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In this timely and topical essay, Kent Center Research Scholar Jack Davis artfully employs a “question and answer” format to examine legitimate policymaker prerogatives and appropriate professional standards for analysts at the intersection of intelligence and policymaking. Tensions between these two communities are neither exceptional nor new, but are most intense when the policy stakes are highest--such as in decisions about military action, as recent events have shown. As argued here, the inherent uncertainty associated with estimative analysis demands analytic rigor and clarity on the part of analysts in reaching and communicating judgments, while accountability for action taken entitles policymakers to question and test those judgments and the confidence with which they are held.

Jack Davis has been associated with CIA since 1956, first as an employee and since 1990 as an independent contractor. Analytic tradecraft is his main professional interest, and the Kent Center welcomes his latest contribution to the ongoing professional dialogue on analyst-policymaker relations, an issue that will inevitably be the subject of lively engagement among professionals as new facets are revealed in the light of experience. The views expressed here are the author’s, but, as always, our goal in presenting them is to improve the doctrine and practice of intelligence analysis.

The Director  
Sherman Kent Center

**The Sherman Kent Center for Intelligence Analysis  
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**Analytic Professionalism and the Policymaking Process:  
Q&A on a Challenging Relationship**

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Intelligence professionalism regarding the proper relationship between analysts and policymakers is an issue that has challenged practitioners since

# Report Documentation Page

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Sherman Kent first grappled with it a half-century ago.<sup>1</sup> Defining the role of intelligence analysts in the policymaking process remains very much a work in progress, and is one on which the Sherman Kent Center for Intelligence Analysis welcomes debate.<sup>2</sup> This essay attempts to put into perspective the current intensive public examination of analyst-policymaker relations triggered by judgments on Iraq's WMD capabilities and relations with al- Qa'ida terrorists in the run up to the March 2003 US-led military invasion.

The essay does not seek to render a substantive appraisal of who estimated what and why, or a scorecard of whose judgments turned out to be right or wrong in the large volume of intelligence analysis and policy analysis on Iraq produced before the war. The focus, rather, is on advancing generally applicable judgments about the professional prerogatives of analysts and policymakers where their views and interests seem to clash.

Nine questions and answers about policymaker prerogatives are posed here to illuminate what actions represent legitimate exercise of their professional responsibilities. The text also addresses the responsibilities of analysts as members of a policy service organization and the professional standards they must protect in order to ensure their distinctive contribution to national security.

First a caution and then a reminder for readers who would join in the debate to clarify these complex and sensitive issues:

- The essay addresses the prerogatives of CIA analysts as intelligence professionals and not their more extensive values and interests as citizens.
- Tensions between the intelligence and policymaking communities are not an exceptional event but rather a recurring pattern reflecting institutional differences that can be traced back throughout the DI's 50-year history.

### **Analysts and Policymakers: In Search of Useful Answers for Difficult Questions**

1. *Are policymakers entitled professionally to reach and promote estimative judgments that diverge from intelligence assessments on a national security issue?*

As a student of the complicated relationship between the two distinct but interrelated national security communities, I would argue *yes*.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Kent Center Occasional Papers, V.2, No.3, "Sherman Kent's Final Thoughts on Analyst-Policymaker Relations," June 2003.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Kent Center Occasional Papers, V.2, No.2, "Tensions in Analyst-Policymaker Relations: Opinions, Facts, and Evidence," January 2003.

Administration officials engage regularly in “policy analysis,” an intellectual process to help determine what policies to adopt to promote the serving President’s concept of national security, and what actions to take to execute agreed policies. Those closest to the President also engage in political advocacy, domestically and abroad, in support of an Administration’s national security strategy and tactics.

Intelligence analysis, especially inherently fallible interpretative and predictive analysis, is an input to—not a substitute for—policy analysis. Policy analysts take account of other providers of information and judgment, and also bring their own, often considerable, experience, insights, and biases to the difficult task for which they must take ultimate responsibility.

Further, policymakers factor into their judgments regarding the meaning of available information on national security issues an action-oriented sense of risk and opportunity. What analysts may see as an unlikely, even remote, prospective development, policy officials may see as a risk large enough to require protective measures, or as an opportunity large enough to leverage to success through employment of US carrots and sticks.

Besides, veteran policy officials are well schooled in the shortcomings of intelligence judgments arising from limited and ambiguous information, which most analysts also readily acknowledge. In addition, policy officials tend to see intelligence judgments as vulnerable to substantive bias, and at times, political bias—frailties many if not most analysts are loathe to recognize.

- It may seem to analysts that policymakers are more prone to see such deficiencies when intelligence judgments run counter to policy preferences. Perhaps so; but then more the reason for analysts to be self-critical and open-minded in the execution of tradecraft on potentially controversial issues.

Finally, though the political ball can take odd bounces in the short run, policy officials recognize that their President ultimately will likely hold them responsible for errant judgments in a policy assessment, as well as the analysts on whose estimative call they may have relied to their detriment.

2. *Are policy officials professionally entitled to ask intelligence analysts to take another look at their estimative judgments (to re-scrub evidence and argumentation)?*

Again, I would argue *yes*.

The reasoning here largely follows that given above for Question 1. Policymakers are commissioned to devise, promote, and enact the President's national security agenda. They know when a policy consensus is taking shape and the time for action is approaching on issues, despite intelligence assessments that sound a caution. Yet, especially those with an appreciation of the distinctive role of intelligence analysis hesitate to ignore intelligence findings and estimative judgments that call into question the underpinnings for US initiatives. One response in these circumstances is to ask analysts to go back to the drawing board.

A policymaker's call for critical review of intelligence analysis can and should be a healthy stimulus to deliver assessments that more solidly meet the twin professional standards of substantive insightfulness and distinctive policy utility. Well-articulated criticism of analysis is much preferable to inadequate guidance for the execution of intelligence deliverables and scant attention to the assessments once delivered.

Two caveats.

- For the analysts, the called-for process of tough-minded review need not result in abandonment of previously well-reasoned judgments. The sought after result can be analysis with essentially the same conclusions that are more transparent, nuanced, and defensible against criticism.
- Policymaker criticism could prove to be motivated largely by political rather than tradecraft concerns. Nonetheless, the extra effort by analysts would help Agency leaders if they were called upon to defend the integrity of the analytic process.

3. *Are policymakers professionally entitled to urge analysts to review and revise their confidence levels in analytic judgments?*

Here too I would argue *yes*.

For the same, usually healthy, reasons one analyst or intelligence agency challenges another's conclusions on whether a shrouded current relationship or indeterminate future development is *nearly certain*, *probable*, or *unlikely*, policymakers may ask analysts to rethink their degree of confidence in a judgment.

Once again, the argument assumes estimative judgments are inherently subject to error; policymaker criticism of analysis is more useful to sound performance than their ignoring of analysis; and, just like analysts, policymakers have their own distinctive professional role to play in the national security process—moving the President’s agenda forward—that entitles them to seek the best possible intelligence input.

Needless to say, intelligence analysts are professionally bound to stick to judgments on probability that survive their critical review. Care must be taken not to allow the pressure of a process of repeated requests for revision to move the bottom line further toward one supportive of policy than the analytic tradecraft would justify.

That said, analysts are also professionally obligated not to dig in their heels in defense of an initial conclusion instead of doing an open-minded reevaluation. Analysts and the Agency can lose precious credibility through dogmatism as well as through acquiescence to political pressure.

4. *Are policymakers professionally entitled to ask analysts to provide well-argued alternatives to their studied bottom line judgments (e.g., Devil’s Advocacy)?*

I would argue *yes*.

Policy officials are at least as wary of the consequences of policy failure as analysts are of intelligence failure. They are professionally entitled to task analysts to use their skills and resources to present for consideration alternative or multiple views of a complex and uncertain issue. At times a call for, say, Devil’s Advocacy may be a caution against the perils of Group Think, especially in cases where policymakers agree with the analysts’ judgments. At times the policymakers’ motive will be to move Agency analysis to closer alignment with their own thinking.

*So long as rigorous analytic tradecraft norms are adhered to for whatever form of alternative analysis is solicited, and the analysts’ preferred bottom line is firmly attached to the deliverable, intelligence professionals should welcome the opportunity for customized service to their policymaking counterparts.*

5. *Are policymakers professionally entitled to ask analysts to change the question they address (say, from “whether” a development is likely to “how” it might occur)?*

My answer here would be an emphatic *yes*.

Once an Administration adopts an initiative, policymakers tend to move forcefully into their “action officer” mode and have limited interest in analysts’ views, based on the latter’s reading of the ground truth, on whether the policy is likely to succeed, much less whether the policy was wise to undertake. Policy officials have a job to do—to make the policy work. They are professionally entitled to ask intelligence analysts to provide action analysis; that is, expert assessment of opportunities for moving the policy forward and of specific dangers to be avoided.

Whether or not policy officials ask for a change in analytic focus, once a Presidential initiative is underway, analysts are professionally obligated to make a shift in effort that reduces the output of bottom-line estimating and increases the volume of customized action analysis. This shift in emphasis tends to occur naturally in more informal lines of communications (teleconferences, working group meetings). But analysts are often slower to adapt to the requisite value-added in written products and formal briefings.

Analysts must take care in assessing tactical policy opportunities to retain their role as members of an intelligence, or policy service, organization. Addressing potential costs and risks as well as benefits of identified opportunities helps avoid a slide into a policy advocacy role.

*6. Are policymakers professionally entitled to seek analytic judgments from outside the Intelligence Community?*

No matter how strongly intelligence professionals would prefer otherwise, I would argue *yes*.

Policy officials, in pursuit of their policymaking and political goals, have a right to rely on whatever sources of information and insight they choose, either to supplement or to substitute for the support they get from intelligence professionals. This includes use of business, academic and other non-governmental sources, as well as their own staffs, whether configured as a policymaking or intelligence unit.

Policymakers, in short, are entitled to reap the benefits of as complete and varied a set of substantive inputs as they can command, as they undertake the arduous task of managing an uncertain and often perilous national security issue. Intelligence professionals must earn their sought-after seat close to the head of the table by ensuring the soundness and distinctive utility of their assessments.

If policymakers use different sources of analytic support simply because they want more cordial answers than those provided by intelligence professionals, then the policy officials must bear the burdens of self-deception, policy failure, and political censure when such outcomes prove to be the case.

As Sherman Kent once said, intelligence professionals wish not only to know everything but also to be believed when they speak. Not always, but often enough, tough-minded tradecraft is the key to credibility with tough-minded policy officials, and to a competitive position in what for many national security issues is a buyer's market for insight and judgment.

- To know everything and to be believed, however, analysts are well served to be well informed on and to take a studied measure of the information and views from outside the Intelligence Community on which their policy clients often rely.

7. *Are policymakers professionally entitled to attribute to intelligence analysts judgments that overstate or understate analysts' confidence levels?*

I would argue emphatically for an answer of *no*.

On potentially controversial issues, intelligence analysts should increase their attention to evaluating evidence for authenticity (protection against denial and deception) and diagnosticity (protection against acceptance of the first apparently supportable line of analysis). Equally important, they should take extra care to avoid confusion in conveying probabilistic judgments (protection against vague phrases such as “may indicate”).

Once a studied, clear, and—if challenged—revisited statement of likelihood is established by Agency analysts, policy officials can attribute it to intelligence in order to buttress their own views, or reject it in favor of their own alternative statement of likelihood. But they should not have the authority to attribute to intelligence professionals an estimative judgment the latter do not hold.

The analysts' response if confidence levels are attributed to them inaccurately should be to call the issue to the attention of the DCI through DI management channels. The DCI should then decide whether the appropriate remedy for protecting Agency integrity is a private demarche to the policymakers or a public correction of the misattribution.



8. *Are policymakers professionally entitled to force analysts to alter their best estimative judgments?*

An equally emphatic *no*.

As already acknowledged, policy officials are entitled professionally to reject intelligence assessments and reach and promote their own estimative judgments (Question 1, above), and are also entitled to urge analysts to rethink and recast Agency intelligence judgments (Question 3, above).

That clarified, under no circumstances are policy officials professionally entitled to force intelligence analysts to change estimative judgments.

Obviously, there are risks to standing firm on a judgment that is contrary to policy preferences. Events may prove the analysts to be wrong. Congressmen may complicate the funding and execution of Administration strategy and tactics by using intelligence findings and estimative judgments to block or modify policy initiatives. Unauthorized leaks to the media of intelligence positions—rarely from Agency sources—may create an untimely public debate over policy. These circumstances can cause a run-up in immediate costs ranging from embarrassment of the Administration to the thwarting of what history may judge to have been a sound policy initiative.

But the long term costs to the integrity and morale of intelligence professionals of forcing them to change their judgments will likely cause much greater harm to the national interest by weakening a vital arm of the national security establishment.

What are analysts to do when pressure from policy officials to change their judgments is seen to go beyond tradecraft criticism and represent bald political force? Once again, the DCI should be informed through DI management channels, and he is charged with deciding on measures to protect the Agency's integrity.

9. *Are policy officials professionally entitled to use the media to criticize intelligence analysts' competence, in an effort to protect the Administration from congressional and public criticism of a policy initiative?*

A final answer of *no*.

As argued above, policy officials are entitled, indeed encouraged, to criticize through government channels either a specific body of analysis or intelligence tradecraft generally. Furthermore, as policy professionals, they are entitled to raise publicly their criticism of analysis so long as it is couched in analytic terms and is not, in effect, a politically motivated *ad hominem* attack. That is, as policy professionals, they are not entitled to criticize publicly a careful body of intelligence work and the credentials of the analysts who produced it merely to relieve themselves of the burden of credible defense of their own contrary judgments.

In principle, nearly all parties to the uniquely American system for making national security policy proclaim the value of integrity of intelligence analysis. A practice of trying to leverage a Congressional vote or public debate on a policy initiative by criticizing the credentials of analysts who produce uncongenial analysis undermines the principle.

The analysts' recourse when they encounter what they judge to be unprincipled public criticism is to inform the DCI. As indicated earlier, one reason for intelligence analysts to take extra care with tradecraft on potentially controversial national security issues is to provide the DCI with a strong case in any private or public defense of Agency performance.

### **A Final Word**

As a group, these are tough questions, and the answers provided will probably not fully satisfy those who have experienced the crossfire between analysts and policymakers.

The analyst-policymaker relationship is institutional and personal, as well as professional, and the dynamics vary both across issues and over time. Mutual understanding of professional values and modes of behavior will be tested most when the policy stakes are highest. Analysts, therefore, face a recurring challenge in maintaining both their professional standards and effective relations with policy clients on the issues that matter most to both parties. Knowing when to call "foul" will always be difficult

Important lessons on policy relations amidst uncertain ground rules can be learned in a fashion while analysts, alone and as teams, are under the gun. Much of value can also be learned, with much less risk and pain, by sharing experiences and debating insights informally and in the classroom—which this essay is intended to encourage readers to do.