



President John F. Kennedy pictured meeting Tanganyika's Prime Minister Julius Kambage Nyerere at the White House on July 17, 1961. (National Archives)

Decision Advantage: Intelligence Support for Presidential Visits

Historical Lessons from Africa Diplomacy

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When US presidents welcome foreign leaders to Washington, they are inundated with paper. From talking points and draft statements to seating arrangements and dinner menus, the White House staff will prepare all of it, except for one essential document: the CIA leadership visit piece. It is this analysis—presented as a standalone assessment or integrated into the *President's Daily Briefing (PDB)*—that delivers decision advantage for the president of the United States.

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Intelligence Support to Presidential Visits

A CIA visit piece is more than a written recitation of a foreign leader's career highlights or a preview of potential agenda items. When it is done well, it is a revealing and yet remarkably succinct study of a leader's hopes and dreams, attitudes and demeanor, and friends and enemies at home and abroad. In other words, it is a roadmap to understand who is sitting across the table and how to advance US national security interests.

Effective leadership analysis is exceedingly difficult to do in the best of circumstances, and arguably even more challenging when it comes to sub-Saharan Africa. Relative to other regions, there has been less reporting, comparatively fewer intelligence analysts, and a limited number of senior policy interactions. It requires deep subject-matter expertise and superior intelligence tradecraft to transcend these shortcomings and contribute to a successful presidential engagement.

As a former CIA analyst, national intelligence officer for Africa, and NSC senior director for African Affairs, I have drafted PDB visit pieces for presidents and personally prepped them for their meetings. When I was a junior analyst on West Africa, I penned intelligence assessments to help President Bush navigate sensitive foreign policy topics and deftly engage African counterparts whose ambitions threatened to undercut regional stability. Later,

as a senior analyst, I participated in an executive briefing for President Obama before the African Leaders Summit in 2014. My colleague and I presented a framework to analyze and interact with more than 40 heads of state. Finally, in my role as NSC senior director, I previewed key points and context for President Biden's meeting with South African President Ramaphosa and Angolan President Lourenco, as well as for his phone call with Kenyan President Ruto.

My professional experience tracks with the declassified record. Even though it is incomplete and riddled with redactions, publicly released intelligence documents showcases how and why CIA leadership analysis has become pivotal to presidential meetings. By examining 34 PDBs and other intelligence reports from 1961 to 1987 and then cross-referencing these analytic assessments with 63 policy memos, public statements, and press reports, as well as personal reflections, it is possible to chart how the CIA perfected the visit piece; measure its policy successes and failures; and point to new innovations to elevate the art form, including through the transformative power of AI. In each of these examples, it was evident that deep expertise and analytic tradecraft were essential for success. As Martin Petersen noted in his article, "The Challenge for the Political Analyst" in *Studies in Intelligence* (Vol. 47, No. 1, 2003), credibility is paramount, and it

only happens when the analysis is "relevant, timely, expert, objective, and informed."

Creating the Visit Piece

In the spring of 1961, President John F. Kennedy, still reeling from the Bay of Pigs crisis, expressed his dissatisfaction with his intelligence support.¹ His staff piled on, complaining about the daily stream of reports from multiple government agencies and the dense, often inscrutable bureaucratic jargon. The CIA, in response, rushed to create the *President's Intelligence Checklist* (the predecessor of the *PDB*) to address Kennedy's concerns. With crisp prose and a global perspective, it became an immediate hit. The president not only relied on the product to inform policy decisions, but it also served him well in his meetings with foreign leaders.

Kennedy believed in the power of personal diplomacy, especially with regards to Africa. He told his staff that he wanted to engage with his African counterparts, decreeing that "if African leaders want to meet me, good. Invite them down here."² Kennedy's interest and appetite for information about the continent was considerable; Arthur Schlesinger, one of Kennedy's closest advisers, recalled that some African leaders told him that the "American president knew more



President Kennedy received Sudan's President El Ferik Ibrahim Abboud (center) at Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland, on October 4, 1961. The CIA told Kennedy that Abboud needed to "demonstrate that the visit has produced tangible benefit." (Robert Knudsen, White House Photographs, JFK Presidential Library and Museum)

about their countries than they did themselves."³

Three months after the creation of the *President's Intelligence Checklist*, Kennedy received a CIA assessment regarding Sudanese general Ibrahim Abboud's state visit. Abboud, who the analysts judged to be a "sincere patriot, disgusted by the corruption among the civilians," was seeking to secure from Kennedy "some sort of dramatic impact project" to increase his prestige.⁴

The "visit piece," however, was hardly a developed art form, and it struggled to distinguish itself from traditional political analysis.

In this early period, most assessments included a cursory reference to a leader's planned travel to Washington before segueing into more standard assessments on the country's political, economic, and security developments. While some exceptions exist (including an astute study on a "more self-assured" Zairian President Mobutu Sese Seko in 1973), the visit piece, as it related to African heads of state, was fairly mundane and not consistently crafted to advance a presidential meeting.⁵ Judging from the declassified record, the art form only started to find its stride during the Carter administration and reached its apogee under President Ronald Reagan.

President Jimmy Carter regarded the CIA's leadership analysis as vital to his diplomacy, especially his landmark summit with Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian president Anwar Sadat in 1978. He told CIA analysts that he wanted to be "steeped in the personalities of Begin and Sadat."⁶ These psychological profiles enabled Carter to navigate negotiations between the two leaders; in 2013, he said that the CIA assessments had "steeled his resolve to seek a full-fledged treaty between Egypt and Israel."⁷ It stands to reason that this diplomatic triumph at Camp David reaffirmed the importance of leadership profiles and visit

Intelligence Support to Presidential Visits

pieces. Carter, who boasted that he was more interested in Africa than his predecessors and spent “more effort and worry on Rhodesia than the Middle East,” presumably demanded similarly rigorous analysis to inform his interactions with African leaders.⁸ While still uneven as an art form, the CIA’s 1978 assessment on Senegalese president Leopold Senghor, who possessed “an impressive blend of intellectual and political skills” and “moves as gracefully and comfortably in French culture as he does in African,” was a significant improvement in analytic quality and insights.⁹

The visit piece reached new heights during the Reagan administration. Indeed, the CIA started to regularly label these assessments as such; 13 out of the 19 declassified analytic reports published to coincide with Reagan’s meetings with African counterparts included the word “visit” in the title. The art form’s growing prominence reflected Reagan’s interest in people. National Security Advisor Bud McFarlane said Reagan “always focused on the human dimension of foreign policy, waiting to know more about everybody.”¹⁰ The increase in the quality of visit pieces also probably stemmed from Reagan’s engagement on Africa. He met with more African leaders than any of his predecessors, and his policies to eject the Cubans from Angola and secure Namibian independence, as well as his antipathy toward Libyan leader

Muammar Qadhafi’s adventurism in the region, framed many of his interactions with African counterparts. CIA rose to the challenge, leveraging its expertise and tradecraft to ensure the president had the most critical analysis to charm, coax, and cajole his White House visitors.

Serving the President

The CIA’s visit piece typically consists of five elements. It delves into a leader’s personality, their goals, and the context for the meeting—specifically the country’s political, economic, and security situation. It also includes a warning component, informing the president that his counterpart may criticize US policy or press for a change to the US approach. Finally, it often features an outlook section, forecasting whether a leader or his country will succumb to or overcome emerging challenges.

Personality

A visit piece’s most critical task is revealing a leader’s personality: not what they have done, but who they are. The study of an African leader’s disposition, temperament, and personal history helps to explain what makes them tick. It is fundamental to a visit piece, and it is certainly the hardest for intelligence analysts to master. The declassified assessments, for example, stressed Ethiopian emperor Haile

Selassie’s “unusual personal vigor and determination” and Zambian president Kenneth Kaunda’s tendency to become “highly emotional.”¹¹ They characterized Sudanese leader Jafaar Nimeiri as “low-key, unpretentious” and explained that Mozambican president Samora Machel was “given to dominating conversation.”¹² The most exceptional pieces tapped into a leader’s mindset; in 1973, for example, CIA analysts asserted that “as Mobutu’s confidence has grown, so have his pretensions to leadership in Africa.” At the same time, they judged that he “remains troubled... by the picture many have of him as being overly pro-US.”¹³

Goals

A visit piece uncovers what an African leader wants from his interactions with the US president. While a predictable feature of the art form, it takes talent and experience to go beyond the obvious. The declassified record is full of intelligence assessments that highlighted potential requests for more financial or military assistance, or a desire “to improve his stature at home,” as was the case for President Quett Masire of Botswana in 1984.¹⁴ More impactful have been visit pieces that unearthed broader foreign policy priorities, such as Senghor’s likely requests for US funding in support of Angolan rebel Jonas Savimbi or Ivorian president Felix Houphouet-Boigny’s hope for “assurances that the US remains



In a PDB prepared for President Nixon (right) on October 10, 1973, the CIA judged that President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire (left) had “increasingly engaged in posturing on nonaligned issues” to address criticism that he is too close to Washington. (National Archives)

committed to protecting its friends in the Third World.”¹⁵ The most sophisticated pieces raised potential quid pro quos; in 1985, the CIA suggested that in return for more US assistance, Machel may accept a symbolic US naval visit to Maputo, the addition of a defense attaché to the US embassy, and more balanced voting by Maputo’s representative at the United Nations.¹⁶

Context

A CIA visit piece also analyzes the political, security, and economic context underpinning a presidential meeting. It explains what is driving a leader’s actions and any potential asks of the US government. Houphouët, for example, was concerned about “the crumbling institutions of the states around him,” and Senghor was animated by a “fear of Soviet intervention in Africa and elsewhere.”¹⁷

Visit pieces often underline a leader’s expectations, such as Kenyan president Daniel Arap Moi’s belief that his acceptance of a military access agreement obliged the United States to help Kenya.¹⁸

The assessments also touch on an African leader’s opinion of US allies and adversaries, such as Senegalese president Abdou Diouf’s criticisms of French president Francois Mitterrand’s Africa policies or Zimbabwean prime minister Robert Mugabe’s close relations with Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, North Korea, and China.¹⁹ Several assessments in the declassified record explained why the Soviet Union valued its partnerships with African leaders, such as Somalia’s Mohamed Siad Barre in 1970s.²⁰ The rare visit piece even called out when a leader was being disingenuous. In 1983, the CIA pointed out that Kaunda’s insistence that he pursued a

balanced foreign policy was “only partly valid.”²¹

Warning

An effective visit piece also prepares the US president for difficult conversations, identifying areas of disagreement and steering them away from counterproductive topics. The CIA profile generally incorporates several red flags and “watch out fors” into its analysis, such as highlighting that Sudan’s Abboud “has been critical of the level of American aid” and that Senghor’s policies on Arab-Israeli issues “conflict with US interests.”²² In 1982, the CIA warned that Liberian leader Samuel Doe’s frustrations with the economy posed “the most serious potential irritant to Liberian-US relations.”²³ The visit piece on Mugabe’s 1983 meeting with Reagan was forthright about potential landmines, noting that Mugabe “resents Western criticism of his efforts to quell dissident violence” and that he is “extremely sensitive to any actions by Washington that he believes infringe on Zimbabwe’s sovereignty.”²⁴

Outlook

A visit piece usually includes an outlook section, forecasting what the future may hold for a leader or country and what that could portend for US interests. It may be as routine as predicting another election win for Kenya’s Moi or asserting that Nigerian leader

Intelligence Support to Presidential Visits

Ibrahim Babangida's "prospects for remaining in office over at least the next year or so appear favorable."²⁵ Some assessments addressed a pending leadership transition, concluding that a successor to Senghor "probably will continue to follow moderate, democratic principles."²⁶

The analysis, however, has historically tended to skew negative, such as the CIA's judgment in 1962 that Ugandan prime minister Milton Obote may gradually adopt some anti-Western sentiment or the risk of growing regional and ethnic tensions in Cameroon and Togo.²⁷ In 1969, the CIA painted a grim picture of Haile Selassie's grip on power, arguing that his reforms paradoxically undercut his control and "unhappiness with his autocratic rule will likely continue to grow and nurture serious and perhaps successful plotting."²⁸

Grading the Analysis

A visit piece, regardless of how well written and considered, is only as valuable as it is convincing to the reader and adept at shaping the president's conversations as well as contributing to favorable outcomes. While the CIA's initial forays into visit pieces were occasionally outmatched by Department of State and National Security Council memos, the declassified record reveals some impressive results. President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger took onboard the CIA's message

that Mobutu wanted to strike a balance between being viewed as independent while remaining "on good terms with the US." In their meeting, Kissinger praised the Zairian leader's UN speech as a masterpiece because it sounded "critical of the United States, but when one read it, it was not so bad." Nixon added that the speech showed that Mobutu was a "skillful politician."²⁹

The analysis on Senghor was prescient that the Senegalese leader fancied himself a mediator. He informed President Carter that "he is part Jewish and can speak frankly to both sides" of the Arab-Israeli question.³⁰ The CIA also accurately pinpointed Liberian leader Doe's need for continued US support to shore up his shaky regime. In press remarks following his White House visit, Doe exclaimed that "President Reagan assured me we can continue to count on America's understanding and support."³¹

The CIA particularly excelled at framing why African leaders viewed themselves as non-aligned and how navigating global geopolitical competition was central to their foreign policies. Following his engagement with Abboud, Kennedy publicly confirmed that the United States "fully endorsed the determination of the newly-independent countries of Africa to maintain their independence."³² In press interviews during his visit to Washington in 1985, Mozambique's Machel

was adamant that his country was "African, independent, and non-aligned," adding that "there is no question of blocs."³³ Reagan seemingly reached a similar conclusion, writing in his diary that Machel "turned out to be quite a guy and I believe he really intends to be 'non-alligned' [sic] instead of a Soviet patsy."³⁴

The visit pieces had mixed results when anticipating an African leader's key priorities or potential issues to discuss. The CIA published a long paper on Liberia's economy ahead of President William Tubman's meeting with President Lyndon Johnson, accurately previewing the Liberian leader's deep concern with his country's pressing foreign debt service and rising commodity prices.³⁵ Tubman and Johnson subsequently dedicated several paragraphs to Liberia's economic challenges in their joint statement.³⁶ Similarly, several of the CIA visit pieces accurately captured how many West African leaders had become apprehensive about Libyan meddling in the region, especially in Chad. After his meeting with Reagan in 1983, Senegal's Diouf told the *Washington Post* that "we must stop the Chadian adventure."³⁷

On the other hand, the CIA repeatedly failed to identify global issues that the African leaders discussed in their engagements with US presidents, including the situation in Berlin in the 1960s or Lebanon in the 1980s.³⁸ The



The CIA warned President Reagan in 1983 that Zambia's President Kenneth Kaunda may reiterate his criticism that the West is "applying a double standard on foreign policy issues to the Africans' disadvantage."

agency's obsession with Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) leader Thomas Sankara—they saw Libya's hand behind his coup in 1983—prompted analysts to repeatedly flag the country as a likely topic in visit pieces on Senegal's Diouf³⁹ and Togo's Gnassingbe Eyadema; Upper Volta, however, was absent in any of the public statements, press reports, diary entries, or the memorandum of conversation from Eyadema's meeting with Reagan.

The visit pieces had some other big misses. Ahead of Nimeiri's meetings with Reagan in late 1983, CIA raised concerns about the Sudanese leader's "erratic personal behavior," warning that his decision to introduce sharia law

had alarmed the country's leftists, secular elite, and predominately non-Muslim southerners.⁴⁰ Despite the agency's growing worry that Nimeiri was vulnerable to a coup, Reagan seemed unconvinced and sidestepped any questions about the Sudanese regime's increasing fragility; Nimeiri was eventually removed from power by a popular uprising some 16 months later.⁴¹ Moreover, the visit piece in the 1980s failed in one fundamental aspect: they did not fully understand their customer. In his diaries, Reagan repeatedly opined on whether an African leader was a believer in "free enterprise," whereas only the profile on Houphouet examined the Ivorian president's economic philosophy.⁴² A central precept of leadership

analysis is knowing your principal's interests, which based on this sample the CIA seemed to have flubbed during the Reagan administration.

Profiling for the Future

US presidents almost certainly will continue to benefit from the CIA's insights on the leaders' political acumen, as well as their top concerns for their country's economy or security, or their needs during global crises. The visit piece, after more than six decades of evolution and refinement, has become a vital resource for US presidents.

At the same time, the art form seems ripe for another

Intelligence Support to Presidential Visits

innovation—this one powered by the generative power of artificial intelligence. The drafting of leadership profiles and assessments are innately human endeavors, but AI has the potential to augment and enhance this critical intelligence product. The 2023 National Intelligence Strategy called for enhancing the IC’s capabilities in language, technical, and cultural expertise by harnessing open-source big data, AI, and advanced analytics. Below are three recommendations on how to leverage AI in the analysis of African leaders, as well as other prominent global figures.⁴³

Scale

The drafting of a leadership assessment is a time-intensive effort, requiring deep substantive expertise and a mastery of analytic tradecraft. While analysts focus on the visiting African leader, AI could generate additional profiles on the entire delegation, adding further value to the engagement. This is more than a just force multiplier; it is crucial for policy success. In the CIA’s piece

on Zambian president Kaunda’s visit, the analysts highlighted the participation of Reuben Kamanga, the ruling party’s top foreign affairs specialist, who was instrumental in repairing relations between the United States and Zambia.⁴⁴ In contrast, the CIA failed to mention Cape Verde’s foreign minister—whom Reagan disliked, according to his subsequent diary entry—in its visit piece on President Aristides Pereira in 1983.⁴⁵

Customization

A visit piece is typically directed toward the US president and later distributed to other senior policymakers. While the analysis for the president addresses strategic topics, it often excludes details useful for subsequent meetings and engagements with US officials. By leveraging AI, it would be possible to generate tailored analyses to plug into existing assessments for additional readers. For example, the CIA only briefly discussed the cocoa market in its visit piece on Houphouët in 1983, whereas the Department of

State dedicated several sections to the topic in its own memorandum.⁴⁶ With AI’s assistance, a leadership profile could have multiple bespoke versions to better align with varied US policy needs.

Data Analytics

Leadership profiles, as is the case for other intelligence assessments, use all-source information to back up analytic judgments. This art form, however, rarely avails itself of big data to strengthen its argumentation. AI’s capacity to identify common themes and patterns in the underlying data and quickly summarize large amounts of text could help analysts to quantify some of their work. For instance, the CIA explained in 1973 that Ethiopia’s “budget suggests that they may be less worried than they say” about the threat from Somalia.⁴⁷ By tapping into AI, the visit piece could have included a deeper analysis of the budget to contrast the emperor’s stated priorities with his government’s current actions. ■

AI Promising, But Improvements Needed

While the state of the art is evolving rapidly, existing AI models are underwhelming when generating leadership profiles and integrating the best standards of analytic tradecraft. It will require significant AI model training and iteration, as well as a proficiency with the art form, to raise the current AI level to something that will strengthen and enrich intelligence products. For example, when this author asked leading models what Kenyan President William Ruto might raise with President Biden during their meeting on May 23, 2024, the answers ranged from unexceptional to unacceptable:

ChatGPT 4 offered the most complete take, indicating that

“Ruto views this as an opportunity to usher in a new era of dynamic partnerships, particularly in transforming trade and investment, green energy, digital technology, and multilateralism, aiming for shared prosperity not only for Kenya and the United States but globally.”

Anthropic’s Claude generated a passable answer, identifying five potential topics, including “strengthening economic and trade ties between the two countries, possibly discussing the proposed US-Kenya free trade agreement that was being negotiated,” and “security cooperation, given Kenya’s role in fighting terrorist groups like al-Shabab in East Africa.” The only

problem, however, is that there is no free trade agreement currently under discussion.

Meta AI spun out a very basic response, generating a list of 11 topics Ruto could possibly raise, such as expanding economic ties, strengthening people-to-people ties, furthering technological innovation, and addressing climate and clean energy.

Google’s Gemini failed the exercise entirely, acknowledging that it was “still learning how to answer this question” and recommended trying Google Search.

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