

The Use and Abuse of Intelligence in the Public Square

Michael Warner

Politicization is related to the integrity of intelligence personnel and services. That someone or some entity has been engaged in it is a charge that has been heard with frequency over the last generation.

The vast literature on politicization has focused on its top-down variety; i.e., on ways in which decisionmaker preferences, directly or indirectly, distort analyses. Some studies have also noticed bottom-up patterns, in which biases among intelligence officers have shaded outcomes. What has received little scholarly attention, at least in the United States, are cases in which policymakers or lawmakers have used charges of intelligence politicization in order to enhance their personal or partisan positions in policy debates. We have evidence of such behavior; indeed such charges may even in certain circumstances be predicable.

Politicization pertains to the integrity of intelligence personnel and services. That someone or some entity has been engaged in it is a charge that has been heard with frequency over the last generation. Though many academic authors have addressed the topic, the phenomenon may have eluded full exploration.

Definitions

In its broad sense, to politicize a matter means to bring it within the ambit of political (and usually governmental) consideration and processes. There is nothing necessarily pejorative about politicization in this sense, as Richard Betts explained with his customary force and clarity in *Enemies of Intelligence*. He

acknowledges that politicization is “a fighting word, usually invoked as a charge of simple bad faith,” but he then argues that its milder varieties can prove beneficial. To politicize in this sense means to elevate a question to precisely where issues of vital national interest should be argued. Hence the “presentation and packaging of assessments in ways that effectively *engage policymakers’ concerns*” is a good and useful thing.¹

This is not the sense in which critics of intelligence politicization mean the term, as Betts readily acknowledges. The common usage of politicization is indeed pejorative. It implies a flaw in the integrity of intelligence—that something that should be objective and fact-based has been twisted for ends short of the common good. All corruption of analysis, Betts insists, is bad: “policy interests, preferences, or decisions must *never* determine intelligence judgments.”²

Examining this challenge to the integrity of intelligence constituted by politicization is worthy of scholarly interest in its own right and merits attention from managers of intelligence. Even the most cogent and objective explorations, however, tend to revisit similar historical episodes and sometimes do not read even these examples rigorously. Politicization by decisionmakers is examined at length, but few scholars have studied politicization by intelligence officers.

The views, opinions, and findings of the author expressed in this article should not be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations or representing the official positions of any component of the United States government.

Politicization is a favorite topic among scholars of intelligence. It blends two of their consistent interests, analysis and integrity, with another, the use of intelligence in decisionmaking.

Yet a third form of politicization, moreover, is hardly studied at all.

Politicization as a Subject for Inquiry

Politicization is a favorite topic among scholars of intelligence. It blends two of their consistent interests—analysis and integrity—with another, the use of intelligence in decisionmaking. We have a comparative wealth of sources on the subject, compared with other intelligence topics, as befits an activity that takes place at least partially in public. Intelligence is politicized for a reason—to influence decisions about policies or events—and such changes are virtually always to some extent visible to domestic electorates and foreign leaders. Hence the landscape of settled facts, as it were, has become fairly extensive for investigators of politicization.

No responsible person argues that intelligence should not serve policy—that is precisely why it exists: to further the policy ends of its legitimate political overseers. Whether those policy ends are wise or foolish is a question that is largely, if not wholly, beyond the purview and competence of intelligence to judge. Paul R. Pillar usefully calls politicization a “compromise of the objectivity of intelligence.”³ Although he does not say so in so many words, the problem with such a lack of objectivity is obvious and two-fold: that public resources have been diverted to private or partisan gain, and that the common-

wealth is not getting the best advice in dealing with serious matters.

The topic of politicization thus bears a kinship to the set of issues surrounding civilian control of military establishments. Long experience has taught that expertise in the military arts does not automatically translate into political acumen. Part of what defines the modern West (and the parts of the East influenced by Marxism) is the norm that soldiers are expected to be not only competent in the profession of arms but subservient to the civilian rulers of the commonwealth. Their expertise is fostered and sustained to serve the common good, notes Samuel P. Huntington, not to facilitate private or partisan aggrandizement, and that expertise must reflect sound analysis of objective conditions and not be subtly shaded to lend support to a partisan or an ideological preference.⁴

The idea of politicization is rather new in historical terms, even in the United States. The word itself is almost a neologism. It dates from the 1930s but apparently came into wider use in the 1960s. Sherman Kent, a good bellwether of issues affecting analysis, did not use the term in his classic *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy*, either in his 1949 original or its 1965 reissue. Certainly US intelligence had been no stranger to controversy in the two decades following World War II, which heard loud arguments over the best policy for the United States with regard to communism, including charges of McCarthyism and fellow

traveling. Google Ngrams, however, suggests the phrase “politicization of intelligence” only began appearing in books written in English in the 1970s, and its use expanded dramatically in the 1980s.

That seems to fit the history of US intelligence. As intelligence grew in importance and public prominence in the United States during the Vietnam War, it became possible to blend three ingredients:

- a public expectation that intelligence services should be serving the commonwealth and be publicly accountable to it;
- an explicit chain of command to that service reaching from a political leadership that is itself subject to the electoral cycle and public criticism of its foreign policies; and
- controversial issues on which intelligence is advising that leadership.

That very fact of official visibility for intelligence services made them and their consumers early, if not the first, focal points for charges of politicization. It also led Congress in 1992 to amend the National Security Act to stipulate that the Intelligence Community’s analysis should be “timely, objective, [and] independent of political considerations.”⁵

A Typology of Politicization

Experts on the topic like Richard Betts see two kinds of politicization: top-down and bottom-up; in other words, by consumers and by producers, respectively.⁶ Mark Lowenthal notes in his textbook *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy* that “the size

or persistence of the politicization problem is difficult to determine.” He hints that the two varieties converge on a single problem: “intelligence officers may intentionally alter intelligence, which is supposed to be objective, to support the options or outcomes preferred by policymakers.” The officers might do so voluntarily on their own, either to curry favor or to boost their careers; that would be the bottom-up variety. Or they might do so because they feel pressure from consumers who want support for their policies (that is the top-down kind).⁷

Top-down politicization gets the most attention in the scholarly literature. Paul Pillar examines this problem in detail, helpfully imposing some order and structure to thinking about it. He sees two forms: consumers directly or indirectly dragging intelligence into the public arena to boost support for policy judgments, and the direct or indirect effect that a decisionmaker’s policy preferences have in influencing analytic judgments.⁸ Pillar, like Richard Betts, calls it a problem inherent in government’s use of intelligence and suggests it can be mitigated but not eliminated.⁹ This form of politicization has been well and exhaustively examined.¹⁰ It can indeed be a problem, but the scholarly treatments of it seem adequate for now, and thus it will not be a focus in what follows here.

The bottom-up species of politicization is tougher to define, which may be one reason it seems to garner less attention in the literature. Several authors have nibbled around the edges of this issue. Pillar admits bottom-up politicization might be a problem but also hints it should be rare by definition because it would be risky and self-defeating for analysts

Evidence for bottom-up politicization might be rare, but it does exist.

to attempt it.¹¹ That seems intuitively satisfying and may well be correct, but it also begs a question: isn’t top-down politicization also risky and self-defeating too? Shouldn’t it also be rare? Perhaps not, for the same reasons that various self-punishing vices like drunk driving and opera are not rare.¹² Those who indulge in them might really believe that they are the miscreants who will get what they want this time and still beat the odds. Yet such a logic could obtain for bottom-up politicization as well, which is why it merits a fuller treatment here.

Evidence for bottom-up politicization might be rare, but it does exist. Vasily Mitrokhin cites a horrifying example from the Soviet side of the Cold War. The head of the KGB, Yuri Andropov, served not only as the Soviet Union’s senior intelligence officer in 1979; he also sat on the Politburo and played a key role in making policy toward Afghanistan as that nation spiraled into civil war. Andropov’s unique portfolio made him both a producer and consumer of intelligence and ensured that the intelligence his service collected and analyzed served his alarmist and interventionist inclinations, with tragic results when the Soviet army (with support from KGB commandos) invaded Afghanistan.¹³

The KGB’s experience, of course, is not representative of US intelligence or its Western corollaries. Bottom-up politicization in a democracy could be expected to be subtle and even furtive, as few intelligence professionals will want to admit to shading their products to support or conform to policy. Still fewer might

confess that they tried to shape the decisions of policymakers.

Not a few democratic leaders, however, have suspected that such shaping is exactly what their intelligence agencies were attempting. President George W. Bush disliked the wording of a 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on the Iranian nuclear program, for example, believing it had presented valid evidence in a way that exaggerated Tehran’s restraint while US diplomats sought to rally international pressure on Iran. Bush worried this optimistic finding would leak, and so he ordered its declassification in order to give his administration a head start on containing the damage to US diplomatic efforts. The president subsequently wondered “if the intelligence community was trying so hard to avoid repeating its [2002] mistake on Iraq that it had underestimated the threat from Iran. I certainly hoped intelligence analysts weren’t trying to influence policy.”¹⁴

President Richard Nixon’s administration offers ample evidence that policymakers suspected bottom-up politicization. National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger recalled that Nixon “considered the CIA a refuge of Ivy League intellectuals opposed to him.” In Nixon’s mind, these experts were “liberals who behind the façade of analytical objectivity were usually pushing their own (policy) preferences.”¹⁵ Kissinger’s memoir, of course, is second-hand and post hoc, but we have some corroborating evidence of Nixon’s views. For instance, a CIA officer present at a National Security Council (NSC) meeting in June 1969 noted

Like his boss, Kissinger also saw in the intelligence analyses a partisan bent toward institutional pessimism.

the president's complaint that intelligence projections for the previous four years had significantly underestimated Soviet weapons deployments. Nixon then issued this directive to the intelligence officers in the room:

People have been showing a tendency to use intelligence to support conclusions, rather than to arrive at conclusions. I don't mean to say that they are lying about the intelligence or distorting it, but I want you fellows to be very careful to separate facts from opinions in your briefings. After all, I'm the one who has to form the opinion—I'm the only one who has to run, I'm the one who has the sole responsibility when things go to pot.¹⁶

A year later, after a series of real and perceived analytical errors with regard to the Vietnam War and the Soviet Union, Nixon complained to his President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB) about the analysts'

penchant for presenting facts or writing reports designed to fit a preconceived philosophy, e.g., to justify a bombing halt if, in the writer's personal views, such an action is warranted. The President recognized that this tendency is sometimes a subconscious one and that there are people of varying philosophies, e.g., hawks and doves, in the intelligence community as

well as the other segments of government.¹⁷

Like his boss, Kissinger also saw in the intelligence analyses a partisan bent toward institutional pessimism. The analysts at CIA, he believed, had all but given up on winning the Vietnam War: they "generally reflected the most liberal school of thought in the government," and, because they believed "they could suffer great damage by making hopeful predictions that turned out to be wrong[,] they ran few risks in making pessimistic forecasts."¹⁸

Research has subsequently found that Nixon's worry about bottom-up politicization was not wholly fanciful. According to a declassified history of CIA analyses during the Vietnam War, the agency's Office of Economic Research from 1965 to 1970 waged an exhausting debate with colleagues in other agencies—and eventually with other CIA officers as well—over the likelihood that North Vietnam would use the port of Sihanoukville (in ostensibly neutral Cambodia) as a secret entrepot for arms shipments to its forces in South Vietnam. CIA economic analysts argued that Cambodia's Prince Sihanouk would not permit such shipments. The United States initially lacked hard evidence either way, but CIA's economists insisted even as contrary indicators accumulated. The analysts did not change their conclusion until mid-1970, when the Cambodian officers who had deposed Sihanouk sought favor with Washington by showing

proof that the prince had indeed allowed North Vietnamese transshipments.¹⁹ The result of this debate was an impression among Nixon and his aides that CIA analysts had persisted in their error because they had trimmed analyses to fit their own policy preferences until forced by overwhelming facts to desist.^a Nixon also cited this episode to the PFIAB in July 1970:

... the slanting of intelligence reports is sometimes deliberate and the President feels that the (CIA's) playing down of the importance of Sihanoukville [as an entrepot for Communist arms into South Vietnam] may have been such a case. Sometimes, he said, the authors of these reports do not actually lie; instead, they slant the report in such a way that their personal points of view receive extra emphasis. He believes that those responsible for the deliberate distortion of an intelligence report should be fired.²⁰

The CIA history of the episode found a kernel of truth in Nixon's allegation. He interviewed surviving CIA participants in the analytical controversy and found some were indeed convinced that the US military wanted to expand the war into Cambodia; they were determined not to provide the Pentagon or the White House an excuse to do so. The study's author felt obliged to conclude that "[t]he intellectual biases that helped distort CIA's logistical estimates were reinforced by the intrusion of policy preferences."²¹

a. Kissinger reflected "as happens all too frequently, intelligence estimates followed, rather than inspired, agency policy views. Those who favored attacks on the sanctuaries [in Cambodia] emphasized the importance of Sihanoukville; those who were opposed depreciated it." See *White House Years*, 241.

Such evidence suggests we need more research on bottom-up politicization. For now we can only say that we don't know how prevalent or rare it is. The complaints of presidents and national security advisors about analytic politicization do not necessarily mean analysis was politicized. Those who have leveled such allegations certainly have had their own axes to grind, and individuals accused of bottom-up politicization have denied the charges. These considerations should make us wary of accepting specific allegations. Of course, such cautions can be leveled, *mutadis mutandis*, about many claims of top-down politicization as well.

Politicization of a Third Kind

Here I should like to expand the conversation beyond the integrity of the intelligence product to include what we might deem the integrity of its use. As noted above, history suggests the top-down variety of politicization is ancient—princes and potentates have always wanted to hear what they wanted to hear. Bottom-up politicization is much newer; it can only date from when analysts gained opportunities to tip the scales in favor of one policy option versus another.

The authors above discuss the phenomenon as a direct or indirect way of boosting institutional or political support for a policy option. Such assistance is obviously easier to lend if the intelligence is released to the public and thus can add to the evidence and expertise supporting a favored course of action. Various authors note that intelligence can be selectively cited (the Washington phrase for this is “cherry picking”)

Bottom-up politicization is much newer; it can only date from when analysts gained opportunities to tip the scales in favor of one policy option versus another.

for just that purpose. Anthony Glees and Philip H. J. Davies maintain that is what happened in Britain in 2002 as the government of Prime Minister Tony Blair declassified certain intelligence to bolster its case for invading Iraq. The government's use of intelligence in a public dossier supporting that policy, Glees and Davies argue, raised the question of “whether it was acceptable practice to exploit a piece of secret intelligence in public to justify military action, and whether there was not a conflict of interest between those tasked with assembling secret intelligence and those tasked with explaining government policy to the British people.”²² Similar complaints were heard about President George W. Bush's parallel and nearly simultaneous declassification of intelligence on Iraq.

If participants in a policy debate can selectively cite intelligence to support a favored policy, then they can also use intelligence to oppose a policy they consider unwise. Paul Pillar complains that intelligence services occasionally find themselves “dragged into public debates over policy not just by policymakers but by their opponents, who look to intelligence to serve as a check on the policymakers' public excesses and inaccuracies.” He argues that this typically happens post hoc, after “policies turn sour and fingers start pointing to people and agencies to blame.”²³ Kenneth Lieberthal of the Brookings Institution adds that NIEs, for instance, “lend themselves to partisan political manipulation.” Whether they are officially declassified or selectively leaked, NIEs create space

“from which political operators may be able to seek ammunition for a particular effort they favor or oppose.”²⁴ The Sihanoukville example above shows this possibility from a bottom-up perspective as well, hinting that analysts themselves can use their product to oppose as well as support a policy course.

Historical evidence suggest that selective citing of intelligence to oppose a policy need not happen *after* the policy has gone awry. As momentum for Soviet-US arms control gathered in the late 1960s, for instance, the fact that intelligence assessments of the Soviet nuclear arms control could be discussed more easily in public created powerful incentives to cite the intelligence more or less accurately in order to criticize rival policy approaches toward the Soviet Union. It was in this context that Senator J. William Fulbright in 1969 complained in a Senate hearing that what Director of Central Intelligence Richard Helms had told him in closed session about new Soviet missiles “sure didn't sound like what the Secretary of Defense [Melvin Laird] has been saying.” Fulbright and allied senators a few weeks later grilled Secretary Laird and other administration witnesses on the differences between their views and a recent NIE. Laird did his best to defend administration policies, but he could not refute Fulbright's charge of a divergence between the intelligence findings and the Nixon administration's policy position without declassifying the intelligence estimate in question—and thereby exposing sensitive sources and methods.²⁵

The hypothesis that policy opponents can expose intelligence findings specifically for rhetorical advantage seems to fit certain evidence surrounding the controversy over the now-infamous October 2002 NIE on Iraq's WMD.

Senator Fulbright's complaint voiced a common assumption about how policy is supposed to be made. Stephen Marrin helpfully notes that various scholars assume that policy-makers consult formal intelligence findings before they choose a course of action.²⁶ That assumption obtains in precincts of Washington as well, as Secretary Laird discovered to his discomfort. A policy that precedes or preempts the intelligence, it could be publicly suggested, might not rest on an objective reading of the facts. And thus such a policy would be questionable, or even flawed, as Senator Fulbright hinted. If the policy matched the intelligence, moreover, the fact that the policy preceded the intelligence might be evidence that the intelligence agencies had aligned their product to a predetermined policy option. That would in turn open the way to an allegation of direct or indirect top-down politicization, and would certainly contravene the aforementioned statutory principle that intelligence should be objective and "independent of political considerations" that Congress decreed in 1992.²⁷

If such intelligence divergence from policy is not yet apparent, can opponents find ways to elicit intelligence products or statements that undermine support for a policy they dislike? I propose such a possibility, and I believe we should be open to finding yet a third kind of politicization, which is the use of intelligence as a proxy for policy gain/or even partisan advantage.

A Case Study of "Third Kind" Politicization

The hypothesis that policy opponents can expose intelligence findings specifically for rhetorical advantage seems to fit certain evidence surrounding the controversy over the now-infamous October 2002 NIE on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs. The intelligence surrounding the Bush's administration's decision to invade Iraq has been examined at length in many venues, but one specific aspect of the debate over intelligence has so far been only summarily discussed in public. That is what we will examine here.

The fact that Saddam had (or could easily acquire) weapons of mass destruction seemed beyond dispute when President Bush took power in early 2001. That February, DCI George Tenet told Congress in public session "[o]ur most serious concern with Saddam Hussein must be the likelihood that he will seek a renewed WMD capability both for credibility and because every other strong regime in the region either has it or is pursuing it." Tenet added the Iraqis had "rebuilt key portions of their chemical production infrastructure" far beyond the capacity to meet civilian needs, and he shared "similar concerns about other dual-use research, development, and production in the biological weapons and ballistic missile fields."²⁸

Nothing the Intelligence Community saw by 2002 diminished its confidence in this judgment about Saddam's desire and ability to pos-

sess weapons of mass destruction. President Bush thus resolved to treat Iraq as a threat to the United States, and his administration began recruiting allies and planning to either force Saddam to comply with UN disarmament resolutions or to remove him from power.

Opponents of such an intervention largely conceded the intelligence that Saddam wanted such weapons and could well use them, but nonetheless doubted intervention's chance of success and its likely consequences for stability in the Middle East. Indeed, both the British and US governments based their public arguments for intervention on the certainty of Saddam's weapons programs, and, as evidenced by Blair's September 2002 dossier and a parallel White Paper released by the DCI's National Intelligence Council (NIC) the following month, the phrasing of the intelligence they cited in support of their joint policy became ever less nuanced as war loomed.²⁹

As Congress debated Iraq policy, senators from both parties called for the Bush administration to direct DCI George Tenet to produce a new estimate on Iraq's WMD programs. The first senator to do so wrote Tenet on 9 September 2002 requesting that the DCI also "produce an unclassified summary of this NIE" so "the American public can better understand this important issue."³⁰

Administration and intelligence officials did not believe a new NIE was necessary but nonetheless complied. DCI Tenet "reluctantly agreed" and ordered the NIC to start work on 12 September. The NSC staff, "(l)ike those of us in the Intelligence Community," said Tenet, thought the data

requested by the senators “were already available in other documents.”³¹ Nevertheless, the NIE was drafted in near-record time, coordinated by the intelligence agencies in a marathon session, and delivered to Congress on the 1 October deadline. It was then summarized, more or less, in an unclassified white paper that lost much of the nuance of the original, classified NIE. The main judgments thus conveyed about Saddam’s weapons programs were the following year discredited by evidence discovered (or more accurately, not discovered) in Iraq, and the estimate and especially the white paper are now cited as monumentally flawed intelligence analysis.³² In the words of George Tenet, “there’s a saying that ‘if you want it bad, you get it bad’.”³³

In light of criticisms of the Bush administration and the Intelligence Community since the 2002 NIE, one might be forgiven for wondering why the senators wanted the product when they did. One need not hunt for nefarious motives: Members of Congress have every right (and duty) to seek accurate and timely intelligence on vital matters coming before them. That is indeed what was happening in 2002; the timing was dictated by the looming vote in Congress on a resolution to authorize the president to use military force to compel Iraq to comply with UN resolutions (the Senate passed the resolution on 11 October 2002). In an ideal world, that would be the only motivation needed to explain the call for a new NIE, and inquiry into the matter could stop there. But such an inquiry would not fully explore two facts about that NIE: its odd production process and the already available reporting and analysis at hand on the matters it covered.

“Because of the time pressures, analysts lifted large chunks of other recently published papers and replicated them in the [2002] Estimate.”

The comparatively pressing deadline (21 days) meant that the resulting NIE could be barely more than a summary of previous reporting, a cut-and-paste job with a few new items from recent reports added to make the end-product more timely. As the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) report noted, Intelligence Community analysts told Senate staffers afterward that

much of the text for the NIE had been pulled from previously written and coordinated IC products, meaning that analysts had previously had the opportunity to comment on the language. A CIA delivery system analyst noted that “. . .this was pulled together from pieces of stuff we’d already written, so it wasn’t as well polished as we would like. It didn’t flow very well. It was pieces pulled together. But we couldn’t argue with what was said because this is what we had written in previous publications.”³⁴

Tenet agreed: “Because of the time pressures, analysts lifted large chunks of other recently published papers and replicated them in the Estimate. Twelve previous intelligence community publications formed the spine of the NIE”³⁵

In addition, the Bush administration tried without success to argue that the intelligence agencies had already published sufficient analyses of Iraq’s programs. The senators certainly had such products available to them, at least indirectly as back-

ground material for briefings on Iraq. As Tenet later recalled,

(w)e had not done an NIE specifically on Iraq WMD in a number of years, but we had produced an array of analysis and other estimates that discussed Iraqi weapons programs, in the context of broader assessments on ballistic missiles and chemical and biological weapons. We all believed we understood the problem.³⁶

Tenet almost certainly recalled that the intelligence agencies at the end of the Clinton administration had concerted their views in an Intelligence Community assessment, as Senate investigators subsequently noted:

In December 2000, the National Intelligence Council (NIC) produced an Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA), Iraq: Steadily Pursuing WMD Capabilities. The assessment was prepared at the request of the National Security Council (NSC) for a broad update on Iraqi efforts to rebuild WMD and delivery programs in the absence of weapons inspectors, as well as a review of what remained of the WMD arsenal and outstanding disarmament issues.³⁷

That ICA has not been fully declassified, but post mortems of the Iraq intelligence failure do not suggest that its conclusions contradicted those of the 2002 NIE. Tenet implicitly endorses this reading of the

Critics were able to cite the NIE and claim that the administration's policy was inconsistent with the intelligence.

consistency of the intelligence analyses: "The judgments we delivered in the [2002] NIE on Iraq's chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons programs were consistent with the ones we had given the Clinton administration."³⁸ Why then was a new NIE necessary less than two years after the December 2000 ICA, especially when the new product could only be a hasty cut-and-paste job?

Available evidence could support the hypothesis that critics of the Bush administration had requested the 2002 NIE because they hoped it would give them rhetorical ammunition to criticize the president's push for intervention in Iraq. Here the actual substance of that NIE was less important than the timing and manner of its presentation. Two features of that distribution gave talking points to the administration's opponents. First, it allowed them to charge that policy had run ahead of the intelligence. This was precisely the sense of the senator who first requested the NIE, as he wrote in the Senate's subsequent review of the episode. He noted that policymakers had set out to sell an intervention to the public before ordering an NIE on the topic:

It was clear from such comments that Administration policymakers were not looking for the Intelligence Community's consensus conclusions regarding Iraq's WMD programs—the President, the Vice President,

*Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and General Myers had already reached their own conclusions, including that the U.S. needed to go to war to neutralize the perceived Iraqi threat.*³⁹

The new NIE also indirectly gave opponents of intervention a second talking point when intelligence officials briefed it to members of Congress. Critics were able to cite the NIE and claim that the administration's policy was inconsistent with the intelligence. Tenet recounts how this worked. The October 2002 NIE was classified, as was the testimony on its behalf the following day (2 October) by senior intelligence officers before the SSCI. Following their briefing, recalled Tenet, "several Democratic senators demanded that a few sentences from the testimony be cleared for public release. The senators also wanted released some language that was contained in the classified NIE but not in the unclassified white paper" (which was supposed to mirror the classified NIE but in its even-more hasty production oversimplified some of the former's conclusions). Tenet cleared a letter providing the requested information a few days later, upon which

Democratic members of the committee released the letter to the media almost immediately, provoking a flurry of stories. The articles suggested that the letter contradicted President

*Bush's assertion on the imminent threat posed by Iraq and implied that the use of force by the United States would only increase the likelihood that Saddam would either use WMD himself or share it with terrorists.*⁴⁰

DCI Tenet then had to explain to National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice (and at her behest the *New York Times* as well) that he had not, in thought or deed, meant to criticize the administration's policy.⁴¹ He satisfied the White House, but critics of the Iraq intervention had scored their point. They could now cite in public what appeared to be a misuse of intelligence by the Bush administration and suggest that congruence between the intelligence and the policy had resulted from pressure on the analysts by the White House. This use of Tenet's statement looks much like a third kind of politicization: a maneuvering of the intelligence agencies to produce an apparent discrepancy between intelligence policy in order to indict policies that critics oppose.^a

Can We Predict Politicization?

Any nation's intelligence system is a function of its government structure, legal system, and political culture. In polities where multiple parties debate vital national security questions, it may be inevitable that one or more of those parties will cite intelligence in the public arena for policy or partisan advantage. Thus

a. Joshua Rovner has helpfully brought my attention to a rather precise fit between this phenomenon and another that he notes in his book, *Fixing the Facts*. To wit, Dr. Rovner cogently argues that policymakers like to cite intelligence in public that helps them convince observers that there is official consensus around an initiative or decision. I agree, and see their opponents citing (and if need be orchestrating) discordant intelligence to refute the idea that the government agencies are united around the facts and logic of the policy in question. See Rovner, *Fixing the Facts*, 46-48.

that third kind of politicization just described seems likely to remain a possibility for the foreseeable future.

Hence a prediction: As we have seen examples of this in the past, we should also see them in the future. This survey suggests that we can expect to hear allegations of politicization in certain kinds of debates over national strategy. Those would be “wicked problems” where the evidence supporting rival policy options is incomplete or inconclusive, and when the high stakes of the various courses of action evoke strong emotions among partisans. Two such subjects readily come to mind: those involving dictators with weapons of mass destruction or terrorists who can reach into the homeland. Such topics seem ripe for allegations of politicization. One might even posit that the political parties would tailor their rhetoric and tactics for weaponizing such allegations of politicization, but that is a topic for another day.

Intelligence services have integrity to the degree that they retain their utility as sensors of and instruments for affecting international conditions

Conclusion

Intelligence services have integrity to the degree that they retain their utility as sensors of and instruments for affecting international conditions; i.e., to the degree that they avoid becoming mere instruments for the personal ends of their masters (as opposed to the ends of the larger commonwealth), or pander to those ends. In a sense, however, both pathologies have marked intelligence since time immemorial. More than a few rulers have succumbed to the temptation to equate the common good with their personal preferences, or have only admitted sycophants into their presence. Thus politicization would seem to be an issue mostly in those times and places where people inside and outside the government expect intelligence to be more than a mere tool, or a sycophant.

Politicization (or allegations of it) seem inherent and more likely when a

democratic nation faces dangers from armed and ruthless adversaries. Such perils, of course, are why democracies keep intelligence systems in the first place. We should probably refrain from defining politicization very broadly to mean any compromise of the objectivity of intelligence. After all, one man’s policy is another man’s folly. In the absence of clear and compelling evidence of policy success—a surrender on the deck of a battleship, for example—there are likely to be ongoing arguments over the efficacy of almost any policy. Leaders may indeed view intelligence through the lenses of their preferences, and a few such leaders, and even analysts, might attempt to shade intelligence findings to support those preferences. Such shading is a more useful definition of politicization. Absent such a distinction, partisans will find temptation to weaponize allegations of intelligence politicization to undermine rival policy choices.



The author: Michael Warner is a historian with the US Department of Defense. He has also served as a historian in CIA’s History Staff.

Endnotes

1. Richard K. Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence: Knowledge and Power in American National Security* (Columbia University Press, 2007), 67, 74. Emphasis in original.
2. Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence*, 75. Emphases in original.
3. Paul R. Pillar, “The Perils of Politicization,” in Loch K. Johnson, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 473.
4. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Harvard University Press, 1957), 14–15.
5. This phrase now appears at 50 USC 3024(a)2.
6. Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence*, 76–77.
7. Mark Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy* (CQ, 2015 (6th edition)), 190–91.
8. Pillar, “The Perils of Politicization,” 474.
9. Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence*, 102.

10. See, for instance, Joshua Rovner, *Fixing the Facts: National Security and the Politics of Intelligence* (Cornell University Press, 2011), 5.
11. Pillar, "The Perils of Politicization," 476.
12. "Going to the opera, like getting drunk, is a sin that carries its own punishment with it."—Hannah More, 1745–1833.
13. Vasili Mitrokhin, *The KGB in Afghanistan*, introduced and edited by Christian F. Ostermann and Odd Arne Westad, Cold War International History Project, Working Paper No. 40, pp. 28, 37; accessed March 10, 2018 at <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-kgb-afghanistan>
14. George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (Random House, 2010), 418–19.
15. Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Little, Brown, 1979), 11, 36.
16. Memorandum from (name not declassified) of the Central Intelligence Agency to Director of Central Intelligence Helms, 18 June 1969, reprinted as Document 191 in Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–72, Vol. 2 Organization and Management of US Foreign Policy* (Government Printing Office, 2006), 388.
17. Editorial Note recounting the minutes of Nixon's discussion with the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board on 18 July 1970, reprinted as Document 210 in FRUS, 1969–72, 446–447.
18. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1180–1181.
19. Thomas L. Ahern, Jr., *Good Questions, Wrong Answers: CIA Estimates of Arms Traffic Through Sihanoukville, Cambodia, During the Vietnam War* (Central Intelligence Agency, Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2004), 39–48; accessed March 10, 2018 at https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/4_GOOD_QUESTIONS_WRONG_ANSWERS.pdf
20. Editorial Note recounting the minutes of Nixon's discussion with the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board on 18 July 1970, 446–47.
21. Ahern, *Good Questions, Wrong Answers*, 44–45.
22. Anthony Glees and Philip H. J. Davies, *Spinning the Spies: Intelligence, Open Government, and the Hutton Inquiry* (Social Affairs Unit, 2004), 87.
23. Pillar, "The Perils of Politicization," 475.
24. Kenneth Lieberthal; *The U.S. Intelligence Community and Foreign Policy: Getting Analysis Right* (Brookings Institution, 2009), 15; accessed 11 March 2018 at <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-u-s-intelligence-community-and-foreign-policy-getting-analysis-right/>
25. Senator Fulbright as quoted in Thomas Powers, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1979) 211–12. United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Intelligence and the ABM*, 91st Congress, 1st Session, 1969. John W. Finney, "Pentagon Charged With Changing Data to Help Antimissile Plan," *New York Times*, May 15, 1969.
26. See Stephen Marrin, "Why Strategic Intelligence Analysis has Limited Influence on American Foreign Policy," *Intelligence and National Security*, 32:6 (2017), 725–42.
27. This phrase now appears at 50 USC 3024(a)2.
28. Statement by Director of Central Intelligence George J. Tenet before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on the "Worldwide Threat 2001: National Security in a Changing World," 7 February 2001; accessed 11 March 2018 at https://www.cia.gov/news-information/speeches-testimony/2001/UNCLASWWT_02072001.html
29. *Final Report of Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction* [the WMD Commission], March 2005, 186; accessed 11 March 2018 at <http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/wmd/about.html>
30. Senator Richard Durbin quoted in United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report on the U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq*, 9 July 2004. Section IX, p. 298; accessed 11 March 2018 at <https://web.archive.org/web/20071225161422/http://www.gpoaccess.gov/serialset/creports/iraq.html>
31. George J. Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm: The CIA During America's Time of Crisis* (Harper, 2007), 322.
32. See, for instance, Peter Gill and Mark Phythian, *Intelligence in an Insecure World* (Polity, 2006), 116–19
33. Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm*, 334.
34. *Report on the U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq*, 301.
35. Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm*, 324.
36. *Ibid.*, 322.
37. *Report on the U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq*, 215.
38. Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm*, 330.
39. *Report on the U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq*, see the Additional Views of Senator Richard Durbin, 505
40. Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm*, 336.
41. See David Corn, "CIA Report Refutes Bush's Rhetoric," *The Nation*, 9 October 2002; accessed 11 March 2018 at <https://www.thenation.com/article/cia-report-refutes-bushs-rhetoric/> See also "Statement by DCI George Tenet, 8 October 2002," *Congressional Record*, October 9, 2002, p. S10154; accessed 11 March 2018 at <https://fas.org/irp/news/2002/10/dci100802.html>