
URL: http://tiny.cc/AR783

Review by Erik J. Dahl, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey

In the field of intelligence studies, one of the most commonly asked questions is the one posed by Stephen Marrin in the article under review: why is it that intelligence so often fails to be heard? Or to put it another way, why is intelligence analysis so frequently rejected, and why does it appear to have only limited influence on policy-making?

Marrin focuses on a specific aspect of the question: “why does strategic intelligence analysis have limited influence on American foreign policy?” (726) This is an important question, and as Marrin notes, it is significant beyond the relatively narrow field of intelligence studies. Most models of governmental decision-making assume that—at least in theory—policy makers make rational choices, based on an objective weighing of the facts and a clear assessment of the alternatives. Of course, in the real world policy makers rarely follow such a rational model, and intelligence scholars have joined political scientists, psychologists, and many others in noting that policy decisions often hinge more on other factors such as politics or cognitive bias than on a rational assessment of the situation as presented by the intelligence community.¹

But Marrin argues that the disregard for intelligence analysis is so common, and found so widely across different countries and in different fields such as law enforcement and business, that there must be something else going on. He suggests the answer can be found by challenging the initial presumption that intelligence should, if everything is working right, influence policy-making by providing leaders with useful information and assessments. The question, he argues, should not be why leaders disregard intelligence. Instead, we should ask why they should listen in the first place. The answer Marrin arrives at might seem surprising, coming from a former CIA analyst who is now a prominent intelligence scholar: he argues that “intelligence analysis will inevitably have limited influence on policy-making because it is a duplicative step in the policy process.”

Policy makers have their own sources of information, and they often have as much or more experience and expertise in the subject at hand as do the intelligence analysts, so why should policy makers listen to intelligence?

As Marrin notes, this question is an old one, and readers might be forgiven for wondering whether there can be anything new to say about it. Marrin cites a number of prominent expressions of the question, dating back to key figures in the study of intelligence during the Cold War such as Sherman Kent and Roger Hilsman, to more today’s senior intelligence scholars and practitioners (and often scholar-practitioners) such as Robert Jervis and Paul Pillar, and the newer generation of intelligence thinkers such as Joshua Rovner.²

Marrin does provide a new take on this old question, often by challenging the conventional wisdom. For example, he argues that although we tend to think that policy should be made strictly on an objective basis, guided by intelligence staffs, that is not necessarily so. In a democracy, where “policymakers are inherently political decisionmakers” (729), there should not be anything necessarily wrong with leaders making decisions based on their political views or their own interpretations of the situation. After all, they were presumably elected because voters were attracted to those views and interpretations.

The conventional thinking in intelligence studies, as Marrin points out, is that the primary job of intelligence is to help policy makers by reducing their uncertainty. For example, prominent intelligence author Mark Lowenthal has written that “the role of intelligence is to reduce uncertainty. That’s it.”³ If intelligence were indeed able to do that, why would a policy maker not listen to intelligence? Who would not want to have less uncertainty? But Marrin argues that good, independent intelligence analysis may actually increase the level of uncertainty for a decision maker, because it may “provide the inconvenient facts and unwanted interpretations which challenge reigning assumptions, presumptions, and preferences” (730). For that reason, decision makers may, not surprisingly, be reluctant to listen to their intelligence staffs.

Marrin poses several questions that would make rich topics for further research, including: who tends to get it right more often, policy makers or intelligence analysts? Marrin writes that “there is not yet any evidence that policy assessment in general is any less accurate than intelligence analysis” (731). But much of this article appears to rest on the assumption that leaders have at least as good, if not better, intelligence sources than the formal intelligence community does. I hope that some young (or perhaps not so young) scholar may take up


this challenge and seek out evidence for whether or not, or under what circumstances, policy makers may
make better assessments than intelligence analysts.4

Marrin is well versed in the literature and historiography of intelligence, and the first half of this article
provides a valuable literature review in the area of intelligence-policy relations. But the meat of the article is
contained in several case studies in which he examines the influence that strategic intelligence assessments had
on American foreign and national security policy. I wish he had devoted more space to these cases, because his
findings often run counter to the conventional wisdom and the limited evidence he presents is not always
sufficient to convince the reader of his argument.

The first case is that of the Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991, and here he argues that strategic intelligence had
limited influence “because it was consistently incorrect and disregarded in favor of more accurate policy
analysis” (732). The second case is that of Yugoslavia, and the 1990 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that
predicted the country would collapse and fall apart. Here, Marrin argues, the intelligence was correct, but was
redundant, because policy makers had come to the same assessment.

Marrin’s third case is that of the U.S. intelligence community assessment of the threat from al-Qaeda leading
up to the 9/11 attacks. He focuses on two NIE’s produced in 1995 and 1997 that warned of the growing
threat, and he argues that these assessments had little effect on American policy because by that time the
Clinton administration had already understood the threat and was working on a counterterrorism plan (734).
In other words, these NIEs were, like the Yugoslavia NIE, redundant.

The final case is that of the Iraq War in 2003, and here Marrin argues that intelligence assessments twice
failed to influence policy. The first instance is the famous 2002 NIE on Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction
(WMD), which Marrin describes as ineffective because its conclusions were already known and were
consistent with what key policy makers already believed. The second instance of limited influence is the two
National Intelligence Council assessments in 2003 that warned of potentially serious postwar problems in
Iraq. Here again, according to Marrin, the intelligence assessments failed to influence policy not because
intelligence was ignored, but because it was redundant—the Bush administration was aware of these postwar
dangers, but made the decision to invade anyway, which is, after all, the prerogative of political leaders (735).

Marrin’s analysis of these case studies runs counter to conventional wisdom, and to my own take, in several
aspects. For example, I would not argue, as Marrin does, that in 1990 U.S. policymakers had reached a more
accurate analysis of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein’s intentions than had the intelligence community. It
seems instead that nobody understood what Iraq was going to do—certainly not senior U.S. leaders, who
tended to rely on the optimistic assessments of their foreign counterparts that Iraq was merely posturing and
that the crisis could be resolved without fighting.5

---

4 A good place to start would be with Yarhi-Milo’s Knowing the Adversary.

5 I have reviewed these assessments elsewhere: Erik J. Dahl, Intelligence and Surprise Attack: Failure and Success
Similarly, I question Marrin’s view that policymakers in 1990 and 1991 had already come to the same pessimistic conclusion as the Yugoslavia NIE. Some of this may be hindsight. As Gregory Treverton and Renanah Miles have written, “In retrospect, several policy officials say the NIE didn’t tell them anything they did not already know.” But the primary explanation for why the NIE failed to gain traction with policymakers seems to be that it ran contrary to official assessments and policies, not that it was redundant to them.

The same point could be made about Marrin’s assessment of the influence of intelligence estimates before 9/11 and before the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Here too Marrin challenges the conventional understanding of these cases, and his arguments would benefit from a fuller examination than he is able to provide in this article.

More generally, however, it would be useful if Marrin could have explained more clearly the reason why he chose these cases for study. These were evidently chosen because they are prominent examples in which intelligence assessments have been seen as failing to influence policy, but perhaps future work could expand on this analysis, reviewing these and other cases in more depth.

Another concern is that the article appears to define intelligence influence on policy too narrowly. According to Marrin’s argument, it seems, the only way intelligence can be seen to influence policy is if it contradicts current policy, and as a result that policy is changed. That might indeed be the epitome of influence, but it is setting the bar pretty high. Instead, it seems reasonable to argue that intelligence can have an influence on policy if it reinforces efforts already in motion, such as was the case with the 2002 NIE on Iraq’s WMD. But for Marrin, the NIE did not influence policy because it reinforced the view already held by the Bush administration.

It seems surprising that an intelligence insider such as Marrin would argue that intelligence analysis is redundant and unnecessary in the making of foreign policy. But Marrin goes further and argues that once we understand the reason for this gap—why policy makers fail to listen to intelligence—it becomes possible to attempt to narrow it and increase the positive influence of intelligence on policy. Marrin’s suggestions for improvement are solid, if unsurprising: analysts should strive to provide decision makers with analysis and expertise they do not have; they should be as transparent as possible in making arguments and presenting evidence; and they should incorporate policy perspectives in their assessments (737). He also suggests steps should be taken to improve the rigor that policy makers use in making their own assessments and in deciding how to use intelligence, but Marrin rightly notes that “this may be an ideal solution” (737), one that is well beyond the ability of the intelligence community to implement.

Marrin’s final recommendation is one less often heard among intelligence specialists, but which deserves attention: perhaps we all place too much emphasis on the influence intelligence has on senior policy levels, and instead we should focus more on how intelligence can shape the way working levels of government operate. To be sure, studying the influence of intelligence on middle-level officials rather than on presidents, or on field-grade military officers rather than on generals and admirals, might be difficult; it surely would be

---

less sexy. But it might be the right thing to do, because it may be at that level that the most significant influence of intelligence is felt. In fact, evidence for this argument can be found in one of the cases examined here: Marten van Heuven, the National Intelligence Officer who requested the 1990 Yugoslavia NIE, said that the NIE “did find resonance at the working level of the Department of State’s European Bureau. At the policy level, however, it was characterized as overblown and greeted with disdain.”7 Future work in this area might also focus less on strategic intelligence, and more on the influence of operational or even tactical level intelligence.

Overall, this article is a valuable contribution to the study of intelligence-policy relations, and I hope it will spur more work by political scientists as well as intelligence scholars on the important question of when, and why, intelligence assessments have an impact on policy making.8

**Erik J. Dahl** is an associate professor of national security affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, where he teaches in the National Security Affairs Department and the Center for Homeland Defense and Security. His research and teaching focus on intelligence, terrorism, and international and homeland security, and he is the author of *Intelligence and Surprise Attack: Failure and Success from Pearl Harbor to 9/11 and Beyond* (Georgetown University Press, 2013). He retired from the U.S. Navy in 2002 after serving 21 years as an intelligence officer, and received his Ph.D. from the Fletcher School of Tufts University.

© 2018 The Authors | Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License

---


8 One minor comment is that the article could have benefited from more careful editing, as there are a number of typos that distract from the argument.