

## How Do I Deal With Politicization?

### SETTING THE STAGE

Concern over the potential for politicization of intelligence analysis—and for analysis *writ large*—must be taken seriously. The charge most commonly levied in the media is that the analytic community tailors its analysis to make it more palatable to senior policy officials. According to Jack Davis, a former National Intelligence Officer (NIO) for Latin America and accomplished mentor of analysts,

A politicized and therefore unprofessional assessment can be defined as an analytic deliverable that reflects either (1) the analyst's motivated effort to distort facts and judgments to support, or *oppose*, a specific policy, political entity, or general ideology, or (2) a conspicuous, even if unmotivated, disregard for sound tradecraft standards that produces similarly distorted outputs that could affect the policymaking process.<sup>1</sup>

Richard Betts expands on this concept, noting that politicization can be both top-down (when officials try to make intelligence analysis conform to policy) or bottom-up (when analysts imbue their product with their own political biases).<sup>2</sup> Top-down politicization occurs when policymakers “cherry pick” their evidence, trumpet questionable reporting that supports their views, fabricate or distort information to support their policy agendas, or task analysts to conduct research and produce analysis that will support their policy agenda.

The most pernicious—and we suspect the most widespread—form of politicization is the tendency of analysts to self-censor. When discussing the role of intelligence in the 2003 Iraq War, Paul Pillar, a former NIO for the Middle East, cited the sugarcoating of unwelcome analysis as a particularly bad form of politicization.<sup>3</sup>

We believe an even more egregious mistake is to not address a certain topic because the views of the analytic community differ from those of the client. Often the justification given for not writing is that the policymaker or decision maker would not read the article or would quickly dismiss the analysis.

Many—including Sherman Kent, who headed the Office of National Estimates at the CIA in its formative years—contend that the best way to avoid politicization is to keep the analyst and the policymaker separated to avoid any potential that the analyst's objectivity might be compromised.<sup>4</sup> The problem with this approach is that intelligence analysts can become so disengaged from the policy community that they can no longer provide effective support. Providing timely analysis is an ODNI analytic standard, and compliance requires interacting with policymakers to know with what issues they are wrestling and how soon decisions must be made. Analysts in the business sector face similar dilemmas when their key findings are perceived by management to not support corporate goals or to document the need for actions that would reduce profitability.

## LOOKING MORE DEEPLY

A better way to avoid the pitfalls of politicization is to build an analytic culture that actively promotes two key principles: analytic objectivity and integrity.<sup>5</sup> Analysts must come to work every day knowing that their task is to do the best they can to explain why things happen—and that how they frame their argument has to be independent of any political consideration or business imperative. This point is made explicit in the CIA's ethos statement: "We are truthful and forthright, and we provide information and analysis without institutional or political bias."<sup>6</sup> Betts has come to much the same conclusion in his writings, concluding that "the irrevocable norm must be that policy interests, preferences, or decisions must never determine intelligence judgments."<sup>7</sup>

Carmen Medina, former Deputy Director for Intelligence at the CIA, observed in 2007 that analysts should not regard integrity and neutrality as the same thing or assume that one is dependent on the other. Neutrality implies some distance from the client, whereas integrity rests on the willingness to provide the most complete answer even if it is not what the client wants to hear. She explains, "Neutrality cannot be used to justify analytic celibacy and disengagement from the customer. If forced to choose between analytic detachment and impact on policymaking, the 21st century analyst must choose the latter."<sup>8</sup>

One strategy for dealing with politicization is to provide alternative interpretations of the evidence, posit multiple hypotheses, and generate alternative scenarios when trying to predict the future. As NIO for Latin America, one of the authors was often asked by policymakers, "What do you think I should do?" Over time, he learned that the best response was to say:

Three or four options are available to you. Here are the upsides and the downsides of each option based on the community's assessment of how each option is likely to play out. And this is our level of confidence in the intelligence reporting that supports our assessment of each of these options. I defer to you to decide which option to choose or recommend to your superiors.

Most policymakers appreciate analytic inputs and will factor them into their thinking. Analysts should keep in mind, however, that decision makers must also consider the analysis in the context of what they have learned from other sources, the policy implications of each option, and the amount of risk they are prepared to take. Analysis can inform their judgments, but it rarely determines what is decided.

Robert M. Gates laid out this dilemma in 1992 in a message to CIA analysts after he survived a bruising confirmation battle to become Director of Central Intelligence (DCI). He said:

Unwarranted concerns about politicization can arise when analysts themselves fail to understand their role in the process. We do produce a corporate product. If the policymaker wants the opinion of a single individual, he or she can (and frequently does) consult any one of a dozen outside experts on any given issue. Your work, on the other hand, counts because it represents the well-considered view of an entire intelligence community. Analysts . . . must discard the academic mindset that says their work is their own.<sup>9</sup>

The challenge for editors and managers of analysts is to shape an analyst's draft to make it more focused and compelling in ways that are consistent with the available evidence and not motivated by policy concerns. As Betts describes the process, "If done properly, managers' editing should be a form of benign politicization, bringing intelligence 'into the realm of politics' without corrupting it."<sup>10</sup>

The growing use of videos and other digitalized forms of electronic communication poses even greater challenges to analysts. As newspaper editors know well, choosing which picture of someone to publish is often seen as a political act, especially if an unflattering image is chosen. A political rally can be depicted as a success if the camera zooms in on the candidate and a tight circle of enthusiastic supporters or a disaster if the camera zooms out to show that most of the room is occupied by empty chairs.

Far less attention has been paid to what constitutes bias in the selection of an image than in written text. And substantial energy is being devoted in today's world to manipulating and Photoshopping images for posting on the Internet to support political or ideological objectives. This increased use of video, graphics, and other digitized images in analytic products will require new metrics for assessing digital objectivity.

Managers will need to be more proactive in reviewing all phases—and all forms—of analytic production to ensure that analytic integrity is not compromised. Supervisors of analysts must also resist the temptation when pressures mount and deadlines approach to short-circuit the role of analysts in the production process. More important, they need to constantly reinforce the perception that analysts are responsible for tracking their products through all stages of the editorial process to ensure that analytic tradecraft and standards have not been compromised along the way.

## RELATING CRITICAL THINKING TO POLITICIZATION

The need to protect against politicization extends to every element of critical thinking. For example, analysts should ask, “Who is my client?” to help them conceptualize a tightly focused paper, but they must not tailor the analysis or the message to make it more palatable to that client.

When one of the authors served as NIO for Latin America, he often encountered situations when the State Department was at odds with the Defense Department or the White House. When delivering intelligence products that were requested by one agency or department, he always sent a copy of the paper to policy counterparts in other agencies to ensure that everyone in the policy community was working off the same baseline of intelligence information (see Figure 14.1).

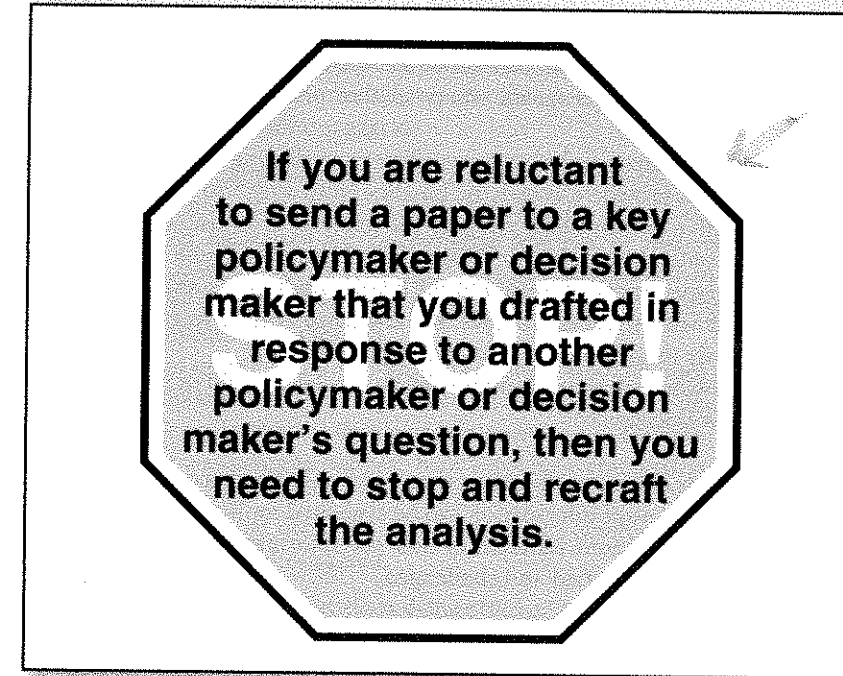
Such procedures also serve as a practical check on analytic objectivity. For example, if analysts are uncomfortable sharing with the State Department how they answered a question for the Defense Department, then they need to consider whether basic analytic standards (see Chapter 3) have been compromised.

Most debates surrounding the potential for politicization center around our second critical thinking element: What are the key questions? The primary concern is whether clients have attempted to politicize the product by asking leading questions or have framed an issue in such a way to ensure that the response will best serve their political agenda. The analyst should take responsibility for ensuring that the right question is being answered. This can be accomplished either by explaining to the client why the question needs to be rephrased or by raising the level of analysis to provide broader perspective while still answering the specific question asked.

Prior to the US invasion of Iraq, the White House was accused of trying to politicize intelligence reporting when senior policymakers kept pressing the Intelligence Community to find out where Iraq’s WMD were located. Many Intelligence Community professionals argued that the more appropriate question would have been, “What is the status of Iraq’s WMD programs?” The first version of the question makes an implicit assumption that such weapons exist; the second formulation is moot on the existence of weapons stockpiles.

The Silberman-Robb WMD Commission found no evidence of politicization, concluding that “no analytic judgments were changed in response

**FIGURE 14.1 Stop! Client Check**



to political pressure to reach a particular conclusion.”<sup>11</sup> The example illustrates, however, the importance of putting any request for analysis in the proper framework. Policymakers and decision makers must function in a political environment and can easily fall into the trap of asking analysts for more ammunition to defend their policies. The analytic community—analysts and managers alike—has the duty to identify such requests for what they are and craft responses that address the questions in a more appropriate analytic context.

## USING STRUCTURED TECHNIQUES TO DEPOLITICIZE THE ANALYSIS

Structured analytic techniques can help counter the pressure to politicize analysis whether the pressure comes from the client or the analyst

*“The administration used intelligence not to inform decision-making, but to justify a decision already made. It went to war without requesting—and evidently without being influenced by—any strategic-level intelligence assessments on any aspect of Iraq. . . . If the entire body of official intelligence analysis on Iraq had a policy implication, it was to avoid war—or, if war was going to be launched, to prepare for a messy aftermath.”*

—Paul Pillar,

Former National Intelligence Officer  
for the Middle East<sup>12</sup>

(see Figure 14.2). The techniques accomplish this task by establishing a more rigorous context in which to address the question and by creating a transparent audit trail of how the answer was generated. If charged with generating a politicized response, analysts can show the accuser how they derived their judgments and ask to be shown where in that process the analysis lacked objectivity.

Structured analytic techniques are effective in dealing with politicization because they can provide a systematic baseline from which to view the data in a more objective fashion, help reframe the analysis to avoid conflict over a particularly contentious point, or present multiple explanations ensuring that everyone's perspective is addressed in the overall analysis. As analysts become more familiar with these techniques, the challenge will be learning to apply them rigorously in the political heat of the moment.

The following techniques have proven particularly useful in mitigating the pressures of politicization:

- Analysis of Competing Hypotheses and other matrices array the data so each item of relevant information can be evaluated for how it contributes to the analysis. Assumptions inherent in how the information is rated or interpreted can also be identified and challenged.
- Multiple Hypothesis Generation provides the opportunity to view the issue from a wider range of perspectives. Use of the Multiple Hypotheses Generator<sup>®</sup> or Quadrant Hypothesis Generation helps ensure that all possible alternatives get attention and that the final set of hypotheses is both comprehensive and mutually exclusive.

**FIGURE 14.2 SATs for Countering Politicization**

#### WHAT STRUCTURED ANALYTIC TECHNIQUES APPLY?

Techniques for dealing with politicization include:

- Analysis of Competing Hypotheses
- Multiple Hypothesis Generation
- Scenarios Analysis
- Indicators
- Indicators Validator<sup>®</sup>
- What If? Analysis
- Argument Mapping
- Mutual Understanding
- Joint Escalation
- The Nosenko Approach

- A well-done scenarios analysis can include scenarios that approximate how a senior policymaker views the issue as well as several contrary or even counterintuitive perspectives. The inclusion of at least one scenario consistent with the policymakers' vantage point provides recipients with an anchor for the analysis and makes it easier to understand other perspectives in terms of how they relate to their baseline scenario.

- Indicators and the Indicators Validator<sup>®</sup> are powerful tools for countering political bias. If agreement can be obtained on what constitutes a good set of validated indicators for determining whether or not something will occur, then a person who is convinced that Scenario X will occur has little ground to argue if all the indicators for that scenario do not emerge and indicators for an alternative scenario do.

A good set of indicators also protects analysts from charges their analysis is politically biased. Most policymakers find it compelling if analysts can say, "These are the indicators we developed six months ago that would warn such a development was going to happen. Now most have emerged, confirming our analysis." The analysts' case is even stronger if they had also developed a list of indicators to show that the event was not going to emerge and most or all of those indicators had not occurred.

- Often a highly contentious debate (either among analysts or between analysts and decision makers) can be defused by use of What If? Analysis. The key to What If? Analysis is to reframe the argument by saying, "Let us assume the issue we now are arguing about has been resolved in this way a year from now. How did that happen? Who had to do what so that events transpired in that way?" The description of what had to happen can then be translated into a series of indicators of what should be monitored to see if the asserted outcome will actually occur. The technique allows analysts to circumvent a particularly contentious and sometimes emotional debate by moving beyond the immediate and often unresolvable issue to focus on more fundamental forces and factors.

- The value of Argument Mapping is that it ensures all views are represented. Any argument made for a position can be rebutted publicly on the map, and all arguments and evidence that anyone deems relevant can be included on the map. If assumptions are suspected to be politically biased, a box supporting that position can be added and others can counter with boxes describing contrarian or counterbalancing forces.

#### POLICY PRESCRIPTION AND OPPORTUNITIES ANALYSIS

The relationship between the intelligence analyst and the policymaker differs from culture to culture. In Canada and the UK, for example, analysts often

work closely with policymakers, providing direct support to the decision-making process. In the United States, the relationship is usually more distant. Two factors largely contribute to the difference: the substantial disparity in the size of the intelligence bureaucracies and the intellectual histories of each country.

- The US intelligence and policymaking communities dwarf those found in Canada, the UK, and all other countries. Analysts are more likely to be separated from their clients both geographically and organizationally.
- The US Intelligence Community has been influenced heavily by the views of Sherman Kent, who observed more than sixty years ago that if analysts get too close to their policymaking and action-taking clients, they will be in danger of losing the independence of mind and the substantive depth and analytic expertise that enables them to make a distinctive professional contribution to national security.<sup>13,14</sup>

In 1996, The Commission on the Roles and Responsibilities of the United States Intelligence Community concluded that the question of how close analysts should get to policymakers was real but manageable.<sup>15</sup> They asserted that the need to present the “unvarnished truth” to policymakers is at the core of every analyst’s tradecraft training and ethos and that this mitigates the potential for bias. Jack Davis, who testified before the commission, framed the issue in this way: “If an intelligence analyst is not in some danger of being politicized, he is probably not doing his job.”<sup>16</sup> According to Davis, the mission of intelligence analysts is to “apply in-depth substantive expertise, all-source information, and tough-minded tradecraft to produce assessments that provide distinctive value-added to policy clients’ effort to protect and advance US security interests.”<sup>17</sup>

In his role as NIO for Latin America, one of the authors quickly learned the value of establishing close working relations with his principal clients in the policy community. Even more important was the realization that access to key policymakers was greatly enhanced if he could provide useful insights and actionable intelligence in addition to the traditional warnings and worst-case assessments intelligence analysts are best known to generate. Over the years, a pattern developed where the author learned that US national interests were best served when he managed to balance the number of warning messages he delivered with an equal number of helpful insights that policymakers could use to advance their policy objectives.

A strategy of providing policymakers and decision makers with assessments that evaluate both the opportunities and the risks of various policy options they might be considering will always be valued.<sup>18</sup> The analyst’s role is to help decision makers shape the future. This requires that analysts not only warn about what bad things the future might bring but also identify forces and

factors the decision maker can influence to optimize national interests or policy objectives. Such opportunity-oriented assessments, or opportunities analysis, should focus on how to mitigate bad scenarios from unfolding and how to enhance the prospects for positive developments to occur.<sup>19</sup>

For opportunities analysis to be effective, it must be timely, provide new insights or a new frame for understanding a problem, and be specific enough to offer actionable options that policymakers or decision makers can implement. Analysis crafted to support a decision that arrives after it has been made obviously is useless. A more important distinction, however, is that opportunities analysis should be offered in time for a decision maker to fashion a new course of action that capitalizes on the analytic insights to exploit a perceived opportunity or to prevent an unwanted outcome. In addition, the decision maker must believe that the analysis comes from a trustworthy source and is intended to serve the overarching national security interest or corporate goals, not support a parochial policy agenda.

A major caveat for analysts is never to cross the line between offering useful ideas and expressing personal views of which ideas most deserve to be implemented. When asked to provide an assessment of the risks and benefits of various policy options, analysts must never be seen as promoting personal agendas or reflecting personal political preferences. The ability to provide analysis that is universally deemed objective in an increasingly politicized environment is highly valued. Almost everyone whom decision makers engage is an advocate. The information most of their sources provide is almost always intended to influence their decisions, not make them smarter. In the policymakers’ world, the intelligence analyst is a rare commodity: someone who knows the facts, will actually point out knowledge gaps, and is motivated only by the desire to help them make the best informed decision possible.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The most pernicious, and probably most widespread, form of politicization is the tendency of analysts to self-censor.
- The best defense against the pressures of politicization is to build an analytic culture based on objectivity and integrity and to provide alternative views.
- The increased use of video and other digitized images in analytic products will require new metrics for assessing digital objectivity.
- Structured analytic techniques are effective in dealing with politicization because they can provide a systematic baseline from which to view the data, reframe the analysis, or present alternative views that capture the perspective of all key stakeholders.
- Those who provide analytic assessments to policymakers or decision makers should strive to balance the amount of bad news they deliver with an equal

portion of opportunities analysis that decision makers can use to advance their objectives.

- Analysts are a rare commodity because they are not advocates; they are motivated by the desire to help the policymaker or decision maker make the best decisions possible.

### CONSIDERING THE CASE STUDY

Review Case Study IV, “Financial Crises in the United States: Chronic or Avoidable?” Assume this case study was written in 2015 for generalists seeking to learn more about the US financial crisis in 2008.

- Did the author present a balanced picture of the positions advocated by the various schools of economic thought, or did the author reflect a personal political agenda?
- How did the organization of the article support the thesis that the case study was a rigorous analysis and not political advocacy?
- What structured analytic techniques could have the author employed to better deflect charges of politicization?
- If you were to include a section on opportunities analysis in the paper, what themes would you highlight?

### NOTES

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2. Richard K. Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence: Knowledge & Power in American National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 67.
3. Paul R. Pillar, “Intelligence, Policy, and the War in Iraq,” *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 2 (March/April 2006): 22.
4. Sherman Kent, *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949), 195–201.
5. These two principles are well represented in analytic standards promulgated for analysts in the United States. The ODNI’s Office of Analytic Integrity and Standards lists “Objective” and “Independent of Political Consideration” as the first two of five IC Analytic Standards. See the ODNI’s “Intelligence Community Directive #203,” January 22, 2015, <http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICD/ICD%20203%20Analytic%20Standards.pdf>.
6. Central Intelligence Agency, “CIA Vision, Mission, Ethos, and Challenges Statement,” <https://www.cia.gov/about-cia/cia-vision-mission-values>.

7. Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence*, 75.
8. Carmen Medina, “What to Do When Traditional Models Fail: The Coming Revolution in Intelligence Analysis,” *Studies in Intelligence*, April 14, 2007, <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol46no3/article03.html>.
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10. Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence*, 77.
11. The Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction, Report to the President of the United States (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, March 31, 2005): 188, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GPO-WMD/pdf/GPO-WMD.pdf>.
12. Pillar, “Intelligence, Policy, and the War in Iraq,” 22.
13. Jack Davis, “Improving CIA Analytic Performance: Analysts and the Policymaking Process,” *Kent Center Occasional Papers, The Sherman Kent School for Intelligence Analysis* 1, no. 2 (September 2002): 2, <https://www.cia.gov/library/kent-center-occasional-papers/vol1no2.htm>.
14. Sherman Kent also cautioned in *Strategic Intelligence* that too much distance between the policymaker and the analyst would make intelligence irrelevant, concluding that this was more dangerous than allowing the analyst to get too close to the policymaker.
15. The Commission on the Roles and Responsibilities of the United States Intelligence Community, “Preparing for the 21st Century: An Appraisal of US Intelligence” (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, March 1, 1996), [www.gpoaccess.gov/int/index.html](http://www.gpoaccess.gov/int/index.html).
16. Davis, “Improving CIA Analytic Performance,” 7.
17. Davis, “Tensions in Analyst-Policymaker Relations: Opinions, Facts, and Evidence,” 9.
18. *Ibid.*, 10–11.
19. *Ibid.*, 9.