

*Profesores Visitantes*

## The Analysts' Exciting Challenges

by Fulton T. Armstrong

Our work as analysts has never been more important, never more difficult, and never more potentially gratifying.

Our governments and companies – our societies – are flooded with information, but they desperately need the sort of intelligence that only rigorous analysis can produce. The internet and 24-hour media have created a sense among many decisionmakers that they have all the information they need to understand the challenges they face and the opportunities they have. It's often true, but they equally often lack the analysis – the intelligence – that they need. Instead, they pull their information from the surge of data swirling around them that serves their preconceptions – and reject that which doesn't.

There's a saying in Washington that “there are only policy successes and intelligence failures” – that glory for good decisions goes to the policymaker and blame for the bad ones goes to the intelligence agencies. It's unfair because, many times, policymakers do not seek or heed the input of professional analysts. They “wing it,” as we say in English, and they are sometimes right, sometimes wrong. But the number of *real* intelligence failures, those in which analysts fail, is also formidable and hugely damaging to the national interest.

I was a member of the United States National Intelligence Council, a group of the most senior analysts of the American “intelligence community,” during the preparation of the famous National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq's supposed weapons of mass destruction. As I have written elsewhere ([click here](#)), that NIE was the result of sustained and intrusive manipulation by the Bush-Cheney Administration – and the willful submission to that manipulation by a number of my colleagues. The National Intelligence Officers involved were never reprimanded; indeed, they received large cash bonuses and remained in their well-paid jobs for years after. The message to serious analysts was devastating.

Politicization is a deep-rooted problem that has steadily eroded the culture of rigor, accountability, and credibility that any intelligence community needs. The alleged weapons were, of course, never found, and even though the Bush Administration in all likelihood would have cooked up other pretexts to invade Iraq, the fact is that the analysts who validated the Administration's false allegations now share in responsibility for a failed war that has cost the United States a trillion dollars, the lives of 4,500 innocent U.S. troops, and immeasurable international prestige.

Bureaucratic priorities, such as pressure to cast one's own organization and its programs in the most flattering light, also diminish the quality of the intelligence product. For many peers, toeing the institutional line and currying favor with bosses trump the analytical mission. In an intelligence agency, for example, the pressure to use information generated by its own programs – even when obviously biased – is given priority over multiple sources of information from outside the organization. That's how sources and their in-house patrons preserve their value-added, but the policymaker gets a skewed intelligence product. The same happens in the private sector, where telling the boss that the other firm's product is more successful because it's made and promoted better is not easy. It takes a strong analyst to resist those pressures.

Another danger is our own laziness. Analysis is hard work, and doing it objectively – removing ourselves and our preferences from the mix – takes energy and discipline. Even when we're free from outside and internal

pressures, resisting the temptation to go with the “common wisdom” or to merely predict the worst – under the guise of doing “warning analysis” – is difficult. It means accepting the risk of being wrong and being alone. Especially for younger analysts, that’s not easy.

Meanwhile, the reward for good work is usually delayed and diluted. When it comes, feedback is sometimes subject to interpretation. Did a policymaker like my work because he or she agreed with it, or because it challenged him or her? In the end, the deepest sense of gratification probably comes from the analyst’s own heart, knowing that he or she got the story right and contributed to the organization’s ability to respond appropriately to both risk and opportunity alike.

There’s good news, however. We all have the tools to provide good intelligence to the governments, companies, and non-governmental groups for which we work– analytical products that rise above political and bureaucratic pressures and truly serve our organizations’ purposes. The tools are embodied in our “tradecraft.” They help us make analysis a *conscious process*, reducing biases, manipulation, and narrow interpretations of our information. They also protect us from unwelcome pressures. Good tradecraft requires, for example, the development of multiple interpretations of our information – helping us resist outside pressure to reach only one conclusion.

Our tradecraft toolbox helps us in other ways:

- Intellectual curiosity – a passion to understand *how* and *why* things are happening – gives our analysis richness and depth.
- Rigorous, critical and even skeptical examination of our information keeps us from “falling in love” with our sources and shutting off other potential leads.
- Building our facts, evidence, and argumentation in a transparent manner shows that we have no agenda and have not pre-cooked our conclusions.
- Identifying drivers of events – separating out the causes of problems, for example, from their symptoms – helps us show decisionmakers where they can have influence without us risking to appear prescriptive. A driver-driven methodology also enables us to give them a range of future scenarios in a transparent, almost educational manner.
- Our concise, unambiguous writing and briefing techniques save policymakers’ time and give credibility to our analysis.

If we analysts know one thing for sure, it’s that there’s often not a perfect solution to every problem – so our tradecraft can’t guarantee brilliant analysis for happy customers. But, in the end, we have to be idealists, and we’ve got to have faith that our pursuit of the truth, a rigorous analysis of the information, and a clear statement of our conclusions serve our country’s, companies’, and our own personal interests. Few things are more satisfying than that.



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