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21st Century Analysis

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I. Introduction

Thanks for opportunity to speak today.

Invitation stems from my article written for Studies in Intelligence entitled
The Coming Revolution in Intelligence Analysis: What to do when Traditional Model Fails

And now for a necessary and important disclaimer: All statements, opinions, policies, and positions expressed herein are solely mine and have not been approved by or reflect the policies or positions of the CIA, the Intelligence Community, or any other US Government entity.

II. Why did the article invoke such powerful emotion?

A. Article does bring into question a great tradition of intelligence analysis. Intelligence analysts report on what the evidence (usually raw reports) reveals. Intelligence analysts have a unique, dare we say superhuman, ability to present an unbiased view of often-confused reality. Intelligence analysis is about speaking truth to power. Some even speak of wisdom.

B. These principles are excellent principles, and continue to be important today. But in the past few years intelligence analysts have had new demands placed on them that challenge their traditional work practices. As analysts, we are not in complete control of our operating environment, although sometimes we pretend as if we were and certainly we wish we were. As Tommy Franks said about the war in Iraq: when it came to executing our battle strategy, the Iraqis had a vote.

When it comes to determining the value of intelligence analysis, the National Security Customer has a vote.

C. Value proposition is one of those business terms I'm sure I don't always use quite right. But the rest of my comments will try to describe the evolution of the 'value proposition' of intelligence analysis for the national security customer. How has that value proposition changed over the years and how it is likely to evolve in the 21st century?

The Changing Value Propositions

1. The First Proposition: Tell the National Security customer what is happening.

I'm sure we can all agree that Intelligence Analysis began here. It's not as simple as it sounds. Making sense out of confusing and incomplete signals is not child's play. Deciding which facts are important and which are not is not trivial.

2. Explain the meaning/significance of what is happening to the National security customer.

After that very first intelligence analyst developed a clear picture of what was happening, no doubt some policymaker asked her: "So what?"

Many an intelligence analyst falters here. But this where we began to apply the foundational techniques of our tradecraft. We began to categorize events, identify trends, notice patterns. Is this the first time we've seen this activity; is this the worst violence in 10 years?

I have often heard Dick Kerr say that he thought one of the most important responsibilities of the intelligence analyst was to explain things. Some might say this is too modest a goal, but it's harder to do a credible job here than one might think. And oftentimes many analysts skip this step--and unfortunately the first one as well--because they are not seen as glamorous enough--too simple really.

Now a very important thing happens as you move from value proposition 1 to value proposition 2. I contend that once you attempt to explain the meaning of a particular event, you are sliding down the slippery slope of subjectivity. Not all "meaning" questions are open to interpretation--this is either the first time this country has had a coup or it is not. But a surprising number of "meanings" are matters of opinion.

Will the round of violence threaten the government's hold on power?
Is the North Korean peace overture sincere?
Could Saddam survive the death of his two sons?

As Robert L. Bartley wrote in the Wall Street journal opinion page on 28 July of this year, speaking about the need for a new era in journalism:

"With instant radio, television and now the Internet taking over bulletin-board news, newspapers have to make their mark explaining not just events but their **meaning. This is manifestly a matter of opinion.**"

Why is meaning so subjective? I contend because when we try to explain what something means, we often, unknowingly or subconsciously, deploy our fundamental beliefs. Do we believe man is basically good or brutish? Do we think men are rational actors or wacky? Are we optimists or pessimists? Laid-back or pay compulsive attention to detail. It is very difficult for the intelligence analyst to hold these beliefs at bay when trying to understand the meaning of a complex or subtle development.

By the way the question of objectivity in the press seems to be a popular topic these days. I recommend an article in the July/August 2003 Columbia Journalism Review called Rethinking Objectivity. The author Brent Cunningham (and the journal's managing editor) makes an interesting case for why the virtue of objectivity may be letting down the press and US citizens. It is an interesting article with several implications for our profession.

Value Proposition #3: Tell the national security customer what could happen next--i.e. predict the future.

Many outsiders assume that this is the key function of intelligence analysts. Certainly this seems to be what people are focusing on when they speak of intelligence failures. And when eager analysts skip or pay cursory attention to the first 2 steps, this is the destination they are racing to. Unfortunately, if you try to think about the future without doing the first two steps rigorously, you end up with probably the worst outcome in intelligence analysis: you end up with opinion. And all policymakers can spot opinion a mile away and rightly reject it. My experience is most analysts who engage in opinion aren't aware that's what they're doing.

Now you will hear some say that they don't want or expect intelligence analysts to predict the future, they realize this is impossible to do. Others say, correctly I might add, that you can't predict the future, a fool's game, because at any point in time, the future is plural. There are many futures at play that will be determined by the actions of the actors involved.

I think these individuals do protest too much. My experience is that most national security customers expect the analysis they receive to help them think about the future--help them frame what will happen next. A colleague recently described the epiphany she experienced while serving a rotation at a policymaking agency. She realized that most intelligence analysis concentrates on the past: what had just happened and why it had occurred. While when you're in a policymaking position, your focus is on the future. As soon as something happens a policymaker is thinking about how this even will shape the future.

Now, I believe these first three value propositions are pretty familiar to you all. This is orthodoxy and a fine orthodoxy it is. I don't mean to ever suggest we should stop doing them. Any thing else that we do well will have these tradecraft principles as its foundation. But I do think that the customer over the years has evolved from this point and wants more. We as intelligence analysts are challenged by this evolution. There are many reasons why the customer's value proposition is changing and will continue to change. I don't want to belabor them here but you can point to the information technology revolution, the end of the Cold War, the emergence of nontraditional threats, the greater complexity of the world, the greater interconnectedness of the world, the speed and pace of events. For all these reasons and more, the customers' expectations of intelligence analysis will evolve in the coming years. Adjusting to this evolution will be the greatest challenge for intelligence analysis during this century.

So what are these new value propositions? I think these will come as no surprise to most of you. But if it is difficult to retain our objectivity when we try to explain the meaning of events, some of these expectations from customers are even more challenging.

4. Tell the national security customer what she needs to know.

This value proposition basically involves accepting explicit tasking from the national security customer and answering his or her questions directly—writing intelligence analysis that is relevant to a particular customer on a particular day related to a specific project or initiative. In many professions, there is nothing at all controversial about letting customer requirements determine the final product. But in intelligence analysis, there are those who contend, even to this day, that allowing customer questions to shape an intelligence product detracts from the objectivity of the intelligence profession.

The response here is that unless you know exactly what the customer needs to know you risk wasting his time, telling her something she already knows, and becoming irrelevant. Not all truth is relevant to policymakers. If today, as a consumer, I am interested in buying a new car, it doesn't help me if the cover story on Consumer Reports this month is about the Best Dishwashers on the market. It is truthful, but not relevant.

But if you find this value proposition troublesome, the next will make you even less happy.

5. Provide intelligence analysis to help the national security customer achieve his or her policy goals.

I think a strong case can be made that this value proposition is antithetical to the intelligence profession. But I also believe that a strong case can be made that, when done correctly, this is the ultimate goal of intelligence analysis. We want US policy to succeed; US interests to be promoted, and US lives to be defended.

A classic commentary on the difference between policymakers and intelligence analysts has is that policymakers want to make something happen while intelligence analysts want to convince you that nothing can be done. In some ways, I think it is helpful to conceive of policymakers as producers of plays. They look at a given world situation and decide what can we do to shape the situation to the advantage of, in our case, the US, or it could be to the advantage of the international community or for the promotion of human rights. They decide to undertake a certain set of actions, they follow a script and put on a production that best meets their goals. They make assumptions about how the other characters on stage will behave and what assets (props) are at their disposal. What really in my mind sells the play metaphor (and I love metaphors) is that, like any producer of a play, the policymaker never knows how the critics will react, how long a run you'll get, whether you'll get back the money you invest, whether your actors will decide to ad lib, and God forbid you have audience participation.

If it is useful to think about governments, all governments and institutions as actors who try not just to react to reality but to shape it to conform to some set of mutually agreed-to interests, then what is the role of intelligence analysis?

Is it our role to help the policymaker put on the best play possible, with the greatest chance of success?

Do we write the script or just doctor it?

Do we just read the script and tell the producer that it will never make it out of Hartford?

Do we critique?

Do we identify all possible scripts for the producer, and suggest which one we think stands the best chance of a 10-year run?

Or do we do a combination of these actions based on what the producer/policymaker needs?

Of course, the real tough problem with the 5th value proposition is that it is unclear how you let the policymaker know when you really think another policy would be more effective. You have a couple of problems here:

First overcoming your own bias as an intelligence analyst; a 10% chance of success may look horrible to you but to a policymaker dealing with an all but intractable problem, of which we seem to have our fair share this millennium, 10% looks pretty attractive.

Second is delivering a message that the policymaker will actually hear. I would suggest that your chances of success are higher if you have a track record of providing the customer with relevant and insightful and helpful analysis. If you have always been a Cassandra, no matter how truthful, well then.....

Finally the sixth value proposition, the one that we have just begun to explore as intelligence analysts, is

6. Help the policymaker understand the significance of what we do not know

There is a subtle bias in the way intelligence analysis is generally taught that emphasizes thinking about what we know much more than thinking about what we don't know. I think many "how to be an analyst" courses—certainly the ones I'm familiar with—teach you to assemble the available evidence and understand what it reveals about a certain situation and draft a short and concise report that packages it for the consumer. We generally don't get a lot of training about how to think about what we don't know and how to communicate that lack of knowledge to a busy policymaker.

Here I'm not talking about the future, which we all know is largely unknowable, right? I'm talking about having a method and a vocabulary to think about what we don't understand about current reality and the significance of that absence of understanding.

I'm working on a terrorist group and I have a certain finite body of knowledge about that group. How much of that terrorist group's world do I understand as a result of my stack of intelligence reports? 10%, 20%, 90%? When I write about what I think the terrorist group will do next, do I sound authoritative even though I'm blind to most of what they are doing? Analysts are taught to create the painting with the colors available to them. But are there some significant shades missing from their palettes? How do we know when this is the case?

I contend that as intelligence analysts in the 21st century, we will always 'know' less and 'not know' more. The types of problems we are dealing with—terrorism, extremist ideologies, fanaticism—are sneaky and subterranean. Just think of all the effort we have to exert just to outline the basic leadership structure of a particular terrorism group and compare it to how easily we understand the government of France. (well, maybe that's not such a good example!) We have to devote many resources to this issue, both here in the US and abroad, in government, private industry, and academia, over the next few years to develop better methods and vocabulary.

In this environment and given these challenges, it is criminal not to take full advantage of every source of information possible. What we know about terrorism is not limited to what is available through secret channels. One of the great advantages of this complex world, and one of its most annoying characteristics, is that purveyors of information are everywhere—chat rooms, gray literature, bloggers, instant messaging. The new challenges are not the domains of monastic experts in the way that arms control or Kremlinology were—a very important fact about Al Qaeda is probably being expressed right now somewhere on the internet.

Policymakers, of course, have already begun to grapple with the problem of uncertainty. If you think about it, preemption is a foreign policy tool that you use to deal with and in fact to avoid surprises. What will the intelligence community's response be to the problem of uncertainty? Isn't the fundamental and dangerous assumption of intelligence today that "all things are knowable."?

One last thing:

As we think about these evolving value propositions, it's also important the we—your customer, your intelligence officers, your shareholders, the public, the media—share a common understanding of what intelligence is trying to do. If the public is expecting intelligence to do one thing but the policymaker is expecting something altogether different, well that's when you get a little controversy. As we struggle to reshape intelligence analysis in this century, it's important that the issues be addressed as openly and honestly as possible.

In conclusion, I want to say that I am very glad to be here with all of you, because I know that each of you in your own way is breaking new ground, thinking new thoughts, and struggling with same issues that I confront each day. I believe in the sharing of open sources & methods, and in the sharing of professional insights, and I hope that now that we know each other, I might be able to take advantage of your experiences and insights as we go forward together in the future. Thank you

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