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NFAC 3450-79

29 June 1979

Memorandum for Dr. Bowie

Subject: Essay on Key Judgments by [redacted]

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[redacted] has written an interesting Essay on formulating the Key Judgments portion of an Intelligence Estimate a copy of which is attached. You may wish to consider the points the Essay raises.

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[redacted]

[redacted]

William Leonard

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Attachment:
As stated

[redacted]

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18 June 1979
(revised 27 June)

To: SRP

Key Judgments:

Concept and Practice

(NIEs and IIMs)

1. The producer of an estimate is apt to regard the main paper as the analytical centerpiece of his effort. From the viewpoint of the policymaking consumer, who often does not have the time or inclination to read the main paper, it is the Key Judgments that are the most important part of an estimate. It will only be interesting Key Judgments that may induce him to read part or all of the main paper. Because to stimulate intelligence consumption and serve the consumer is the purpose of estimative products, the Key Judgments should be designed with great care.

2. The literal use of Key Judgments was started in 1969, and their importance apparently reaffirmed in 1973. I have not so far been able to establish whether these initiatives were accompanied by written or elaborate oral directives.

3. In any case, present practice exhibits a large range of quality, and of conceptions of what the Key Judgments should be about.



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4. The relevant criteria of quality are hardly controversial and can be simply stated. Key Judgments should be (a) clearly articulated, (b) coherent, that is, logically and substantively integrated and (c) reflective of the analysis in the main paper. Although these criteria are unobjectionable, Key Judgments vary inordinately in meeting them. While some variation in quality is inevitable and acceptable, the average should be raised. This is especially true regarding the extent to which Key Judgments and main paper are appreciably at variance.¹

5. Even more striking is the conceptual disagreement on the purpose of Key Judgments. In my experience, many, if not most authors simply write Key Judgments as if they were meant to be a summary of the main paper, often with an apparently indifferent selectivity on the points in the main paper that are to be included.

6. There are very lengthy NIEs (for example, 11-14) that feature a Preface, Key Judgments, Summary, Main Paper, and Annexes. This practice, incidentally, obviously regards Key Judgments and Summary to be different things. However, most NIEs and IIMs are much shorter and, therefore, do not require a summary in addition to the Key Judgments.

¹ In some cases, the divergence results from the fact that main paper and Key Judgments are written by different people.

7. Key Judgments do, of course, summarize parts of the main paper. But they should do so in a sharply selective fashion. Key Judgments should present, and present exclusively, estimative answers to the Key Questions that are presumably of interest to the policymaker.² Estimative answers are judgmental statements about things we do not know, whether they are predictive or related to presence or past.

8. Present practice in the formulation of Key Judgments reflects another conceptual conflict that affects their selectivity. At one extreme, Key Judgments present only the best estimative guess or guesses. At the other extreme, Key Judgments recognize different assumptions and contingencies even if one estimate is favored, more or less, over another. Practice varies greatly on this perspective.

9. Both concepts can be seriously defended. The more "balanced" version is safer. It recognizes that estimating is a hazardous business. It alerts the consumer to the possibility of events held to be less probable than others (which is especially important if these events would have serious consequences to US interests.) It also informs the consumer on how to think about the estimative problem rather than giving him only the result of the author's thinking.

² In general, these will be the key questions, formulated in the Concept Paper, which prompted the need for an estimate to begin with. Subsequent analysis, however, may engender some revision, or additions, to these questions.

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On the other hand, the balanced version has the grave disadvantage of the diminished usefulness of a hedging estimate.

The alternative version has the great virtue of being truly estimative in the sense of giving the consumer forthrightly the best judgment that can be produced. Choosing among assumptions, contingencies and judgments is the very essence of the estimative process.

10. To be dogmatic about solving this conceptual conflict seems unwise in view of intrinsic differences in estimative difficulties. Yet it seems also unwise to leave this conceptual conflict wholly unresolved. Three desiderata greatly commend themselves. First, if the author is truly unable (as distinct from being unwilling) to exercise judgment about various possibilities, he should clearly say so, and present his alternatives. Similarly, alternatives should be presented in the Key Judgments if different estimating units arrive at conflicting estimates about important matters. Second, forthright selective judgment should be regarded as the ideal outcome of the estimative effort. Third, uncertainties about the preferred estimate are better expressed - in the Key Judgments - in terms of degrees of confidence with which they are offered than by giving different estimative judgments.

11. In line with the estimative ideal, Key Judgments should be as forthright as possible in the expression of probabilities attached to an estimate. Whenever this is the preferred estimate, to say that an event is virtually certain to happen is better than to say that it is probable, etc.

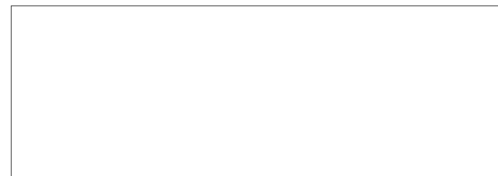
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12. If Key Judgments only give the policymaker key estimate answers to the key estimative questions, then these estimates deserve to be supported by a brief, concise, explanatory statement, including estimative assumptions. The brevity of the supportive statement depends on the number of estimative answers (or ticks) that are presented--which can involve very few or a great many.

13. Finally, it would seem useful, especially when the estimative answers are many and supportive statements must be very economical, that each answer show in parentheses the supporting paragraphs in the main paper and the annexes. If he feels challenged to do so, the policy consumer can then quickly turn to the relevant portions of the main paper and the annexes.

14. It seems that the use and usefulness of NIEs and IIMs might well increase if the proposed practice became reasonably uniform.



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* I wish to thank my colleagues on the Senior Review Panel for helpful comments.

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