
INTELLIGENCE & WMD

Reports, Politics, and Intelligence Failures: The Case of Iraq

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ABSTRACT The intelligence failure concerning Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) has been the center of political controversy and official investigations in three countries. This article reviews the *Report on the U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq*, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 7 July 2004, *Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction*, a Report of a Committee of Privy Councillors to the House of Commons, 14 July 2004 (the Butler Report), *Report to the President of the United States*, The Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction, 31 March 2005. It explores the reasons for their deficiencies and the failure itself. This case and the investigations of it are similar to many previous ones. The investigations are marred by political bias and excessive hindsight. Neither the investigations nor contemporary intelligence on Iraqi WMD followed good social science practices. The comparative method was not utilized, confirmation bias was rampant, alternative hypotheses were not tested, and negative evidence was ignored. Although the opportunities to do better are many, the prospects for adequate reform are dim.

KEY WORDS: intelligence, intelligence failures, Iraqi WMD, official inquiries

¹Truth in reviewing requires me to say that I chair the CIA's Historical Review Panel which advises the Director on declassification policies and priorities, wrote a post-mortem for the CIA on why it was slow to see that the Shah of Iran might fall that located a number of errors which recurred in the Iraq case ('Analysis of NFAC's Performance on Iran's Domestic Crisis, Mid-1977–November 1978', declassified as CIA-RDP86B00269R001100110003-4), and led a small team that analyzed the lessons of the Iraq WMD failure. This essay has been cleared by the CIA's Publications Review Board, but nothing was deleted and there is nothing of substance I would have added if I had not had to submit it.

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‘The trouble with this world is not that people know too little, but that they know so many things that ain’t so’, Mark Twain.

‘If it were a fact, it wouldn’t be intelligence,’ General Michael Hayden, then head of the National Security Agency, now Deputy Director of National Intelligence, quoted in Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (2004) 132.

‘We missed the Soviet decision to put missiles into Cuba because we could not believe that Khrushchev could make such a mistake’, Sherman Kent, ‘A Crucial Estimate Relieved’, *Studies in Intelligence*, Spring 1964.

Failures, Investigations, Organizations, and Politics

Failure may be an orphan, but often it is a closely observed one. This is true for the misjudgment of Iraq’s programs weapons of mass destruction (WMD), featuring British, Australian, and American post-mortems, with the American intelligence community (IC) going furthest, formally retracting its estimate and conducting public as well as secret analyses of what went so wrong.² As interesting as all these

²The *Report of the Inquiry into Australian Agencies*, Canberra, July 2004 (the Flood Report) is not as detailed as the US and UK reports and I will say little about it. The UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee and the Intelligence and Security Committee had investigations and reports, although what is of value in them for our purposes is subsumed by the Butler Report. The UK also held a special investigation into the suicide of David Kelly and the related question of whether the British government had ‘sexed up’ its public dossier on WMD (the Hutton Report). The Butler Report covers some issues of policy as well as intelligence, in part because in the UK the line between the two is not as sharply drawn as in the US. Indeed, ‘assessment is really viewed in the UK as a *government* function and not specifically an *intelligence* function’: (Philip Davies, ‘A Critical Look at Britain’s Spy Machinery’, *Studies in Intelligence*, 49/4 (2005), 41–54). For other analyses of the Butler Report, see Philip Davies, ‘Intelligence Culture and Intelligence Failure in Britain and the United States’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17 (Oct. 2004), 495–520; Nigel West, ‘UK’s Not Quite So Secret Services’, *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 18/2 (Spring 2005), 23–30; Mark Phythian, ‘Still a Matter of Trust: Post-9/11 British Intelligence and Political Culture’, *ibid.* 18 (Winter 2005–2006), 653–81; Alex Danchev, ‘The Reckoning: Official Inquiries and The Iraq War’, *Intelligence and National Security* 19/3 (Autumn 2004), 436–66 Prime Minister Blair gave his response to the Butler Report in a speech to the House of Commons on 13 July 2004. For Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) responses, see Associated Press, ‘CIA Revising Pre-Invasion Iraq Arms Intel’, *New York Times*, 2 Feb. 2005; CIA Directorate of Intelligence, ‘Continuous Learning in the DI: May 2004 Review of Analytic Tradecraft Fundamentals’,

studies are, the very failure that occasioned them provides a context that we need to take account of. One review of some of the British reports put it well: 'Inquiries are a continuation of politics by other means, as Clausewitz might have said. In the nature of the case, these inquiries were more political than most. They were steeped in high politics and played for high stakes.'³ If history is a guide, we should not expect too much. There were four official investigations in the years following Pearl Harbor and while they made public much valuable information, they could not explain what had happened or settle the political debate.⁴

None of this is unique to intelligence organizations. The official commission to investigate the *Challenger* space shuttle disaster (1986) was superficial, with the best work being the independent analysis of its maverick member, Richard Feynman. But it took a decade of research by an outside sociologist, Diane Vaughan, to understand the organizational routines that both made it possible for NASA to operate smoothly and laid the foundations for accident.⁵ Furthermore, NASA ignored this analysis, with the result that the same organizational flaws led to the disintegration of *Columbia* years later.

The reaction of the Catholic Church to sexual abuse followed a similar pattern: to protect the organization, wrong-doing was first

Sherman Kent School, CIA, *Tradecraft Review* 1 (Aug. 2004); Richard Kerr *et al.*, 'Issues for the US Intelligence Community', *Studies in Intelligence* 49/3 (2005), 47–54. For earlier discussions of the intelligence failures, see Peter Bamford, *Pretext for War: 9/11, Iraq, and the Abuse of America's Intelligence Agencies* (New York: Doubleday 2004) and, especially, John Prados, *Hoodwinked: The Documents that Reveal How Bush Sold Us a War* (New York: New Press 2004). These accounts do little to explain the failures, however. It also appears that intelligence made errors in other areas, especially in underestimating the deterioration of Iraq's infrastructure. But little attention has been focused here, or on areas of intelligence success, especially in anticipating the obstacles to political reconstruction.

³Danchev, 'Reckoning', 437.

⁴The four investigations of Pearl Harbor conducted in the five years after it failed to settle the basic questions, as shown by Martin Melosi, *In the Shadow of Pearl Harbor: Political Controversy over the Surprise Attack, 1941–46* (College Station: Texas A&M Press 1977), and it took an unofficial (but government sponsored) study much later to shed real light on the problems in an analysis that remains central our understanding not only of this case, but to surprise attacks in general (Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* [Stanford UP 1962]).

⁵Diane Vaughan, *The Challenger Launch Decision: Risky Technology, Culture, and Deviance at NASA* (Univ. of Chicago Press 1996); Vaughan draws in part on Charles Perrow, *Normal Accidents with High Risk Technologies* (New York: Basic Books 1984); for another superb analysis of this type see Scott Snook, *Friendly Fire: The Accidental Shootdown of U.S. Black Hawks Over Northern Iraq* (Princeton UP 2000).

ignored and then covered up, with short-run benefit to the clergy but at great cost to some parishioners and, eventually, to the institution itself. Universities are no better: they argue that their mission requires that outsiders fund but not police them, and then do little self-examination and self-correction.

Did Intelligence Matter?

If intelligence services do not stand out in having a hard time reforming themselves, they are unusual in that their major errors are believed to be so consequential. In fact, the relationships between policy and intelligence in Iraq and elsewhere are complex and often unclear. One argument (analyzed in the reports and discussed below) is that the intelligence was politicized – i.e., illegitimately influenced by the IC's knowledge of the answers the policy-makers wanted to hear. More obviously, causation is believed to run the other way, as intelligence informs policy. The fact that only those countries that supported the war held investigations is consistent with this view (although another possible reason is that intelligence is not seen as important in France and Germany), and most of the investigations imply a link between intelligence and policy. They almost have to: if there were none, why bother with the investigation?

Many parties have an incentive to agree. Anyone who favored the war but grew uneasy after WMD were not found was happy to point a finger at intelligence. This was bipartisan in that many people from both parties fell into this category. But there were partisan differences as well, and in the US members of both parties felt different cross-pressures. Democrats could shield themselves from the unfortunate consequences of supporting the war by blaming intelligence, but doing so would also shield the Bush administration by treating it as the innocent victim of intelligence incompetence. It would also force Democrats to face the uncomfortable question that presidential candidate John Kerry alternately dodged and mishandled: 'Would you have supported the war if you had known that Saddam did not have active WMD programs?' For Democrats, then, the best way out was not, or not only, to blame faulty intelligence, but to argue that the errors stemmed from politicization. They had been misled; the administration had done the misleading.

For Republicans in general and the administration in particular, the first line of defense was that intelligence had not been badly in error, that WMD would be found or had been spirited across the border to Syria. Once this became untenable, the claim of politicization had to be refuted in the face of common sense. The Republicans also had to deflect attention from the ways in which the administration distorted

intelligence to bolster its policy, and they resisted allowing the investigations to even look at this question. In the end, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) was able to proceed only on the basis of an agreement that this question would be put off to the second phase of the inquiry. At this writing, it is unclear whether it will ever take place.

The Republicans still could be asked whether intelligence mattered in the sense of whether they would have favored the war if they had known the truth about Saddam's programs. Most Republicans in Congress have been able to avoid the question, but President George W. Bush has been forthright in his affirmation that he would have proceeded anyway, arguing that Saddam wanted WMD, especially nuclear weapons, and that sanctions and inspections could at best have slowed him down. Furthermore, Saddam was a tyrant and so there was a great danger that he would make enormous trouble once he had them. Previously acceptable risks were too great to run in the post-9/11 world. Prime Minister Tony Blair has taken a similar position. This argument is not without merit, but it implies a much reduced role for intelligence. If the fundamental danger is the existence of tyrannical regimes, neither spies nor satellites are needed to tell us who fits into this category. This turns on its head the familiar cautious claim that one must judge capabilities rather than intentions. Here the former were relatively benign yet drastic action was necessary because the malign nature of the regime would eventually lead it to do evil.

The fact that Bush and Blair say that they would have gone to war even if they had known of Saddam's reduced capabilities does not mean that this is correct and that the intelligence was irrelevant, however. In fact, these two points are somewhat different. Intelligence might have strongly contributed to the policy even if Bush and Blair are accurately describing their own preferences because the reluctance of many members of the Labour Party, Democrats, and perhaps Secretary of State Colin L. Powell was overcome only by the belief that the Iraqi dictator had growing WMD capability.

It is less clear whether the intelligence directly affected Bush and Blair. Their statements that they would have proceeded had they known the truth are not definitive, even though they do not seem to have been affected by the increased uncertainty that has characterized post-Iraq WMD intelligence on other countries and the revision of the Iranian estimate to say that it is unlikely that Iran could develop nuclear weapons in less than ten years.⁶

⁶Steven Weisman and Douglas Jehl, 'Estimate Revised on When Iran Could Make Nuclear Bomb', *New York Times*, 2 Aug. 2005.

First and most obviously, although saying that they would have followed a different policy had they been better informed would have shifted the blame to intelligence, it would also have made them seem credulous and admitted that the war was unnecessary.

Second, the fact that they responded to the revelations about the true state of Saddam's programs by redoubling their commitment to spreading democracy may be a marker of the political and psychological need to find adequate justification for a policy that otherwise would lack one. Cognitive dissonance indicates that when a person acts in a way that later seems to have been foolish, he will place greater weight on any factors that can be used to justify the policy. Thus had WMD been found, subsequent policy might not have so fervently favored democracy and, symmetrically, the adoption of this policy may indicate that the belief that Saddam had WMD indeed was a necessary component of the decision for war.

Third and most importantly, it is unlikely that Bush and Blair can know what they would have done had they understood the truth. People are not aware of the reasons that move them; even an introspective person with incentives to estimate how he or she would have behaved with different information cannot do this.⁷ My sense is that once Bush moved towards war in the late winter and spring of 2002, he would not have been deflected by accurate estimates (which, in any case, could not have definitively said that Saddam lacked vigorous programs). But if the judgment of the IC when Bush assumed office had been accurate, then perhaps he would have developed a different position.

Investigations, Secrecy, and Very Political Science

That the reports are highly partisan does not render them valueless or impossible to judge. Political scientists and historians work with political documents all the time, trying to understand them in their political context and assessing how the authors' goals and interests effect what they are saying. One of our standard ways to do this is to look at the underlying data, for example examining a state paper in light of the field reports and discussions that fed into it. But this is just what we *cannot* do with these reports. Most of the massive documentation on which they rest remains classified, and so we cannot tell whether the reports accurately summarize and characterize it. Although we can be at least somewhat reassured by the fact that the

⁷Much of this literature is summarized in Timothy Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP 2002). For a further discussion of this and related issues see Robert Jervis, 'Understanding Beliefs', *Political Psychology*, forthcoming).

reports are generally consistent with each other, to a significant degree we must take what they say on trust. This is never a good way to proceed, and it is especially dubious when the studies are highly political. Ironically, the reports note that intelligence analysts lacked sufficient access to their sources and so should have exercised greater caution, but they do not seem to realize that the same stricture must be applied to the documents they have produced.

Secrecy similarly inhibits another mechanism that usually aids us in judging works of contemporary history. In most cases, those who feel wronged will come forth with their own accounts. We welcome memoirs in part because they call up competing versions. In this case, the people who are best positioned to write rebuttals are the intelligence professionals, and their positions prevent them from doing so.

Some evidence for the role of partisan politics in the reports is provided by their tone and the extent to which they point to a simple conclusion. Here the SSCI report stands out in its weaknesses, and the obvious (but perhaps not only) explanation is the partisan context in which it was written. As I noted earlier, the report itself was a product of a political compromise, and of all the reports it is the only one with dissenting appendices. I suspect that it is not an accident that the SSCI report is most dismissive of the claims that the intelligence was politicized, is starkest in the blame it attributes to the IC in general and to the CIA in particular, and judges intelligence by naïve standards. Although it gives us the largest volume of raw intelligence reports, its tone and the extent to which it deflects blame from the administration most sharply raise the question of trustworthiness.

An additional complication with the SSCI report is that significant portions of it are 'redacted' (i.e. blacked out by CIA for security reasons) because the report was written in a highly classified form and only submitted for clearance once it was completed. Indeed, the summary sections were never submitted, perhaps because SSCI did not want to give CIA advance notice of what was in them, and so had to be withheld from the public even if they contained no classified material. The WMD Commission and Butler Report were conceived from the start as chronicles that could be publicly released except for a few sections, with the result that they are much easier to read.

Meanings of Intelligence Failure

These reports set out to document and explain the intelligence failures concerning Iraq's WMD programs, but the notion of intelligence failure is more ambiguous than they acknowledge. On this and several other scores the Butler Report is most sophisticated, SSCI is least, and the WMD Commission is in between, although closer to the former.

Being Wrong

The most obvious sense of intelligence failure is a mismatch between the estimates and what later information reveals to have been true. This is simultaneously the most important and least interesting sense of the term. It is most important because this is what policy-makers and the public care about. To the extent that policy depends on accurate assessments, almost the only thing that matters is accuracy.⁸

In two ways the brute fact of the intelligence failure is uninteresting, however. First, it does not take intensive probes to decide that there was a failure here; all that is required is the knowledge that what was found in Iraq did not match the assessments. Second, the fact that intelligence often is in error does not surprise scholars and should not surprise policy-makers. Much of the history of international politics can be written in terms of intelligence failures, starting with the report in the Bible that the spies that Moses sent to the Land of Israel overestimated the strength of the enemies to be found there.⁹ Although most attention has been paid to surprise attacks because the failures here are so traumatic, broadening the focus reveals many more cases.¹⁰

⁸For a good argument that intelligence mattered less in the Cold War than is generally believed, see John Lewis Gaddis, 'Intelligence, Espionage, and Cold War History', *Diplomatic History* 13/2 (Spring 1989), 191–212; for the general (and overstated) claim that intelligence matters little in warfare, see John Keegan, *Intelligence in War* (London: Hutchinson 2003). For a small but important case in which good intelligence derived from intercepted cables guided policy, see Ken Kotani, 'Could Japan Read Allied Signal Traffic? Japanese Codebreaking and the Advance into French Indo-China, September 1940', *Intelligence and National Security* 20 (June 2005), 304–20. Not only may policy be independent of intelligence, which may not have been the case in Iraq, but good policy may rest on bad intelligence. In the most important case of this kind, in prevailing on his colleagues to continue fighting Nazi Germany in June 1940, Winston Churchill utilized estimates of German strength that were even more faulty than the WMD estimates: David Reynolds, 'Churchill and the British 'Decision' to Fight on in 1940: Right Policy, Wrong Reasons', in Richard Langhorne (ed.), *Diplomacy and Intelligence During the Second World War*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge 147–67.

⁹Numbers 13: 1–2, 31–32; for the most recent report of an intelligence failure, see Bill Gertz, 'Analysts Missed Chinese Buildup', *Washington Times*, 9 June 2005.

¹⁰The literature is enormous: the best discussion is Richard Betts, *Surprise Attack* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution 1982); the classic study is Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor*, see also Emphrain Kam, *Surprise Attack: The Victim's Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP 1988). Good historical studies are Ernest May, ed., *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment Before the Two World Wars* (Princeton UP 1984) and the special issue of *Intelligence and National Security* 13/1 (Spring 1998) edited by Martin S. Alexander on 'Knowing Your Friends: Intelligence Inside Alliances and Coalitions from 1914 to the Cold War', also in book form that year, now available from Routledge. For a detailed study of the failure of American, Dutch, and UN

Any specific instance of intelligence failure will, by definition, seem unusual, but the fact of the failure is itself quite ordinary.¹¹ This may be unfortunate, but is not mysterious. Intelligence is a game between hidiers and finders, and the former usually have the easier job. Intentions, furthermore, often exist only in a few heads and are subject to rapid change. Deception is fairly easy and the knowledge that it is possible degrades the value of accurate information (Stalin was very skeptical about what he was being told by his spies at Los Alamos and within the British government on the grounds that his adversaries could not be so incompetent to allow this kind of penetration). In summary, the only fault with Clausewitz's view is that he restricts it to wartime: 'Many intelligence reports in war are contradictory; even more are false, and most are uncertain.'¹²

Although hints of this realization appear in the Butler and WMD Commission reports, its disturbing implications are shunted aside. If intelligence is often erroneous, there may be little to be gained by going back over any particular case of failure. The details are interesting and may constitute an explanation in the sense of spelling out the intervening links of cause and effect, but the meticulous focus on them misses the larger truth. One might think that the IC might point this out, but to do so would be to imply that its contribution to policy must remain limited because of the high probability of error.

intelligence to anticipate the capture of Srebrenica and the massacre of the men captured there, see Cees Wiebes, *Intelligence and the War in Bosnia, 1992–1995* (Munster: Lit 2003). Much of this work rests on analysis of how individuals process information and see the world, as I have discussed in *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton UP 1976). For an application of this approach to improving intelligence, see Richards Heuer, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* (Washington DC: CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence 1999). For a superb study of individual differences in accuracy of predictions and willingness of change one's mind, see Philip Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment* (Princeton UP 2005). In my post-mortem on why CIA was slow to see that the Shah of Iran might fall (note 1), I came to the conclusion that many of the problems centered on organizational habits, culture, and incentives, however. For all their weaknesses in this area, democracies probably do a better job of assessing their adversaries than do non-democracies: Ralph White, 'Why Aggressors Lose' *Political Psychology* 11/2 (June 1990), 227–42; Dan Reiter and Allan Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton UP 2002).

¹¹Of course, it would be difficult to determine the percentage of cases in which intelligence was right or wrong, even leaving aside the questionable nature of such a dichotomy. Indeed, probably the more interesting metric would be a comparison of the success rate of the IC with that of informed observers who lack access to classified information.

¹²Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton UP 1976), 117. The Butler Report uses this quotation as its headnote.

The second and related implication is more disturbing: reforms are not likely to bring great improvement. Of course, any improvement is to be welcomed and may be worth great effort, but the very fact that intelligence failures have occurred in all countries and all eras indicates that while there may be better or worse systems in terms of accuracy (and we do not even know whether this is the case¹³), errors are likely to be frequent even if we do better. I believe that few intelligence professionals would disagree with this statement; it is worth making only because political entrepreneurs imply that their remedies, such as the establishment of a Director of National Intelligence (DNI), will cure the disease, and responsible members of the political elite seem to believe that once the system is fixed we will never be fooled again.¹⁴

The third implication follows from this: by failing to understand the essential problem, leaders will indulge in policies that are premised on a high degree of accuracy from intelligence. Of course action requires assumptions about what the world is like, but great confidence in the judgments rendered may lead to insufficient attention being given to policy that is less sensitive to intelligence inputs and surprises.

Reasonable Expectations

If the first sense of failure as intelligence being inaccurate is straightforward, this is less true of the second sense, which is a falling short of what we could expect a good intelligence service to have done. Judgments here must be much more subjective, and so it is perhaps not surprising that the reports are content to criticize without developing clear standards. To proceed, we need to separate collection from assessment because what can be expected from the latter depends in part on what information is available. All the reports remark on the paucity of good information produced by technical means because overhead photography and signals intelligence could not reveal what was being said and done under the rooftops. The sort of intercepts that Secretary of State Powell quoted in his UN speech were ambiguous, and some seemingly impressive evidence from overhead photography

¹³The Israeli service is often held up as a model, but for a review of its errors, see Ephraim Kahana, 'Analyzing Israel's Intelligence Failures', *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 18/2 (Summer 2005), 262–79.

¹⁴For the cogent but politically unacceptable argument that 'if the September 11 and Iraq failures teach us anything, it is that we need to lower our expectations of what intelligence analysis can . . . do', see Thomas Mahnken, 'Spies and Bureaucrats: Getting Intelligence Right', *Public Interest* No.81 (Spring 2005), 41. This would mean trying to design policies that are not likely to fail disastrously if the supporting intelligence is incorrect.

proved to be misleading. While perhaps better efforts could have yielded a bit more from technical intelligence, no one has suggested more than a marginal difference in usable output was likely.

Human intelligence (Humint) was also in short supply and its problems will be discussed later. Part of the reason was that the US and UK relied heavily on UN inspections in the years when they were in place and never developed substitutes when they were withdrawn. How much could have been reasonably expected is a difficult question, however, and depends in part on knowing how good Humint is on several similar targets. The WMD Commission indicates that it is not better for North Korea and Iran, and I do not see any reasons to believe that it was below what is apparently quite a low average, a conclusion reinforced by the fact that no country was able to get adequate Humint about Iraq. The US and the UK erred in allowing their covert collection services to wither, but it is far from clear what greater effort would have yielded. According to Bob Woodward, the full-court press instituted to support the invasion produced a great deal of information, but much of it appears to have been wrong.¹⁵ The best information would come from scientists and technicians who were actually working on WMD, and this circle is small and difficult to penetrate.

It is clear that Iraq was a case of collection failure in that the evidence collected was scattered, ambiguous, and often misleading. But this is just what Clausewitz would lead us to expect, and so it is harder to say whether it was a failure in terms of what is usual and whether reforms are likely to produce marked improvement.

The second part of the question is whether the ICs made good use of the information at hand. The pre-report consensus was that the errors were egregious. SSCI agrees. The WMD Commission does as well, but with many more qualifications. The Butler Report points to problems but does not render an overall judgment. (In general the Butler Report is not as overtly critical as are the American reports, which may reflect British understatement and the belief that blaming intelligence would inappropriately excuse the political leadership.) My review circles around this question, and, in summary I think that while the analysis could have been significantly better, the result would have been to make the judgments less certain rather than to reach a fundamentally different conclusion. We like to think that bad outcomes are to be explained by bad processes, but this needs to be demonstrated rather than assumed, something the reports do only occasionally. If history had been different and Secretary of State Powell had not spent several days closely querying intelligence officials about the information that would go into his UN speech,

¹⁵Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster 2004).

I am sure that critics would have said that many of the mistakes would have been avoided if the Secretary had exercised this kind of due diligence. If I am right that although some serious (and correctable) errors were made, the processes were not as flawed as the reports claim, this is good news in that the system was not horribly broken, but bad news in that there are few fixes that will produce more than marginal (but still significant) improvements.

To analyze the performance of the ICs we need to avoid equating being wrong with having made avoidable and blameworthy errors. SSCI in particular falls into this trap, as is shown by the fact that it almost always equates reasonable, well-grounded inferences with those that proved to be correct. We can see the problem by asking the obvious counterfactual: would the same report have been written if the estimates had turned out to be correct? This is implausible, yet it is what SSCI implies. After all, its argument is not that the conclusions were wrong – we knew that already – but that the analytical processes were badly flawed. Often, this was indeed the case. But SSCI reasons backwards: incorrect answers must have been the product of flawed procedures. Politically, this way of proceeding makes a good deal of sense; intellectually it does not.

Description of the Intelligence Failure

Before turning to the explanations the reports offer for the failure, we should present their descriptions of it, realizing that the line between the two is blurred.

Too Much Certainty

The reports are clearly correct to note that many of the ICs' judgments were stated with excessive certainty: while the preponderance of evidence indicated that Iraq had WMD, it was not sufficient to prove it beyond reasonable doubt. In effect, the IC should have said that the evidence was good enough to convict Saddam in a civil suit, but not in a criminal prosecution.¹⁶

The public version of the assessments were especially culpable in this regard, but even the classified ones gave an unjustified impression of certainty.¹⁷ Part of the reason for this is that the infamous October

¹⁶I am grateful to Richard Betts for this formulation.

¹⁷For comparisons between the classified and public American reports, see SSCI, 286–97; Jessica Mathews and Jeff Miller, 'A Tale of Two Intelligence Estimates', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 31 March 2004; Donald Kennedy, 'Intelligence Science: Reverse Peer Review?' *Science* 303, 26 March 2004; Center for American

2002 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) was produced with great haste. The Presidential Daily Briefs (PDBs) were even more stark, in part because they reflected first impressions derived from¹⁸ recent information and had to be brief.¹⁹ Other reasons for the excess certainty were that analysts overestimated the number of independent sources reporting to them, and they failed to carefully consider the significance of negative reports and the absence of evidence, as we will discuss below.

A related problem was that finished intelligence did not do a good job of conveying levels of certainty to consumers. Post-mortems reveal that there are no accepted standards for how to do this. The Butler report notes that while consumers thought that terms such as ‘likely’ and ‘probable’ were conveying subtle differences of meaning, intelligence actually used the terms interchangeably, choosing among them for stylistic reasons.²⁰ In any event, it is doubtful whether consumers were looking for subtle differences in degrees of certainty. Furthermore, although the problem of conveying degrees of confidence is real and reforms are underway, solutions may be beyond reach. ICs have grappled with this problem for years and the fact that several alternatives have been tried and abandoned indicates the depth of the difficulties.

No Alternatives Considered

A second facet of the failure was the lack of consideration given to alternative explanations. This is not to say there were no disagreements. The American reports document the sharp splits over whether the aluminum tubes that Iraq was surreptitiously importing indicated that Iraq was reconstituting its nuclear program and whether the fact that the software that Iraq procured for its Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) included maps of the US implied a threat to the American homeland. Some people also had doubts about the reliability of the testimony of the now notorious informant ‘Curveball’ that Iraq had mobile facilities for producing biological weapons. But no general alternative explanations for Saddam’s behavior were offered. There were no ‘Red Teams’ to attack the prevailing views; no analyses

Progress, ‘Neglecting Intelligence, Ignoring Warnings’, 28 Jan. 2004, <www.americanprogress.org/site/pp.asp?c=biJRJ8OVF&b=24889>. One of the main recommendations of the Butler Report was that the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) not issue public estimates which, contrary to precedent, it did in this case.

¹⁸WMD Commission, 50.

¹⁹WMD Commission, 50.

²⁰Butler Report, 13.

commissioned from Devil's Advocates; no papers that weighed competing possibilities.²¹

Relatedly, the ICs failed to realize that some evidence that was consistent with their interpretations was consistent with other views as well. Indeed, analysts often seemed to think that the latter was not the case, which meant that they saw the evidence as not only fitting with their explanation, but as giving independent support to it and therefore as justifying greater confidence in the overall judgment. In general, Iraq's use of fronts and other surreptitious means to obtain dual-use material was taken as evidence that it was pursuing forbidden programs. While this inference was consistent with the behavior, it neglected 'the fact that Iraq typically used front companies and evaded UN sanctions for imports of purely legitimate goods.' More specifically, the majority of the ICs believed that the fact that Iraq used intermediaries to procure the aluminum tubes meant that they were intended for uranium enrichment. But, as the Department of Energy (DOE) noted at the time, Security Council resolutions prohibited Iraq from importing such material for conventional military uses, which means that the behavior did not discriminate between the two main hypotheses.²²

Most strikingly, no one proposed a view close to that we now believe to be true. This was a serious failure, but one that needs to be placed in context. No observers outside the government, including opponents of the war, proposed serious alternatives, and no one, including analysts in the Arab world, provided a description of Saddam's motives and behavior that was close to what we now think is correct. There is no reason to think that any alternative would have been seen as highly credible had it been proposed, and indeed it is hard to argue that any alternative fit the available evidence better than the prevailing one. The reports do not explicitly argue to the contrary, but neither do they explicitly consider the question, which is essential to their task.

²¹Israeli intelligence did employ a Red Team, but its arguments were found to be unpersuasive: Kahana, 'Analyzing Israel's Intelligence Failures', 273–4. This serves as a good reminder that many of the prescriptions offered in the report would not have changed the outcome. In fact, academic research casts doubt on the efficacy of this approach: Charlan Nemeth, Keith Brown and John Rogers, 'Devil's Advocate Versus Authentic Dissent: Stimulating Quality and Control', *European Journal of Social Psychology* 31 (Nov./Dec. 2001), 707–20. Within CIA, the best work on the related approach of Alternative Analysis: see especially his exposition of how this method could have been used before the Soviet missiles were discovered in Cuba: 'Alternative Analysis and the Perils of Estimating: Analyst-Friendly Approaches', unpublished MS, 6 Oct. 2003.

²²SSCI, 20–21, 106.

Insufficient Imagination

Related to the fact that alternatives were not considered is the argument, made more by the WMD Commission and the Butler Report than by SSCI, that the ICs should have been more imaginative. This claim is familiar: it is a conclusion of a recent re-analysis of the failure to understand the revolt that unseated the Shah of Iran²³ and is the standard view of intelligence before 9/11, where intelligence ‘failed to connect the dots’. This phrase, which the reports on Iraq WMD shrewdly avoid, betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the problem. In 9/11, Iraq, and most other cases there were countless dots – all of them, not only those whose significance is apparent in retrospect – and they could have been connected in a great many ways. To take the 9/11 case, I am sure that if we look back at all the information that was received rather than only the bits that we now know could have led us to the plot, we will find a huge number of possible alarms that looked as troubling as the danger that turned out to be the real. In retrospect the presence of a handful of Arabs in flying schools without obvious employment prospects called for immediate investigation, but if the attacks had been delivered by chemical trucks, we would now be bemoaning the failure to see the significance of the scattered warnings – which I am sure we could find – about Arabs who were enrolled in truck-driving schools.

A lack of imagination may have been shown by the ICs’ unwillingness to think about puzzling aspects of Iraq’s behavior. Had the ICs asked why Saddam was refusing to do all he could to avoid war, they might have been led in an interesting and highly policy-relevant direction. After the war, there were scattered reports that France and Russia had told Saddam that they would restrain the US, and this may have played a role in his decision (and if these countries did believe that Washington would back down, this probably was the most consequential of all the intelligence failures). Working backwards from his recalcitrance, and combining it with any intelligence on what French and Russian diplomats were saying, could have led the ICs to flag this possibility. The obvious policy would have been for the US and UK to tell France and Russia in the strongest possible terms that their opposition would not deter the coalition, and that those countries could best contribute to peace by making this clear to Saddam. Of course they might not have been willing to comply, and it might not have made a difference, but imagination does seem to have been absent here.

²³‘Iran: Intelligence Failure or Policy Stalemate?’ Working Group Report No.1.

More centrally, few in the ICs felt the need to go beyond the obvious proposition that Saddam was developing active WMD programs. Similarly, in the case of Iran in 1978, intelligence thought it was clear that the Shah would live up to his reputation for ruthlessness and crack down if the disturbances grew serious. Before 9/11 most of the concern about terrorism focused on the kinds that had occurred previously. This pattern makes sense. Intelligence analysts are selected and trained to be careful, to stay close to the information, and to resist speculation. Indeed, there are good reasons why the IC resists being highly imaginative. There are few limits on what can be imagined, and those who urge the community to be more imaginative have said little about how this should be done in a sensible way and how the IC should test the alternatives.

Furthermore, in one sense, the ICs were too imaginative about Iraq in putting together scattered and ambiguous information to form a stark and dramatic picture. They ended up speculating without realizing that they were doing so. While one can legitimately reply that this kind of outrunning the evidence was not imaginative because the picture painted was a familiar one, the analysts were seeing a world beyond the incoming reports.

Explanations for the Failure

Although the reports are heavier on detail than generalization, they do provide some broad explanations for the failure. These are marred by a glaring methodological defect, however. This is the lack of comparative analysis to probe the arguments being made. This leads to their missing an obvious puzzle: apparently all intelligence services in all countries and most private analysts came to roughly the same conclusions about the Iraqi programs.²⁴ Part of the reason may be that each gained confidence from knowing the others' conclusions, but the uniformity of the failure indicates either that analytical and methodological flaws were universal or that somehow each service made its own errors that led to the same faulty conclusions. The latter is unlikely and the former casts doubt on the explanations offered and indicates that no simple reorganization or changes in analytic tradecraft are likely to solve the problems.

An understanding of the need for comparisons also reminds us that reports like these are exercises in searching on the dependent variable.

²⁴Only a few scattered individuals dissented. According to Hans Blix, France's President Jacques Chirac was one of them, remarking on the propensity of intelligence services to 'intoxicate each other': Hans Blix, *Disarming Iraq* (New York: Pantheon 2004) 129.

That is, we have post-mortems only after failure, not after successes.²⁵ Even if we did them well, and even if we found that certain factors were present in all the cases, we would not be on firm ground in making causal inferences – namely, in providing an explanation – unless we could also establish that those factors were absent in cases of intelligence success. Oxygen is not a cause of intelligence failure despite its being present in all such cases.

When we turn to the accounts offered below, it is far from clear that the factors highlighted distinguish cases of failure from those of success. Although the reports, especially the WMD Commission and the Butler Report, do look at other WMD cases in which intelligence did better, as far as we can tell (some of these sections remain classified) they make no use of these comparisons to develop their explanations. Neither do they note that all intelligence services seem to have reached the same conclusions despite their different national cultures, biases, and ways of proceeding. Also ignored is the apparent fact that most senior Iraqi officials believed that their country had WMD. (This illustrates a potential danger of good intelligence: had the US or UK tapped into what these people were saying, any lingering doubts would have been dispelled as the ICs ignored the possibility of what is known as Red-on-Red deception.²⁶)

It is also unfortunate that the reports leave underdeveloped comparisons between what different agencies said or between what the IC said on one issue as opposed to another on Iraq. SSCI uses the correct conclusions of some parts of the IC (Air Force intelligence in the

²⁵For a brief discussion of an intelligence success, see David Robarge, 'Getting It Right: CIA Analysis of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War', *Studies in Intelligence* 49/1 (2005), 1–8. For a discussion of some of the earlier CIA post-mortems, see Douglas Shyrock, 'The Intelligence Community Post-Mortem Program, 1973–1975', *Studies in Intelligence* 21 (Fall 1997), 15–22; also see Woodrow Kuhns, 'Intelligence Failures: Forecasting and the Lessons of Epistemology', in Richard Betts and Thomas Mahnken, eds. *Paradoxes of Strategic Intelligence* (London: Frank Cass 2003), 80–100; John Hedley, 'Learning from Intelligence Failures', *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 18 (Fall 2005), 435–50. Douglas MacEachin, a former career CIA official, has done a series of excellent post-mortems: *The Final Months of War With Japan: Signals Intelligence, U.S. Invasion Planning, and the A-Bomb Decision* (Washington DC: CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence 1998); *Predicting the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: The Intelligence Community's Record* (Washington DC: CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence 2002); *U.S. Intelligence and the Confrontation in Poland, 1980–1981* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP 2002).

²⁶In fact, as the NIE was being written, confirming reports were received from a very well placed source. This was so sensitive that it was not shared with the analysts and so did not effect the estimate, but it reinforced the confidence of those in charge of the exercise and of the top policy-makers: WMD Commission, 117.

case of UAVs, DOE in the case of the aluminum tubes) as a way of castigating the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), but the comparisons remain of limited use because SSCI does not explore whether the factors that they think generated the wrong judgments were present in the correct ones as well, as I will discuss below often was the case.

The need for comparisons sheds disturbing light on the argument for the failure of imagination. Intelligence failure may be associated with lack of imagination, but I suspect that similar patterns are present in successes as well. The reason for this is explained by Richard Betts, who notes that we bring to cases our general beliefs and implicit theories of the world.²⁷ These usually are correct, which means that most of the time we are better off being guided by them rather than exercising great imagination, and that surprises occur when the other's behavior is in fact extraordinary. If we were more imaginative in the latter cases we might have gotten them right; but if we were generally more imaginative we would have been wrong in many standard cases. Of course what we want is a way of determining when the normal patterns will hold and when they will not, and perhaps this is the main task of intelligence. But without some magic key, we must live with the conundrum that the same ways of thinking that produce an accurate picture of normal adversary behavior will fail when the country or situation is odd.

Groupthink

In one of its main conclusions, SSCI argues that a 'groupthink' dynamic led intelligence community analysts, collectors and managers to both interpret ambiguous information as conclusively indicative of a WMD program as well as ignore or minimize evidence that Iraq did not have active and expanding weapons of mass destruction programs.²⁸ Taken literally, this is simply incorrect. Groupthink is, as its name implies, a small group phenomenon, as is made clear in Irving Janis' book that is the founding text, one of the few pieces of academic research that is cited by SSCI.²⁹ The driving motor is the posited tendency for tightly-knit groups to seek the comfort and confidence that comes from mutual agreement and approval. Such an atmosphere not only leads

²⁷Richard Betts, 'Warning Dilemmas: Normal Theory vs. Exceptional Theory', *Orbis* 26 (Winter 1983), 828-33.

²⁸SSCI, 18.

²⁹Irving Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1983); for later research in this area see Paul 't Hart, Eric Stern and Bengt Sundelius, eds., *Beyond Groupthink: Political Group Dynamics and Foreign Policy-Making* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press 1997).

people to refrain from disturbing the group consensus, but to not even entertain disturbing thoughts. Intelligence on Iraq was not developed by small groups, however. A great deal of work was done by individuals, and the groups were large and of a shifting composition.

Excessive Consensus

In fairness to SSCI, it is using the term groupthink in a colloquial rather than a technical sense. What is claimed to be at work are general pressures of conformity and mutual reinforcement. Once the view that Iraq was developing WMD was established there not only were few incentives to challenge it, but each person who held this view undoubtedly drew greater confidence from the fact that it was universally shared.

There is much to this, but again it needs more careful scrutiny than the reports gave it. First, the general consensus did not prevent vigorous disagreements on specific issues, especially over UAVs and the aluminum tubes. But excessive conformity may have come up in one odd aspect of the latter discussion. Although DOE thought that the tubes were not designed to enrich uranium, it did not dissent from the judgment that Iraq was reconstituting its nuclear program. Presumably DOE's analysts believed that Iraq was developing weapons through some other, unspecified, route, but their reasoning was not queried by the other agencies because for their purposes what was crucial was the conclusion that Iraq was reconstituting.³⁰ It was this after all, that was of most concern to the policy-makers, and there seemed to be no point in figuring out why DOE disagreed on the tubes yet agreed with the conclusion. In fact, it would have been worth learning whether the rest of the IC felt that the DOE's analysis of how Iraq could develop weapons without the tubes had merit because, if it did not, there would have been more reason to question the conclusion.

More centrally, the reports would have served us better had they probed the notions of conformity and consensus. Conformity is often warranted; the fact that several conscientious and intelligent people believe something is a valid reason for me to believe it. In many cases, everyone believes the same thing because there are good reasons to do so, which is one reason why cases of success are likely to be characterized by as high levels of agreement and mutual reinforcement as are cases of failure. What needs to be avoided is unthinking conformity in which everyone quickly accepts conventional wisdom, thereby reinforcing and perpetuating it without further examination. In practice, however, it is not easy to separate justified from unjustified

³⁰WMD Commission, 183.

conformity, and while the latter may have been the case in Iraq, this needs to be demonstrated.³¹

Failure to Challenge Assumptions

In parallel with the diagnosis of excessive conformity is the argument that assumptions were insufficiently examined. Thus SSCI said the NIE ‘suffers from a “layering” effect whereby assessments were based on previous judgments without carrying forward the uncertainties’.³² The other reports reach similar judgments, and I think it is clear that much of the reason why each new bit of information that *could* be interpreted as showing that Iraq had active programs *was* interpreted in this way was the hold of the belief that Saddam was doing all that he could to get WMD. Ambiguities were missed or downplayed, alternative interpretations rarely were fully considered (for example concerning Iraq’s failure to account for all the missing chemical and biological weapons), and when they were, as with the tubes and UAVs, the more damning implications won support in part because they fitted with the prevailing view.

Important also were beliefs that extended beyond Iraq. According to a biological weapons specialist in the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), one reason why the IC was quick to

³¹For reports of pressures to conform within CIA, see WMD Commission, 191–94; for the argument that the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) has developed a culture that encourages dissent and the CIA has not, see Justin Rood, ‘Analyze This’, *Washington Monthly* (Jan./Feb. 2005), 18–21.

³²SSCI, 22. In the mid-1980s a similar conclusion was reached by CIA’s Senior Review Panel based on examining a number of cases from 1945 to 1978: Willis Armstrong *et al.*, ‘The Hazards of Single-Outcome Forecasting’, originally in *Studies in Intelligence* 28 (Fall 1984) and declassified in H. Bradford Westerfield, *Inside CIA’s Private World: Declassified Articles from the Agency’s Internal Journal, 1955–1992* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP 1995), 238–54. Political psychologists have similarly argued that much information is ordinarily processed ‘online’, i.e., that as new information is received it is melded with the person’s standing judgment on the subject, with the person not being aware of how the latter was formed. See, for example, Kathleen McGraw and Milton Lodge, ‘Review Essay: Political Information Processing’, *Political Communication* 13 (Jan.–March 1996), 131–38; Charles Taber, ‘Information Processing and Public Opinion,’ in David Sears, Leonie Huddy, and Robert Jervis, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* (New York: Oxford UP 2003), 433–76. An interesting possible case is the CIA’s over-estimate of the time it would take the USSR to produce an atomic bomb. It was so sure that the USSR suffered from a great shortage of uranium that it missed the signs that large-scale enrichment was underway: Donald Steury, ‘Dissecting Soviet Analysis, 1946–50: How the CIA Missed Stalin’s Bomb’, *Studies in Intelligence* 49/1 (2005), 24–25.

accept the evidence that Iraq was developing mobile labs was that ‘the U.S. BW analysts generally think that BW programs historically have shifted [away] from large-scale fixed facilities. . . . So it’s very appealing to the analysts to learn about a mobile BW program. It fits with what we think the state of BW programs worldwide are heading toward.’³³

Perhaps the most general assumption was that Saddam’s policy was consistent, coherent, and unchanging. He had sought WMD before the 1991 Gulf War and afterwards had tried to continue them in the face of sanctions. The elements of his behavior, although distressing, fit together and embodied a comprehensible plan. Since Saddam was a dictator, there was every reason to expect the regime to be a unitary actor as well. In fact it now appears that Saddam did *not* have a coherent plan, his control was less than complete, and the regime was less than fully competent.³⁴ Thus SSCI notes that, contrary to what CIA assumed, the reason why the aluminum tubes had specifications unnecessarily precise for rocket motors was that the Iraqi engineers were inexperienced and erred on the side of caution.³⁵ More importantly, almost everyone assumed that Saddam’s behavior and plans remained relatively stable, whereas it now appears that in the late 1990s he realized that he would not be able to develop robust WMD programs in the face of sanctions and bombings like those the US and UK carried out in 1998. As David Kay, first head of the post-war Iraq Survey Group, says: ‘One of the hardest things to do in the world of intelligence is to discern change. . . . When people’s behavior has been consistent, you tend to predict the future based upon the past.’³⁶ It appears that the ICs never asked whether Saddam’s approach had changed.

The impact of assumptions and beliefs needs to be understood rather than merely criticized, however. Many correct inferences about Iraq WMD were based on strong assumptions, as I will note later, and it is impractical to reexamine all assumptions all the time, which means that knowing that many faulty estimates rest on mistaken and unexamined assumptions does not provide practical guidance. There is no such thing

³³SSCI, 161–62.

³⁴In addition to the Duelfer Report, see James Risen, ‘The Struggle for Iraq: Intelligence; Ex-Inspector Says CIA Missed Disarray in Iraqi Arms Program’, *New York Times*, 26 Jan. 2004.

³⁵SSCI, 102–3. Of course the general problem is that there are an infinite number of non-rational, non-unitary explanations that can account for any bit of data.

³⁶David Kay, ‘Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction’, *Miller Center Report* 20 (Spring/Summer 2004), 8. It also does not help when a CIA analyst is newly assigned to a case, he or she starts by ‘reading into’, not the field reports, but the finished intelligence that gives the office’s established views.

as ‘letting the facts speak for themselves’ or drawing inferences without using beliefs about the world; it is inevitable that the perception and interpretation of new information will be influenced by established ideas.³⁷

This means that there is not likely to be a completely satisfactory way to proceed. But the reports are correct that crucial assumptions should be made explicit in order to make the analysts conscious of them and to alert consumers to those they might want to dispute. The exercise is much easier in hindsight, of course, and carrying it out in the Iraq case might not have changed the estimate. It now appears that intelligence needed to question whether the regime’s refusal to provide full cooperation with inspectors could have been explained by anything other than hiding forbidden programs and whether its past use of chemicals and history of WMD programs were highly diagnostic of what it was doing in 2002. Although it is not quite correct to say that these assumptions were so deep that the analysts were not aware of them, they were never explicitly defended because they seemed obvious and were widely shared. (It is worth noting that outside observers also failed to question these beliefs, which did not rest on classified information.)

It is even more difficult to specify ahead of time which assumptions should be reexamined. In principle, it might be useful to make all assumptions explicit. But is it really necessary to start a paper by explaining that the other country is populated by human beings? One wants to concentrate on assumptions that are not subject to dispute in the ordinary course of analysis, are central to the conclusions (what some in the American IC call ‘linchpins’), and are amenable to sensible analysis.

Confirmation Bias and Negative Evidence

Although the reports do not use the term ‘confirmation bias,’ they see this phenomenon at work. Cognitive psychologists have documented the propensity for people to seek information that confirms their beliefs and to gloss over what could contradict them.³⁸ This occurred at every stage, from requests to the field for information, to what was reported (and not reported), to what the analysts paid attention to. Thus as focus shifted to Iraq in the wake of the successful war in Afghanistan, CIA agents around the world were told to seek information about Iraq’s progress toward obtaining WMD. This made sense, but the obvious

³⁷Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Chapter 4.

³⁸For a summary, see Ziva Kunda, *Social Cognition: Making Sense of People* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1999), 112–20.

danger in asking people to be on the look-out for certain kinds of information is that they and their sources will find it.

During World War II, British intelligence saw this as a trap, and when it received preliminary reports about a new German weapon it was careful to phrase inquiries to other agents in neutral terms that did not disclose what it believed the Germans might be developing. It appears that CIA did not take this precaution, and by making it clear what it was seeking may have led its agents and sources to bring in any information, even if insubstantial, and – most importantly – to ignore reports of lack of activity. ‘None of the guidance given to human intelligence collectors suggested that collection be focused on determining *whether* Iraq had WMD. Instead, the requirements assumed that Iraq had WMD and focused on uncovering those activities...’³⁹

Even without this specific bias, I suspect that it was rare for negative information to be solicited or reported. Agents were not likely to press for what their sources did *not* see; I doubt if the field reported that various sources did *not* have any information that Saddam was actively pursuing WMD even if these people were well-placed; had such reports come in to the Reports Officers at the Directorate of Operations (DO), I doubt if they were passed on to the analysts in the Directorate of Intelligence (DI). Finished intelligence apparently never sought to evaluate the number and significance of reports by knowledgeable informants who did not see traces of WMD programs.

Negative reports rarely if ever led to requests for follow-up by headquarters whereas positive ones did. The fact, glaringly significant in retrospect, that the increased collection efforts yielded little was not considered worthy of note.⁴⁰ By its nature, positive evidence is much more striking and vivid than is its absence, and psychologists know that vivid information has impact out of proportion to its diagnostic content. It stands out, will be noted, and sticks in the memory. Negative evidence and things that do not happen tend to be overlooked. Often they should not be, and it is disturbing but not surprising that the IC found it hard to comply with SSCI’s request that it turn over this kind evidence because there is no simple way to retrieve it from memory or files.⁴¹

‘Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence’, as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously said. Like many mantras, there is quite a bit to

³⁹SSCI, 21, also see 268.

⁴⁰WMD Commission, 93; James Rissen, ‘C.I.A. Held Back Iraqi Arms Data, U.S. Officials Say’, *New York Times*, 6 July 2004. For the dismissal of negative evidence that was received in another case, see Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP 1999), 282.

⁴¹SSCI, 3.

this, but it conceals quite a bit as well. There are indeed numerous cases in which an adversary's action or capabilities were not preceded by any detected signs. But presumably even Rumsfeld would acknowledge that absence of evidence can be significant. If it were not, one would be in the absurd position of arguing that lacking positive evidence that a country is not pursuing WMD (and it is not clear what this could be), we should assume that it is.⁴² (But it is chastening to note that the Western ICs were unaware that the Soviet – and Russian – governments continued robust biological weapons programs after signing the treaty banning it and that Albania had developed chemical weapons.⁴³)

Cases in which specified behavior does not occur or in which evidence is absent are highly significant if an important proposition or argument implies the contrary. Political scientists refer to this kind of evidence as 'dogs that do not bark', borrowing from the Sherlock Holmes short story in which Holmes, but not Watson, realizes that the fact that the murder victim's dogs did not bark the night he was killed shows that the murderer was an acquaintance: had he been a stranger, the dogs would have barked. As this example shows, negative evidence and events that do not occur are not automatically or uniformly important, but matter when a significant argument or proposition implies that they *should* be present.

A heightened awareness of this logic and the attendant research design of focusing on relevant negative cases have greatly improved social science over the past several years. Intelligence (and these post-mortems as well) has not come to fully appreciate this. This is not surprising, because it requires thinking in a counter-intuitive way that comes from an explicit consideration of the hypothetico-deductive method. We move naturally from evidence to inference, but it takes greater self-consciousness to see that to test our propositions we need to ask what events should occur and what evidence should be observable if this argument or explanation is correct.

In the Iraq case, doing so would have helped in three related ways.

⁴²Iran's president reacted to the fact that lack of hard evidence that Iran was seeking nuclear weapons had not dispelled Western suspicions (justified, in my view) by declaring: 'Usually, you cannot prove that sort of thing [i.e., that a country is not seeking weapons]. How can you prove that you are not a bad person?' (Quoted in Steven Weisman and Warren Hoge, 'Iranian Leader Promises New Proposals to End Nuclear Impasse', *New York Times*, 16 Sept. 2005). As I will discuss in the next section, the paucity of evidence can be explained by the other's deception and denial activities, an argument made by the US in this case as well as about Iraq: Bill Gertz, 'U.S. Report Says Iran Seeks to Acquire Nuclear Weapons', *Washington Times*, 16 Sept. 2005.

⁴³Mahnken, 'Spies and Bureaucrats', 37.

First, it could have corrected for the propensity to note only corroborating facts. Thus although intelligence considered Iraq's use of 'code words to compartmentalize BW program elements' as diagnostic, apparently it missed the fact that code words were not used to 'conceal acquisition of BW related equipment, and impair Western measures to monitor Iraqi technology acquisition'.⁴⁴

Second, asking 'If Iraq has reconstituted its nuclear program, what would it have to do?' might have pointed intelligence to areas that should have been probed more deeply, such as the lack of evidence that Iraq was seeking the components other than tubes that it would have needed if it were building centrifuges.⁴⁵

Third, an explicit focus on the potential importance of negative information could have restrained the confirmation bias in collection. More specifically, headquarters in both the US and the UK could have instructed their agents to look for and report not only WMD activities, but also cases in which people who might have known about them in fact saw nothing.

Denial and Deception

Intelligence analysts knew that some reports were negative and that there were great gaps in what they saw of Iraq's WMD programs. But, as the reports note, this was easy to explain – and explain away – by Iraq's denial and deception campaign. The experience with the UN inspectors was especially clear and vivid. Iraqi officials would own up to activities only when confronted by direct evidence. They did what they could to thwart the inspectors, including moving materials and records out the back door when the inspectors arrived at the front. Machinery would be hidden, even buried, and any information was hard to come by. So it is not surprising that intelligence concluded that it was seeing only a fraction of the Iraqi program.

This made sense, being consistent with previous Iraqi behavior and explaining why there was not more direct evidence. The inference also was consistent with the behavior of other states, especially the USSR, which had trained many of the Iraqis. The problem was that the ICs treated deception and denial as a given rather than as a hypothesis to be tested and never asked what information might lead

⁴⁴SSCI, 184.

⁴⁵SSCI, 107. For a fascinating discussion of the ignoring of negative evidence from signals intelligence in the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident, see Robert Hanyok, 'Skunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds, and Flying Fish: The Gulf of Tonkin Mystery, 2–4 August 1964', *Cryptologic Quarterly* 19/4–20/1 (Winter 2000–Spring 2001) esp. 31–2, 41, 43–4, available at <www.gwu.edu/~nsaarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/relea00012.pdf>.

to the conclusion that activities were missing rather than being hidden. Unfortunately, this is a very difficult hypothesis to disprove. Here more than elsewhere, Rumsfeld's mantra applies.

Even if the ICs had been more careful and explicit, it is not clear how they could have gone about deciding whether their faith in Iraq's denial and deception was justified. But it is disturbing that the ICs did not seem to realize that the proposition that many of Iraq's activities were hidden was both central to their conclusions and was just that – a proposition, and one that did not rest on direct evidence such as a series of recent deceptions that they had unmasked. Neither did they appear to realize that their belief was essentially impossible to disconfirm. The failure to detect concealment merely testified to its success, and any evidence of deception and denial could – and probably would – have been taken as proof that many activities remained undiscovered.⁴⁶

There are no easy solutions here, but what the ICs should have done was to note the central and hard-to-‘confirm’ role of beliefs about Iraqi denial and deception, increase their efforts to penetrate it, and alert the policy-makers to the fact that the projected activities could not be directly seen. The ICs could at least have asked themselves what should be concluded if what they were seeing was not the tip of the iceberg, but the bulk of it. In other words, did the observed activities support the conclusion that Iraq had robust WMD programs? Goethe famously said, ‘We are never deceived, we deceive ourselves.’ The irony here is that the US and the UK deceived themselves into believing that Iraq's deception campaign was central. The final embarrassment was that when Secretary Powell raised the subject in his speech to the UN, he called his ‘colleagues’ attention to the fine paper that the United Kingdom distributed yesterday which describes in exquisite detail Iraqi deception activities’: it soon was discovered that this paper had been plagiarized.

Overlearning

It is well known that people not only learn from the past, but overlearn from it.⁴⁷ A recent and important event is likely to leave a deep imprint

⁴⁶Many estimates are built on beliefs that cannot be disconfirmed, and in most of these cases analysts and consumers fail to realize this. For example, as unrest grew in Iran in 1978 intelligence believed that if it were really serious the Shah would crack down, and the fact that he did not do so was taken as evidence that the situation remained in control. In 1941 both Stalin and most British officials believed that Hitler would not attack without making demands first and that some of the alarming signs emanated from the bellicose German military rather than Hitler, beliefs that only the attack itself could dispel: Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion*, esp. 180–86.

⁴⁷Jervis, *Perception*, Chapter 6.

on people, especially when they were in error. People will be sure not to make the same mistake again – and are more likely to commit the opposite error. This helps explain both the ICs' certainty that Iraq was engaging in deception and denial and the main conclusion that it had active WMD programs. After the 1991 Gulf War the ICs found to their dismay that they had greatly underestimated Saddam's WMD activities, partly because Iraq had deployed an undetected deception program. They therefore became especially vigilant, which meant they were unlikely to miss activities that were taking place, but the inevitable cost was to increase the risk of making more out of the information than they should have.

Human Intelligence

The reports attribute some of the intelligence error to three basic shortfalls of Humint.⁴⁸ Most obviously, the amount of Humint was slight. It is not clear how many sources the Americans drew on; the British had five, none of whom claimed firsthand knowledge of the programs. The ICs had relied heavily on information from the UN inspectors, and when they were forced out in 1998 adequate sources were not developed to fill the gaps. It seems clear that insufficient attention was given to the problem throughout the 1990s, but, as I noted earlier, it is hard to say what reasonable expectations should be in this area. Unfortunately but typically, the reports do not raise this question, but merely indicate that we must do better. The reports do make clear, however, that they were surprised by how few sources were available, that conclusions were often drawn from what only one or two people had said, and that the analysts did not focus on and indeed sometimes did not know how few sources they had.

A second problem was that most of the Humint was misleading. These two points combine to reproduce Woody Allen's famous line: 'Such bad food, and small portions too.' The best known and perhaps most important source was 'Curveball', whose testimony convinced analysts that Iraq was using mobile laboratories to produce biological agents. It turns out that although some of the sources may have been accurate in relaying what they heard others say, little if any of the information was true. The most obvious explanation was that the sources had come through the Iraqi National Congress (INC), an organization that had an interest in leading people to believe that Saddam was vigorously pursuing WMD. But it now appears that this was rarely the case and the reasons for the misinformation remain a mystery, probably varying from one source to another. It is also worth

⁴⁸See, for example, WMD Commission, 22–178, 285–6, 320–21, 367, 437.

noting that apparently no national service did much better than the others in producing Humint or separating truth from fiction.

Third, all of the reports stress that the analysts did not know enough about the sources they were relying on. Sources are loathe to disclose all of the details about the sub-sources who report to them; agents in the field rarely give a complete picture of their sources; Reports Officers at CIA Headquarters remove significant identifiers before passing the material to the analysts, as well as deciding what material is valuable enough to send on at all. The results are that analysts are given only a generic description of the source, and indeed one that can vary from one report to another, which in this case led the analysts to overestimate the number of different sources who were reporting. In other cases, the descriptions omitted important details about the source's specific expertise and access that would have helped the analysts judge the information.

The problems were even greater when the source was under the control of a foreign service, as was the case with 'Curveball'. German intelligence kept him to themselves, arguing incorrectly that he did not speak English and was anti-American, and the only direct contact was a single meeting with an American who was highly skeptical about 'Curveball's' reliability. Furthermore, his information flowed not through DO, but through Defense Humint Services (DHS) which was unwilling or unable to push the Germans for information about him. Even when DHS has direct access, it does not appear to do as thorough a job of vetting and passing on information about sources as does DO.

There are real limits to DO's role as well. Some Reports Officers apparently believe that the analysts are in the best position to validate the source by determining whether the information fits with other evidence at their disposal. Not only did many DI analysts fail to understand this, but the danger of circularity and confirmation bias is heightened by this approach – the fact that information fits with prevailing views will validate the source, and the reliability of the source will lend credence to the information. While the problem is often described as DO not providing enough information to DI, part of the difficulty is that DO did not scrutinize the sources with sufficient care.⁴⁹

The reports generally reinforce the widespread view that the paucity of Humint was a major cause of the Iraq debacle. But while of course more information from well-placed sources would improve intelligence, this is a good deal more difficult than simply increasing the amount of

⁴⁹For a discussion of similar weaknesses in the British system, see Butler Report, 102–4, and Davies (note 2). Late in the process (Dec. 2002) DO apparently did express skepticism about 'Curveball's' reliability: WMD Commission, 95–98. The most detailed discussion of Curveball is Bob Drogin and John Goetz, 'How U.S. Fell Under the Spell of "Curveball,"', *Los Angeles Times*, 20 Nov. 2005.

Humint. When dealing with WMD capabilities, let alone the country's intentions, the number of well informed people will be small. Furthermore, even if vetting were done much better, it will remain more an art than a science and will produce both false positives and false negatives. Indeed for this reason Humint is generally suspect, and it seems to have been given unusual credence in this case, probably because little else was available. While Humint then contributed greatly to the failure, it is ironic, although not necessarily foolish, that the prescription is to get more Humint.

Information Sharing

Another prescription is for much greater information sharing within the IC.⁵⁰ In what seems like common sense, Senator Pat Roberts, chair of SSCI, argues that 'Key terrorism analysts... must be given access to every single piece of relevant intelligence data concerning threats to the homeland.'⁵¹ Clearly it was not helpful when DO described Ambassador Joseph Wilson, who was sent to Niger to ascertain whether Saddam was seeking uranium, as 'a contact with excellent access who does not have an established reporting record'.⁵² This is not only a matter of DO saying more to DI, however. The vetting of sources probably would be best done by both branches pooling their impressions. Furthermore, information collectors are often in a good position to see when analysts have made insufficient use of available information or conversely have overestimated the extent to which their judgments are rooted in hard evidence or specific reports.

The freer flow of information should not be limited to human sources. One reason why analysts believed that Iraq had stepped up production of its chemical weapons was that they saw increased activity at the suspected production sites. But the WMD Commission says that what the analysts did not know was that the satellites had been re-programmed to provide more frequent coverage and so what they were seeing reflected a change in American surveillance, not Iraqi behavior.⁵³ A footnote in the report undercuts this claim, but even if

⁵⁰WMD Commission, 285–86, 320–21, 437. This complaint is usually focused on Humint, but SSCI (p.27) reports that CIA refused to share other information as well, and other agencies are not likely to be more forthcoming – information, after all, is power.

⁵¹Pat Roberts, 'Comments & Responses: Intelligence Reform', *National Interest*, No.81 (Fall 2005), 8.

⁵²SSCI, 43, also see, 46.

⁵³WMD Commission, 125–26; SSCI, 267–68. For some of the dangers of close contact between analysts and collectors, see Garrett Jones, 'It's A Cultural Thing: Thoughts on

it is not true, the point remains that discussion of who needs what information within the IC should not be restricted to Humint. For example, in some instances analysts may need to know a great deal about the technical details of a collection system in order to think about what sorts of information could and could not have been gathered.

The WMD Commission correctly remarks that the terminology we use may implicitly accept undesirable boundaries within the IC: 'To say that we must encourage agencies to "share" information implies that they have some ownership stake in it.'⁵⁴ Anyone who has worked in or around CIA knows the proprietary attitude of the directorates, especially DO. But, as usual, there are problems with the prescription. Not only will it meet a great deal of resistance, but fully sharing information reduces the value of the division of labor. For DO to pass on all information to DI would be to swamp it.

Furthermore, the withholding of information at all levels reflects not only the fact that the information is power, but legitimate security concerns. Spies like Aldridge Ames and Robert Hanssen would have done even greater damage had there been less compartmentalization. While some barriers have to be broken down, I doubt that there is a perfect way to balance the competing needs involved, and I suspect that some years from now a distinguished panel will attribute a security debacle to the excessively free flow of information within the IC.

The reports point to other problems of information filtering within CIA, especially the screening out of doubts about 'Curveball'.⁵⁵ Much remains unclear, including the extent and depth of the doubts and whether they were conveyed to Deputy Director McLaughlin.⁵⁶ Ironically, if McLaughlin was informed (which he denies), then information flowed more appropriately and fewer corrections are within reach. But even under the best interpretation, the IC in general

a Troubled CIA,' Part 1, 28 June 2005, Foreign Policy Research Institute, <www.fpri.org/endnotes/20050628.americawar.jones.ciaculture.html>.

⁵⁴WMD Commission, 321. For the (plausible) claim that when the Reagan White House was trading arms for hostages, political consideration led to the withholding of information on Iran and the status of political 'moderates', see the memo from an Iran analyst to the Deputy Director of Intelligence, 2 Dec. 1986, printed in John Gentry, *Lost Promise: How CIA Analysis Misserves the Nation* (Lanham, MD: UP of America 1993), 276–81.

⁵⁵SSCI, 247–51; WMD Commission, 87, 105, 195. Also see discussion of familiar problems on other issues in SSCI, 94, 239–46.

⁵⁶Bob Drogin and Greg Miller, 'Curveball and the Source of Fresh CIA Rancor,' *Los Angeles Times*, 2 Apr., 2005; Statement of John E. McLaughlin, former Director of Central Intelligence, April 1, 2005 (http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/wmd_mclaughlin.html).

and CIA in particular failed to develop mechanisms and forums for scrutinizing 'Curveball's' reliability and conveying judgments up the hierarchy.

Politicization

To the surprise of many, the reports rejected the most widely held explanation for the failure, which is that policy-makers exerted illegitimate influence on the IC to give the answers they wanted to hear.⁵⁷ Contrary to my initial impressions, I think the reports are largely correct, although definitive judgments are impossible because of the multiple and subtle effects that can be at work.

The reports skip over some practices that could be included under the rubric of politicization, most obviously that leaders in the US and UK gave inaccurate accounts about intelligence in order to garner political support. Most famously, the President said that the British reported that Saddam had sought uranium from Africa (true, but the implication that American intelligence agreed was not), the Vice President and the Secretary of Defense said that there was solid evidence for connections between Iraq and Al Qaeda, and many policy-makers insisted that the WMD threat was 'imminent'. The intelligence community disagreed, and Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) George Tenet testified that he privately corrected officials for claims like these.⁵⁸

In some cases, the line between distortion and legitimate if questionable emphasis is hard to draw. The most striking case is Tony Blair's use of intelligence that Saddam could use chemical weapons within 45 minutes of deciding to do so.⁵⁹ He not only implied that the

⁵⁷On politicization in general, see H. Bradford Westerfield, 'Inside Ivory Bunkers: CIA Analysts Resist Managers' "Pandering" – Part I,' *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 9 (Winter 1996/97) 407–24; Westerfield, 'Inside Ivory Bunkers: CIA Analysts Resist Managers' 'Pandering' – Part II,' *ibid* 10 (Spring 1997), 19–56; Richard Betts, 'Politicization of Intelligence: Costs and Benefits,' in Betts and Mahnken (note 24) 59–79; a personal account of some bitterness but also persuasiveness is Gentry (note 53). My analysis assumes that the administration believed that Saddam had WMD. Although this seems obvious, one significant bit of behavior raises doubts: the failure of US forces to launch a careful search for WMD as they moved through Iraq. Had there been stockpiles of WMD materials, there would have been a grave danger that these would have fallen into the hands of America's enemies, perhaps including terrorists. I cannot explain this failure, but the rest of the US occupation points to incompetence.

⁵⁸Douglas Jehl, 'C.I.A. Chief Says He's Corrected Cheney Privately,' *New York Times*, 10 March 2004.

⁵⁹Butler Report, 125–27, which concludes that the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) 'should not have included the '45 minute' report in its assessment and in the

information was more solid than it was (blame on this point must be shared with the IC), but left the impression that these weapons could reach the entire region and so showed the Saddam was a great menace with evil intent. Blair omitted the crucial point that these were short-range battlefield weapons, which actually pointed to Saddam's *defensive* orientation because such readiness would have had value only as a safeguard against a swift attack on him.

Here and in many instances, officials in the US and the UK engaged in 'cherry-picking' and 'stove-piping.' The former is highlighting reports that support the policy to the exclusion of contradictory ones that may be more numerous and better-established; the latter here refers to the delivery of selected raw intelligence to policy-makers, bypassing intelligence analysts who could critically evaluate it. These practices can be defended as within the prerogatives and even the duties of top officials to reach their own conclusions, but when used to justify policies to the public they incorrectly imply the backing of the intelligence community.

Most attention has been focused on politicization in the more insidious form of pressure on the IC to provide analyses that support decisions. The head of MI6 came back from a trip to Washington in July 2002 convinced that 'Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and the facts were being fixed around the policy.'⁶⁰ On the other hand, the crudest form of politicization in which superiors changed the papers coming up to make them conform to policy did not occur, and few analysts have leaked reports that they were unduly pressured on WMD, something that might have been expected if they had been.⁶¹ Perhaps Rumsfeld's mantra applies, as is implied by the following exchange between a member of SSCI's staff and Richard Kerr, who headed CIA's internal review:

Mr Kerr: 'There's always people who are going to feel pressure in these situations and feel they were pushed upon.'

Committee Interviewer: 'That's what we've heard. We can't find any of them, though.'

Mr Kerr: 'Maybe they are wiser than to come talk to you.'⁶²

Government's [public] dossier without stating what it was believed to refer to'; for related US intelligence, see SSCI, 251–52.

⁶⁰Memo of 23 July 2002 from Matthew Rycroft to David Manning, which is printed in many places, for example *New York Review of Books*, 9 June 2005, 71.

⁶¹For a summary of the leaks about such pressure see Joseph Cirincione, 'You Can't Handle the Truth', *Carnegie Non-Proliferation*, 2 April 2005.

⁶²SSCI, 484–85.

I doubt whether this is the bulk of the story, however. My confidential interviews with CIA officials at several levels of the hierarchy did not find anyone excusing his or her errors as resulting from political pressure. Of course they might have felt that admitting to having given in to pressure was worse than admitting to have been honestly mistaken, and, as I noted earlier, people are often unable to understand how they reached their judgments. As an analyst put it at the confirmation hearings for Robert Gates as DCI, which provided the most extensive discussion of this issue: ‘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.’⁶³ Perhaps only those who were there can tell whether they felt such influence, but unanimity is not likely, as depending on personality and political views what one person interprets as probing questions another will feel as pressure.

So better evidence may be provided by relevant comparisons. All intelligence services believed that Iraq had active WMD programs, even those of countries that opposed the war.⁶⁴ At minimum, this shows that political pressure was not necessary to reach the conclusions that the American and British ICs did. Furthermore, on other aspects of Iraq CIA resisted strong administration pressure. Three months before the war the National Intelligence Council warned that the aftermath of the invasion was not likely to be easy and that invading might increase support for terrorists in the Islamic world.⁶⁵ Even more strikingly, intelligence consistently denied that there was significant evidence for Saddam’s role in 9/11 or that he might turn over WMD to Al Qaeda, holding to this position in the face of frequent administration statements to the contrary, repeated inquiries and challenges that can only be interpreted as pressure, and the formation of a unit in the Defense Department dedicated to finding such connections.⁶⁶ The administration’s pressure was illegitimate, but the lack of success not only speaks to the integrity of the intelligence officials, but also cuts against the claim that the reports on WMD were biased by the desire to please.

⁶³Quoted in Gentry, *Lost Promise*, 243.

⁶⁴The comparison between the views of different services can shed light on various causal propositions. Thus the common claim that Stalin was taken by surprise by Hitler’s attack because of the particular infirmities of his intelligence system, although partly correct, needs to be reconsidered in light of the fact that Soviet and British estimates were closely parallel until the last weeks: Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion*, esp. 264–65, 281.

⁶⁵Douglas Jehl and David Sanger, ‘Prewar Assessment on Iraq Saw Chance of Strong Divisions,’ *New York Times*, 28 Sept. 2004.

⁶⁶For some evidence, but a muddied interpretation, see SSCI, 357–65.

Comparing the differences within the American IC also casts doubt on the politicization thesis, although this is not without ambiguity. The State Department's INR was the most skeptical member of the community and Air Force intelligence dissented on the UAVs, yet State and Defense were the two most policy-oriented agencies. DOE dissented on the aluminum tubes, and there is no evidence that political pressure was exerted; if it was, it does not seem to have had any effect. But Secretary of State Powell's standing may have permitted him to shield his intelligence officials, and the fact that for much of the country intelligence is equated with the CIA may have meant that the latter bore the brunt of the pressure, perhaps because it was ostensibly removed from politics.

A final comparison is with the Clinton-era estimates. There were significant differences, especially in the claim that Saddam had reconstituted his nuclear program, was increasing his stockpiles of chemical weapons, and that he had mobile biological laboratories. But the latter possibility was beginning to be reflected in assessments in 2000 as 'Curveball's' reports started coming in, and the changes in the nuclear and chemical assessments also corresponded to new information. Thus much of the gap between the Bush and Clinton estimates can be explained in terms of reports from the field, and the gap between the two sets of estimates is a good deal less than that which separated them both from what we now believe to have been true.

This does not mean that political pressure had no role at all. At the very least, it created (and probably was designed to create) an atmosphere that was not conducive to critical analysis and that encouraged judgments of excessive certainty and eroded subtleties and nuances. Analysts and intelligence managers knew that any suggestion that Saddam's capabilities were limited would immediately draw hostile fire from their superiors. In this political climate it would have been hard for anyone to ask if the conventional wisdom about Saddam's WMD programs should be reexamined. Thus when at the last minute an agent questioned the use of information from 'Curveball' in Secretary of State Powell's speech, his boss replied: 'Let's keep in mind that this war's going to happen regardless of what Curveball said or didn't say, and that the Powers That Be probably aren't very interested in whether Curveball knows what he's talking about.'⁶⁷ It is also possible that the desire to avoid the painful value trade-off between pleasing policy-makers and following professional standards created what psychologists call 'motivated bias' in favor of producing estimates that would support, or at least not undermine, policy. This is not unusual. In Britain in the 1930s even without explicit pressure the

⁶⁷SSCI, 249; also see WMD Commission, 189–91.

estimates of the balance of power with Germany changed in the wake of policy shifts.⁶⁸

Perhaps the best evidence of politicization has not been noted by the reports or other critical commentary, probably because it was something that did not happen: it appears that the ICs did not make any reassessments once UN Monitoring and Verification Commission (UNMOVIC) inspections resumed and found no traces of WMD.⁶⁹ This was a significant failing, and I suspect that the reason is that by this point it was clear to the ICs that the US and UK were committed to overthrowing Saddam and that any re-evaluations would be unacceptable.

Politicization represents the tribute that vice plays to virtue and may be a modern phenomenon. That is, leaders at least in the US and UK now need to justify their foreign policies as being based on the findings of intelligence professionals, as was illustrated by the fact that Secretary of State Powell demanded that DCI Tenet sit right behind him when he made his Security Council speech spelling out the evidence against Iraq. This is a touching faith in the concept of professionalism and how much can be known about other states. It is not the only way things could be. A leader could say 'I think Saddam is a terrible menace. This is a political judgment and I have been elected to make difficult calls like this. Information rarely can be definitive and while I have listened to our intelligence services and other experts, this is my decision, not theirs.' Perhaps unfortunately, this is politically very difficult to do, however, and a policy-maker who wants to proceed in the face of ambiguous or discrepant information will be hard pressed to avoid at least some politicization of intelligence.⁷⁰

⁶⁸Wesley K. Wark, *The Ultimate Enemy: British Intelligence and Nazi Germany, 1933–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 1985). The literature on motivated bias is discussed and applied to international politics in Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP 1985). Lord Hutton's report clearing the Blair government of the BBC's charges that it distorted intelligence notes the possibility that analysts were 'sub-consciously influenced' by their knowledge of what the government wanted to hear: quoted in Brian Urquhart, 'Hidden Truths,' *New York Review of Books*, 25 March 2004, 44. For a fascinating case of motivated bias in science, see Frank Close, *Too Hot to Handle: The Race for Cold Fusion* (Princeton UP 1991).

⁶⁹SSCI, 404–22 analyzes the extent to which the US provided intelligence to UNMOVIC, and the Butler Report, 87 briefly mentions the lack of assessments.

⁷⁰John Bolton, often accused of putting illegitimate pressure on intelligence, apparently believed that the problem instead was that members of the IC was over-reaching and trying to censor his 'political judgment as to how to interpret this data', in the words of one of his top aides (Douglas Jehl, 'Released E-Mail Exchanges Reveal More Bolton Battles', *New York Times*, 24 April 2005, and Jehl, 'Bolton Asserts Independence On

Specific Analytical Errors

Thanks to their great detail, the reports turned up interesting specific analytical failings. The bitter, prolonged, and indecisive battle over the aluminum tubes revealed several things that the IC did wrong. Because the tubes were seen as the least ambiguous indicator of Iraq's nuclear program, the issue was the focus of intense IC concern and resources. But the discussion was muddled. Although puzzles remain, it appears that there was a history of strong and unresolved disagreements between CIA and DOE dating back a decade or more. Relatedly, the inter-agency group (the Joint Atomic Energy Intelligence Committee) designed to rule on such matters never did so. Partly because the discussion was not well structured, people sometimes talked past each other. In particular, the questions of whether the tubes *could* have been used for uranium enrichment and the much stronger argument that Iraq had procured them for this *purpose* often were blurred.⁷¹ The evidence for the former claim was fairly convincing, but what correctly made the most impact on analysts and consumers was the less substantiated inference that Iraq had sought the tubes in order to further the nuclear program. Another major blunder entered in here. Throughout most of the discussion, the Army's National Ground Intelligence Center (NGIC) argued that 'the tubes were, technically speaking, poor choices for rocket bodies', which we now know was in fact their true use.⁷² NGIC, which presumably had great expertise in this area, apparently missed the Italian rockets that served as the model for the Iraqis.

Throughout, the reports note that each bit of evidence the ICs used was ambiguous or impeachable, and yet formed the basis for far-reaching conclusions. Each account lent credence to the others. This is indeed what happened, but it is not clear that this was as unwarranted as the reports imply. If Saddam was in fact producing one kind of WMD, it was likely that he was producing others as well. Of course, evidence of nuclear activities did not prove that 'Curveball' was correct, for example, but it did paint a picture in which his reports made a great deal of sense. If each report were worthless, the sum total of even a large number of them would still be zero, although the listing them

Intelligence,' *ibid.* 12 May 2005). Unfortunately, it is much harder for anyone below the level of the president or perhaps the cabinet to make clear that what he or she is giving is a judgment different from that of the IC, because it would invite the obvious question of whether the president agrees.

⁷¹WMD Commission, 49, 56; SSCI, 85–119; the same problem appeared in the UK: Butler Report, 130–34. Some of the discussions of chemical weapons and UAVs also displayed this ambiguity: SSCI, 204, 221–30.

⁷²WMD Commission, 55, also see 67–68 and SSCI, 93–4, 100–2.

together would give them an air of credibility. But if there was a reasonable probability that any one of them were correct, the fact that there were several did indeed make the positive finding more reasonable. The 'mosaic effect' may be such that pieces of information, each ambiguous in itself, together provide quite convincing evidence.

It is not clear how we are to determine this is the case, however. The reports are correct to fault the IC for not being explicit, and perhaps not even aware, about the inference processes involved, but they were not necessarily inappropriate.⁷³ A study of how scientists came to accept the argument for global warming explains that 'each story [about an aspect of the phenomenon], bizarre in itself, was made plausible by the others'.⁷⁴

More broadly, it is often not clear what inferences should be drawn from certain information. To take a current example, should the discovery of A. Q. Khan's nuclear network increase our estimate of the probability that North Korea might sell nuclear materials to terrorists? On the one hand, most of us were surprised that Khan, with or without the knowledge of the Pakistani government or intelligence service, would have undertaken these activities. It therefore both reminds us that things we consider unlikely if not unimaginable can indeed happen and that nuclear information and material can spread in unorthodox ways. On the other hand, we could say that the fact that Khan, despite his nefarious activities, refrained from selling to terrorists means that the probability of North Korea or any other country doing so is quite low, perhaps even lower than we had thought before. I do not think there is any rule for telling which inference is most likely to be correct.

One point the reports miss is that whereas Saddam's refusal to fully cooperate with the inspectors did seem to imply that he was conducting forbidden activities, his behavior in the 18 months preceding the war was hard to understand even if he did have things to hide. His actions made it almost certain that the US would overthrow him and his behavior therefore was figuratively and perhaps literally suicidal. Since national leaders seek to avoid this fate, there was a puzzle whether or not Saddam had WMD. I do not think it would have been reasonable to expect the ICs to have unraveled it, but noting that Saddam's behavior was inexplicable might have sparked doubts and productive thought. The ICs displayed an unfortunate but perhaps typical lack of curiosity.

⁷³For a brief but trenchant discussion, see the Butler Report, 11; for discussion of a similar issue in judging the evidence of the existence of a bird long believed to be extinct, see James Gorman, 'Ivory-Bill or Not? Proof Flits Tantalizingly Out of Sight,' *New York Times*, 30 Aug. 30, 2005, Section F.

⁷⁴Spencer Weart, *The Discovery of Global Warming* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP 2003), 89.

Another puzzle is given insufficient attention by the reports. This is that Saddam's son-in-law, Hussein Kamel, who defected from Iraq in 1995 and brought a great deal of valuable information about Iraq's forbidden programs, told interviewers that the old material had been destroyed and that the programs were moribund. But the version that reached the public was that he testified that the programs were continuing. Indeed, for many outside observers, this was a major reason for believing that Saddam was continuing to vigorously pursue WMD.

There are two mysteries here. First, who spread the false reports and why were they not corrected? The Bush administration had an interest in maintaining the myth, but it is hard to see how Clinton's did. Second, why did the ICs not pay more attention to Kamel's testimony? In retrospect his reports were very revealing and one would think that they might have led the ICs to believe that Saddam no longer had active programs. The failure of the post-mortems to raise the question may reflect their falling victim to one of the analytical problems that bedeviled intelligence: because Kamel did not loom large in the assessments, the reports did not think to explain the absence.⁷⁵

Empathy and Context

The reports echo other studies of intelligence in attributing part of the failure to a lack of area knowledge and empathy. As with many of their criticisms, there is much to this. Few members of the IC spoke Arabic, had lived in Iraq, or were familiar with the country's culture, history and political system, and it is hard to deny that a priority must be recruiting and training people with these skills.

But we need to inject some cautionary notes, starting with the fact that the countries in the region reached basically the same conclusions that the West did. Furthermore, even though local knowledge was limited in the US and UK, their ICs were not without empathy. They did try to see the world as Saddam did, and partly for this reason believed that he had great incentives to get WMD (which in fact was correct). They also understood that he saw himself under siege by the US, which is not always the case when the perceiving state believes that its intentions are benign. Indeed, the attempt to empathize may have made it more difficult to understand how little information reached Saddam from the outside world, how isolated he was from even his inner circle, and how corrupt his regime had become. Nevertheless, three aspects of the limits on empathy are relevant, including an especially troubling one that brings us to the heart of the failure.

⁷⁵For brief mentions of Kamel's testimony, see SSCI, 218; Butler Report, 47–48, 51.

First, intelligence failed to integrate technical and political analysis sufficiently. Most estimates of Iraq's WMD programs were supervised by the National Intelligence Officers (NIOs) for the relevant weapons and drew most heavily on the Weapons Intelligence, Nonproliferation, and Arms Control division of CIA. Regional analysts and the NIO for Near East and South Asia were involved, but usually less than centrally. Thus questions of Iraqi WMD capabilities were not treated in the context of Saddam's political system, fears, and intentions.⁷⁶ I doubt if this was an exceptional case. The specialization, division of labor, and caution that characterize a large intelligence organization like CIA is more conducive to studying trees than the forest. But, to return to one of my dismal themes, it is unlikely that greater integration would have produced the correct answer. Indeed, in some ways the analysts not only implicitly took account of the political context, but also over-weighted it. It was less the specific signs of WMD activity that led them to conclude that Saddam had robust programs than it was their sense of his political objectives and outlook.

Second, analysis usually assumes foreign actors are rational as Americans understand rationality, and often as unitary as well. Empathizing with confusion, improvisation, and corruption is very difficult. As Douglas Ford explains, during World War II the UK never was able to understand Japanese 'long-term plans and the [strength of the military] opposition to be encountered [in Burma] owing to the Japanese high command's failure to devise a coherent strategy'.⁷⁷ Saddam's Iraq lacked a coherent strategy as well, and it is not surprising the ICs had great trouble discerning it.

Third, and central to the Iraq case, empathy is difficult when the other's beliefs and behavior are strange and self-defeating. It was hard for the US to guess that Japan might attack Pearl Harbor because it made no sense for a country to attack another with an economy more than five times larger. Although the US did not entirely discount the possibility that Khrushchev would put missiles in Cuba, it was surprised that he did so because it correctly believed that such a move could not be sustained. American analysts and decision-makers similarly failed to anticipate the Soviet deployment of troops to Afghanistan because they knew that this would be foolish.⁷⁸ Three days

⁷⁶WMD Commission, 173; apparently this was also true in Australian intelligence: Flood Report, 26.

⁷⁷Douglas Ford, 'Planning for an Unpredictable War: British Intelligence Assessments and the War Against Japan, 1937-1945,' *Journal of Strategic Studies* 27/1 (March 2004) 148; for other examples, see Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion*, 233; Stephen Budiansky, *Her Majesty's Spymaster* (New York: Viking 2005), 203.

⁷⁸MacEachin, *Predicting the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, 46.

before Hitler attacked the Soviet Union, the British ambassador told a Soviet diplomat the German military build-up was ‘one of Hitler’s moves in the “war of nerves”....But a war?...An attack? I find it difficult to believe. It would be crazy!’ The Soviet diplomat agreed: ‘An invasion [of Russia] always ends badly for the initiators.’⁷⁹

Many intelligence failures are then bilateral in that one state is taken by surprise because it is unable to anticipate the other’s intelligence failure. I believe this is the central reason for the American and British failures in Iraq. It is not surprising that intelligence failed to grasp Saddam’s strange and self-defeating outlook; it is particularly difficult for analysts to get it right when the truth is implausible, and the role of plausibility is central in this and many other cases.

The Importance of Plausibility

The fundamental reason for the intelligence failures in Iraq was that the assumptions and inferences were reasonable, much more so than the alternatives. This is recognized by the WMD Commission and the Butler Report, although they shy away from the full implications. Saddam had vigorously pursued WMD in the past (and had used chemical weapons to good effect), had major incentives to rebuild his programs, had funds, skilled technicians, and a good procurement network at his disposal, and had no other apparent reason to deceive and hinder the inspectors. In fact, even if there had been no errors in analytic tradecraft I believe that the best-supported conclusion was that Saddam was actively pursuing all kinds of WMD, and probably had some on hand. The judgment should have been expressed with much less certainty, the limitations on direct evidence should have been stressed, and the grounds for reaching the assessments should have been explicated. But while it would be nice to believe that better analysis would have led to a fundamentally different conclusion, I do not think this is the case.

If before the war someone had produced the post-war Duelfer Report, I am sure that she would have been praised for her imagination, but would not have come close to persuading. Even now, the report is hard to believe. To take one example, who would have believed that the reason why Saddam’s scientists would not account for much of the missing anthrax was that they feared his anger if he learned that they

⁷⁹Quoted in Gorodetsky, *Grand Illusion*, 305, 308. Shortly before he was overthrown in 1974, Archbishop Makarios of Cyprus dismissed the possibility because a coup would lead to an invasion by Turkey and so ‘would not make sense, it would not be reasonable’: quoted in Lawrence Stern, *The Wrong Horse* (New York: New York Times Books 1977), 106.

had dumped it near one of his palaces? Did it make any sense that ‘by late 2002 Saddam had persuaded himself...that the United States would not attack Iraq because it already had achieved its objectives of establishing a military presence in the region’?⁸⁰

More generally, Duelfer tells us that Saddam was particularly concerned about maintaining the appearance of WMD in order to deter Iran, that he feared that unlimited inspections would allow the US to pinpoint his location and assassinate him, that private meetings between the inspectors and scientists were resisted because ‘any such meeting with foreigners was seen as a threat to the security of the Regime’, and that ‘Iraq did not want to declare anything that documented use of chemical weapons [in the war with Iran] for fear the documentation could be used against Iraq in lawsuits’.⁸¹ Saddam’s central motivation apparently was first to end sanctions and inspections and then to reconstitute his programs, all the while keeping his real and perceived adversaries at bay. ‘This led to a difficult balancing act between the need to disarm to achieve sanctions relief while at the same time retaining a strategic deterrent. The Regime never resolved the contradiction inherent in this approach.’⁸²

This is putting it mildly. Full compliance with the inspectors was the only way that sanctions were going to be fully lifted, especially after

⁸⁰*Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq’s WMD*, 30 Sept. 2004 (hereafter Duelfer Report) Vol.3, Section on Biological Warfare, 56; Vol.1, Regime Strategic Intent, 32. In parallel, the American chief of intelligence in Vietnam looked back at the Tet offensive and declared: “Even had I known exactly what was to take place, it was so preposterous that I probably would have been unable to sell it to anybody. Why would the enemy give away his major advantage, which was his ability to be elusive and avoid heavy casualties?” (quoted in William Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1976), 321.

⁸¹Duelfer Report, 29, 55, 62, 64 (this and subsequent references are to Vol.1). John Mueller had earlier speculated that Saddam’s limitations on the inspectors were motivated by his fear of assassination: ‘Letters to the Editor: Understanding Saddam’, *Foreign Affairs* 83 (July/Aug. 2004), 151.

⁸²Duelfer Report, 34, also see, 57. The Duelfer Report itself should not be considered definitive. In many places it reads like a collection of note-cards, much information remains unexploited, and there is some tension between this report and Kay’s views (note 37). Ending economic sanctions and ending inspections would not necessarily have coincided and it is not clear which of them was viewed as most troublesome, and why. The UN resolutions provided for the latter to continue even after the former ended, and Saddam had terminated inspections in 1998. This presents a puzzle because if inspections had been the main barrier, Saddam should have resumed his programs at that point, as most observers expected. But it is hard to see how the sanctions were inhibiting him because after the institution of the Oil for Food program and extensive oil smuggling, the regime had sufficient cash to procure what it needed.

9/11. It is true that revealing that Saddam had no WMD would have reduced his deterrence, but the fear of such weapons could not and did not prevent an American attack, and Iran was hardly spoiling for a fight and could not have assumed that the West would stand aside while it greatly increased its influence by moving against Iraq. Saddam's policy was foolish and self-defeating, and this goes a long way to explaining the intelligence failure. When the situation is this bizarre, it is not likely to be understood.⁸³

The central analytical error was not that inferences were driven by their plausibility in light of previous Iraqi behavior and the sense they made of Saddam's goals and general capabilities, but that the analysts did not make this clear and probably did not even understand it. The ICs should have tried to separate the role of plausibility from the impact of the specific reports and done more to understand and communicate not only their final judgments, but how they reached them.⁸⁴ This also helps explain what SSCI means when it says that many IC conclusions were 'not supported by the intelligence' and instead were the products of 'analytical judgments'.⁸⁵ This is correct, but misguided in implying that the latter are somehow illegitimate – in fact, they are the bread-and-butter of intelligence analysis. Direct reports that are valid and unambiguous are extremely rare. To tell the IC to shy away from analytical judgments would be to condemn it to silence on almost all important questions, just as a similar prescription for science would stymie any comprehension of our world. Deductions and indirect inference are central to the enterprise of understanding. The real problem in Iraq and many other cases was that the ICs and policy-makers were unaware of the extent to which the conclusions did rest on these kinds of judgments.

Being strongly influenced by plausibility can be criticized as being closed-minded or assumption-driven. But this is a powerful and legitimate habit of the mind, necessary for making sense of a complex and contradictory world, and it is responsible for many correct as well

⁸³Several other cases in which the behavior seems puzzling made sense once one understood the situation the other was in and the strategy it was following. Thus the US and Israel were taken by surprise by President Sadat's Egyptian and Syrian attack in 1973 because they failed to appreciate Sadat's desperation, the military improvements he had instituted, and his idea that what was needed was not a massive military victory, but enough of an effort to convince Israel that the status quo was untenable and to bring the US in as a broker. Here empathy would have been difficult, but not out of the question. It was even harder with Saddam because his behavior does not seem to have been the product of any reasonable calculation.

⁸⁴For a related argument, see WMD Commission, 10, 12, 173, 175.

⁸⁵SSCI, 187, 192, 194, 204, 213. The Butler Report makes a similar point about some instances of British intelligence, but without implying that this was illegitimate: 73, 75.

as incorrect inferences. At least some of the reason why CIA analysts were (rightly) unconvinced that there was a close and collaborative relationship between Al Qaeda and Iraq was that such ties did not fit with how they believed the regime operated and saw its self-interest. Although information pointing to such a connection was not reliable or abundant, there were enough scattered reports so that someone who had a different reading of the regime could have placed more faith in them, as the ad hoc Defense Department intelligence unit and administration leaders did. Similarly, although INR is to be praised for rejecting the reports that Iraq was making a serious effort to buy uranium from Niger, if SSCI's summary is correct the explanation is less that these analysts read the evidence more carefully than that they found the whole idea implausible because Iraq would not 'risk such a transaction when they were "bound to be caught."'

In the same way, those in Air Force intelligence who dissented from the judgment that the procurement of mapping software covering the US meant that Iraq might be planning to use UAVs against the American homeland did so 'because they did not believe that the UAVs were intended for CBW delivery use and, therefore, Iraq would have no need to use the UAVs in the U.S.'⁸⁶

For the ICs to have explained more carefully why judgments were reached would have had multiple benefits. It would have alerted consumers to trains of reasoning that they could question; it would have told consumers and analysts what evidence, direct and indirect, was being relied on; it would have sensitized analysts to their assumptions and instances in which they were engaged in illegitimate 'bootstrapping.' After first seeing evidence as consistent with established views because of the latter's plausibility, in some instances in the Iraq case (and I am sure in many others) this evidence was then used as a reason to be even more certain that these views were correct. This is a form of circular thinking that leads to excessive confidence.

Conclusions

Underlying several of the weaknesses of the American IC may be the pressure to produce current intelligence, which apparently has increased since Bush assumed office.⁸⁷ Although the IC did not lack

⁸⁶SSCI, 38, 228.

⁸⁷The Flood Report sees a similar trend in Australia: 69. But here as in many places it is difficult to make the crucial comparisons to the way things were in the past. A history of the Directorate of Intelligence reports that in the 1960s its leaders believed that long-term research had been sacrificed to the pressures of current intelligence: Anne Karalekas, 'History of the Central Intelligence Agency', in William Leary, ed., *The*

in-depth knowledge of the technical questions of WMD, it may have lacked the time as well as incentives to step back, re-examine central assumptions, explore alternatives, and be more self-conscious about how it was drawing its conclusions. With a projected increase in the size of DI and the responsibility for the PDB moving to the DNI, it is possible that there will be room for more time-consuming kinds of analysis, but this will only happen with improved middle-level management and leadership from the top of IC, which is not likely to be forthcoming.

Despite the many errors, most of the ICs' general conclusions, although wrong, were reasonable. Indeed the Flood Report 'acknowledges that it is doubtful that better process would have changed the fundamental judgments about the existence of WMD'.⁸⁸ In places, the WMD Commission comes close to seeing this, and the Butler Report can be read in this way as well. SSCI strongly implies the opposite. But even the former two leave the impression that some (unspecified) alternative fits the evidence better than the ICs' assessments. I suspect that the reports shied away from this question because of excessive hindsight and a failure of political nerve. To have admitted that although errors were made and the process could be improved, no conceivable fix would have led to the correct judgment would have been met with incredulity and undercut the recommendations.

The reports are right to find fault; better analysis would have highlighted the central role of assumptions, pre-existing beliefs, and views of what was plausible. By doing so, it would have facilitated their reexamination, although it probably would not have changed them. Carl Sagan reminds us that 'extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence', and by the mid-1990s the claim that Saddam was actively developing WMD programs was ordinary and therefore did not require extraordinary evidence to be confirmed. This makes sense of the exchange in which Bush reacted to CIA's presentation of recent evidence for Saddam's programs by asking whether 'this is the best we've got?' and received Tenet's now-infamous reply: 'Why, it's a slam-dunk!'⁸⁹ Bush was focusing on the specific evidence he had just heard; Tenet was moved by the plausibility of the entire picture.

Central Intelligence Agency: History and Documents (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press 1984), p.100. When I did the post-mortem on why the CIA was slow to see that the Shah might fall (note 1) I concluded that some of the reason was the pressures for current intelligence, which left analysts with not only little time but also little inclination or ability to look beyond the recent cables.

⁸⁸Flood Report, 27.

⁸⁹Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 249. By this point Tenet may have also been biased by his knowledge that CIA had a string of sources in Iraq whose lives (and those of their

Similarly, the UNMOVIC and IAEA inspectors may have been more skeptical that Iraq had WMD programs not only because they lacked some information that intelligence had and were strongly influenced by their firsthand exposure to the absence of evidence of a program, but because their job was only to inspect, not to reach judgments, and they therefore were less influenced by their general beliefs about how Iraq's behavior fitted together. If the ICs had been aware of the extent to which their interpretations of specific reports were influenced by what they already believed, they would have been more sensitive to the paucity of direct evidence, and would have been less certain in what they believed and conveyed to policy-makers.⁹⁰

While many of the recommendations of the reports and of the CIA's internal studies are designed to keep assessments closer to available evidence and so decrease the likelihood of their being confidently wrong, as they were on Iraq, they do less to increase the chance that the judgments will be right. Many are useful, such as the call for more and better post-mortems covering successes as well as failures and the greater use of 'Red Teams' and Devil's advocates. These recommendations, however, are not new and the reports might have tried to find out why they had never been implemented on a sustained basis (as well as noting that they would not have led to a different outcome in the Iraq case.)⁹¹

Of course the most far-reaching reform was the establishment of a DNI that grew out of the 9/11 Commission.⁹² Much of the WMD Commission report discusses how to organize the DNI's office. Whatever one thinks about the call for a large number of new high-level positions, it is chastening to realize that there is no reason to

families) would be sacrificed if the US did not invade: Jake Blood, *The Tet Effect: Intelligence and the Public Perception of War* (London: Routledge 2005), 176.

⁹⁰WMD Commission, 47, 408.

⁹¹For a discussion of the failure of previous CIA attempts to institutionalize competing views, see Gentry, *Lost Promise*, 53, 58, 63, and 94.

⁹²For justly critical reviews of the 9/11 Commission report, see Richard Posner, 'The 9/11 Report: A Dissent,' *New York Times Books Review*, 29 Aug. 2004; Richard Falkenrath, 'The 9/11 Commission Report: A Review Essay,' *International Security* 29 (Winter 2004–2005) 170–90; Joshua Rovner and Austin Long, 'The Perils of Shallow Theory: Intelligence Reform and the 9/11 Commission,' *Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 18 (Winter 2005–2006), 609–37. For more of an explanation than a defense, see Ernest May and Philip Zelikow, 'Sins of Commission?' *International Security* 29 (Spring 2005), 208–9. For a good discussion of the 9/11 case, see Charles Parker and Eric Stern, 'Bolt From the Blue or Avoidable Failure? Revisiting September 11 and the Origins of Strategic Surprise,' *Foreign Policy Analysis* 1 (Nov. 2005), 301–31.

expect that such arrangements would have prevented the terrorist attacks or the Iraq failure.

So while these reports convey a great deal of useful information and will be mined by scholars for years to come, they are not satisfactory either intellectually or for improving intelligence. I think we can be certain that the future will see serious intelligence failures, some of which will be followed by reports like these. Reforms can only reduce and not eliminate intelligence errors, and in any event there is no reason to expect that the appropriate reforms will be put in place.⁹³ Perhaps a later scholar will write a review like this one as well.

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⁹³Recent signs are not encouraging: see the testimony of Michael Hayden, Deputy Director of National Intelligence: <<http://intelligence.house.gov/Reports.aspx?Section=122>>. More on the right track is 'A Tradecraft Primer: Structured Analytic Techniques for Improving Intelligence Analysis', Sherman Kent School, CIA, *Tradecraft Review* 2 (June 2005). For discussions of some of the barriers to reform, see Richard Russell, 'A Weak Pillar for American National Security: The CIA's Dismal Performance Against WMD Threats', *Intelligence and National Security* 20/3 (Sept. 2005), 466–85; Gentry, *Lost Promise*, esp. 93–107, 184; Rood, 'Analyze This'; Mahnken, 'Spies and Bureaucrats'; Jones, 'It's A Cultural Thing: Thoughts on a Troubled CIA,' Part 2, 19 Aug. 2005, Foreign Policy Research Institute, <www.fpri.org/endnotes/20050819.americawar.jones.culturetroubledcia.html>.

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