The Temptation of Intelligence Politicization to Support Diplomacy

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Good diplomacy goes hand-in-hand with good intelligence. Just as courtroom lawyers never ask a question to which they do not already know the answer, so too should politicians and diplomats avoid negotiating with enemies without first understanding what they bring to the table and what they seek to conceal. Because rogue regimes are among America’s most opaque and dangerous adversaries,¹ a breakthrough in relations can define a President’s legacy and make diplomats’ careers. Too often, the temptation to succeed can be overwhelming. When intelligence clashes with political and diplomatic goals, the sanctity of intelligence often loses: seldom do Presidents want their diplomatic initiatives to be the sacrifice.

The corruption of intelligence can occur in many ways. Analysts can allow personal biases to intrude on assessments, officials can change definitions or interpretations about what is licit or illicit, and decisions about what to

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include in assessments let alone the President’s Daily Brief, can, by inclusion or omission, impact decisionmaking. But, to what end does intelligence politicization occur? While popular imagination suggests that administrations twist intelligence to make the case for war—take, for example, the Gulf of Tonkin incident or allegations that President George W. Bush or Vice President Richard B. Cheney politicized intelligence prior to the second Iraq War—the reality is largely the opposite. When administrations seek to bring rogues in from the cold, diplomats, politicians, and even intelligence analysts themselves will often twist intelligence in order to support diplomatic goals and to reconcile with an enemy, even when that adversary has not changed its character.

TWISTING INTELLIGENCE IN THE COLD WAR

The history of politicians’ frustration with the Intelligence Community (IC) is long. President Lyndon B. Johnson used to tell a story about his cow Bessie: “One day, I’d worked hard and gotten a full pail of milk, but I wasn’t paying attention, and old Bessie swung her s—smeared tail through the bucket of milk. Now, you know that’s what these intelligence guys do. You work hard and get a good program or policy going, and they swing a s— smeared tail through it.”

During the Cold War, arms control became both an intelligence priority and focal point of U.S.–Soviet diplomacy. The stakes were huge, not only for national security, but also in politics. If disarmament talks succeeded, a President might reap political rewards. But if the Soviet Union gained a competitive advantage by cheating on agreements, then a President would face derision. Hence, when deals were struck, administrations would often downplay, if not cover up, any talk of cheating.

In order to bypass the political dynamic, the Kennedy administration created the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA). Housed within the State Department but reporting to the President, almost everyone treated the agency with suspicion. Diplomats feared that the ACDA would interfere with the State Department’s mission to foster good relations with other countries, while conservatives feared that ACDA employees, anxious to prove their utility, would promote arms control even when it was detrimental to national security. Robert Lovett, who had been Secretary of Defense under President Harry S. Truman, worried that the agency was “going to be a mecca for a wide variety of screwballs.”

During the Johnson administration, the agency clashed repeatedly with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who felt that its interference endangered American military preparedness. The Nixon White House slashed the ACDA’s budget after some senators used its findings to criticize President Richard M. Nixon’s concessions in the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I).
Nixon had reason to be sensitive: The talks concluded with the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972 which, rather than usher in an era of security, instead coincided with Soviet moves to upgrade the size and lethality of its nuclear arsenal.\(^7\)

During the 1980s, the ACDA clashed with the State Department. Dov Zakheim, a longtime Pentagon official, and Robin Ranger, a political scientist at St. Francis Xavier University, explained why: “The Department of State finds life without enforcement of treaties politically easier. Ignoring compliance policy allows the many arms-control enthusiasts in and out of government freely to develop schemes without worrying about enforcement.”\(^8\)

The ACDA was not the only focus of Cold War intelligence battles. At the height of that era, politicians worried that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was downplaying the Soviet threat. When the CIA reported to Congress that multi-warheaded Soviet missiles would not threaten America’s ability to retaliate against a first strike, Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger dismissed the CIA’s conclusions as based more on speculation than evidence, and ordered the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) to revise the findings.\(^9\) Then, in 1976, President Gerald R. Ford created a Team B to provide an outside assessment of Soviet military capabilities. The CIA initially resisted any outside appraisal, but on 26 May 1976, its director, George H. W. Bush, signed off on the group. Team B began operating the following autumn and confirmed the argument of University of Chicago professor Albert Wohlstetter who, in a seminal 1974 *Foreign Policy* article, suggested that the CIA had allowed the Soviet Union to gain a military edge by consistently underestimating its military deployments. It found that Moscow had embraced SALT to seek comparative advantage, not to reduce mutual threat.\(^10\) Critics, however, argue that hindsight shows that Team B exaggerated Soviet capabilities and provided intellectual fodder to support President Ronald Reagan’s subsequent expensive military buildup.\(^11\) If the Team B assessment represented political corruption of intelligence in order to undermine rapprochement, it would not be the last time.

Incoming President Jimmy Carter enthusiastically sought détente. Donald H. Rumsfeld, Ford’s outgoing Defense Secretary, recalled how, as he briefed Carter and his national security team for the transition, the President-elect excitedly said that he had an “unprecedented” communication from Moscow expressing interest in new arms control talks.\(^12\) Whereas Ford blamed Pentagon intransigence for his failure to get SALT II passed, Carter’s defense secretary, Harold Brown, was less hostile to the treaty than Rumsfeld had been. When Carter launched the SALT II talks, he wanted nothing to stand in the way of agreement. Against the wishes of his European allies, therefore, he omitted the Soviet Union’s SS-20
intermediate-range nuclear missiles from the agenda to avoid risking the agreement. Carter sang SALT II’s praises, but even the Democrat-controlled Senate refused to ratify the agreement. “The Carter team had invested so much in believing that the Soviets were well-intentioned that they found it almost impossible to reverse course,” Rumsfeld recalled. Yet, diplomats were unwilling to put even legislative concern above their goal of détente.

To this end, they soon found an ally in the Intelligence Community. Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, reports persisted that the Soviet Union was using chemical or biological weaponry in Laos, Cambodia, and Afghanistan, in violation of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention. Tribesmen in Laos described clouds of colored gas or oily liquid emerging from bombs or rockets that exploded at tree-top level. Twice in 1980, Dutch journalists filmed a Soviet helicopter dropping canisters emitting a yellow cloud on a village outside of Jalalabad, in eastern Afghanistan.

The Carter administration went public with its suspicions. The American Intelligence Community was able to collect both plant samples and tissue, blood, and urine from refugees exposed to the “yellow rain.” In July 1981, a toxicologist at the Armed Forces Medical Intelligence Center suggested that the symptoms suffered by those exposed were consistent with thichothecene mycotoxins, a poison produced naturally by certain types of mold that grow on wheat, corn, and other grains. In February 1982, a Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) concluded that the Soviets were mass-producing thichothecene mycotoxins. While the United Nations investigation was obstructed by the Soviet bloc and went nowhere, many American allies conducted their own studies affirming the American conclusion, but refused to release their results for fear that definitive proof of Soviet cheating would torpedo arms control talks. Intelligence could not get in the way of diplomacy.

Ronald Reagan’s election changed the way the Intelligence Community looked at the problem. Many academics, diplomats, defense officials, and even intelligence analysts feared that the hawkish new President might consider proof of Soviet use of biological or chemical weapons as justification to renew U.S. chemical weapons research and production. Harvard and Yale scientists suggested that the “yellow rain” might have been natural in origin, a mixture of pollen and bee feces. The State and Defense Departments reassessed earlier refugee interviews and found reason to dismiss them. The bee feces story ignored both geographically divergent occurrences of yellow rain, their correlation with battlefield operations, traces of the toxin on a gas mask, extensive Soviet literature on mycotoxins, and the fact that such episodes did not recur after the end of conflict. Simply put, analysts and officials withheld or twisted intelligence...
out of fear that politicians might otherwise use it to pursue policies with which they disagreed.

Reality would soon intervene. In early 1980, reports surfaced of an “outbreak of disease” in Sverdlovsk, today’s Yekaterinburg, in Russia’s Ural Mountains. U.S. intelligence suggested that the center of the anthrax outbreak was a biological weapons facility; the Soviets blamed tainted meat. The U.S. government believed the sheer numbers involved—more than 1,000 casualties—suggested that the anthrax had been inhaled rather than consumed. Witnesses and émigrés reported quarantine and decontamination efforts. Satellite imagery showed that a building in the suspect military complex was abandoned after the incident. Some intelligence officials questioned Soviet guilt, disputing both the difference in symptoms between gastric and inhalation anthrax, and the possibility of determining an accurate casualty count. Only after Reagan left office, as analysts stopped worrying about the perceived proclivity to aggression in the Oval Office, did the Intelligence Community revert to its initial conclusion regarding Soviet treaty violations. Finally, in 1992, Russia’s President Boris Yeltsin acknowledged that the Soviet Union had in fact maintained an offensive biological weapons program. Initial American suspicions with regard to the “yellow rain” and Sverdlovsk incidents had been correct.

**Skewing the Debate**

Debate surrounding both events centered on the burden of proof. Shifting goal posts has been, alas, a common method to massage intelligence to impact the political debate. After Congress mandated that the White House report regularly on Soviet compliance with arms control agreements, the State Department would often seek to dilute the findings. Even when the reports concluded that there was “a pattern of Soviet noncompliance,” evidence supporting the findings remained subject to heated debate. Using arbitrarily defined modifiers like “probable,” “likely,” and “potential” provided reasonable doubt for those seeking it. The fact that subsequent reports often used the same information to draw opposite conclusions further illustrated the subjectivity of the treatment of intelligence. For example, the President’s February 1985 report on Soviet noncompliance found no violation resulting from the Soviet use of dismantled SS-7 missile sites to support the SS-25. The next report, however, determined the Soviets to be in violation of SALT I for the same activity.

Persistent Soviet cheating eroded the case for diplomacy for many Americans, but not so for some experts who worried about the prospects for diplomacy. In 1983, an American spy satellite detected a Soviet radar complex near the Siberian town of Krasnoyarsk. The sheer size of the
complex underlined the scale of Soviet subterfuge of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.\textsuperscript{31} To confirm the cheating, however, would undercut future arms control agreements with the Soviet Union, so the Kennedy and Johnson advisors, McGeorge Bundy and Robert McNamara, along with Gerard Smith, a SALT I negotiator, pronounced the facility to be “of only marginal importance.”\textsuperscript{32} The Arms Control Association also dismissed Krasnoyarsk as insignificant, and the Federation of American Scientists suggested that suspicion was “more a product of faulty deduction than of analysis of the facts.”\textsuperscript{33}

Reagan thought otherwise. “No violations of a treaty can be considered to be a minor matter, nor can there be confidence in agreements if a country can pick and choose which provisions of an agreement it will comply with,” he explained.\textsuperscript{34} While this might sound self-evident, it was a controversial statement to analysts and academics. “The Soviets can respond to U.S. concerns only if Washington establishes politically realistic standards of compliance,” observed Gary Guertner, a professor at California State University.\textsuperscript{35} William D. Jackson, a professor at Miami University in Ohio, actually recommended that the United States should “avoid inordinately intrusive inspection and verification procedures which hinder progress in arms control.”\textsuperscript{36}

Even those willing to excuse Soviet cheating had difficulty finding a legitimate purpose for the Krasnoyarsk complex. Soviet attempts to link dismantlement of the Krasnoyarsk complex with that of a 30-year-old American missile-tracking facility in Thule, Greenland, belied the Kremlin’s initial claim that the complex was merely a space tracking system.\textsuperscript{37} Finally, in 1989, the Soviets admitted that the radar did violate the ABM treaty.\textsuperscript{38}

Accusations of intelligence manipulation went beyond arms control. Any area subject to sharp Cold War policy debate became a battleground for conflicting analyses. Sometimes, the manipulation was by omission. In 1983, \textit{Foreign Relations of the United States} omitted key documents discussing the 1954 CIA-backed coup against Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán in Guatemala. A 1991 act of Congress was required to force declassification of documents to accurately describe these events.\textsuperscript{39} Even history fell victim to the filter of politicized intelligence.

**TWISTING INTELLIGENCE ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA**

Although unable to garner the headlines of the Middle East, the quest for peace—or at least stability—on the Korean Peninsula has been a consistent goal for U.S. diplomats. Long before shifting his focus to brokering peace between Egypt and Israel, President Carter had set his sights on Korea. The situation was the subject of his first foreign policy
speech as a candidate and, upon winning the White House, he was unwilling to let intelligence assessments get in the way. He refused to consider any intelligence that did not support his desire to withdraw troops from the Korean Peninsula. “I have always suspected that the facts were doctored by DIA and others, but it was beyond the capability even of a president to prove this,” Carter explained. When Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance assigned Richard Holbrooke to oversee the Korea policy review, he was forbidden to offer the option of not withdrawing forces, intelligence be damned. Ultimately, Defense Secretary Brown talked Carter back down to reality, at least for the duration of his presidency. Of course, as ex-President, Carter has repeatedly circled back to Pyongyang.

While North Korea was always bellicose, the danger it represented increased exponentially in the 1980s when Pyongyang clearly indicated that it had nuclear ambitions. By February 1987, analysts understood that North Korea intended to produce plutonium. When satellites the following year detected a new structure at Yongbyon, 200 yards long and six stories high, they had apparently found the smoking gun. But some intelligence analysts, eager to avoid conflict, suggested that the building might be a factory producing something akin to nylon. Though this was nonsense, it injected enough uncertainty into the debate to deny politicians a cut-and-dried conclusion to North Korean cheating.

The Clinton administration likewise would not allow questions about North Korean sincerity to get in the way of diplomacy. Shortly after President Clinton took office, the White House pressured the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to downplay North Korean noncooperation in order to avoid forcing a confrontation. Later, when South Korean President Kim Young Sam told the New York Times that North Korea was simply buying time, the State Department was angry. When he repeated his criticism the next year, Clinton was furious. His reaction was remarkably similar to the spite with which President Barack Obama treated Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu two decades later when the Israeli leader criticized the wisdom of the proposed nuclear deal with Iran. Of course, in hindsight, the South Koreans were right.

Diplomats invested in a North Korea breakthrough found it was far easier to lash out at critics than acknowledge legitimate criticism. After the conclusion of the 1994 Agreed Framework, Washington Post columnist Jim Hoagland cautioned against undo optimism that the deal had changed anything and demanded that Clinton’s team answer three basic questions: “(1) Do they really believe that North Korea has ceased being a backlash state and should therefore be trusted? (2) Why did Kim Jong-il do the deal now? (3) Won’t it serve as an incentive for other backlashers to pursue nuclear weapons programs, to get bought off by the United States if for no other reason?” Clinton not only refused to answer those questions,
but also refused to budge on his assessments. By 1997, the Agreed Framework had undoubtedly failed, but the State Department would not accept the IC’s findings to that end. To do so would invalidate Clinton’s approach. Nicholas Burns, the State Department spokesman, asserted, “We are absolutely confident... that the agreed framework, put in place two and a half years ago is in place, it’s working. We are absolutely clear that North Korea’s nuclear program has been frozen and will remain frozen.” Stephen Bosworth, the U.S. ambassador to South Korea, also insisted that the Agreed Framework was on track. Nothing was further from the truth.

In 1999, the General Accounting Office (GAO) reported that it could no longer verify how North Korea distributed or used the food aid which was to be strictly regulated by agreement. The North Korean regime allowed World Food Program monitors to visit only ten percent of institutions receiving food aid, and the North Korean military blocked access to inspectors. The State Department refused to accept the GAO findings. To accept them would be to admit North Korean cheating and to undermine the premise of engagement in which its diplomats had already invested too much time and effort. Likewise, when the GAO reported that North Korea had violated agreements with regard to monitoring heavy fuel oil, the State Department informed Congress of its trust that the regime’s use of the heavy fuel oil was consistent with the Agreed Framework. Congress did not buy the story, and, in an angry exchange of letters, Secretary of State Warren Christopher in effect covered up North Korean noncompliance. The State Department continued to insist that the Agreed Framework was “a concrete success.”

By the time George W. Bush’s presidency began in January 2001, earlier diplomacy with North Korea was hard to characterize as a success, although some of its negotiators do so to the present day. While the Intelligence Community was suspicious of Pyongyang’s intentions, it was also wary of Bush’s instincts, especially after he included North Korea (along with Iraq and Iran) in the “Axis of Evil.” By 2003, with the Iraq war looming, the CIA consciously diluted its intelligence estimates on North Korea’s plutonium possession; the Agency’s analysts simply did not wish to give Bush the fodder for another war. Diplomats acted similarly. In 2007, Christopher Hill, the State Department’s point man on North Korean nuclear issues, presented to Congress an artificially rosy picture of the diplomatic process with North Korea so as not to undercut support for engagement.

This willingness to massage or ignore intelligence to support diplomacy is a bipartisan phenomenon. George W. Bush’s second Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, pushed to remove North Korea from the terrorism list in a blatant example of intelligence suppression. The State Department’s
insistence that Pyongyang had not sponsored terrorism since the 1987 bombing of Korean Air 858 contradicted information provided by France, Japan, South Korea, and Israel which described robust North Korean involvement with both Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka.  

Ali Reza Nourizadeh, a London-based Iranian reporter close to Iran’s reformist camp, described North Korean assistance in the design of underground Hezbollah military facilities, assertions supported by a diverse array of reporting.  

Chung-in Moon, a professor at South Korea’s Yonsei University, has reported Mossad allegations that Hezbollah missiles included North Korean components.  

North Korean efforts to aid the Tamil Tigers were more blatant. Thai intelligence traced North Korean weaponry to the group. The State Department’s Patterns of Global Terrorism made similar claims in 2001, 2002, and 2003, rendering its subsequent claims that Pyongyang had abandoned the terrorism business curious. Three times between October 2006 and March 2007, the Sri Lankan navy intercepted cargo ships flying no flag and without identifying markers subsequently found to be carrying North Korean arms.  

With the U.S. involvement in both Iraq and Afghanistan increasingly unpopular, the political desire for a diplomatic legacy outweighed intelligence reality.  

In subordinating intelligence reality to diplomatic ambition, the treatment of intelligence about North Korea has been more the rule than the exception. When, in advance of Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly’s October 2002 visit to North Korea, word leaked that Pakistan was supplying nuclear technology to Pyongyang, the Bush administration debated about how to react. “There was a lot of pressure not to embarrass [President Pervez] Musharraf,” one senior administration official told the New York Times. Likewise, the White House was reluctant to castigate North Korea for its assistance to Syria’s nuclear program, fearing that the revelation of such assistance would undermine diplomacy.  

The same pattern has held true with China. Despite intelligence pointing to Chinese weaponry proliferation, the Clinton administration approved an export license for a Cray supercomputer, trusting that Beijing was being upfront in claiming that the computer would be for weather forecasting only; in reality, China used supercomputers for its ballistic missile programs. The same pattern has held true with the Obama administration. In April 2010, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner delayed the submission of a report to Congress that was critical of China’s exchange rate manipulation. Senators criticized his move. “The past few years have proven that denying the problem doesn’t solve anything,” wrote Senator Charles Grassley of Iowa, the top Republican on the Senate Finance Committee.
TWISTING INTELLIGENCE ON RUSSIA

Americans hoped for a new world order after the fall of the Soviet Union and extended an olive branch of reconciliation to Moscow. In the decade after it emerged from the USSR’s economic collapse, and especially after Vladimir Putin succeeded Boris Yeltsin, Russia retrenched into a renewed hostility toward the United States and the West. American officials—including the Intelligence Community—long remained in denial. The CIA, for example, denied knowledge of new Russian defenses that violated the ABM treaty, despite having in its files updated evidence on Moscow’s antiballistic capabilities and command-and-control.66

While a “re-set” with Russia became a signature initiative for Obama administration Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the desire to improve relations was not necessarily mutual. On 27 June 2010, three days after Russian President Dmitri Medvedev visited the White House, the FBI arrested ten Russian spies. The bust raised questions not only about Russian behavior, but also about President Obama’s signature “re-set” policy to improve relations with the Kremlin. Still, the White House was determined not to let Russian subterfuge disrupt diplomacy.67 U.S. officials released the Russian agents in a hastily arranged spy swap, which raised eyebrows among former intelligence officials. “We have to do a damage assessment, and when you do a damage assessment, you want to have access to the individuals involved for an extended period of time so you can get new leads and ask questions,” commented Michelle Van Cleave, a former head of U.S. counterintelligence. “We lost all that. We lost a clear window into Russian espionage, and my question is: What was the rush?”68 The reason for the rush was apparently to avoid any exposure of Russian malfeasance that might further undermine Obama’s outreach.

History repeated itself. Just as Carter sought to pursue SALT-II despite Soviet cheating, so too was Obama willing to overlook Russian duplicity in order to win agreement on a Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (“New START”). The White House and State Department apparently buried reports about Russian violations of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty so as to remove any impediment to the Senate’s ratification of New START. Obama got his treaty, but senators were furious. The ends did not justify the means. President Putin remains just as adversarial as he was before New START, and has become perhaps even more aggressive.

TWISTING INTELLIGENCE ON THE MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East has, in recent decades, become a foreign policy priority and intelligence about its toughest spots has become a political football. In the
mid-1980s, the Reagan administration sought to remove Iraq from the State Sponsors of Terrorism list in order “both to recognize Iraq’s improved record and to offer an incentive to continue this positive trend,” according to the White House congressional liaison. But Iraq remained a chief sponsor of Palestinian terrorist groups. Only years later did Noel Koch, former assistant secretary of defense, acknowledge that removing Iraq from the list had nothing to do with terrorism and everything to do with Reagan’s strategic goals. 69 Indeed, the administration was even willing to overlook Saddam Hussein’s granting of refuge to Abu Abbas, mastermind of the Achille Lauro hijacking. When Rep. Howard Berman (D-California) introduced a bill to return Iraq to the terrorism list, Secretary of State George Shultz refused. “Iraq has effectively disassociated itself from international terrorism,” Shultz wrote, warning that Berman’s bill risked “severely disrupting our diplomatic dialogue on this and other sensitive issues.” He promised that he would not hesitate to return Iraq to the list if he concluded that any Iraqi-sponsored groups conducted terror attacks. 70 Evidence of Iraqi complicity in terrorism continued to pour in, but the State Department simply refused to report it publicly. Similarly, the White House shunted aside concerns about Iraqi nuclear ambitions in the interest of selling dual use goods to Baghdad. 71 The Pentagon even dressed down some employees for obstructionism when they raised red flags about the deals. This same logic led the administration to bury reports of Iraq use of chemical weapons against Iran and, later, its own Kurdish minority. 72 After Iraq invaded Kuwait, then-Senator Joseph R. Biden (D-Delaware) castigated successive administrations for ignoring evidence that the Iraqi dictator had not changed. 73 A decade later, critics claimed that President George W. Bush had manipulated intelligence to justify invading Iraq. The reality was not as sensational. Certainly, flawed intelligence influenced Bush’s decisions. 74 But no evidence indicates that intelligence agencies had bowed to political pressure or that superiors changed analytical products to conform to political orders. Indeed, European countries, Arab allies, the United Nations, and even Saddam’s own underlings believed that Iraq had a covert weapons program. 75 The IC’s conclusions were wrong, but were they corrupted by politics? As one analyst explained: “Politicization is like fog. Though you cannot hold it in your hands, or nail it to a wall, it does exist, it is real, and it does affect people.” 76 Joseph Wilson, having been dispatched by the CIA to Niger to investigate charges that Iraqi officials had tried to purchase uranium there, jumpstarted his career through a controversial New York Times op-ed column accusing the Bush administration of politicizing intelligence. 77 Not every error is the result of politicization but even if Wilson were correct that Bush had politicized intelligence to justify war, the episode would still have been an exception rather than the rule.
Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution and the subsequent seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran strained ties between Washington and Tehran. Whereas Iran had once been a pillar for American security, the U.S. became within a few months the “Great Satan.” Yet, reconciliation became a top goal for diplomats from the Carter administration to the present. The Reagan-era Iran–Contra Affair had its roots in an attempt at reconciliation. President George H. W. Bush used his 1989 inaugural address to reach out to Iran. When Iran began to reciprocate gestures—for example, with Iranian President Mohammad Khatami’s 1997 call for a “Dialogue of Civilizations”—few American diplomats were willing to allow intelligence to get in the way of diplomacy. After terrorists bombed the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996, killing nineteen U.S. Air Force personnel, suspicion centered on Iran. Both the FBI and the Senate Intelligence Committee fingered Iran. But President Clinton refused to allow Iranian complicity to disrupt his diplomatic efforts and ordered the FBI’s report withdrawn. This action was par for the course according to Caspar Weinberger, the Reagan administration’s first Defense Secretary, who in Senate testimony described how hope for diplomacy often led administrations to table retaliation. The State Department’s willingness to cherry-pick intelligence can be downright dangerous for American travelers. In 1998, the State Department revised its travel warning to make the Islamic Republic seem like a safe destination. This was, of course, wishful thinking not grounded in intelligence. Soon afterward, Iranian hardliners attacked a bus carrying Americans.

Iranian policy remained the subject of a fierce debate throughout the George W. Bush administration. Some officials, centered in both the State Department and National Security Council, wanted to engage Iran diplomatically, while others remained deeply suspicious of the Iranian leadership. Diplomats lambasted Bush for including Iran in the Axis of Evil, although its inclusion rested in part on Tehran’s secret nuclear program and its continued sponsorship of terrorism. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage even cast the Islamic Republic as a democracy. Diplomats likewise tried to paper over Iranian complicity in the Iraqi insurgency so as to avoid any hardening of policy. “I think there’s a dearth of hard facts to back these things up,” State Department spokesman Adam Ereli said, even though a growing body of evidence suggested the opposite.

The National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) regarding Iran’s nuclear program soon became the center stage in a policy battle. The U.S. Intelligence Community had warned since the 1990s that the Islamic Republic was covertly pursuing uranium enrichment as part of a nuclear weapons program, and that Iranian scientists were experimenting with plutonium and uranium. In 2002, an opposition group revealed the
existence of a secret enrichment facility at Natanz, a revelation Tehran confirmed when confronted. A 2003 NIE report suggested that Iran was conducting a robust military nuclear program; by 2007, the National Intelligence Council released a new estimate in which it declared that “Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program” in 2003. What did not change between the two estimates was less the intelligence but rather the political climate. President George W. Bush had invaded Iraq, an enterprise which by 2007 had proven itself far more costly than the White House had expected. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s presidency and Iranian assistance to militias in Iraq brought a sharp downturn in U.S.–Iranian relations. Some intelligence analysts feared that suggesting Iranian nuclear progress might lead Bush to launch military strikes, and so they apparently sought to game policymaker reactions when constructing the Estimate. Indeed, the three primary authors—Thomas Fingar, a former analyst for the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research; Vann Van Diepen, the national intelligence officer for weapons of mass destruction (WMD); and Kenneth Brill, the former U.S. ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency—all had reputations for partisanship and distrust of Bush’s instincts.

The alleged politicization occurred in two ways: First, in a classic case of what James Madison University political scientist Glenn Hastedt has called “soft politicization,” the authors changed definitions in order to omit uranium conversion and enrichment from the “nuclear weapons program.” This meant they could give Iran a clean bill of health, even if Iranian officials continued with their covert program (which they had). Military and civilian enrichment are not distinct enterprises, however, and the ability to produce highly enriched uranium is the biggest technological hurdle on the way to building a nuclear bomb. The redefinition also absolved Iran of motivation for the secrecy surrounding the Natanz enrichment plant and, subsequently, the one at Fordo. After all, if covert enrichment outside of inspectors’ monitoring was no longer considered military in nature, then with sleight-of-hand, diplomats could say that Tehran’s motivations were no cause for concern.

The NIE’s authors also cherry-picked evidence. Discounted intelligence included Iran’s experimentation with polonium-210, a key component for nuclear bomb triggers, and documents showing that Iran had sought a warhead that would detonate at a level too high for anything but a nuclear warhead. The IC’s assertion that Tehran had abandoned its nuclear weapons drive because of “increasing international scrutiny and pressure” was tenuous. Asserting with false certainty that diplomacy rather than military coercion or intelligence prowess had changed Iranian behavior, the Intelligence Community was guiding officials toward dialogue. Even if Iranian authorities had abandoned their program, alternative explanations
were equally plausible. By ousting Saddam Hussein over WMD questions, the U.S. military achieved in three weeks what the Iranian army was unable to do in eight years. Second, Tehran suspected that an Iranian defector had provided information to the CIA, raising difficult consequences for continued covert work.87

The Obama administration, desperate to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq in order to fulfill a campaign pledge, was just as willing to ignore Iranian malfeasance in Iraq. “Many people point... and talk about an Iranian influence,” Vice President Biden told the Veterans of Foreign Wars in 2010. “Let me tell you something, Iranian influence in Iraq is minimal. The Iranian government spent over $100 million trying to affect the outcome of this last election, to sway the Iraqi people, and they utterly failed.”88 The WikiLeaks document dump showed Biden to be lying: Intelligence about Iran’s growing influence was overwhelming. The State Department’s refusal to designate Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) or even its elite Quds Force as terrorist organizations also suggests a politicization of intelligence so as not to create an impediment to diplomacy. That the U.S. Treasury Department, whose purview does not include diplomacy, does designate the Quds Force and several senior IRGC officers as engaged in terrorism underlies the reality of how diplomacy can corrupt intelligence.

Rapprochement with Iran became a central pillar of Obama’s second term diplomacy. As Obama laid the ground for direct negotiations with Tehran, his administration increasingly found itself at odds with the IAEA, especially with regard to its secret findings on the possible military dimensions of Iran’s nuclear program.89 Ultimately, the IAEA’s conclusions were published openly as an annex to an IAEA Board of Governors report in November 2011.90 As diplomacy advanced, the Obama administration also sought to alter the public’s perception about Iran’s true nuclear breakout time. In his 2015 State of the Union Address, President Obama declared, “Our diplomacy is at work with respect to Iran, where, for the first time in a decade, we’ve halted the progress of its nuclear program and reduced its stockpile of nuclear material.”91 This, of course, was not true. Although its twenty percent enriched uranium stockpiles declined, Iran had augmented its five percent enriched stock. Centrifuge production continued apace.92 Likewise, the Obama administration reportedly hid intelligence that Iran was just three months away from building a nuclear bomb, even though the President had earlier justified his nuclear diplomacy on the notion that Iran was at least a year away from any possible nuclear breakout.93 The Institute for Science and International Security actually posited several scenarios in which Iran’s nuclear breakout time could be even less.94 After the Iranians and the so-called P5 + 1 (the permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) struck a
preliminary deal with Iran in April 2015, the Obama administration sought to suppress reports that Iran had maintained an active and covert nuclear procurement network.\(^95\)

The Bush administration had also ignored intelligence in order to enable diplomatic efforts to flip relations with Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi. Intelligence demonstrating that Qaddafi had not abandoned terrorism or covert weapons programs was swept under the carpet. Shortly before the United Kingdom restored ties with Libya, for example, British authorities confiscated 32 crates of Scud missile parts—labeled automotive parts—from a British Airways flight bound for Libya via Malta. The British foreign secretary, Robin Cook, hushed up the incident so as not to derail his diplomatic efforts.\(^96\) A decade later, the Scottish government released Abdelbaset Ali Mohamed al-Megrahi, the mastermind of the Lockerbie aircraft bombing, on compassionate grounds after determining that he had terminal cancer and less than six months to live. Leaked ministerial letters between British and Scottish officials, however, show that London hoped to trade Megrahi for oil contracts. The doctor who had publicized the dire diagnosis had lied,\(^97\) Megrahi lived for almost three more years.

American diplomats were little better. When in 2004 word leaked of a Libyan plot to assassinate the Saudi crown prince, the Bush administration promised consequences if the evidence pointed to the Libyan government. When such evidence did emerge, diplomats cast it aside. Instead, they had a stern conversation with the Libyans to remind them of their commitment “to cease all support for terrorism.”\(^98\) The State Department spokesman refused to detail the Libyan response and explained that the terror question would not affect the decision to set up a permanent U.S. office in Tripoli.\(^99\) Just a year later, the State Department’s William Burns called Libya a true ally in the war on terror, effectively perjuring himself during a congressional hearing.

Nowhere has political filtering been more consistent than with U.S. efforts to achieve Arab–Israeli peace. When President Clinton went to Camp David in 2000, he expected to leave as the triumphant broker of an Israeli–Palestinian peace. Instead, he went away embarrassed and angry. Yet his Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, described the summit as achieving “incredible progress.”\(^100\) Over subsequent weeks, the State Department repeatedly spoke of the summit’s “success” to an increasingly skeptical press.\(^101\)

Because the U.S. Congress feared that the White House and State Department might subvert honest reporting about the Palestine Liberation Organization’s (PLO) terror connections to its desire to keep dialogue alive, the State Department was required to issue a semiannual report certifying that America’s Palestinian negotiating partners had upheld their Oslo Accords commitment to eschew terrorism. When the State Department issued its
April 2001 report, it refrained from assigning responsibility for violence to any senior PLO or Palestinian Authority official, citing a lack of “conclusive evidence.”102 Yasser Arafat had in fact provided money to Tanzim and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade to conduct attacks.103 But by massaging the definition of “conclusive,” the State Department was able to deceive Congress in order to avoid compromising a diplomatic mission in which it believed, and continued to embrace the “no conclusive evidence” line even after the seizure of documents showing a direct link between Palestinian chairman Arafat and an illicit shipment of Iranian arms.104 This was not a one-time event. The following year, the State Department chose to ignore the involvement of Maher Fares, head of the PLO’s military intelligence in Nablus, in a Tel Aviv bus bombing.105

Near the end of his second term, and engaging a political desire to seek a positive legacy on the foreign policy front, President Bush tried to kick the moribund Palestinian–Israeli peace process into high gear. As the political stakes grew larger, the State Department again began to claim success, even where none existed. “Well, the Israelis and Palestinians have both made quite a bit of progress on a lot of issues,” asserted Sean McCormick, the State Department spokesman, in October 2008. “Now, they’ve kept that progress quiet in terms of the details, which, as you’ve heard from us, are a positive thing.”106 In effect, the State Department argued that secret details equaled success, and that a skeptical public should take diplomats’ word for it. Officials simply ignored intelligence that suggested otherwise.

TWISTING INTELLIGENCE TO EXCULPATE ALLIES

Sometimes policymakers feel that diplomatic necessity leaves them no choice but to turn a blind eye. For example, so long as the Red Army remained in Afghanistan, the Reagan administration bypassed sanctions designed to punish neighboring Pakistan’s nuclear program. Either the State Department or the Intelligence Community did not pass along information about Pakistan’s nuclear program to the White House or, more likely, President Reagan simply ignored the intelligence, regardless of legislative demands. After the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington of 11 September 2001 (9/11), the White House again needed Pakistan. The newly-installed Bush administration waived nuclear sanctions and transformed that country overnight into “America’s closest non-NATO ally.” The Bush administration even downplayed the danger posed by Pakistan’s A. Q. Khan and his international web of nuclear materials supplies. In June 2004, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld professed confidence that Khan’s “network has been dismantled,” and four months later, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice declared the network to
be “out of business.” This was nonsense, and intelligence reports suggested as much.

President Obama’s aides also twisted intelligence to court Pakistan. While rumors of subterfuge by Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency were rife among regional specialists and intelligence analysts, both Pentagon and CIA briefings to Congress were “vague and inconclusive.” Aid continued to flow. In July 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced the allocation of an additional $500 million, calling the United States and Pakistan “partners joined in common cause.” All the while Pakistani intelligence was actually supporting America’s enemies.

Then, after terrorists attacked Indian targets in Afghanistan, Richard Holbrooke, Obama’s special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, denied Pakistani complicity, although evidence suggested otherwise. After WikiLeaks exposed Pakistani complicity in terrorism, the New York Times observed, “The behind-the-scenes frustrations of soldiers on the ground and glimpses of what appear to be Pakistani skulduggery contrast sharply with the frequently rosy public pronouncements of Pakistan as an ally by American officials, looking to sustain a drone campaign over parts of Pakistani territory to strike at Qaeda havens.” Perhaps no person better exemplified the cavalier treatment of intelligence than Leon Panetta. As CIA director, he warned, “We really have not seen any firm intelligence that there’s a real interest [in reconciliation] among the Taliban, the militant allies of al-Qaida, al-Qaida itself, the Haqqanis [and]... other militant groups.” Yet, when he became the defense secretary, he pushed reconciliation with the same groups. The State Department got in on the act. When it issued its list of terrorist organizations on 6 August 2010, it added the Pakistani Taliban, but omitted any Afghan Taliban group.

Osama bin Laden’s death was ostensibly Obama’s counterterror triumph, but this victory against terrorism resulted in more twisting of intelligence to fit political aims. The film Zero Dark Thirty, a cinematic depiction of the raid that took out bin Laden, received criticism for its controversial depiction of the efficacy of waterboarding. In a report drawn largely on partisan lines, the Senate Intelligence Committee denied the utility of the tactic. Whether or not waterboarding al-Qaeda detainees was ultimately responsible for or utile in finding bin Laden, the sharp partisan divide among senators investigating the matter suggests the political filter by which intelligence is judged.

The bin Laden episode illustrated the politicization of intelligence in other ways: The Obama administration released only 17 documents out of a total of one million seized from bin Laden’s Abbottabad, Pakistan, compound. The released documents supported the narrative that al-Qaeda was on the
run, and that bin Laden was isolated. The unreleased documents, however, implied the opposite, suggesting that the Obama administration gauged the release on the basis of what would best support its political desire to extricate U.S. troops from Afghanistan. The Pentagon’s decision—reversed amidst outcry—to classify data with regard to the training of Afghan National Security Forces further implied that political considerations guided classification more than did intelligence necessity.

DOING A DISSERVICE TO DIPLOMACY

The value of intelligence derives from its ability to serve as an independent check on policy. But the firewall between intelligence and policy has never been as solid in reality as in theory. While journalists and academics castigated the George W. Bush administration for allegedly manipulating intelligence to justify war with Iraq, the problem is actually far greater when administrations wish to make peace with rogue regimes. Once a President launches a high-profile peace process, not only is his legacy at stake, but so too is the prestige of entire departments. When President Obama announced his rapprochement with Cuba, he directed the State Department to rush its review to de-list Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism. Diplomacy subordinated objective criteria to subjective readings with regard to Iranian, Iraqi, Taliban, and North Korean terrorism.

Methods to twist intelligence are plentiful, and have consistently grown alongside the intelligence and policy bureaucracies. Too often, officials manipulate definitions to privilege diplomacy. The Clinton administration may have brought the term “rogue” into vogue, but by its waning years, officials believed that the rogue label undercut diplomacy by stigmatizing partners. Clinton’s Secretary of State Madeleine Albright announced that the United States would cease designating regimes as rogues: “We are now calling these states ‘states of concern.’” State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said the category of rogue regime “has outlived its usefulness.” Robert S. Litwak, a Clinton-era National Security Council staff member, explained that dispensing with the category “will permit the necessary differentiation to deal with each country in its own terms.” Such strange logic even transcends political parties. In the months before 9/11, three elder statesmen—Lee H. Hamilton, James Schlesinger, and Brent Scowcroft—complained that the State Department’s definition of terrorism unfairly targeted only “one strand of the whole spectrum of politically motivated violence.” They argued that it was not much different from asymmetrical warfare. If sponsorship of terror hampered diplomacy and trade, they suggested that it would be both easier and better to redefine terror than demand real change. And, in order to rationalize terror, they recommended that the State Department distinguish...
“between different kinds of terrorism,” a policy which, if implemented, would essentially make some forms of terrorism acceptable. The Obama administration took political correctness to an even greater extreme when Janet Napolitano, the Secretary of Homeland Security, aimed to replace the term “terrorism” with “man-caused disasters.” Likewise, the Obama administration’s refusal to label Taliban attacks on civilians as terrorism led to some awkward press briefings.

Simply altering the definition of terrorism does not end terrorism, however, nor does shifting burdens of proof to alter conclusions, as occurred during the “yellow rain” controversy and with regard to the Iran NIEs. Calibrating policy to a false reality does not enhance security; rather, it allows enemy regimes to use a diplomatic process as an asymmetric warfare strategy. And this is the ultimate irony. If diplomats, politicians, and even some intelligence analysts massage data to favor diplomacy, their actions often undercut security and set the United States down the path toward insecurity or even war. The failure of the Intelligence Community to stand up to diplomats and politicians who weakly seek peace with the same firmness that it confronts those whom it considers bellicose is to the benefit of no one, except perhaps the rogue regimes themselves.

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