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Towards a Reasonable Standard for Analysis: How Right, How Often on Which Issues?

MARK M. LOWENTHAL

This article takes the view that largely impossible standards have been imposed on intelligence analysis, largely for political reasons stemming from the 9/11 attacks and Iraqi WMD. The article begins by examining the supposed lessons for intelligence analysis derived from these. It turns out that many of these widely accepted lessons have little basis and are, when compared, entirely contradictory from one case to the other. The article then reviews what the office of the Director of National Intelligence has done to make changes in analytical tradecraft and assesses whether these steps are likely to have a positive effect on future intelligence analysis. Finally, the article posits some ways in which analysis should be assessed and some of the impediments that will make this difficult even though it is necessary.

The importance of hindsight cannot be overstated. Every investigation or commission into any lapse or failure is based to a large degree on hindsight. Hindsight not only lends false clarity to errors after the fact, it has a compelling and lingering after-effect. As Richard Neustadt and Ernest R. May show in Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers,¹ policy makers tend to carry in their heads a version of a formative foreign policy event from the early part of their careers that then forms the basis for decisions on events later in their careers, despite the actual lack of complementarity between the two sets of events. Thus, the botched handling of the crisis of 1914 leads to misguided efforts at appeasement in 1938.

The US intelligence community is living in the afterglow of a surfeit of hindsight. The received lessons of 9/11 and Iraq WMD are so well-known that at least two of them have passed into the popular lexicon, one as a seemingly reasonable standard for intelligence and the other as a punch-line. We have had three formal inquiries into the lapses of US intelligence – the
Joint Inquiry and the 9/11 Commission for 9/11; the WMD Commission for Iraq WMD, as well as a series of other reports, mostly about Iraq – the Senate Intelligence committee, the Kerr Panel and two foreign reports, the Butler Commission in the United Kingdom and the Flood Report in Australia. As a consequence, Congress and the Bush administration agreed on the most radical changes for US intelligence since its formal creation in law in 1947.

In the mid-1990s, former DCI Richard Helms met with the staff of the House Intelligence Committee as we prepared our staff study *IC21: The Intelligence Community in the 21st Century*. ‘The DO (Directorate of Operations) is where you get into trouble’, Helms observed, ‘because they do things overseas that are dangerous and illegal where they are doing them.’ Helms went on to say that most of the time he spent testifying before congress was related to DO activities. The irony, if that is the correct word, about the current plight of the intelligence community, is that analysis, not operations, was the cause of their problems.

It is far too soon to know with any certainty if the changes we have made are actually an improvement or even if they will address the supposed lessons of 9/11 and Iraq WMD. But it is not too soon to take issue with the received lessons of these two events and to note the necessary part of the discussion about intelligence that never happened and that still needs to happen: a discussion about reasonable standards for intelligence analysis. More specifically, we need to have a national discussion, within the intelligence community, between the intelligence community and the Executive branch and Congress, among interested members of academia and the media and that small (but perhaps growing) segment of the public about how right intelligence analysis should be how often on which issues.

**THE RECEIVED LESSONS OF 9/11 AND IRAQ WMD**

The two analytic issues that have been at the heart of the investigations and subsequent restructuring of US intelligence have also resulted in a set of received lessons. The term ‘received lessons’ is used here to mean lessons that appear to be broadly agreed upon by the various investigations, Congress, the press and that always small segment of the public that evinces any interest in intelligence. The term also infers that these lessons may not be accurate lessons to have been drawn from these two experiences.

- Information Sharing: Perhaps the key lesson to come out of 9/11 was that the intelligence community failed to share information widely or rapidly enough. This is often reduced to a discussion of the tensions between the
CIA and the FBI but it also stands as a general indictment of the mentality of ‘stovepipes’ and the self-limitations imposed by ‘need to know’ security standards, which have theoretically been abandoned by the Director of National Intelligence as he shifts the standard to ‘responsibility to provide’.

However, one of the indictments of Iraq WMD was the sharing of information that turned out to be highly problematic, namely sharing the erroneous reports by the human source known as CURVEBALL. His fictitious reports about Iraqi biological weapons got into the analytic system and received fairly wide dissemination. In other words, information was shared. Unfortunately, once some agencies and analysts understood that CURVEBALL was a fabricator (to use the polite intelligence term for a liar), it was not possible to warn all the analysts who had received the report because that data point was unknown, if for no other reason than that the intelligence had been widely shared. So, if we were to revise the received lesson of 9/11, share information, in light of Iraq WMD, the lesson would be share information but not false information – assuming, of course, that you know which is which.

- Failure to Warn: Over 9/11, the intelligence community has been taken to task for its failure to be explicit enough in its warnings. Intelligence managers at the time insist that they were as explicit as they could be given the intelligence they had, but the criticism remains. The now famous Presidential Daily Briefing (PDB) of 6 August 2001 is held up as an example of the failure to be explicit. How, only 36 days before the attack, could the warning not be more vibrant? What this critique overlooks, of course, is the difference between strategic and tactical warning. The PDB article offered fairly pointed strategic warning about the overall nature of the threat posed by Al Qaeda. Specific warning about the four planes that would be hijacked on 11 September 2001 was not given because that level of tactical intelligence was missing and was likely unobtainable without a human penetration of Al Qaeda leadership or the plot itself. This is not the same as arresting one, two or however many of the 9/11 hijackers, since they would have been unlikely to talk, especially under the civil rules of police investigation to which they would have been subjected. Still, the reductio ad absurdum of this lesson is that the intelligence community failed to cry wolf.

But when we turn to Iraq WMD, the indictment is just the opposite. Based on flimsy, dated intelligence and flawed analysis, the intelligence cried wolf in the classic sense of the phrase. In other words, they created an illusionary threat and shrilly warned policy makers about it. So, the received lesson is that one should cry wolf and cry wolf loud and clear – but only when the threat is real.
Connecting the Dots: This is one of the post-9/11 phrases that has entered into the popular lexicon as one of the ways to judge intelligence. It is also one of the most unperceptive, misleading, demeaning and mean-spirited things ever said about any intelligence organization. The received lesson of 9/11 is that the intelligence community failed to connect the dots. Enough intelligence (i.e., dots) was out there to warn about the attack but it was either not perceived or was not connected in the right way. If it had been, the attack might have, would have been prevented. The appeal of the epithet is obvious. Connecting the dots is easy; it is literally child’s play. If the intelligence community had been more alert, and if it had shared information better, the dots would have been apparent and connected. The flaws in the epithet are overwhelming. When a child attempts to connect the dots, he or she has only as many dots as needed, not one dot more or less. And they are numbered, sequentially. Indeed, that is the whole learning purpose of connecting the dots, to learn numerical (or alphabetic) order. Finally, the typical connect-the-dots page has hints, sketches – eyes, faces, surroundings – to give the child a sense of what the final picture should be. Still, the phrase has entered the popular lexicon about intelligence and, over 9/11, the intelligence community failed to connect the dots.

Iraq, of course, is the opposite problem. Here, the intelligence community has been accused of connecting too many dots, or of connecting dots that were not there. This is, of course, akin to the crying wolf problem. So, the received lesson is: be sure to connect the dots – it’s easy. Just don’t connect the wrong dots or too many dots.

One of the interesting questions that arises from these received lessons is how did they result in the creation of a Director of National Intelligence (DNI)? As Judge Richard Posner has pointed out, there is a disconnect between the findings of the 9/11 Commission and their recommendations to create a DNI. (The WMD Commission report was published after the December 2004 passage of the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act – IRTPA – which created the DNI.) The creation of the DNI is less a solution to the intelligence flaws that led to 9/11 (or Iraq) than an admonition: don’t let this happen again.

ANALYTICAL STANDARDS TO DATE

It will come as no surprise that intelligence analysts have always had standards. Most of these have been self-proclaimed or self-discovered and many of them evolved as the profession of intelligence analysis evolved. Those individuals most responsible for espousing these standards recognized
at the outset that what they were dealing with was an intellectual activity, not an industrial process (even though analysts and their managers use the odd phrase ‘production’ in conjunction with analysis). Sherman Kent, who probably deserves to be called the founding father of intelligence analysis, created many of these standards. Richards Heuer was also instrumental in his *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis.*

Some of the early-agreed upon analytic standards include:

- Be objective. Do not allow personal biases or preferences for a given outcome to affect your analysis.
- Avoid policy prescriptions, for two reasons: (1) it is not the job of the intelligence community; (2) if policy prescriptions are written, then objectivity will most likely be compromised as the intelligence analyst now has a vested interest in the outcome.
- Be alert to the hazards and pitfalls of incomplete intelligence.
- Be open-minded about contradictory intelligence.
- Be intellectually honest.
- Think critically: be self-aware of what you are writing, on what basis.

These are not groundbreaking nor are they especially remarkable standards. In fact, most of them are fairly commonsensical but still mandatory. Of course, following them will not necessarily produce accurate analysis but they will result in analysis that avoids several unnecessary pitfalls. But they do read a bit like ‘good government’ standards and are both widely assumed and often (but not always) taken for granted.

In addition to replacing the Director of Central Intelligence with a Director of National Intelligence, and divorcing him from responsibility for the CIA, the IRTPA also required (Sec. 1019) that the DNI appoint an individual or office responsible for ensuring that finished intelligence produced by any intelligence community element are ‘timely, objective, independent of political considerations, based upon all sources of available intelligence, and employ the standards of proper analytic tradecraft’. To ensure the objectivity of those responsible for overseeing these standards (sort of a double check), the law also requires that this individual or office can have no direct responsibility for the specific production of any finished intelligence. It also calls for regular detailed reviews of analytic products, lessons learned and recommendations for improvement. The section then lists in detail the criteria for these evaluations and reviews. Finally (Sec. 1020), the act calls for the creation of what has become an analytic ombudsman.

In response to these requirements, the position of Assistant Deputy DNI for Analytic Integrity and Standards was created under the Deputy DNI for
Analysis. This office, which is also that of the Ombudsman, created a set of evaluation tradecraft standards for analysis:

- Properly describes quality and reliability of underlying sources.
- Properly caveats [sic] and expresses uncertainties or confidence in analytic judgments.
- Properly distinguishes between underlying intelligence and analysts’ assumptions and judgments.
- Incorporates alternative analysis [broadly defined] where appropriate.
- Demonstrates relevance to U.S. national security interests.
- Provides logical argumentation.
- Demonstrates analytic consistency over time, or change in judgments highlighted and explained.
- Makes accurate judgments and assessments. This is determined retrospectively, assuming the availability of essential data.

Finally, each of these eight standards is scored anywhere from Poor to Fair to Good to Excellent for each analytic product.

One could cavil about each of these but it is fairer to recognize that this is a reasonable set of standards – or expectations – for intelligence analysis. They are also highly reflective of the received lessons of 9/11 and Iraq WMD, although they lean much more heavily on Iraq than on 9/11. This may seem odd but it makes sense politically. It was the combination of 9/11 and Iraq WMD that created the necessary political impetus for intelligence reform. Either alone might not have been sufficient. However, in terms of intelligence analysis, Iraq WMD was the much more important event, revealing as it did a number of analytic flaws in that particular NIE. Although 9/11 was more dramatic and traumatic, it was less an issue of analytic flaws.

The unstated problem with these standards is that an analyst could accomplish the first seven with a grade of ‘Excellent’ and still not achieve the eighth, accurate judgments and assessments. Standards are not recipes; they are guidelines. But accurate judgments are what policy makers and Congress want and what the press expects – on a fairly regular basis. Or perhaps the new standards are an ongoing and mandatory checklist and code of conduct. Indeed, Members of Congress have asked intelligence officials how many analysts have been fired to date for not meeting the new standards!

TOWARDS A REASONABLE STANDARD FOR ANALYSIS

Each year in my intelligence class at Columbia University, we discuss the problem of analytical standards. We achieve rapid agreement that 100% is too high, impossible in fact. And everyone agrees that you have to do better
than 0%. We then rapidly move to the suggestion each year of 50%, chosen by students largely because it is a mid-point. I customarily point out that we could achieve roughly that same standard by flipping a coin. So, we then move to 75%, again because it is a mid-point. At the end, we agree that there is no numerical standard that makes sense.

However, if you have this conversation with someone slightly conversant with and interested in intelligence, they will often agree that 100% is unreasonable but offer that intelligence should get ‘the big things’ correct. Both 9/11 and Iraq WMD would probably fall into the category of ‘big things’. So would the collapse of the Soviet Union, an event that the intelligence community is seen as having ‘missed’.

It is fair to ask: what constitutes a ‘big thing?’ It is something that should be important to your national security. It is also a ‘big thing’ because it was unexpected, it was a surprise. And isn’t that why we have intelligence agencies – to avoid surprise?

Let us return to the ‘connect the dots’ problem. If that metaphor is inapt, is there a better metaphor? I have suggested elsewhere that the intelligence community is in the business of making pearls. Think about how we collect intelligence. We go after our targets with as many different types of collectors as we can, and we return to them again and again. Intelligence collection is a slow accretionary process, the building up of layer upon layer of intelligence on the target, much like the slow creation of a pearl in a mollusk. Most observers would likely concede that this is a sound approach. We do not want analysts jumping on the first piece of intelligence and writing from there. That approach sounds very much like Iraq WMD. Indeed, look at the first of the DNI’s new analytic standards: ensuring that we understand the quality and reliability of underlying sources. One of the ways we do that is to keep collecting, to look for either confirmation or inconsistencies and then try to determine what these mean and which are more significant. In other words, more layers for the intelligence pearl.

But it is also important to recognize that the intelligence pearl is also something of an intellectual trap. At some point it begins to engender perceptions and predispositions. These may be firmly based on good intelligence and on the target’s known behavior over time but this can be a trap because the ‘big things’ are surprises because they are counterfactual.

Let us return to Iraq WMD. The rationales behind the conclusion that Saddam Hussein had WMD remain logical. The intelligence community could not account for the WMD that Iraq failed to destroy after 1998. Iraq had 500,000 enemy troops on its borders, US and British armies that had been willing to invade before. Iraq’s air defenses were being picked apart on a regular basis in the northern and southern no-fly zones. And still Saddam Hussein refused to allow inspectors into certain buildings
(especially his numerous palaces) in Iraq. What did that behavior look like? Even without CURVEBALL or the infamous aluminum tubes (neither of which was conclusive by itself in the final outcome of the NIE), we still have the appearance of someone who has something to hide. Why would Saddam Hussein risk a war if he had no WMD? And yet that is exactly what he did. We will never have a definitive answer to this question, but the Iraq Survey Group (ISG) report written by Charles Duelfer offers an interesting explanation. Duelfer had served on UNSCOM, the UN-backed group that examined Iraqi WMD after the 1991 Gulf War. He knew many senior Iraqis who had been involved in the earlier WMD efforts. He concluded in his ISG report that Saddam did not have WMD but was trying to hold on to the beginnings of WMD programs, hoping that the UN-imposed sanctions would come to an end, thus allowing him to then resume his pursuit of WMD. Indeed, there were signs that France and Russia were less supportive of the sanctions on Iraq, for reasons of past debts and new economic opportunities. But, according to Duelfer, Saddam did not want to appear weak vis-à-vis Iran, with which he had fought a bloody and inconclusive war (and one that he had begun in 1980). Knowing his own military weakness, Saddam bluff ed, creating a state of ambiguity regarding WMD as a means of deterring Iran. So, if we accept Duelfer’s argument, Saddam’s bluff worked — people assumed he had WMD. Unfortunately, the wrong people assumed he had WMD. One can ask how Saddam could make such a monumental error. The answer to this may lie in the fact that Saddam was extremely unworldly. He knew very little except for the violent internecine politics of Baghdad and, as is typical in most dictatorships, did not have reliable sources of information about the outside world. He miscalculated that states less hostile to him than the United States and Britain would prevent the war he had provoked by his own desire to appear to have WMD even as he denied it.

In the summer of 2003, as it began to be evident that we were not finding even traces of the weapons that we had assumed existed, senior intelligence officials spent an entire Saturday going over the Iraq WMD NIE again, line by line, word by word, attempting to deconstruct what we had said and why we had said it. After ten hours, we decided to stop. At that point, DCI George Tenet asked me what an intelligence-based, intellectually sound NIE that made the case that Saddam had been telling the truth would look like. I could not answer that question then or now. And this was the real problem with Iraq WMD. Saddam’s behavior was entirely counterfactual to his past behavior. He was telling the truth. (We now know that Iraqi generals assumed until their defeat that Saddam had been lying and that there were stockpiles of chemical weapons. It might be fair to ask: if they did not know, how could we?)
The best we could have done, and perhaps should have done, was to prepare an estimate that offered our most likely scenario, that Saddam had WMD, and then offered a much more pointed discussion about our uncertainties. But it remains difficult, if not impossible, to describe an intellectually sound, intelligence-based NIE that would have come to the conclusion that Saddam Hussein was telling the truth and there were no WMD in Iraq. Moreover, an estimate that gave the most likely case but then underscored all of the uncertainties would not have been well received by those requesting the estimate, the US Senate. The Senate was looking for political cover, seeking to justify its vote to support President Bush in Iraq by having a NIE on which to lean. Indeed, based on the behavior of most senators we can conclude that they also believed that Saddam had WMD, as only six of them bothered to read the NIE before they voted. But had the intelligence community written an NIE of the sort described here, with a most likely case of WMD possession and then a long list of uncertainties, most senators would not have been pleased with the intellectual honesty set before them. After all, they could come up with a list of the likely outcomes: Saddam has WMD; he doesn’t have WMD; we don’t know. What they expect from the intelligence community is a narrowing of obvious choices, of some ranking that points them in the most likely right direction. This is true of all policy makers, regardless of their branch of government. And the most likely, most plausible scenario was that Saddam was lying and that he did have some WMD.

To underscore the point about the problem of counterfactual events, consider this hypothetical intelligence tasking. It is 1989 or 1990. The Soviet Union is clearly in crisis. A policy maker or a senior intelligence official has a whim. He asks his intelligence analysts to write an intellectually sound, intelligence-based analysis on the following premise: when push comes to shove in the Soviet Union, the Communist Party will peacefully give up power. This premise approaches the laughable. Think about the pearl of intelligence we had accumulated on the Soviet Union. This was a 45-year pearl, a very big pearl, a pearl with which we had become very comfortable. As James Clapper, now the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency aptly put it: ‘The Soviet Union was the enemy we came to know and love.’

What did our Soviet pearl tell us? It told us that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) would do anything to maintain its hold on power. For decades, it had waged internal war against its own people. Stalin possibly killed more Soviet citizens than Hitler did. So, the premise is difficult to write about in any intellectually sound manner. And yet that was exactly what happened. After the failed coup against Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991, the
power of the Communist Party melted away, until it was banned. The CPSU gave up without even a whimper. Again, the outcome was completely counterfactual.

In cases like Iraq WMD or the Soviet Union, getting the correct answer probably would not be enough. If an analyst or team of analysts had come to the conclusion that Saddam Hussein was telling the truth and that he did not have WMD, one can be virtually assured with very high confidence that any policy maker would have asked: ‘How did you come to that conclusion? Where is the intelligence that backs it up?’ Any answer that did not have solid intelligence support would be found wanting. Indeed, this is one of the pitfalls of the contrafactual experience. The situation is so far from the range of what would be expected that a substantial amount of intelligence would be necessary to support the analysis if only to allay the skeptics. This also points up one of the shortfalls of the recently promulgated analytical standards. These standards assume an underlying basis of intelligence for all analysis and ask the analyst to distinguish between assumptions and judgments. There is little or no room for the intuitive conclusion based on little more than analytical insight.

Had the intelligence community come up with the answer that proved to be true in either of those cases, what would the policy makers have done with it or about it? In the case of Iraq WMD, the Bush administration would have lost its best case for removing Saddam Hussein and might have given up on the idea of a war at that point. But we then face the possibility that the scenario that Charles Duelfer played out in his ISG report would have come to pass: that Russia and France would have vitiates the sanctions regime and Iraq would have been free to resume its WMD programs, leaving us to face the problem that we thought we had in 2002 in perhaps 2008 or 2009 – only this time for real, a nuclear armed Iraq. Or take the Soviet case. Intelligence analysts and policy makers did consider the demise of the CPSU, although rarely on a peaceful basis. The idea of the dissolution of the Soviet Union was too horrific to contemplate. The dissolution and a potential civil war in a state with one of the two largest nuclear arsenals in the world gave policy makers a vested interest in the status quo. But had they somehow believed that the Soviet Union could be undone peacefully, would there have been much that the United States or other outside powers have done about it? Could we have picked – let alone be seen to support – the winning, liberal democratic post-Soviet politicians? Likely not.

The professional desire and political necessity of avoiding future 9/11s or Iraq WMD has led to our converting a difficult intellectual process into a largely mechanical, if not mechanistic one. Writing good analysis is now formulaic. And, at the same time, we find the office of the Deputy DNI for Analysis offering ‘analytic transformation’ which seems to concentrate
almost entirely on means of improving information sharing (all to the good) but never really touches the intellectual issues that are central to all analysis.

**CREATING A REASONABLE STANDARD**

What might a reasonable standard for intelligence analysis look like?

First, we must come to renewed agreement on the role of intelligence and of intelligence analysis. As I have written elsewhere, the role of intelligence is to reduce uncertainty. That’s it. This is both a very useful and a very limited service. Policy makers usually appreciate having levels or areas of uncertainty reduced but often want more. They want to know what is going to happen or what is likely to happen. The smarter policy makers also know this wish will not be fulfilled and probably should not be voiced. Intelligence does not exist to provide definitive answers or necessarily to point to the winning or losing policy choices.

Second, for intelligence analysis to provide the types of insights that policy makers most crave – intentions and plans – there must be collection that offers the types of consistent penetrations that will provide these insights. Typically, this means either espionage or successful communications intelligence. One of the mantras in intelligence is ‘analytically driven collection’. We also have to remember the importance of ‘collection based analysis’. Given how rarely we achieve these types of sustained penetrations, for some very understandable reasons, analysts are still asked about intentions. They can write about them but they must make clear the basis – or lack of a basis – upon which they are writing. And policy makers must appreciate this basis and read the analysis only on that basis. This is not to slough off analytical responsibilities on to the collectors or create a civil war within intelligence but we need to recognize that good analysis requires good collection.

Third, we have to accept, as Richard Betts wrote years ago, the inevitability of surprise. We ask intelligence analysts to describe the actions of people who are geographically distant and culturally remote. Worse yet, they are people. They react to emotions, to stress, to miscalculation and they sometimes make profoundly bad decisions. As I said earlier in this article, we need to differentiate between strategic surprise and tactical surprise. When surprise happens, we have to approach the necessary post-mortem with reasonable standards as to whether it was ‘knowable’ or not. As many others have written, there is a vast difference between secrets and mysteries. Intelligence exists to penetrate secrets, not to solve mysteries. Many surprises – but not all – are mysteries.

Fourth, we need to remember that intelligence analysis is an intellectual process. It needs standards and guidelines but these alone will not ensure
analysis that will produce the ‘right’ answer. Indeed, there is no way to ensure the ‘right’ answer.

Fifth, if we want analysts to take analytical risks, then we have to give them the right to be wrong. In other words, if we want analysts to take intellectual flyers, to go out on intellectual limbs, to write even when there is no firm collection backing them up – then we have to expect them not to be right all of the time or even most of the time. As long as their potential error is not putting the security of the nation at risk, analysts should be encouraged to take these risks and not be punished when they do not pan out analytically.

Sixth, we have to keep analytical failures and successes in perspective. Just as the intelligence community cannot work on a 100 vs. 0 basis, it is unlikely to be completely right or wrong on any given topic area. For example, despite the errors in the Iraq WMD estimate, the community did reasonably good work on Libya and provided useful support to policy makers on North Korea.

Seventh, we have to remember what the intelligence community means when it offers an estimate. It is not a forecast or a prediction. An estimate is an analytical appraisal of one or more likely outcomes in a given situation. If the intelligence community knew the outcome with certainty, it would not be estimating.

Eighth, we must remember, when we consider the National Intelligence Program (NIP) of $43.5 billion (for fiscal year 2007) that it is divided up among literally dozens of topics taking place in scores of nations, plus those issues that we have defined as ‘transnational’. Yes, $43.5 billion is a considerable amount of money but it does not all go to one or two or even ten intelligence issues. We also have to keep in mind that calculating the return on investment for that amount of money – or any intelligence budget – is extremely difficult.

What I am suggesting, is a recalibrating of expectations or, if you will, a lowering of expectations of what intelligence analysis can do. No one has yet come up with any methodologies, machines or thought processes that will appreciably raise the intelligence community’s batting average. But we are not going to breed more confident analysts or analytical managers by creating or holding intelligence to standards that are unrealistic. Part of the problem that intelligence now faces is symptomatic of a wider problem: the no fault standard that seems to pervade so much of our public discourse. No matter how dangerous or difficult the activity – from space exploration to estimate intelligence – the given expectation is that everything will go right all the time and that if it does not then the likely cause is misfeasance or malfeasance.

I will return, in closing, to something I said earlier. We will not achieve a reasonable standard either by fiat or by the actions of the intelligence
community alone. A set of reasonable standards can only come about as the result of a serious set of discussions. This means less grandstanding by some in Congress, less harping on perfect outcomes by some in the press and a less supine approach by the intelligence community itself. It also means accepting the fallibility of intelligence and - when considering the terrorists’ war against us - the fact that we will suffer losses on occasion not because intelligence is flawed but because it is human and it is difficult. To do anything less than this is to condemn intelligence to more unnecessary pillorying because of unreasonable expectations. At that point, intelligence is not a vital part of the policy formation process, it is just a fall guy. And the only reason a fall guy exists is to take the fall.

NOTES

4 These standards were promulgated in Intelligence Community Directive 203 (ICD 203), effective 21 June 2007. A copy can be found at <http://www.fas.org/irp/dni/icd/icd-203.pdf>.