

## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PUZZLE

### *Contributing Factors to the Top-Down Politicization of Intelligence*

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POLICY AND INTELLIGENCE ARE INTIMATELY INTERTWINED. POLICYMAKERS NEED INTELLIGENCE TO MAKE DECISIONS, WHILE THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY DERIVES SIGNIFICANCE FROM ITS ABILITY TO PROVIDE POLICY MAKERS WITH RELIABLE INFORMATION. IN THIS SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP, IT IS HEALTHY FOR INTELLIGENCE CONSUMERS TO AT TIMES CHECK AND DIRECT THE WORK OF INTELLIGENCE PRODUCERS. HOWEVER, IF UNDERTAKEN MALICIOUSLY, THIS CHECKING MECHANISM MANIFESTS AS TOP-DOWN POLITICIZATION. HERE, LEADERS USE INTELLIGENCE POST FACTO TO LEGITIMIZE THEIR POLICIES INSTEAD OF USING IT TO GUIDE THEM, REVERSING THE RATIONAL DECISION-MAKING PROCESS. CERTAIN FACTORS MAY COMPEL LEADERS TO MANIPULATE INTELLIGENCE TO REFLECT THEIR POLICY PREFERENCES. THIS ESSAY DEMONSTRATES HOW THREE DISTINCT PROCESSES OF TOP-DOWN POLITICIZATION CAN ARISE FROM AMBIGUOUS EVIDENCE, THE PSYCHOLOGY OF INTELLIGENCE CONSUMERS, AND THE NATURE OF THE LEADERS' POLITICAL POSITIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES. IT THEN PROCEEDS TO ARGUE THAT POLITICAL LEADERS' PSYCHOLOGY IS THE MOST POTENT SOURCE OF TOP-DOWN POLITICIZATION.

## AMBIGUOUS EVIDENCE AND INDIRECT MANIPULATION OF INTELLIGENCE

Ambiguous evidence can subtly shape and manipulate intelligence. Policymakers can exert this form of top-down politicization either consciously or unconsciously. For example, when ambiguous evidence is a factor, intelligence consumers may pose repeated questions to producers or request more specific information. If the policymaker truly does not understand the intelligence or wants the analyst to produce more relevant information, this process remains relatively benign. However, policymakers will often use this tactic as a subtle form of pressure, designed to direct analysts—who sometimes comply out of self-interest or resignation—to produce policy-friendly intelligence. Policymakers often prefer a snappy and decisive analysis over a careful and complex one, since they are under time constraints that incline them to act quickly and confidently, while analysts are more concerned with depth and accuracy.<sup>1</sup> Uncertainties and ambiguities—characteristics inherent to intelligence—are discomfoting to policymakers, who try to refine intelligence to make it support their policies or otherwise exploit ambiguity by manipulating intelligence to their liking.<sup>2</sup> When intelligence is vague, choices regarding critical decisions are likely to be political. The tendency of intelligence officers to qualify their intelligence and render it more ambiguous leads policymakers to reward and encourage those who produce more concise—and often more hasty—intelligence products.<sup>3</sup>



A POLITICAL CARTOON FROM *HARPER'S WEEKLY* DEPICTING AN EXCHANGE BETWEEN CARL SCHURZ AND UNCLE SAM (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

“Analysts who simplify and advocate get more attention from time-pressed policymakers than analysts who complicate or equivocate,” writes Richard Betts.<sup>4</sup> Policymakers may ignore ambiguous evidence or force analysts to continually re-evaluate and re-focus their analyses. When intelligence is too ambiguous, policymakers may also try to bypass analysts by examining the raw data themselves, which invariably leads to an imposition of their own biases. Ambiguous evidence makes it hard to create the consensus of support policymakers need to justify their decisions, and increases the likelihood that leaders will prod the intelligence community to produce more decisive analyses. Mark Lowenthal explains, “The policy maker wants to be able to show that a policy or decision is correct or well handled and wants intelligence that is supportive or that does not call into question the policy or decision.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, ambiguous evidence is at times shunned by policymakers, who will search for a more suitable analysis or indirectly manipulate intelligence to their benefit.

## LEADERS’ PSYCHOLOGY AND SELECTIVE PROCESSING OF INTELLIGENCE

From leaders’ psychology can emerge the process of “cherry-picking” congenial intelligence, ignoring and disregarding information that refutes certain policies. Due to cognitive biases, policymakers are likely to focus on information that supports their opinions while ignoring opposing information, discouraging analysts from revealing contradictory evidence.<sup>6</sup> According to Richard Betts, “What [political zealots] seek from intelligence is ammunition, not truth.”<sup>7</sup> Leaders are accustomed to risk, and experience has taught them to be confident in their judgments, which is why it is psychologically feasible for them to ignore contrary evidence and seek ammunition to confirm their biases. “The psychology of decision-making also explains why leaders ignore intelligence,” writes Joshua Rovner. “Individuals’ expectations have a powerful effect on their ability to accurately perceive information,” writes Rovner.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, policymakers have a hard time absorbing data that is inconsistent with their preconceptions. Rather than seeking out intelligence to shape policy, they seek intelligence to support their preformed political and ideological notions.<sup>9</sup> Because bottom-up politicization exists simultaneous to “cherry-picking,” policymakers inherently fear subversion by intelligence producers and focus on analyses that fall in line with their own policies. Not only do they disregard unpleasant information, but they may also scorn the analyst or organization that provided it.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, this selectivity of information can advertent-

*“The psychological pain of confronting failure is intense in any situation, but is especially magnified on the global stage in the policymakers’ world.”*

ly or inadvertently apply pressure on analysts, who may tailor their reports to the policymakers’ preference. There are heavy psychological costs to be incurred with the realization that a chosen and long-propounded policy is failing and must be reversed; therefore, policymakers “cherry-pick” not only to publicly support their policies, but also to privately soothe their psychological qualms about their own decisions. In dealing with the war in Iraq, former President George W. Bush “was aware that a degree of self-manipulation if not self-deception was involved.”<sup>11</sup> Bush focused on intelligence that supported his policy in Iraq because he knew that if his resolve weakened, his whole team’s confidence in its abilities would weaken as well. The psychological pain of confronting failure is intense in any situation, but is especially magnified on the global stage in the policymakers’ world. Policies are difficult to reverse once they have gained momentum, so even if related information surfaces against the policy it will likely be ignored.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, once people have invested a lot of time and effort into something, the psychological costs of starting from scratch are too painful to bear. As a result, officials will ignore unwelcome news and fixate on information that is supportive of their endeavors.

#### LEADERS’ POLITICAL POSITION AND DIRECT MANIPULATION OF INTELLIGENCE

Sometimes even direct manipulation of intelligence may arise from officials’ political positions and policy concerns. Direct manipulation is risky since it is the most blatant kind of politicization and is therefore used in only dire situations when a leader’s political position or an important policy is at stake. Although examples of this arm-twisting are rare, it appears to be an effective solution when a leader’s reputation is in danger.<sup>13</sup> “Politicization is more likely when policymakers have committed themselves to highly controversial issues,” writes Rovner. “Public commitments make policymakers vulnerable to political costs if their plans appear misguided or doomed to fail, giving them strong incentives to pressure intelligence to deliver supporting estimates.”<sup>14</sup> Direct politicization occurs when policymakers pressure intelligence agencies to deliver

products that support their policies and, more subtly, appoint analysts who are likely to produce the preferred outcome, resulting in manipulation by appointment. Direct manipulation can emerge out of leaders’ genuine belief that their policy is the best long-term solution for their constituents, regardless of contrary intelligence. Furthermore, since renegeing a political position or admitting failure can have severe political consequences, leaders are likely to do everything in their power to defend their actions. They know that criticism of their policies will be very costly, so they try to create an image of consensus and legitimacy by pressuring intelligence—which tends to be seen as politically unbiased—to support their decisions.<sup>15</sup> “To change their basic objectives will be to incur very high costs, including, in some cases, losing their offices if not their lives,” writes Robert Jervis.<sup>16</sup> Policymakers seek reelection, career advancement, and other benefits from the policies they pursue, giving them a strong personal incentive to gain approval for their initiatives.<sup>17</sup> Since the stakes are high in such cases, leaders in these situations are more likely to employ direct manipulation. If desperate, policy-



A POLITICAL CARTOON FROM *THE WORLD* DEPICTING NATIONALIST SYMBOLS OF GREAT BRITAIN UPSET OVER AMERICAN NEUTRALITY DURING EARLY WORLD WAR I (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

makers may even resort to the willful distortion of analysis. Usually this occurs when policymakers genuinely believe their policy will eventually be beneficial, and are willing to manipulate the truth to get it to succeed.

### LEADERS' PSYCHOLOGY AS THE MOST POTENT SOURCE OF POLITICIZATION

At first glance, leaders' political position appears to be the most potent source of politicization. However, although this is a powerful source, it is neither the most prevalent nor the most corrupting. While the nature of leaders' political positions and responsibilities is subject to change, their cognitive behaviors remain the same, which is why leaders' psychology is actually the most potent and widespread source of politicization. If officials were unfettered by their psychological influences, they would realize that it is more rational and beneficial to adapt policy to intelligence whenever possible. In practice, by accepting important evidence—even if it contradicts policy—leaders could ameliorate their political positions and better fulfill their responsibilities to the public in the long run. Although they may suffer short-term consequences for modifying their policies, leaders could validate these shifts with relevant intelligence. In reality, however, the leader will often choose to continue the policy even when it is unpopular. This phenomenon can only be explained by the policy maker's psychology, since rational consideration would favor more flexible decision-making. As Betts says, the main challenge to high-level operators is "recognizing when a proper understanding of reality confirms the feasibility of their aims, or compels them to change course."<sup>19</sup> What compels leaders to politicize intelligence is not their current political positions, but rather the psychological tendencies that prevent them from constructively accepting opposition. Leaders' psychology and their political position are intrinsically tied. The leaders' psychological attachment to predispositions and first-choice policies is what prevents them from looking at their policies and responsibilities objectively. Even if leaders receive intelligence that their policy is failing, they will fixate on supporting evidence and continue their policy out of a psychological aversion to backing out of large commitments. For this reason, it is difficult for leaders to see when their policies are inadequate and to use intelligence in an unbiased way that could help improve policy. What allows policymakers to exploit ambiguous intelligence is not primarily the intelligence itself, regardless of its ambiguity, but rather the psychological predilections that prevent them from accurately appraising the information.

### ENDNOTES

1. Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence*, 2007, 71.
2. Lowenthal, *Intelligence, From Secrets to Policy*, 2000, 266.
3. Rovner, *Fixing the Facts*, 2011, 23.
4. Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence*, 2007, 77.
5. Lowenthal, *Intelligence, From Secrets to Policy*, 2000, 270.
6. Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence*, 2007, 93.
7. Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence*, 2007, 96.
8. Rovner, *Fixing the Facts*, 2011, 36.
9. Rovner, *Fixing the Facts*, 2011, 29.
10. Jervis, "Why Intelligence and Policymakers Clash," 2010, 185-204.
11. Jervis, "Why Intelligence and Policymakers Clash," 2010, 187.
12. Jervis, "Why Intelligence and Policymakers Clash," 2010, 188.
13. Rovner, *Fixing the Facts*, 2011, 31.
14. Rovner, *Fixing the Facts*, 2011, 36.
15. Rovner, *Fixing the Facts*, 2011, 45.
16. Jervis, "Why Intelligence and Policymakers Clash," 2010, 192.
17. Lowenthal, *Intelligence, From Secrets to Policy*, 2000, 189.
18. Jervis, "Why Intelligence and Policymakers Clash," 2010, 192.

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