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Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse, H-Diplo/ISSF Editors
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Introduction by Jack S. Levy, Rutgers University

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Introduction by Jack S. Levy, Rutgers University

The U.S. intelligence failures associated with 9/11 and with Iraqi weapons of mass destruction generated renewed interest in the question of intelligence failure, the study of which had been disproportionately influenced by the study of the failures at Pearl Harbor, Barbarossa, and Yom Kipper.¹ The Iraqi WMD case in particular focused more attention on the question of the politicization of intelligence, an age-old problem but one that had been neglected in studies of the classic cases. The subsequent scholarly literature has focused on the policy question of the proper relationship between intelligence and policy, and on the causal questions of where and when politicization is most likely to occur and the role it plays in the processes leading to intelligence failure.²

Fixing the Facts is a major contribution to the study of the politicization of intelligence in modern democracies, and thus to our understanding of the more general phenomenon of intelligence failure. Joshua Rovner identifies a variety of pathologies of intelligence-policy relations, types of politicization, and standard explanations for politicization, and he engages normative questions about the proper relationship between intelligence and secrecy in democratic states. The core of the book, however, is Rovner's theoretical argument about the sources of politicization and his efforts to test his theory against the historical evidence. Standard explanations for politicization involve the personal proximity of intelligence officers and policy makers; organizational proximity between intelligence agencies and the political decision-making process; and the organizational dependence of intelligence agencies and analysts on political leaders for resources, autonomy, and career prospects. Rovner argues that these arguments cannot explain variations in politicization across a number of historical cases. The puzzle is why political leaders would incur the bureaucratic and political risks of politicizing intelligence when they can simply ignore intelligence and implement their desired policies.

Rovner then lays out his argument that the politicization of intelligence derives primarily from domestic politics. Political leaders' goals of maintaining their positions of power and gaining support for their policies generate incentives for them to periodically pressure intelligence agencies and analysts to manipulate intelligence in a way that reinforces their preferred policies. Political leaders are most likely to impose this pressure after they make public policy commitments, and after a critical constituency emerges in opposition to those policies. Rovner tests his explanatory model against the leading alternatives for six

¹ Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962); Barton Whaley, *Codeword Barbarossa* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1973); Avi Shlaim, "Failures in National Intelligence Estimates: The Case of the Yom Kippur War," *World Politics*, 28, 2 (April 1976): 348-80.

² Richard K. Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence: Knowledge & Power in American National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Richard H. Immerman, "Intelligence and Strategy: Historicizing Psychology, Policy, and Politics," *Diplomatic History* 32 (January 2008): 1-23; **Error! Main Document Only.** Paul R. Pillar, *Intelligence and U.S. Foreign Policy: Iraq, 9/11, and Misguided Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

historical cases, organized in terms of three paired comparisons (which incorporate variations in the dependent variable by including cases in which intelligence was ignored rather than politicized): the Johnson Administration's responses to intelligence analyses of the domino theory in 1964 and estimates of enemy strength in Vietnam in 1967; the Nixon and Ford Administrations' estimates of the size and aims of the Soviet strategic arsenal; and U.S. and British estimates of Iraqi capabilities and intentions in the 1998-2003 period. In this series of detailed case studies, Rovner finds that his domestic oversell model of politicization provides a much better explanation for important variations in politicization across these cases than do traditional explanations based on individual or organizational proximity or dependence.

Each of the reviewers in this Roundtable agrees that *Fixing the Facts* is a major contribution to our understanding of the politicization of intelligence, and that its strengths include the combination of a novel theoretical argument and a series of rich historical case studies. Yet each reviewer highlights some of the book's limitations. I find it useful to organize these criticisms into four major categories: internal validity, external validity, conceptual issues, and normative considerations such as the proper role of secrecy in the intelligence processes of a democratic state. I focus on all but the normative issues here. Internal validity concerns the question of whether the evidence supports the theory in the particular cases Rovner examines – whether each historical case study demonstrates that politicization was a major source of intelligence failure and that it derived from the domestic sources specified by Rovner rather than from individual or organizational proximity or dependence. External validity concerns the extent to which Rovner's findings can be generalized beyond his specific case evidence to other cases of the politicization (or neglect) of intelligence. Here it is useful to distinguish between the relevance of Rovner's findings for other American cases and for other non-American cases, presumably in democratic regimes. Rovner does not attempt to explain the politicization of intelligence in non-democratic regimes, where the personal and organizational dependence of intelligence analysts and agencies on political leaders presumably plays a critical role.

The reviewers generally agree that Rovner's well-documented historical analyses provide strong evidence for his theoretical arguments, but they raise questions about some of his particular interpretations. They question whether leaders' public commitments and the rise of a critical constituency to challenge the political leader were the only or even primary factors involved in the politicization of intelligence. Keren Yarhi-Milo, for example, argues that Rovner's domestic overall model does not provide a satisfactory explanation for the "Team B" affair in the Ford Administration. She also emphasizes the potential explanatory power of individual-level psychological variables, including motivated biases, which are neglected by Rovner. Uri Bar-Joseph also emphasizes the role of individual-level factors, which he illustrates by referring to an earlier U.S. case – President Dwight Eisenhower's decision during the "missile gap" controversy at the end of his second term not to try to manipulate intelligence to maintain his domestic stature. Bar-Joseph emphasizes the need to supplement Rovner's model with three additional sets of variables: individual decision-making variables such as political leaders' operational code belief systems, leadership styles, and personalities; organizational variables (both institutional and cultural) such as the strength of the organization and its level of professionalism; and the importance of the

issue. I suspect that some students of intelligence might agree with Bar-Joseph that Rovner underestimates the extent to which a healthy and professional organizational culture often frustrates attempts at manipulation by political leaders, and consequently that it sometimes deters such efforts.

Turning to the criterion of external validity, several of the reviewers accept large parts of Rovner's analyses of his American cases but question the applicability of the model to other political systems. Philip H. J. Davies argues that "the way intelligence works in the United States is highly idiosyncratic," and that relatively few general analyses of the U.S. system are transferable to other national systems." Michael S. Goodman argues that the relevance of leaders' concerns with public justifications for their actions, especially in the face of opposition to their policies, is "very much dependent on a particular system of government – the U.S. model." Similarly, Bar-Joseph criticizes the tendency of American scholars of intelligence "to present their findings as universal." He argues that Rovner's model is "partially valid" for the United States but "much less so" for other democratic states.

The reviewers go on to identify specific respects in which intelligence-policy relations in other democracies differ from those in the United States in ways that are consequential for the analysis of politicization. Davis argues that Rovner (like other American analysts) fails to understand the operation of the intelligence system and its relationship to the policy process in the United Kingdom, in part because the independent Civil Service has no counterpart in the United States. Goodman makes a similar point about the consequences of political appointments of the heads of intelligence agencies in the UK but not in the United States. Bar-Joseph argues that the politicization of British intelligence regarding Iraqi WMD was a rare event in the history of British intelligence, where the more common pattern is the intervention of intelligence in the political process, not top-down politicization.³ He argues that in Israel "there is no record of an attempt by policymakers to politicize intelligence."

I now turn to some conceptual issues, beginning with the definition of the central concept of politicization, about which the reviewers say surprisingly little. Rovner defines politicization as "the attempt to manipulate intelligence so that it reflects policy preferences" (5), though later (29) Rovner drops the word "attempt" and speaks only of the manipulation of intelligence. I much prefer the latter formulation. If top-down political pressure on intelligence analysts is rejected by analysts and has no causal impact on the intelligence product, I would not say that intelligence has been politicized. It is important to distinguish attempts to manipulate intelligence and those that succeed. We should also remember that successful politicization (as defined above) does not necessarily imply either that the leader is successful in diffusing opposition to his policies, or that the politicization of intelligence has a causal impact on policy. It is conceivable that in the absence of politicization, political leaders might simply have neglected intelligence and

³ Bar-Joseph develops this argument more fully in *Intelligence Intervention in the Politics of Democratic States: The United States, Israel, and Britain* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1995).

followed identical policies. These are empirical questions that raise difficult methodological issues.⁴

A more troubling issue is that Rovner's fairly broad definition includes not only pressure from political leaders for intelligence to please, but also the production of estimates by intelligence agencies with the deliberate aim of undermining policy decisions (30). Each of these patterns is an important source of intelligence failure, each can poison the intelligence-policy relationship, and each can feed on the other. These patterns are sufficiently different, however, that we need different concepts to describe them. I prefer to reserve the concept of the politicization of intelligence to top-down manipulation of the intelligence product.⁵ The question is not whether the intelligence process is political, but what causal mechanisms are involved. As John Ferris argues, "Intelligence always has a political context, but that need not produce politicization...."⁶

In his elaboration of different types of politicization, Rovner makes a useful distinction between "direct" and "indirect" politicization. The former involves coercive pressure (or rewards) or "manipulation by appointment" (31) of sympathetic or malleable intelligence directors or analysts,⁷ whereas the latter involves more tacit signals and subtle threats. Some of Rovner's types of politicization are more problematic. One of his types of politicization includes "widely held strategic assumptions and social norms [that] restrict the bounds of acceptable analysis" (205). These "embedded assumptions" do indeed shape both the intelligence product and views of policymakers, but they are best conceived as an analytically distinct path to intelligence failure rather than as a form of politicization.

This brings me back to Yarhi-Milo's argument for an alternative psychological explanation for the politicization of intelligence. She notes "the importance of motivated biases in explaining *both* why policy-makers would try to interfere, influence, or have a biased interpretation of intelligence, as well as why intelligence officials would revisit and at times

⁴ Rovner argues that "leaders who set out to politicize intelligence usually succeed" (19), though this may be due in part to the fact that leaders only set out to politicize intelligence when they are fairly confident of succeeding. The question of causal impact raises difficult issues in counterfactual methodology. See Jack S. Levy, "Counterfactuals and Case Studies," in Janet Box-Steffensmeier, Henry Brady, and David Collier (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 627-44.

⁵ Another possibility is to simply distinguish between top-down politicization and bottom-up politicization.

⁶ John R. Ferris, "'Now that the Milk is Spilt': Appeasement and the Archive on Intelligence," *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 19, 3 (September, 2008), pp. 527-65, at p. 545.

⁷ To this I would add the establishment of a new office or agency for the purposes of bypassing normal intelligence channels. The establishment of the Office of Special Plans in the Pentagon after the 9/11 attacks is an example. Uri Bar-Joseph and Jack S. Levy, "Conscious Action and Intelligence Failure," *Political Science Quarterly*, 124, 3 (Fall 2009): 461-88, at p. 475.

radically change their estimates in the fact of a change in policy.”⁸ I agree on the causal importance of psychological variables in intelligence, even if the result is a less parsimonious explanation of politicization than Rovner advocates. There is an important analytic distinction, however, between a process in which political leaders interfere with and try to influence intelligence, and one in which political leaders have a “biased interpretation of intelligence.” Each leads to cases of policy driving intelligence rather than intelligence driving policy, and each can contribute to intelligence failure, but they do so through different causal mechanisms or paths.

The first (interference and influence) involves a political mechanism in the form of top-down pressure on intelligence analysts to produce a particular intelligence product. The second (biased interpretation) involves a psychological process, one that does not necessarily involve the manipulation of intelligence agencies. It may lead, for example, to strongly held beliefs, high levels of confidence in those beliefs, and a decision to neglect intelligence. The political and psychological mechanisms are analytically distinct, but the two can reinforce each other in practice.⁹ Empirically distinguishing the two is another matter, and one that involves some difficult methodological issues, as Yarhi-Milo illustrates with reference to British intelligence estimates of the Nazi threat in the 1930s.¹⁰

I have aimed in this essay to provide a useful introduction to the four excellent reviews of *Fixing the Facts*, and also to add some additional comments of my own. The bottom line is clear: the book is essential reading for all of those who are interested in the complex relationships among intelligence, politics, and policy.

Participants:

Joshua Rovner is Associate Professor of Strategy and Policy at the U.S. Naval War College, adjunct professor in the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University, and reviews editor of *The Journal of Strategic Studies*. He is the author of *Fixing the Facts: National Security and the Politics of Intelligence* (Cornell University Press, 2011). Other recent publications include “The Heroes of COIN,” *Orbis*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (Spring 2012), pp. 1-18; and “Dominoes on the Durand Line? Overcoming Strategic Myths in Afghanistan and

⁸ The concept of motivated biases refers to the subconscious tendency to see what you want to see. It is driven by people’s emotional needs, by their need to maintain self-esteem, and by their interests – diplomatic, political, organizational, or personal. See Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, chap. 4.

⁹ These distinct mechanisms are illustrated by alternative interpretations of the U.S. intelligence failure regarding Iraqi WMD. Rovner (chap. 7) and Pillar (*Intelligence and U.S. Foreign Policy*, chap. 6) emphasize the role of politicization. Jervis (*Why Intelligence Fails*, chap. 3) emphasizes the role of individual psychological biases.

¹⁰ For an argument that although Chamberlain might have been driven by motivated biases, there is very little evidence of successful pressure on intelligence agencies to distort the intelligence product, see Norrin M. Ripsman and Jack S. Levy, “Playing It Straight or Politicized Process? British Military Intelligence and the Nazi Threat, 1933-39” (Concordia University and Rutgers University, unpublished paper, 2012).