

**Richard H. Immerman.** "Intelligence and Strategy: Historicizing Psychology, Policy, and Politics." *Diplomatic History* 32.1 (January 2008): 1-23. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-7709.2007.00675.x. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2007.00675.x>.

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Reviewed by **Christopher L. Ball**, H-Diplo Book Review Editor

**R**ichard Immerman, author and editor of several histories of the Eisenhower administration's foreign and intelligence policies and recently a U.S. intelligence official, asks whether intelligence analysis influenced U.S. national security policy during the Cold War. What sparked his inquiry, an extension of his June 2007 SHAFR presidential address prior to his government appointment, was the "politicization" of intelligence on Iraq by the George W. Bush administration (p.4-5), but Immerman defers that discussion for the last third of the article. The balance of the article examines how cognitive biases and political motives kept intelligence from shaping U.S. grand strategy during the Cold War.

Immerman notes that John Lewis Gaddis expected in 1989 that secret intelligence would not critically affect the history of the Cold War, and that a 2005 Oslo conference reached a similar conclusion (n.8, p.4).<sup>1</sup> Of course, covert operations, surveillance photographs, and electronic intercepts have figured prominently in crises and decisions. Immerman's focus, however, is whether "strategic intelligence" in the form of National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) and similar products fundamentally altered U.S. national security policy from what it otherwise would have been (p.5).<sup>2</sup> His answer: they probably did not (p.7). Put differently, no NIE ever compelled National Security Council staffers to scrap a major

<sup>1</sup> For a more cautious assessment of the macro-effects of intelligence, see Raymond L. Garthoff, "Foreign Intelligence and the Historiography of the Cold War," *Journal of Cold War Studies*. Spring 2004, 38-40.

<sup>2</sup> Strategic intelligence is information important for establishing "policies with respect to national planning and security in war and peace and for the advancement of broad national policy" (p.7-8, quoting the Central Intelligence Group's (CIGs) 1947 description of its function).

strategy document or left a president mulling over whether his defense policies should be radically altered.

Why not? From Truman through Eisenhower, Immerman argues that cognitive bias blunted intelligence's impact. Presidents and their advisors were unlikely to change their preconceived beliefs whatever new evidence was presented. From Kennedy onward, directors of central intelligence were reluctant to issue estimates that contradicted presidents' chosen strategies, or were ignored if they did. The politicalization of intelligence reinforced the cognitive barriers.

The cognitive finding Immerman draws on the most is belief perseverance, in which a person retains a belief despite strong evidence that it is false or flawed (p.2). This error is associated with the confirmatory bias, a tendency to accept information that supports one's belief and find fault with information that undermines it.<sup>3</sup> Unlike studies that focus on intelligence analysts' cognitive failings, Immerman's focus is on how executive officials respond to their judgments.<sup>4</sup> For example, the fledgling CIA's Office of Reports and Estimates (ORE) found no sign in 1950 that the Soviet atomic capability had made it more aggressive, but this failed to assuage Paul Nitze, who already saw "mounting militancy" (p.9). Likewise, Immerman sees no sign that intelligence ever changed Eisenhower's mind over important strategic questions. While they might have confirmed Eisenhower's beliefs, it is not clear that Eisenhower needed such confirmation to proceed (p.11-12).

One problem for Immerman's argument is that it is hard to find a case both where an NIE or similar document could truly be said to have discredited a belief *and* where abandoning that belief would have required U.S. grand strategy to change. Immerman acknowledges that intelligence is often ambiguous (p.6), but to falsify a belief the information must be decisive. Take the case of the 1950 estimate on post-atomic Soviet policy cited above. The State Department and the armed services all dissented from the CIA's view.<sup>5</sup> State's dissent focused whether the new nuclear arsenal would embolden the Soviet Union to use military force. The estimate argued that the Soviet Union never intended "to continue its military advance to the Atlantic in 1945... Certainly the burden of proof lies on those who would assert that the Soviet rulers had become so drunk with power as to disregard all the precepts of Russian tradition and Communist doctrine and

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<sup>3</sup> See Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1976), esp. p.143-161. Lee Ross and Craig A. Anderson, "Shortcomings in the attribution process: On the origins and maintenance of erroneous social assessments," in Daniel Kahneman, et al, *Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge University Press, 1982) p.144, 149.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Jervis reviews several official reports on the Iraq intelligence errors, which focus on the analysts. See "Reports, Politics, and Intelligence Failures: The Case of Iraq," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29:1 (Feb. 2006).

<sup>5</sup> "Estimate of the Effects of the Soviet Possession of the Atomic Bomb Upon the Security of the United States and Upon the Probabilities of Direct Soviet Action" ORE 91-49, 6 April 1950. Accessed via <http://www.foia.cia.gov/search.asp>. The excerpt in *Assessing the Soviet Threat*, Immerman's source, lacks the ORE's enclosures, pages 11 to 28 of the estimate.

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to substitute a hazardous program of world conquest, unlikely to succeed, for a supposedly infallible program of world revolution.”<sup>6</sup>

The State Department rejected this reasoning in a familiar way, “We do not consider, however, that *lack* of evidence of a Soviet intention to use military force on the U.S. can be taken as *evidence* of the *absence* of such a Soviet intention... Is there evidence on the basis of which it can be assumed that Soviet leaders will not resort to military action against the U.S. now that they possess an atomic weapon?”<sup>7</sup> Despite its anti-skepticism, State did have a valid point: ORE’s analysis discussed what the USSR might have done if the United States had lacked an atomic bomb and what the USSR did when the U.S. had an atomic monopoly. State was focused on what the USSR would do now that it had an atomic bomb too, an area the estimate did not explicitly address. This doesn't mean that State's conclusion was correct, but ORE’s inference was flawed.

Even if intelligence does discredit a belief, it does not follow that national security policy must change. For example, the Kennedy administration entered office assuming that there was a “missile gap.” Although a NIE stating as much would not be issued until Sep. 1961, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and his deputy, Roswell Gilpatric, reviewed the photographic intelligence upon taking office, and concluded there was no gap by early February.<sup>8</sup> The absence of a gap did not logically dictate the policy. The U.S. could have slowed missile deployments given that the Soviet arsenal was not that advanced, or it could have exploited the gap in its favor by accelerating its deployments. In fact, the U.S. did both. Two Titan-II squadrons and the Minuteman rail-based program were cancelled, while the silo-based program was accelerated.<sup>9</sup>

Even more confusing is the fact that beliefs can change when intelligence has not. For example, Ronald Reagan’s reversal in his Soviet policy came in spite of, not because of, the CIA’s views of the USSR.<sup>10</sup> For Immerman, the point is that Reagan was willing to ignore intelligence advice in making national security policy (p.16-17). (The missile gap

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6 ORE 91-49, “Enclosure B: Soviet Intentions and Objectives, Particularly With Respect to Uses of Military Forces,” p.18-19

7 ORE 91-49, “Appendix A: Dissent by the Intelligence Organization, Department of State,” p.29 (emphasis in original).

8 Garthoff, “Estimating Soviet Military Intentions and Capabilities” in Gerald K. Haines and Robert E. Leggett, eds. *Watching the Bear: Essays on CIA’s Analysis of the Soviet Union* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2003) at <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/watching-the-bear-essays-on-cias-analysis-of-the-soviet-union/article05.html>; Fred Kaplan, *Wizards of Armageddon* (Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 287

9 David Stumpf, *Titan-II: A History of a Cold War Missile Program* (University of Arkansas Press, 2000), p.4-5. The cancellation of the Titan squadrons was based on a Bureau of the Budget (today’s OMB) proposal to cancel four squadrons. McNamara had wanted to keep all four. See “Memorandum From Secretary of Defense McNamara and the Director of the Bureau of the Budget (Bell) to President Kennedy,” 10 March 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, VIII at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjif/viii/32070.htm>

10 For a psychology-based explanation of Reagan’s change see Barbara Farnham, “Perceiving the End of Threat” in Stanley A. Renshon and Deborah Welch Larson, eds., *Good Judgment in Foreign Policy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

case is also consistent with Immerman's argument in that McNamara relied on his own evaluation of the raw data, not intelligence estimates). However, these are important exceptions to belief perseverance and related cognitive errors as explanations of decisionmaking. Immerman's second reason that intelligence fails to shape grand strategy is that it becomes politicized. That is, analysis is molded to match an administration's policy decisions. By Immerman's account, politicization emerged in the 1960s and has never really ended. On Vietnam, Directors of Central Intelligence (DCI) John McCone and Richard Helms resisted the CIA analysts' pessimistic views, and estimates on Vietnam were redrafted so that they complemented rather than contradicted administration policies (p.13-15). The fault is not with the intelligence chiefs or their subordinates, Immerman maintains, but with the presidents. When estimates implied that U.S. policy was misdirected, presidents marginalized directors' roles in top policy councils. For example, when McCone backed the CIA's Vietnam estimates, Lyndon Johnson excluded him from the Tuesday luncheons (p.15). Politicization does not require policymakers to explicitly demand that reports be altered. The intelligence community (IC) — the set of all U.S. intelligence agencies, not just the CIA — learned that there is no incentive to speak uncomfortable truths to power.

All this leads to Immerman's assessment of the role of intelligence in U.S. policy toward Iraq under George W. Bush. Immerman focuses on the role that intelligence played in two "motives" for the war: Saddam Hussein's links to al Qaeda and Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program (p.18). Immerman is ambiguous about whether administration figures formed their policy because of these two beliefs or whether these beliefs formed based on their policy toward Iraq (p.22).

First, Immerman states that the IC never found a "link" between Saddam and al Qaeda (p.18); President Bush and his advisors ignored the IC consensus. Immerman is imprecise here. There is no known evidence that Iraq ever provided al Qaeda with funding, training, or material. Nevertheless, there were a series of contacts between Iraqi intelligence agents and bin Laden or his deputies beginning possibly as early as 1994 and occurring intermittently until 1999 but, as the 9/11 Commission put it, "to date we have seen no evidence that these or the earlier contacts ever developed into a collaborative operational relationship. Nor have we seen evidence indicating that Iraq cooperated with al Qaeda in developing or carrying out any attacks against the United States."<sup>11</sup> Despite this assessment, as Congress debated authorizing the use of force against Iraq, President Bush told the nation: "We've learned that Iraq has trained al Qaeda members in bomb-making and poisons and deadly gases."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (Washington: GPO, 2004). p.66.

<sup>12</sup> "Remarks by the President on Iraq," Cincinnati OH, 7 Oct. 2002, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/10/20021007-8.html>

What DCI George Tenet told Bush in 2002 and 2003 was more ambiguous than Immerman allows. Two sources that Immerman cites in support of the claim that Tenet, on behalf of the IC, rejected any Iraqi aid to al Qaeda show that Tenet often *backed* such claims (p.19, n.48). *The New Republic* reported that Tenet told reporters he had fact-checked Bush's speech cited above, and a letter by Tenet to Senate intelligence committee chair Bob Graham, dated the same day as the speech, cites "credible reporting" that "Iraq has provided training to al-Qa'ida members in the areas of poisons and gases and making conventional bombs."<sup>13</sup> The 2004 report of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's 2004 report notes Tenet's testimony in an open hearing on 11 Feb. 2003 that Iraq had "provided training in poisons and gases to two al Qaeda associates."<sup>14</sup> Prior CIA reports and Tenet's own Senate testimony had qualified these claims, noting that the reports were "second-hand or based on sources of varying reliability." The Defense Intelligence Agency was highly skeptical of the primary source, Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi, who recanted his claims in Jan. 2004.<sup>15</sup> According to the minority section of the Senate report, the CIA had another source who was in contact with "a high level Iraqi official who had access to Saddam Hussein." This source was considered so sensitive that only top policymakers, and not analysts, were briefed about his WMD claims. The source, reported later to be Iraq's foreign minister, also said Iraq had no ties to al Qaeda, but this information was never disseminated, neither to policymakers nor to other analysts because "it did not provide anything new."<sup>16</sup> Such an omission fits more into the category of politicization of intelligence — information policymakers do not want to hear is not reported — than cognitive bias.

On Iraq's WMD, Immerman argues that the failure of accurate intelligence to shape policy was over-determined. The IC lacked sufficient data on Iraq's programs and always assumed they existed (p.21). The Bush administration had already decided that regime change was necessary in Iraq, and indirectly pressured the IC to produce estimates conforming to its views (p.22). Politicization overlapped with cognitive bias to a calamitous crescendo.

Immerman's underlying position is that the blame rests with presidents and other policymakers, not the IC. Even if the intelligence was accurate and the IC was adamant

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<sup>13</sup> The letter is available at <http://www.fas.org/irp/news/2002/10/dci100702.html> It was produced in the 9 Oct. Congressional Record, p.S10154

<sup>14</sup> The *The U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments of Iraq* (Senate Report 108-301, 7 July 2004) remains classified. But sections from it are reported by the SSCI in its 8 Sep. 2006 release "Postwar Findings about Iraq's WMD Programs and Links to Terrorism and How They Compare with Prewar Assessments," p.77-78. Available <http://intelligence.senate.gov/phaseiiaccuracy.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> "U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments of Iraq," p.79-82. According to a Feb. 2004 CIA cable, Al-Libi made the false claims under threats and abuse by CIA agents and under torture by a foreign intelligence service (reportedly Egyptian intelligence). For more on Al-Libi's detention and treatment, see Jane Mayer, "Outsourcing Torture," *The New Yorker*, 14 Feb. 2005.

<sup>16</sup> "Postwar Findings about Iraq's WMD Programs," p.142-43. NBC News reported on 20 Mar. 2006 that the Iraqi official was the foreign minister, Naji Sabri, and that the source was an intermediary arranged via French intelligence. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11927856/>

about it, the Bush administration would still have barreled ahead, just as past presidents had done.<sup>17</sup> What this implies, however, is that politicization is more the consequence of a policymaker's cognitive bias rather than an independent cause of the intelligence-policy chasm. When belief perseverance is pervasive, analysts and their superiors learn to omit or downplay disconfirming data lest they repeatedly knock heads with policymakers. How else do we explain why the Iraqi foreign minister's claims that Iraq had chemical weapons (but no biological ones) were reported but not his al Qaeda denials? Or why the CIA never reported that "some thirty" Iraqi scientists previously associated with Iraq's WMD programs, contacted via relatives at the CIA's behest in 2002, *all* said that the programs had been abandoned?<sup>18</sup>

Focusing on the Iraq case, however, may distort our understanding of the intelligence-policy nexus. First, the 2003 Iraq war remains a hotly contested political as well as historical topic. We must guard against our own beliefs about its origins persevering despite new, disconfirming information, if any. Second, the focus on the Iraq intelligence leads us away from the role that intelligence played more broadly in Bush administration foreign policy. Libya, North Korea, and Iran respectively abandoned, declared, and denied nuclear weapons programs during the Bush administration. What role did cognitive errors or politicization play in these cases?

There is a more fundamental problem in discussions of intelligence and policy. If policymakers were not "cognitively impaired and politically possessed" (p.23), what role would intelligence play? While Immerman states that good intelligence does not guarantee good policy (p.1), there often remains the tacit assumption that NIEs or other intelligence reports can decide strategic questions (i.e., when and how military force should be used and for what ends). The implicit counter-factual claim is that if the Soviet, Vietnam, or Iraq estimates were correct and read impartially, presidents might have chosen the "right" policy. But intelligence cannot do this because it cannot determine what U.S. policy aims should be and what levels of risk should be accepted. If Iraq, hypothetically, had on-going WMD programs, had provided training or support to al Qaeda, and the IC had accurately reported this, it would not follow that the U.S. should have invaded. The problems of post-war occupation and regional responses would still have existed. Likewise, if the IC had decisive evidence that Iraq had neither backed al Qaeda nor had on-going WMD programs and had reported this confidently, it does not follow that the U.S. should have not have invaded. The problem of Iraq re-starting WMD programs if sanctions ended would still have existed. A thicket of strategic quandaries affected U.S.-Iraq relations since Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, and more accurate intelligence would not have determined how to solve them, or any other strategic

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<sup>17</sup> This is not necessarily true. As Jervis argues ("Reports, Politics, and Intelligence Failures," p.7), without the intelligence support, they might not have mustered the political backing for war.

<sup>18</sup> James Risén, *State of War: The Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), p.106.

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problem. In this sense the CIA headquarters' epigraph “And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32) is not an aspiration. It is a curse.

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