic Intelligence: Why the CIA Gets It Wrong and What Needs to Be Done to Get It Right (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 121; John Diamond, The CIA and the Culture of Failure (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 43. Self-censorship by the analysts is also impossible to detect. Diamond, p. 19.


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


33 “Once when an analyst averred that reliable evidence had become available that indicated a suspected development that undermined an administration initiative was ‘almost certainly taking place,’ a policy critic retorted that the analyst ‘couldn’t get a murder-one conviction in an American court with [his] evidence.’” Jack Davis, “Intelligence Analysts and Policymakers: Benefits and Dangers of Tensions in the Relationship,” Intelligence and National Security, vol. 21, December 2006, p. 1004. Years earlier Paul Wolfowitz had argued that when analysts denied uncertainty on a contentious issue, this often would be used as a weapon in the policy arena, and yet I think it is likely that he would have viewed any expression of doubt on the WMD issue as
aimed at aiding opponents of the war. Davis, p. 1006.

34 SSCI, pp. 161-162; also see Drogin, *Curveball*, p. 52. The plausibility of Iraq’s mobile facilities may account for the CIA’s being especially slow to change its views as new information came in after the war, although stubbornness and idiosyncratic factors may have been at work as well.

35 SSCI, pp. 38, 228.

36 WMD Commission, pp. 144-145.


38 Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm*, pp. 344-345.

39 Duelfer report, pp. 29, 32, 55, 62 (this and subsequent references are to volume 1 unless otherwise noted); vol. 3, “Biological Warfare,” p. 56; vol. 1, “Regime Strategic Intent,” p. 32; Woods et al., *Iraqi Perspectives Report*.

40 Duelfer report, p. 64. John Mueller had earlier speculated that Saddam’s limitations on the inspectors were motivated by his fear of assassination. “Letters to the Editor: Understanding Saddam,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 83, July/August 2004, p. 151.


42 SSCI, *Postwar Findings about Iraq’s WMD Programs*, p. 67.

43 Duelfer report, p. 34; also see p. 57. Ending economic sanctions and ending inspections would not necessarily have coincided, and it is not clear which of them was viewed as most troublesome and why. With some reason, by the late 1990s Saddam seems to have concluded that showing that he had no WMD programs would not have been sufficient to end the sanctions, and so cooperating with the inspectors was pointless. Indeed, the UN resolutions provided for sanctions to continue even after inspections ended, and Saddam had terminated inspections in 1998. This presents a puzzle because if inspections had been the main barrier, Saddam should have resumed his programs at that point, as most observers expected. But it is hard to see how the sanctions were inhibiting
him because after the institution of the Oil for Food program and extensive oil smuggling, the regime had sufficient cash to procure what it needed.

INR in fact had this insight in the spring of 1973, but it dropped out of subsequent analysis: “The Performance of the Intelligence Community before the Arab-Israeli War of October 1973,” pp. 15-16.


For a related argument, see WMD Commission, pp. 10, 12, 173, 175.

SSCI, e.g., pp. 187, 192, 194, 204, 213. The Butler report, pp. 73, 75, makes a similar point about some instances of British intelligence but without implying that this was illegitimate.

Woods et al., Iraqi Perspectives Report, pp. 93-95. This is why an experienced military intelligence analyst argues that “the perception of the adversary’s fundamental goals and priorities is the sine qua non of warning. It constitutes the most significant difference between those who ‘have warning’ and those who do not.” Cynthia Grabo, Anticipating Surprise: Analysis for Strategic Warning (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic Intelligence Research, Joint Military Intelligence College, 2002), p. 81.

Jervis, Perception and Misperception, pp. 156-61. This also recasts the argument that a common inference error is to under-weight base-rate data about the frequency of phenomena: Jervis, “Representativeness in Foreign Policy Judgments,” Political Psychology, vol. 7, September 1986, pp. 483-506.

Drogin, Curveball, p. 82; also see p. 73.


SSCI, p. 21; also see p. 268. CIA apparently also declined to ask for the specifications of the Italian rocket that some (correctly) thought in modified form was the intended use of the aluminum tubes on the grounds that it was firmly established that the tubes were part of an enrichment program. WMD Commission, p. 68.

The phrase apparently originated with Carl Sagan and was used by DCI William Casey when he was disputing the significance of the lack of evidence for Soviet involvement with terrorism. Davis, “Intelligence Analysts and Policymakers,” p. 1004. It should be noted that while Casey was wrong in some of his specific allegations, we now know that the Soviets did indeed train and support many terrorist movements.


Iran’s president reacted to the fact that lack of hard evidence that Iran was seeking nuclear weapons had not dispelled Western suspicions by declaring, “Usually, you cannot prove that sort of thing [i.e., that a country is not seeking weapons]. How can you prove that you are not a bad person?” Quoted in Steven Weisman and Warren Hoge, “Iranian Leader Promises New Proposals to End Nuclear Impasse,” New York Times, September 16, 2005. As I will discuss in the next section, the paucity of evidence sometimes can be explained by the other’s deception and denial activities, an argument made by the United States in this case as well as about Iraq. Bill Gertz, “U.S. Report Says Iran Seeks to Acquire Nuclear Weapons,” Washington Times, September 16, 2005.

WMD Commission, p. 93; also see James Risen, “C.I.A Held Back Iraqi Arms Data, U.S. Officials Say,” New York Times, July 6, 2004; Risen, State of War, chap. 4; and Isikoff and Corn, Hubris, p 167. Jami Miscik, the head of DI, did express surprise at the
paucity of signals intelligence pointing to WMD programs. Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm*, p. 364. For the dismissal of negative evidence that was received in another case, see Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion*, p. 282.

58 After the war, former deputy prime minister Tariq Aziz pointed this out to his interrogators. SSCI, *Postwar Findings about Iraq’s WMD Programs*, p. 67.

59 SSCI, p. 3.


61 Quoted in SSCI, p. 184.

62 Ibid., p. 107.

63 Ibid., pp. 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup>, 106.

64 Ibid., pp. 199<sup>th</sup>-200<sup>th</sup>; WMD Commission, pp. 122<sup>nd</sup>-26<sup>th</sup>. Part of the problem may have been the reorganization that moved imagery analysis out of CIA and into a larger
unit controlled by the military. Russell, *Sharpening Strategic Intelligence*, pp. 80–81; also see Diamond, *CIA and the Culture of Failure*, pp. 379–85.


69 John Bolton, often accused of putting illegitimate pressure on intelligence, apparently believed that the problem instead was that members of the IC were overreaching and trying to censor his “political judgment as to how to interpret this data,” in the words of one of his top aides. Douglas Jehl, “Released E-Mail Exchanges Reveal More Bolton Battles,” *New York Times*, April 24, 2005, and Jehl, “Bolton Asserts Independence On Intelligence,” *New York Times*, May 12, 2005. Unfortunately, it is much harder for anyone below the level of the president or perhaps the cabinet to make clear that what he or she is giving is a judgment different from that of the IC because it would invite the obvious question of whether the president agreed.

70 Where to draw the line and whether Bush administration officials crossed it is debated by Democratic and Republican Senators in Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report on Whether Public Statements regarding Iraq by U.S. Government Officials Were Substantiated by Intelligence Information*, June 2008. This problem is not unique to intelligence but also comes up in areas in which policy is supposed to be based on science, and the years of the Bush administration were filled with controversy on this
score.

71 For further discussion, see Robert Jervis, “Understanding Beliefs,” Political Psychology, vol. 27, October 2006, pp. 641-64.

72 For the argument that Saddam could have been deterred even if he had developed nuclear weapons, see Robert Jervis, American Foreign Policy in a New Era (New York: Routledge, 2005), chap. 3.

73 Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence on Postwar Findings about Iraq’s WMD Programs and Links to Terrorism and How They Compare with Prewar Assessments, September 8, 2006.

74 Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence on Prewar Intelligence Assessments about Postwar Iraq, May 2007.

75 Steven Holmes, “Administration Is Fighting Itself On Haiti Policy,” New York Times, October 23, 1993. The title of this article shows the problem: intelligence is part of the administration but is committed to independent analysis. Treverton argues that given the sensitivity of the subject and the softness of the evidence, the assessment should not have been written but rather orally briefed to policymakers. Treverton, Reshaping National Intelligence, pp. 188-89. When President Truman felt that he had to withdraw troops from Korea in 1948, he ignored estimates that this would “probably in time be followed by an invasion.” Michael Warner, ed., CIA Cold War Records: The CIA under Harry Truman (Washington, DC: CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1994), p. 268.


77 “Implications of an Unfavorable Outcome in Vietnam,” September 11, 1967, in
