

# Tradecraft Review

Continuous Learning in the DI:  
The May 2004 Review of  
Analytic Tradecraft Fundamentals



August 2004

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**SCOPE NOTE**

During 10-12 May, 2004, I convened the analyst and manager corps of the Directorate of Intelligence for a mandatory, half-day "stand-down" session on analytic tradecraft. As indicated in my opening remarks, the state of analysis in the Directorate is strong but with room for improvement. The goal in asking every officer to come "off line" for a half-day was therefore two-fold: to underscore the importance of the Directorate's analytic mission and to provide a collective opportunity to learn and improve by reviewing both the requirements for sound analytic practices and lessons learned from poor tradecraft.

In these sessions, jointly organized by the Sherman Kent School and the Office of Policy Support, presentations by senior DI officers addressed the trademarks of quality analysis and offered exemplars of strong and weak practices. Many thanks to those involved for their illuminating and candid presentations. In order to capture the lessons identified and make them readily accessible as an ongoing reference for DI officers, the Sherman Kent School [redacted]

[redacted] has distilled the key concepts from these presentations for both hardcopy and web-based dissemination.

No topic could be more appropriate [redacted] than this booklet, prepared by a Senior Analytic Service analyst. It is not an exhaustive rendering of all that was covered during the refresher sessions but provides a synthesis that covers the essential elements. It will assist analysts in continuous tradecraft learning and in attaining the highest standards of our shared profession.

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**MESSAGE FROM THE DDI ON THE MAY 2004 "STAND-DOWN"**

In holding these sessions, we are following through on a commitment I made in my February speech on the State of Analysis in the Directorate to hold a Tradecraft Refresher Course for all DI analysts and managers. As I said in February, intelligence analysis is our profession and it is our craft. As practitioners of that craft, it is up to us—not others—to ensure that we are continuously learning and improving and that we do not lose sight of the fundamentals of our work.

Our generation of analysts and managers has an especially heavy burden of responsibility. First, we face an exponentially growing volume of information that must be read, digested, and analyzed. Second, the time it takes to send a requirement to the field, mount collection, disseminate and write reports, and deliver finished intelligence analysis has been radically compressed. And third and most importantly, we now have unprecedented access to the President and his most senior national security advisers. This means we must meet a higher standard than ever before—a standard set first and foremost by our own professional commitment to excellence, but also one expected and demanded by the Administration, the Congress, and the American public.

I called for a "stand-down" because, quite simply, it is overdue and it is needed. In my February speech, I characterized the Directorate's "state of analysis" as strong, with room for improvement. And that is why these sessions are being held—to improve. We will not get better without trying to get better—and without focusing on our mistakes and learning from them.

Our mission and our corporate responsibility must be to give the policymaker the best-crafted analytical product possible. And, when that product leaves CIA, it represents and reflects on every one of us. One key message of these "stand-down" sessions is that no analyst and no analytic manager can be either a passive recipient of intelligence or a disengaged producer of intelligence. We have to cultivate a passion for this work, and every one of us must accept personal accountability for the quality of his or her work. Moreover, this is not something to be feared; it is what gives us our greatest professional satisfaction—taking pride in our work.

In these sessions, analysts and managers will hear some of the challenges we face in our work that go beyond the fundamentals of tradecraft. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] We have launched a number of initiatives to ensure that those obstacles are overcome. But our primary focus now is the importance of continuous improvement. Our goal is not to produce analysis that our customers agree with or necessarily even like. Our job is to be objective, cogent, and provide value-added to the policy debate over important national security issues. When the Directorate is delivering a difficult or unwelcome message, we need to be sure there is a solid foundation of credibility with our consumers so they will hear the message. Products based on strong tradecraft will stand up well to the scrutiny of skeptical readers.

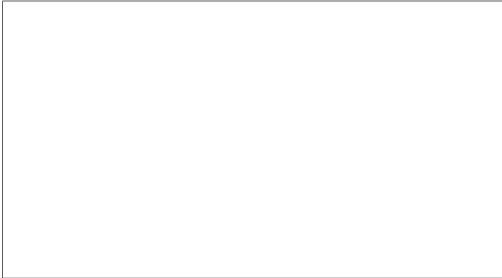
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**CONTINUOUS LEARNING IN THE DI: MAY 2004 REVIEW OF ANALYTIC TRADECRAFT FUNDAMENTALS**



"This is a difficult profession. You are asked to inform the debate on some of the country's most important policy judgments, usually based on limited and conflicting information. We only get pieces of the puzzle. It is like trying to do a 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle with only 200 pieces. And, as a kicker, you do not get to see the lid of the box to tell you what it is supposed to look like."

--DDI, February 2004

"When we make mistakes we need to learn from them collectively as a Directorate. We will enhance our expertise and broaden our point of view by reaching out to others, employing contrarian analyses and, perhaps most importantly, by expanding the diversity of our workforce."

--DDI, May 2004

**A Time for Reflection on the Quality of Analysis**

The foregoing observations highlight the significant responsibilities and challenges that the Directorate of Intelligence faces in the period ahead for providing insightful analysis to our nation's most senior leaders. Seldom has the Directorate had such access to

or such impact on the highest levels of our government. As the DCI said earlier this year, we will never be "all right or all wrong." When problems occur, it is important for DI managers and analysts to reflect on what we have done right and what we can do better. A period of self-examination is important now and can serve as one of the best ways of constantly working to improve the "quality of our analysis." Like any catchall phrase, this concept is shorthand for a lot of different things. In its broadest sense, it requires:

- Sophisticated, value-added analysis on key national security issues; it is not "gisting" cables but rather putting an issue into a bigger context, providing nuance and details that will drive a critical foreign policy decision or discussion.
- World-class expertise on an issue; it is not just opinion but insight, informed by a career-long development of expertise.
- Rigorous re-examination of analytical judgments and assumptions; it is not holding onto an analytical model or line of reasoning just because it has proven to be reliable in the past.

Translating these broad objectives into every day practice means that DI analysis must contain the following attributes:

- Precision of language.
- Clear articulation of judgments and levels of confidence.



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**“Continuous learning will require new tradecraft review processes ...”**

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- Understanding and explaining the quality of intelligence sources and key gaps.
- Examination of alternative analytical possibilities or outcomes.

**Key Principles to Guide DI Analysis**

Maintaining high-quality analysis demands that the DI understand and put into practice daily some important principles that should shape everything we do. Among these are: continuous learning, personal accountability, corporate responsibility, analytical integrity, precision and accuracy, and insightful analysis.

**Continuous Learning.** The DDI has noted that any organization that does not learn from its mistakes is destined to repeat them. While the DI has had numerous successes, it has also made mistakes and will make mistakes again. When we do, we will admit them, study them and learn from them. As a senior manager remarked, “the East India Company—a global power in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, exists today but only in the history books. If we do not constantly reassess our tradecraft, we too could go the way of the East India Company.” As practitioners of that craft it is up to us—not others—to ensure that we are continuously learning and improving. We must not lose sight of the fundamentals of our work—the key elements of our tradecraft. We will not get better without trying to get better.

Continuous learning will require new tradecraft review processes to develop understanding of where our analysis can improve and where our analytical workforce can be assisted. The Iraq WMD Review Group, established

in 2003, was one mechanism for examining critical judgments and incorporating lessons learned into the Directorate’s training programs.

[redacted] will allow us to examine our tradecraft more systematically,

[redacted] and turn those findings into new tradecraft training objectives that will strengthen the Directorate. Already, the DI has initiated an “Advanced Analyst Training Program” that will be offered in Fall 2004 and will draw heavily from our lessons learned to bolster best practices.

**Personal Accountability.** The current focus on Iraq should not mislead analysts to think they are not personally affected by tradecraft mistakes. Analysts who worked on the Soviet Union or Central America in the 1980s, India-Pakistan nuclear issues in the mid-1990s, and terrorism since 9/11 know that analytical controversy could well visit others in the future. Rigorous testing of assumptions and revisiting of past judgments can prepare each analyst for the day when his or her issue becomes the focus of policymakers’ scrutiny and challenge. An analyst prepared for such controversy is an analyst who has identified key analytical assumptions, has a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the reporting, and can articulate how judgments were reached [redacted]

[redacted] A dose of analytical humility—that is, graciously accepting the comments and criticisms from colleagues—is a professional requirement. Analytical arrogance in the coordination process has no place in the DI and is dangerous as it leads to dismissing valuable information and insights into our work. [redacted]

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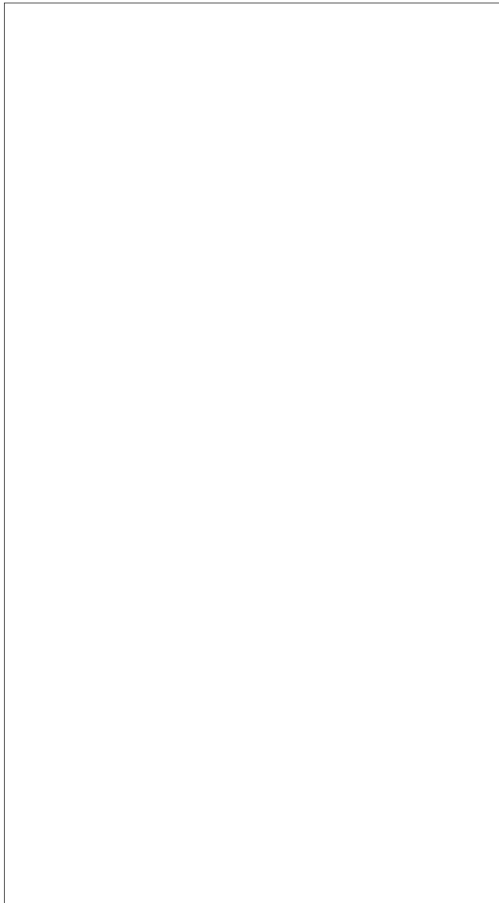
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Senior mentoring is now a key skill to insure the DI's continuous learning and ultimate survival as a world-class analytical service.

The pressure to "get it right" should not lead analysts to shy away from reaching firm judgments. Mistakes will happen; they should teach analysts how to improve, not how to avoid tough calls. Analysts must take responsibility for getting the facts straight. Relying on other analysts or reviewers to catch errors is a recipe for failure and rebuke by senior policymakers who notice them.



**Corporate Responsibility.** Our judgments are not our own but rather are the Agency's. We have the obligation to coordinate our products fully across the DI and increasingly across the Intelligence Community. Just as no analyst can assume his or her issue is safe from political controversy or analytical challenge, the entire Directorate must share in the responsibility for each and every analyst's judgments. That means an individual analyst or issue team's work cannot be done in a vacuum. There must be dialogue among analysts and across issue teams to maximize the talents of our diverse and sophisticated experts. There must be involvement of senior managers as well as the Senior Analytical Service in this analytical dialogue, to take responsibility for nurturing newer analysts and developing their skills as self-critics and skeptics. In sum, colleagues must seriously read and comment on each other's drafts; managers must rigorously develop and challenge analysts; senior Agency managers from the DCI, DDCI, and DDI on down must be prepared to stand behind our judgments to the President, the Congress, and the American people.

**Analytical Integrity.** The Directorate exists for one reason—to analyze all-source information in as even-handed a fashion as is humanly possible and to provide policymakers with judgments not effected by any policy agenda. The best minds and information in the world will be useless if DI managers and analysts are not able to present frank assessments to powerful leaders who may not agree with our judgments. It sounds easy but it is not. Policymakers, who rightfully have a policy agenda, can make it hard for DI analysts to bring them bad news. They can demand that we re-examine the evidence, delineate our analytical approach, or look for

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**“... we must be prepared to explain our reasoning and challenge ourselves to ensure we are not missing something.”**

**“Credibility with senior policymakers begins with getting the facts right.”**

**“... the Directorate has to “ask the right question” if it is to produce useful and insightful analysis.”**

alternative scenarios. As a Directorate, we must be prepared to explain our reasoning and challenge ourselves to ensure we are not missing something. However, at the end of the day, we must be prepared to stick to our judgments when they are sound or admit to errors and correct them as appropriate.

Analytical integrity is not a new challenge but rather an enduring one. Richard Helms’s memoirs recount that the Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs in the late 1960s had worked himself into exhaustion while briefing unpleasant assessments to President Lyndon Johnson. Vice President Humphrey later praised this senior officer for having “served the President well by holding your ground and telling us about the situation as you saw it in Vietnam. It was brutally frank and forthright analysis.” And today, the challenge remains the same.

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[Redacted] also to be open to the idea that we could be wrong and will admit our mistakes.” Doing so makes policymakers respect the analyst and the institution. It is what demonstrates the Directorate’s integrity and validates its mission.

**Precision and Accuracy.** Credibility with senior policymakers begins with getting the facts right. There is a need for absolute accuracy and precision in everything the Directorate writes and briefs. Failing to do that not only leads to incorrect judgments, but also seriously undercuts our credibility with our readers. Misquoting [Redacted]

[Redacted] will be noticed and, if not corrected, foster a belief among policymakers that they cannot depend on CIA fact-checking.

Choosing our words carefully so that the reader grasps the exact meaning intended is equally important. Analysts should not confuse elegant prose for precision and clarity. Caveats or qualifications lost in the editorial review process can distort the analyst’s intended message and mislead the reader. Explaining that some nuance had been removed by a night editor is not likely to mollify an annoyed reader the day after. Analysts must be prepared to go the extra mile in articulating the importance of caveats and context to editors who do not know the issues as well as the experts, and they must be willing to stand by their analysis.

**Insightful Analysis.** The mission of preparing insightful analysis is what distinguishes the Directorate from any other organization to which senior US policymakers could go for information and analysis. *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, or *Foreign Affairs* can write about whatever they decide will be controversial, appealing, or profitable. The CIA, however, is in the business of telling a select, demanding, and decisive group of policymakers what it does not already know, will find useful, and will find credible. Simply put, the Directorate has to “ask the right question” if it is to produce useful and insightful analysis. Providing obvious conclusions will cause our work to be discounted and make our jobs harder the next day. In order to ask the right intelligence question, analysts need to know the audience, the policy agenda, and the state of play within the interagency process.

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- Analysis that is irrelevant or ignored comes from targeting the wrong audience or misunderstanding what

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the audience's level of understanding and policy needs are.

- Insightful or "value-added" analysis comes from knowing what the policymaker already knows, what he cannot yet know, and what he would find useful in understanding a complex story.

Ultimately, the target audience—the President, an Assistant Secretary, or a military commander—will be the judge of whether CIA analysis has been useful or credible. CIA team chiefs, publication editors, or IC colleagues will review this analysis, but they are **NOT** the audience. Persuading the policymaker that you are right is your job, not the policymaker's responsibility. This challenge warrants the additional elaboration that follows.

**Crafting Insightful, Persuasive Analysis**

CIA analysts must know what the audience knows

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Understanding where the policymaker is in the decision-making process will help determine the kind of analysis that is needed:

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

**A Policymaker's Top Ten for Analysts**

--Get me information and analysis on time, so I can make an informed decision. If it is late, I will decide without it.

--Tell me something I do not already know. Know what I know and what I need.

--Give me fact-based analysis, and let others write op-ed pieces. You need to organize facts in a way that reveals patterns, notes change, and has insight.

--What are all the angles on the issue? What did I not ask for that I would need to understand the issue?

--Have you convinced me that you have examined all the alternatives? You should know all the reasons for doubting your conclusions.

--Is your argumentation transparent? You must tell me what you know, where your data come from, and whether you are confident or not. Tell me if you are changing your line of argument and why.

--What should worry me, but also what opportunities are there? If you overwarn, I will ignore you to our peril.

*"Persuading the policymaker that you are right is your job . . ."*

*"Understanding where the policymaker is in the decision-making process will help . . ."*

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**“... Caveats are essential and help policymakers gauge how much trust to put in our analysis.”**

**“... our analysis becomes more insightful when it goes beyond answering the immediate question and examines related issues ...”**

--Keep me honest with any bad news but you will have to persuade me. If I misunderstand an issue, figure out a way to make me listen.

--Check for your own policy bias and be open to your own fallibility. Do not let your personal views color your analysis or blind you to contrary information.

--If you are wrong tell me so. If you do, I am more likely to respect you and have confidence in you than if you do not.

Useful information can be conveyed in many forms. It may be a fact

[redacted] or [redacted]

a graphic that displays a complex process on a single page. Sometimes the most useful information is not a secret, but rather an unclassified description

[redacted]

Once the analyst understands the audience's needs, the challenge is to present facts and argumentation in a way that is clear, accurate, and compelling. Analysis that has no clear focus, is missing details, and has not carefully weighed the evidence or assessed information gaps cannot be fixed by editors. The goal of sending forward well-supported argumentation does not mean, however, overstating a case or ignoring problems of sourcing or contradictory reporting.

Caveats are essential and help policymakers gauge how much trust to put in our analysis and how much risk they run in basing policies on it. It is the analyst's responsibility to know the certainty of the information.

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Finally, our analysis becomes more insightful when it goes beyond answering the immediate question and examines related issues, which the policymaker must also be aware of in order to appreciate the key conclusions of our analysis. That is what will distinguish insightful analysis from the obvious. Answering the policymaker's first question may also suggest other areas where the analyst should provide further details or context to understand the issue

[redacted] even if it is only a mental exercise that captures the broader context in which the immediate issue sits and connects it to other issues important to the target audience.

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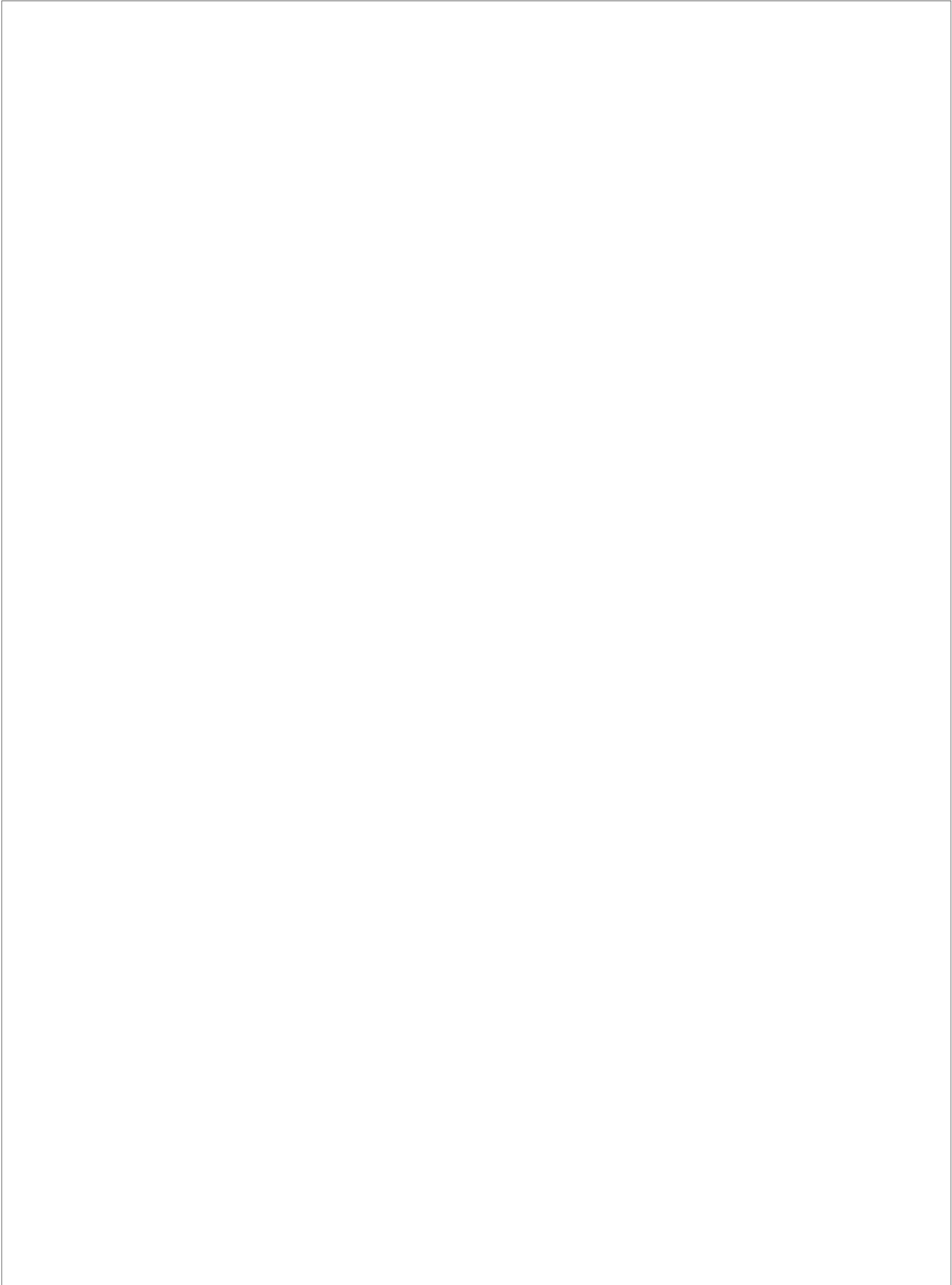
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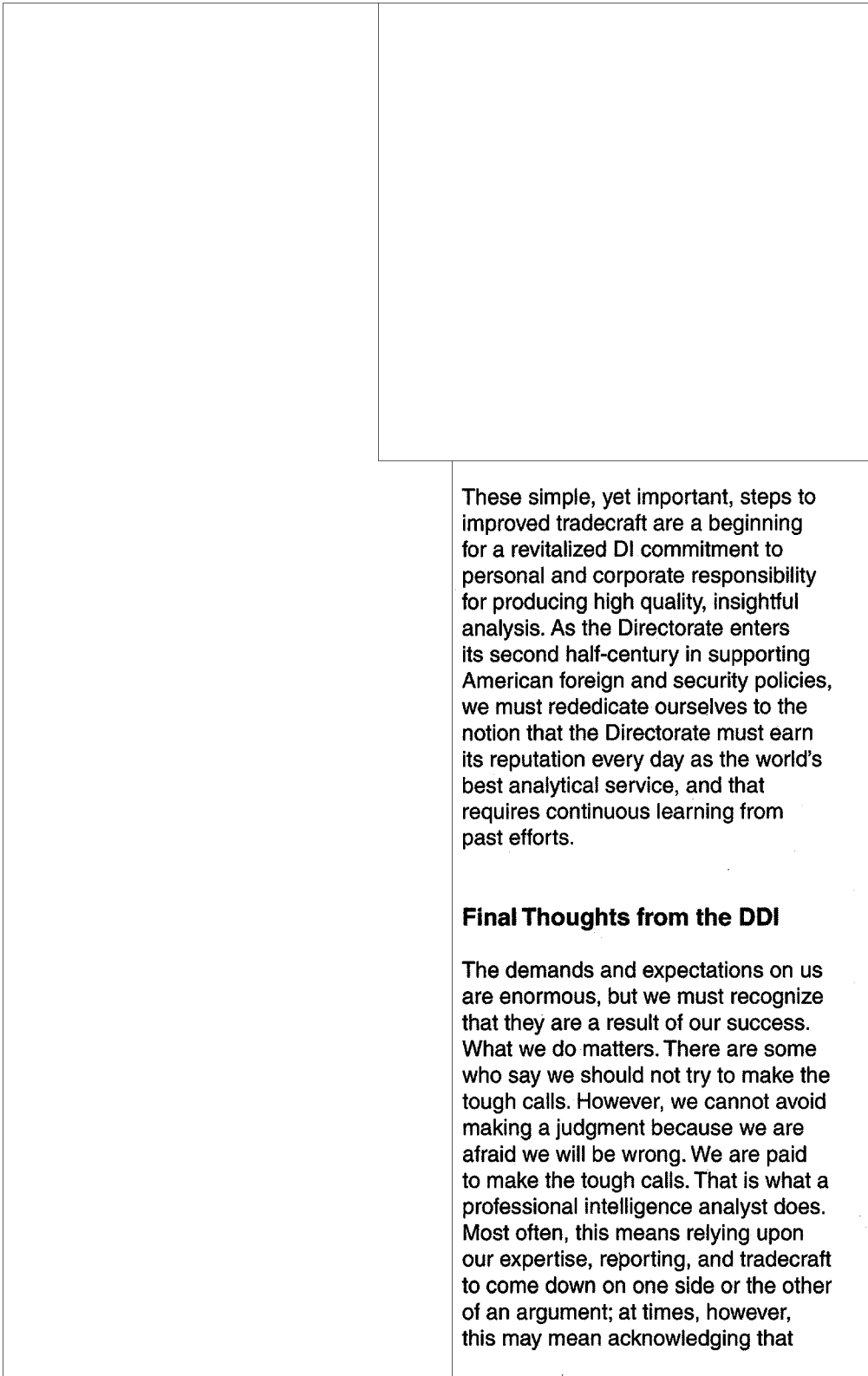
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**“... the  
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**“We are paid to  
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These simple, yet important, steps to improved tradecraft are a beginning for a revitalized DI commitment to personal and corporate responsibility for producing high quality, insightful analysis. As the Directorate enters its second half-century in supporting American foreign and security policies, we must rededicate ourselves to the notion that the Directorate must earn its reputation every day as the world's best analytical service, and that requires continuous learning from past efforts.

**Final Thoughts from the DDI**

The demands and expectations on us are enormous, but we must recognize that they are a result of our success. What we do matters. There are some who say we should not try to make the tough calls. However, we cannot avoid making a judgment because we are afraid we will be wrong. We are paid to make the tough calls. That is what a professional intelligence analyst does. Most often, this means relying upon our expertise, reporting, and tradecraft to come down on one side or the other of an argument; at times, however, this may mean acknowledging that

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***“... we must give the policymaker full transparency into our confidence in the judgments.”***

the reporting could support several hypotheses. But we must remember that when we “call it as we see it,” we must give the policymaker full transparency into our confidence in the judgments. We must be clear, tell them what we know, what we do not know, what our judgment is, and occasionally—when there is no firm reporting—tell them what our experience suggests to us. As I said in February, “if you apply good tradecraft—and do your job to the fullest—you can be sure that I will defend your analysis before any critic.”