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The Challenge for the Political Analyst

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Over thirty years as a political analyst and manager of analysts has convinced me that it is harder for political, leadership, and country analysts to be taken seriously by the policymaking audience than economic or scientific analysts, to name but two. There are good reasons why this is the case and they have nothing to do with the expertise of political analysts, their integrity, or the complexity of the issues involved. Rather, it is the nature of the beast—politics—that makes policymakers more skeptical of what political analysis can offer and adds to the credibility burden that all analysts share.

Establishing credibility is different than establishing access. The CIA label is often enough to open a door, but the CIA label does not necessarily translate into credibility. Getting an intelligence product read does not mean it has credibility either. This is a political town, and it is smart politics to know what the CIA is saying, especially if the analysis is likely to influence policy on a contentious issue.

Credibility exists when the product is seen as relevant, timely, expert, objective, and informed. With credibility comes impact. There can be no impact without credibility. The goal of intelligence analysis is not to determine the outcome of the policy process, but rather to put the policymaker in the best position possible to make the best-informed decision possible. Impact occurs when, in the words of Sherman Kent, we “raise the level of the debate,” and, in the words of Director Richard Helms, “level the playing field.”

Establishing credibility and having impact start with understanding the nature of our audience—not the *who*, in this case, but the *what*. Policymakers are political animals. Four generalizations can be made about them—and it is these generalizations that make the credibility hurdle higher for political, leadership, and country analysts.

Four Facts of Life

My experience has convinced me of the essential validity of four broad characterizations of the policy audience. I think of them as “the facts of life” for all analysts. There is an element of hyperbole here, perhaps, but at the center is a core of hard truth.

First, all policymakers, regardless of their training, area of expertise, or track record, believe themselves to be excellent political analysts. What money is to New York and celebrity is to Los Angeles, politics and the knowledge of politics is to Washington. Policymakers know they are politically savvy—that is why they are in

the positions they are in—and they have tremendous and justified confidence in their own political judgment. Moreover, they consume vast amounts of raw intelligence—the same stuff intelligence analysts are reading—and they often have friends with powerful connections who share information with them but not with the Intelligence Community. Policymakers may or may not question the physics that underpins the missile report or the numbers that support the economic outlook item, but they will argue politics.

Second, policymakers are overwhelmingly “people” people. They think in terms of people, not history or trends. They see politics as people making deals, people maneuvering for advantage, people acting. Historical precedents and larger political, military, economic, or social forces register less than individuals. From a policymaker’s perspective, France, China, Russia, etc. do not act; their counterparts in these countries act. History is made by powerful people like themselves.

Third, policymakers have met the people intelligence analysts write about. In many cases, they have known them for years, both in and out of power. As a result, senior officials believe that they know these people in a way that the analyst does not and cannot. It is hard to dispute this. Policymakers are therefore inclined to believe that the analyst has little to offer beyond a few facts.

Fourth, policymakers believe they read all people equally well. One reason they are where they are is because they have excellent people skills. Policymakers will acknowledge the importance of culture, but they are convinced that they can see through the culture to the person. And, given some time, they believe that they can read intentions and influence the other person, especially if they have met the individual more than once.

Tough audience. Senior officials are smart, talented, confident, comfortable in their judgment, and almost always better plugged in than analysts. If the Intelligence Community is to help policymakers make the best-informed decisions possible, then analysts must bring something to the party—in short, they need to be seen as credible sources of needed expertise. The key is not our objectivity. Senior officials more often than not know the answer they want and are looking for the intelligence to support it. The key is our ability to put the political behavior that policymakers see into a larger cultural and historical context—that they do not see—with enough sophistication to demonstrate that the context matters.

The Foundation of Credibility

“Matters” is the key word in that last sentence. Achieving a degree of insight that recognizes the importance of context rests on an analyst mastering six broad types of knowledge. Political, leadership, and country analysts must continually work to deepen their command of these subjects. Following the daily traffic can make you current; absent expertise in these areas, you cannot be credible.

First, know your own history and culture. It is the key to being aware of the innate biases that shape our perceptions of others. Specifically, it is important to know well the history that the United States has with the country you are working on. More generally, it is important to be conscious of US values and the preferred American style, and how well those mesh with the values and style of the country in question. In *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World*, Walter Russell Mead argues that there are basically four different American views of the world, and that the four are always competing with one another for control of US foreign policy.¹ Mead may be right or wrong, but every administration has a certain bias or predisposition—a Bush administration is different than a Clinton administration. Analysts must understand that and factor it into their thinking— not because they need to tailor their product to fit the bias, but because that bias preconditions how other nations interact with us.

Equally important is the ability to recognize when American cultural biases and values are likely to lead to miscommunication or produce tension in a foreign relationship. In the *Art of War*, Sun Tzu advises that it is as

important to know yourself as it is to know your enemy. The American emphasis on law and legal forms is an example. In the United States, strangers meet, come to agreement, draft a legal document, abide by it, and on occasion go to court to settle differences. What is important is the law, and the law and the procedures and trappings that surround it are held in high regard.

In China, the personal relationship is paramount. There is no agreement or understanding absent the personal relationship, which is more binding than a legal document. Indeed, law, as we understand it, is at odds with the great Confucian tradition, which stresses moral men and holds law itself in low regard. Among China's many proverbs are: "Let householders avoid litigation, for once you go to the law there is nothing but trouble;" "Though you are very angry, do not go to the law; though you are very hungry, do not be a thief;" and "No punishment on the Bench and no law below it." There are many reasons why agreements with China have been difficult to reach and harder to sustain, but one factor is probably the very different value each side attaches to written agreements. In some Asian cultures, appearance is more important than reality, which is also at odds with the US emphasis on explicit, transparent, precise, and binding agreements.

Second, learn their history, but learn it as they teach it. If you are a Japanese high school student, you probably have the impression that Japan was forced into World War II, that the war was a noble effort to rid East Asia of Western colonialism, and that the two great victims in the war were the Jews, who endured the Holocaust, and the Japanese, who were victims of the atomic bomb. Japanese aggression, the "rape of Nanking," comfort women, and the systematic abuse of prisoners are not taught. And the Japanese are not unique. There is the history of the Balkans . . . and then there is the history of the Balkans according to the Serbs, according to the Croats, according to the Albanians, and so forth. Robert Kaplan, the noted author of *Balkan Ghosts* and *Eastward to Tartary*, was once asked what he liked to read. He replied: the classics of western philosophy, ancient histories by Greeks and Romans, and travel books from the 19th and early 20th centuries, because clues to the present are in understanding the past. I would only add that the key to understanding people today is to understand their past as they understand it.

In all lives, there are key moments. These are the events that shape a person's worldview and act as filters through which subsequent events are perceived. Political, leadership, and country analysts should be able to identify the two or three seminal events in a generation's lifespan. These are the hard lessons of history that seep into a nation's bones. For my father's generation, it was the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War. For mine, it was Vietnam, the Cold War, and the prosperity and disillusionment of the 1960s. The events of 9/11 will be one of the seminal moments for my daughter's generation. For China's aged leaders, it is the Western dominance of China, the Japanese invasion, and the Cultural Revolution. Although these events recede, the lessons that they taught—consciously or unconsciously—do not fade. Psychologists tell us that as we grow older, we become less open to new ideas and more inclined to look back when trying to see ahead.

Third, it is important that analysts study the philosophy, literature, and key thinkers of whatever country they work on. This is especially true if an analyst is working on a non-Western country or one whose philosophical outlook does not flow from the Enlightenment. The works of leading intellectuals will tell you what a people believes about itself, especially what it believes to be best about itself. It is these beliefs that shape the views of the political elite.

Philosophy and art speak volumes about what a culture believes about the nature of man, the role of government, and the temporal world. Confucian philosophy identifies five basic relationships: emperor to subject, father to son, husband to wife, elder brother to younger brother, and friend to friend. Note that only one is considered to be between equals, and friend-to-friend relationships are rare. Thus, friendship means something different in China than it does in the United States—when Beijing calls someone an "old friend of China," it is an attempt to confer a sense of obligation on the honoree—and the notion that the normal order of things is superior-inferior helps to explain why China often acts as it does. The Japanese take this to another level: Not only is relative

power a defining principle of social organization, but also obligations generally flow up and not down. Classic Indian and Buddhist philosophy is more focused on the spiritual world than the temporal one, which has implications for how these societies historically have looked at progress and material achievement—the antithesis of the Protestant ethic.

An understanding of creation myths and religion (which are not always the same thing) is also very important. You cannot comprehend Western culture without knowing about Catholicism, the Reformation, and Protestantism. The Japanese creation myth explains the importance of the emperor in Japanese society, the Japanese feeling of being unique, and the relative worth of anyone who is not Japanese. Buddhism, Christianity, and most other major religions have a form of the Golden Rule; Shinto does not.

Fourth, analysts must understand the three key elements of power, which are culture bound: how power is acquired, the preferred means of wielding power, and the acceptable and unacceptable uses of power. These are the real rules of the game and they supersede constitutions. China and Japan both have long histories of real power being wielded by people who are not in the top position. Deng Xiaoping's only title at one point was Chairman of the Chinese Contract Bridge Association, and he was honorary chairman at that.

As important, a thorough understanding of how power works is the key to putting individual events in perspective and even recognizing when the game—and not just the players—is changing. In China, the military historically has been held in low regard. A proverb says: “You do not make nails out of good iron or soldiers out of good men.” Some of the civil-military tension in China today is a reflection of this ancient attitude. Mao's tactics in launching the Cultural Revolution went beyond accepted political norms, and much of what has happened in China since then reflects a conscious effort on the part of the leadership to see that the system does not and cannot produce another Mao. Because scholarship is so revered, students in Asia have a moral authority that students in the West lack. Asian students see themselves as a moral beacon for society. They have weight and their actions have a political significance that often exceeds their raw numbers, which helps to explain the Chinese government's reaction to the students in Tiananmen Square, and the historic sensitivity to student demonstrations in South Korea, Indonesia, and Thailand.

Fifth, study the popular culture. How people play, what they read, and which entertainments they prefer say a great deal about how individuals relate to one another. Popular culture determines what is considered fair and proper and defines obligations between people and groups, characteristics that shape the attitudes, prejudices, and expectations of other nations. Wellington's assessment that Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton may or may not be correct, but the fact that the notion has become part of what it means to be British—as well as notions of fair play and what's cricket—speaks to expected and accepted behavior. The bold, unexpected stroke from the sword of a samurai that defeats an adversary in a single blow is much admired in Japanese culture; in the United States, it is considered cowardly behavior when its expression is Pearl Harbor. Two of the most entertaining and enlightening books on Japanese popular culture are Ian Buruma's *Behind the Mask* and Robert Whiting's *You Gotta Have Wa*. The first is about Japanese movies and comic books and the second examines baseball in Japan and what happens to Americans when they play there.

And this works both ways. Foreign impressions of—and, more importantly, expectations about—the United States are shaped by American films and TV. For better or worse, violent westerns, “Baywatch,” and Jerry Springer are synonymous with the United States for many in Europe and Asia. Conclusions about American strength and resolve drawn from an erroneous reading of American popular culture and materialism misled Japanese military leaders in the 1930s and Saddam Hussein in the 1990s. They will probably not be the last leaders to make this miscalculation.

Sixth, there is no substitute for the ability to speak or read the language of the country. Beyond the practical benefits of being able to travel easily, read widely, and converse with ordinary people, language can

provide insights into what other cultures value and how they see the world. When written together, the Chinese symbols for “woman” and “male child” make the word “good.” The symbol for “roof” written above the symbol for “woman” means “peace.” The words for “danger” and “opportunity” when combined together become the word “crisis.” The analyst with language can get out of the capital, ride the local transportation, and gain the feel of a place that is not possible otherwise. The ability to start a sentence with “when I was in” adds greatly to an analyst’s credibility when the place is not the capital city. Everyone gets to the capital.

It is important for analysts to recognize that language is the test of choice for the non-expert. It is an easy measure; either you have it or you do not. And if you do not have command of the language, you are less credible in the eyes of many whom you are trying to serve. Pointing to the lack of language skills is the easiest way for critics to cast doubt on an individual’s expertise and call into question the quality of the analysis.

From Credibility to Impact

The six broad areas of knowledge help to build credibility, but DI tradecraft holds the key to impact. Nothing kills credibility quicker than the unsupported assertion. In briefings and reports, every use of such words as “suggests,” “could,” and “likely” should send up a flare in the analyst’s mind. Unless these troublesome words are bolstered by facts or demonstrated expertise, we are just another opinion in a town full of opinion—and, for a sizeable portion of our audience on any issue, we have the wrong opinion. The fact that the analyst is an expert in his or her own right carries very little weight for all the reasons that constitute the “four facts of life” discussed earlier.

The problem is not the use of “suggests” or similar verbs, or even the judgment itself. The problem is that too often what is behind the judgment is invisible to the audience. When no hard evidence is available and analysts are forced to rely on their expertise and experience in making a call, the tradecraft solution is to allow the expertise behind the judgment to show through by using an example from one of the six broad areas of knowledge to illustrate or amplify the point. A historical precedent, the parsing of a foreign word or phrase, or a reference to cultural practice have all been used to good effect in the past to buttress a judgment or establish credibility before offering the judgment.

If there is no evidence or precedent or cultural factoid to support the judgment—if we are in effect listing possible outcomes—then we should not make the judgment at all, because it tends to undercut not only the credibility of the current work but also the credibility of future work. Tossing out possibilities does not raise the level of the debate or help the policymaker make better decisions. Unsupported assertions only add to the clutter. The exception to this rule is when we are specifically asked to list or rank possibilities; even in this circumstance, however, we owe the policy audience our rationale for settling on a particular set of possible developments.²

Analysts can do three things to help themselves when the evidence is thin and the situation is moving quickly:

- Articulate and examine their assumptions about the country they work on and the problem at hand. If an analyst cannot articulate what he or she assumes to be true, then the analyst has only the faintest idea of where he or she can go wrong. Assumptions more often than not are the underpinnings of unsupported assertions and frequently are the product of an analyst’s command (or lack of command) of the six broad areas of knowledge. Because analysts are so close to the issue, managers and reviewers bear a special responsibility to probe for assumptions and question their validity.
- Solicit the views of other experts. When analysts can cite other experts, whether private sector or foreign liaison, they add to their own credibility—experts talk to other experts—as well as buttress their argument.

- Use hindsight in fast-moving situations. A colleague of mine made it a practice to reread older reporting during a crisis. From clandestine reports in particular, he gained insights into the present. Things that he had missed previously, that had not made sense, or that he had not fully appreciated jumped off the page and suddenly had a powerful ability to explain and predict.

Final Observations

The bar is higher for political, leadership, and country analysts than it is for others, but all analysts regardless of discipline have a credibility challenge. Economic analysts writing for economists and military analysts writing for the military audience must pass the same tests with their policymakers as political analysts face with all policymakers. Achieving a passing grade lies in mastering the six areas of expertise. The military analyst who speaks the language and has walked the ground has greater credibility than one who does not and has not. The economic analyst who understands a country's culture and knows how values may influence choice has an edge, especially when the issue is less the consequences of a policy than which policy a leader may opt for. When analysts switch accounts, they take on an obligation to study the history, culture, and language as well as the current developments of their new country. To do less is to do our job less well. To do less is to be less than fully proficient on matters of critical importance to our national security.

Lastly, our credibility is on the line every time we write or brief. We can strengthen credibility gradually over time, or we can lose it in a heartbeat. In either case, we start all over again every four years when the policymaking community changes. It is a fact of life.

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[1.](#) According to Mead, the four schools are: the Hamiltonian, which favors international commerce and institutions; the Jeffersonian, which frowns on international entanglements; the Jacksonian, which does not shy away from using military force; and the Wilsonian, which is internationalist but based on moral principles. See Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York, NY: Alfred Knopf, 2001).

[2.](#) For an example of how the Agency handled one such tasking exceptionally well, see Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2002), pp. 132-133.

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