AMERICAN INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES did not know much about Iraq’s nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons before the war in 2003. Unable to penetrate Saddam Hussein’s regime after the first Gulf War, they lacked reliable human sources on Iraqi capabilities. Satellite imagery and signals intelligence produced occasional hints about Iraqi activities, but most estimates relied on American beliefs about Iraqi intentions. The situation was worse after United Nations inspectors left the country on the eve of a four-day bombing campaign in 1998. UN inspectors had been the primary source of information on Iraqi unconventional weapons programs; now they were gone. In the absence of solid data, intelligence analysts were forced to rely on assumptions about Saddam’s likely behavior. For this reason, they included conspicuous warnings about the lack of solid information underpinning their conclusions. Intelligence estimates on Iraq’s biological and nuclear programs were especially cautious in this regard. Even though analysts suspected that Saddam was interested in these weapons, they routinely warned policymakers that information was thin and sources were unreliable.¹

In the summer before the war, however, the tone and substance of estimates began to change. The intelligence community started to move toward a definitive conclusion that Iraq possessed chemical and biological weapons, and that it was on the threshold of achieving a nuclear capability. The transformation culminated in October with the publication of National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) 2002–16HC, Iraq’s Continuing Programs for Weapons of Mass Destruction. The estimate found that Iraq possessed up to five
hundred tons of chemical warfare agent and precursor material. Previous estimates had never exceeded one hundred tons. It also stated that Iraq had stockpiled “lethal and incapacitating” pathogens and possibly maintained a small fleet of mobile biological weapons laboratories. Anthrax, smallpox, and even genetically modified germ weapons were all part of this growing arsenal. Most worryingly, it concluded that Iraq could acquire nuclear weapons “in months to a year” if it was able to import fissile material from abroad. (A parallel finding that the international sanctions regime was eroding added weight to this assessment.) An unclassified public version of the NIE went further by stripping the estimate of any sense of doubt or debate among analysts. Conditions and caveats were removed, as were qualifying phrases that appeared in the original. The result was a damning portrait of a tyrannical power with a growing unconventional arsenal and a confirmation of President Bush’s claim that Iraq was a “grave and gathering danger.”

None of this was based on new information. Rather, these worst-case conclusions came from the same partial and ambiguous information that had characterized intelligence on Iraq for more than a decade. Why, then, did the intelligence suddenly become so much more ominous?

This question became the focus of controversy after invading U.S. forces found no stockpiles of biological or chemical weapons and no evidence of an active nuclear weapons program. Postwar inquiries pinned most of the blame on the intelligence community for shoddy analytical methods. Congressional investigators found that analysts had become wedded to basic assumptions about Iraqi aggressiveness and, as a result, were unduly confident about their conclusions. Poor management also led to mistakes in the production of the NIE, such as the failure of coordination that led analysts to believe that multiple reports from the same source were actually separate and corroborating data points. Critics of the Bush administration, on the other hand, accused it of forcing the intelligence community to exaggerate the threat. Anonymous intelligence officials suggested that high-level policymakers pressured them to deliver estimates that supported policy statements about Iraq. According to this argument, intelligence chiefs bent to pressure from the White House, and skeptics in the community were quickly stifled. As one British official famously concluded after meeting with his counterparts in Washington, “the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy.”

Supporters of the administration believe that the episode was an egregious intelligence failure, and that the president’s decision to go to war was made in good faith on the basis of bad intelligence. Critics charge mendacious policymakers with corrupting the intelligence process in order to win support for the war in Iraq. A careful reconstruction of events shows that both sides are half-right: the flawed estimates were the result of a complete collapse in intelligence-policy relations. Intelligence analysts began with false
assumptions about Iraqi strategic behavior and clung to them despite the emergence of contrary evidence. Policymakers exacerbated the problem by pressuring analysts to draw worst-case scenarios from these assumptions and subsequently used intelligence to rally domestic support for military action against Iraq. The failure of intelligence-policy relations led to a public picture of the threat that was utterly detached from reality. By early 2003, policymakers were routinely using intelligence to erase any doubt about Iraq’s capabilities and intentions. “Saddam Hussein is determined to keep his weapons of mass destruction,” Secretary of State Colin Powell declared to the UN Security Council shortly before the war, “[and] he’s determined to make more.” The director of central intelligence sat behind Powell during his presentation, a powerful symbolic reminder that the administration’s statements were based on extensive and detailed information. Almost none of it was true.

This is a book about the relationship between intelligence and strategy. Broadly, it addresses the question of how intelligence informs state perceptions and strategic decisions. Specifically, it explains how policymakers respond to intelligence estimates about real and imagined threats to national security. Understanding how leaders incorporate intelligence into the decision-making process at pivotal moments is an important step toward a theory of intelligence-policy relations. It also adds to a growing body of research in international relations theory, now called neoclassical realism, which explores how domestic institutions filter and mediate international signals. Because intelligence agencies are specifically designed to collect and interpret information about the international security environment, understanding the causes of intelligence-policy breakdowns provides an important window into the domestic sources of misperception in international politics.

Most of the literature on intelligence has to do with collection, covert action, and counterintelligence. Spy versus spy intrigue dominates both the popular imagination and the academic study of intelligence. There is no lack of research on covert operations, espionage, and the more technologically exotic forms of intelligence collection. Nor is there any lack of attention to the problem of protecting secrets from foreign spies, and in knowing the difference between genuine sources and double-agents. The subject of intelligence analysis has received less frequent attention, although scholars have isolated some of the main barriers to accurate political and military assessments. Far less theoretical work has been devoted to the connection between intelligence officials and policymakers. This is unfortunate, because even the best intelligence is irrelevant if it is disbelieved by decision makers. Harry Howe Ransom understood the problem four decades ago, when he wrote that “assuming the intelligence product is of high quality,
getting it accepted as reliable and useful remains a basic problem.” Despite Ransom's insight, surprisingly little has been done to identify the conditions under which intelligence is likely to be accepted, or to identify the sources of intelligence-policy failure.

In the ideal, intelligence contributes to rational state action by providing unique kinds of information to policymakers and by helping organize an enormous amount of data from secret and open sources. By virtue of their control over secret information, intelligence agencies are ideally suited to provide comprehensive strategic analyses for policymakers. “The intelligence community,” writes Richard Betts, “is the logical set of institutions to provide what one may call the library function for national security: it keeps track of all sources, secret or not, and mobilizes them in coherent form whenever nonexpert policymakers call for them.” Both parties have a vested interest in the quality of relations. Policymakers need intelligence to provide information, mitigate ambiguity, and reduce the amount of uncertainty in the decision-making process. Wartime leaders have a special interest in knowing the disposition of enemy forces, but peacetime statesmen also benefit from intelligence when it identifies looming dangers as well as opportunities for diplomacy. Intelligence agencies, for their part, require policy guidance so that they know where to focus their collection efforts. Absent such guidance, their work will be inefficient and useless to policy needs.

In reality, however, the relationship is characterized by friction; policymakers and intelligence officials often look at one another with suspicion and even outright hostility. In extreme cases intelligence can become almost entirely irrelevant to the decision-making process because leaders lose faith in its ability to provide useful information and insight. In other cases intelligence agencies become so disillusioned with policymakers that they stop trying to support the policy process. Healthy intelligence-policy relations help states make reasoned judgments, but the relationship is prone to dysfunction.

Some amount of friction is natural. One reason is that the policy and intelligence communities attract different kinds of individuals. Policymakers tend to be self-confident and action-oriented. They come into office with strongly held worldviews and the belief that certain truths exist about international politics. They also believe that intelligence agencies can (and should) provide firm and unequivocal predictions about future events. Intelligence analysts, on the other hand, are less confident about their ability to divine certain truths from an inherently ambiguous international environment. Because they see uncertainty and change as normal, they are usually unwilling to offer specific predictions about the future. Instead of offering unequivocal forecasts, they attempt to identify the factors that will make events more or less likely. And because intelligence analysis is
somewhat akin to academic social science, analysts are comfortable speaking in abstract and theoretical terms that are unfamiliar to their policy bosses. One scholar has called this the “tribal tongues” phenomenon. As long as the intelligence tribe and the policy tribe speak different languages, they will find it difficult to interact.\textsuperscript{12}

Other kinds of friction are more variable. Sharp deviations from normal interaction are what I call the pathologies of intelligence-policy relations. The first is neglect, in which policymakers ignore intelligence or cherry-pick for supporting analyses. Neglect is a serious problem because it makes intelligence superfluous to the policy process and removes a significant check on policymakers’ preexisting beliefs. The second pathology is the opposite: excessive harmony. In cases of excessive harmony, intelligence officials are unwilling to challenge policy beliefs, and policymakers are unwilling to criticize intelligence conclusions. This can lead to shared strategic tunnel vision. The third pathology is politicization, defined as the attempt to manipulate intelligence so that it reflects policy preferences. Although the word \textit{politicization} appears frequently in the press, it is rarely defined with any degree of precision. Moreover, there are several varieties of intelligence manipulation, and the differences are important. Direct politicization occurs when leaders intervene to change specific analytical conclusions, offering rewards to malleable analysts and threatening punishment for non-compliance. Indirect politicization is more subtle, involving tacit signals to the intelligence community about the desired direction of estimates. Most treatments of intelligence-policy relations in the public discourse focus only on direct politicization, leaving aside the other ways in which intelligence can become politically biased.

In addition to describing these pathologies, this book presents a theory of politicization in modern democracies. Politicization is the most significant problem in intelligence-policy relations and it deserves special attention. The manipulation of intelligence leads to flawed estimates because policymakers encourage analysts to indulge in certain assumptions, to deliver unambiguous findings even when the data are unclear, and to ignore evidence that contradicts their preferences or beliefs. The act of pressuring intelligence constrains its ability to provide nuance and alter its analysis as circumstances warrant. Because policy pressure causes analysts to become wedded to certain conclusions, the act of politicization can inhibit learning even as new information becomes available. In addition, episodes of politicization have effects on the relationship that last for years after the fact, reinforcing mutual stereotypes and suspicions. Lingering hostility and mistrust is often the result of policy meddling.

I also choose to focus on the problem of politicization because it presents an intriguing theoretical puzzle. Extant political science offers good explanations for neglect and excessive harmony. Political psychologists
have long been aware of the powerful effects of existing beliefs on the abil-
ity to interpret new information. When individuals hold strong worldviews
they find it difficult to absorb contrary information. Instead, they will sub-
consciously mold the information so that it conforms to their existing be-
liefs, or they will ignore it entirely. For this reason, policymakers tend to
disregard intelligence when it clashes with their own expectations. On the
other hand, leaders and intelligence officials may fall into excessive har-
mony because they both have vested interests in the same policy outcome
and fall victim to wishful thinking. Excessive harmony may also occur
because of groupthink, a pathology of small-group decision making that
describes the psychological desire to reach agreement, even if consensus
means ruling out reasonable alternatives.

The causes of politicization are less clear. Why would leaders ever try
to force intelligence to change its conclusions, especially when they can
simply ignore it? Why would leaders risk domestic scandal by “cooking
the books” when they have no legal or procedural obligation to pay atten-
tion to intelligence in the first place? Moreover, high-ranking policymakers
come into power with their own informal networks that provide informa-
tion and advice. If they are unsatisfied with intelligence, why not just trust
their own sources?

The Political Science of Intelligence-Policy Relations

Unlike civil-military relations, the subject of intelligence-policy relations
has not received sustained attention. The bulk of the literature is contained
in professional memoirs, whose authors offer general principles about
the appropriate behavior of both intelligence professionals and policy-
makers. As a result, the literature tends toward exhortation rather than
analysis. There is little in the way of abstract theorizing on the nature of
ideal intelligence-policy relations and the causes of dysfunction. With a
few important exceptions, political scientists have not spent much time on
the subject. Moreover, the best theoretical treatments focus on why lead-
ers ignore intelligence, which is only one of the three major pathologies of
intelligence-policy relations.

Two debates dominate the literature. The first revolves around the ques-
tion of surprise attack. Ever since Roberta Wohlstetter’s pathbreaking work
on Pearl Harbor, scholars have debated the causes of intelligence failure
and the degree to which intelligence agencies can predict and prevent fu-
ture attacks. Wohlstetter introduced the signal-to-noise metaphor to de-
scribe the fundamental problem for warning intelligence. Indications of an
attack are usually present in the data available to intelligence analysts, but
they are overwhelmed by a mountain of meaningless background infor-
mation. As long as genuine indicators (the signal) remain weak relative to
the other information (the noise), analysts will not be able to anticipate attacks. Richard Betts took the argument further by arguing that even when intelligence analysts properly identify the danger signs, they still have to convince policymakers of the reality of the threat. This is difficult because of policymakers’ belief in their own ability to conduct analysis and because of human beings’ psychological inability to absorb discomfiting information. It is also difficult because multiple interpretations are possible from the same evidence. Scholars have used variations on these arguments to explain why policymakers have ignored intelligence warnings even when the indicators of attack were very strong.

Critics of this argument have labeled it the “no-fault” school of intelligence because it seems to forgive the intelligence community of responsibility for failures. Eliot Cohen and Ariel Levite contend that more aggressive collection efforts, better analytical methods, and changes to organizational processes can lead to more accurate warnings for policymakers. This suggests a different reason why policymakers ignore intelligence: the product is not useful. If intelligence analysts do not provide timely and relevant estimates, then policymakers should not waste their time dealing with them. If this is correct, then the quality of intelligence-policy relations ultimately depends on the quality of intelligence. Intelligence agencies will lack influence if they gain a reputation for sloppy, tardy, or irrelevant work.

The second debate, which is more relevant to the problem of politization, has to do with the appropriate distance between intelligence and policy. The orthodox view in the formative years of the U.S. intelligence community was that intelligence officials should remain distant from policymakers lest their views become biased by policy needs. According to this view, intelligence professionals should cultivate a reputation for neutral detachment and avoid becoming wrapped up in the excitement of the policymaking process. Similarly, intelligence agencies ought to be organizationally insulated from policymaking bodies so that they are not subject to policy pressure. The problem, however, is that too much distance risks making intelligence irrelevant to the decision-making process. For intelligence to inform policy judgments, it must be close enough to understand the kinds of analysis that policymakers need and respond to new requests as events change. Perfect insulation from the policy process will guarantee objectivity, but it also means total isolation.

The debate about proximity is as old as the U.S. intelligence community itself. Indeed, the parameters of the debate were clear only a few years after the National Security Act created the CIA in 1947, and it has resurfaced periodically after episodes of intense intelligence-policy friction. But there have been few efforts to abstract these claims in such a way to make empirical testing possible. Stephen Marrin’s work is a recent exception. Marrin starts by identifying the basic tension in intelligence-policy
relations, condensing the dilemma into what he calls the proximity hypothesis: “Intelligence agencies that are close to policymakers tend to produce analysis that is useful for improving decision making but potentially distorted due to the incorporation of policy biases and preferences, while intelligence agencies that are distant from policymakers tend to produce ‘objective’ analysis containing little distortion, but of little use in improving policymaker judgment.” Marrin measures proximity according to the degree of formal and symbolic autonomy from the policy process; the geographic separation between intelligence agencies and the policy center; and the frequency of interaction between senior intelligence and policy officials. Some agencies enjoy a substantial amount of separation. In other cases intelligence is closely integrated in the policy process and no effort is made to create real or symbolic distance. If the basic logic of the proximity hypothesis holds, then the more distant agencies should be less vulnerable to politicization.

Although this framework is a useful way of thinking about the possible effects of proximity, it does not identify the causal mechanism that would lead to politicization. The proximity hypothesis suggests that close and regular interaction leads to biased estimates through some kind of osmosis. Intelligence analysts may not intend to slant their products to favor policy beliefs, but they come to identify and sympathize with policymakers and lose the ability to remain neutral and objective. But even if this is the case, it still does not explain why policymakers would consciously choose to manipulate the analytical process. The following section builds on the concept of proximity to draw out some testable hypotheses on politicization, with specific focus on the policymaker’s incentive structure.

Explaining Politicization

I infer three hypotheses on politicization from the literature on intelligence-policy relations. Two are based on the concept of proximity; the third is based on how leaders exploit bureaucratic dependence to manipulate intelligence products.

*Personal proximity.* The first explanation holds that the likelihood of politicization increases when intelligence officials interact closely with policymakers. When intelligence officials maintain appropriate professional distance from their policy counterparts, they are less likely to face the kind of policy pressures that lead to biased estimates. When they veer too close, on the other hand, policymakers are more likely to cajole them into providing intelligence to please. Policymakers can do this by exploiting the intelligence officials’ ambition and eagerness to take part in the policy process. One former chair of the British Joint Intelligence committee has warned about the dangers of getting wrapped up in the “magic circle”
of high-level policymakers, where the excitement of crisis diplomacy makes objectivity impossible. In a similar vein, policymakers can enlist intelligence chiefs into the execution of policy decisions. This effectively changes the role of the intelligence officer from impartial analyst to policy advocate.

Two kinds of evidence would support the personal proximity hypothesis. First, episodes of politicization should occur when leaders and key intelligence officials work closely together. In these cases intelligence officers will lose their ability to remain objective. Conversely, politicization should be rare in circumstances where intelligence officials maintain their distance and interact infrequently with policymakers. This correlation should appear in the historical record, whether the proximity effect occurs as a result of conscious manipulation or through osmosis. Second, leaders should recognize the opportunity to exploit close ties with intelligence officials and cultivate them as policy advocates. Enough has been revealed in the historical record to make judgments along these lines, especially in past cases where expansive archival records contain clues about policy motives and behavior.

Organizational proximity. A related hypothesis is that politicization is likely when intelligence agencies are too “close” to the policy process. Unlike the personal proximity hypothesis, which focuses on professional judgment, the organizational proximity hypotheses is based on bureaucratic design. Leaders are more likely to politicize agencies that are bureaucratically intermingled with policymaking bodies. Conversely, intelligence agencies that enjoy a significant degree of insulation from the policy process are less likely to face pressure to change their estimates. As with the personal proximity hypothesis, this explanation is based on the simple fact that policymakers have more opportunity to exert influence over the product. Organizational proximity makes indirect politicization especially likely because policymakers can keep up a steady stream of signals to intelligence officials about what they expect to see in estimates. On the other hand, bureaucratic separation means that these signals are less numerous, less clear, and less compelling. Moving the estimative process away from the policymaking process removes the conditions necessary for politicization.

Differences in organizational proximity exist between states and within them. For example, British intelligence agencies are closer to the policy process than their American counterparts, and the line separating “intelligence” from “policy” is sometimes indistinct. Intrastate differences in proximity are also apparent. In the United States, the military intelligence services are directly subordinate to their consumers and interact closely with them. Other intelligence agencies enjoy more distance. The CIA, for instance, enjoys the symbolic separation of having its headquarters outside
of Washington, DC. In addition, the CIA cultivates professional norms of objectivity and neutrality that reinforce the functional separation from the policy process. According to Richard Russell, this has given the agency “a better chance than other intelligence community components to produce strategic intelligence that is divorced from policy equities.”

Organizational dependence. The third explanation is based on the idea that leaders are able to manipulate intelligence by holding the bureaucratic incentives of intelligence agencies at risk. Organization theorists posit that bureaucracies seek wealth, autonomy, and prestige, and that these institutional interests color their advice to policymakers. If intelligence agencies rely on policymakers to achieve their goals, then they are vulnerable to manipulation. Policymakers should be able to recognize their ability to use bureaucratic incentives over dependent agencies as leverage to influence the content of intelligence estimates. On the other hand, if intelligence agencies do not require patronage or bureaucratic protection, then they will not so easily bow to pressure. In these cases, policymakers will be less inclined to attempt to politicize estimates because of the low probability of success.

Organizational dependence can take several forms. In extreme cases, policymakers can exert control by threatening to cut off resources or eviscerate the autonomy of the agency in question. Occasionally policymakers have clear legal or procedural mechanisms that they can use to hold bureaucratic resources at risk. In other cases, policymakers can influence the relative prestige of the agency by giving it more or less opportunity to participate in the policymaking process, or by restricting its ability to operate independently.

Many observers have used the logic of organizational dependence to explain why some intelligence agencies routinely miscalculate enemy threats. George Allen, a legendary intelligence official during the Vietnam War, argues that military intelligence analysts were encouraged to deliver estimates that supported the military’s perceived interests. Instead of producing balanced assessments of the counterinsurgency campaign in the early 1960s, they were ordered to produce “Headway Reports,” which conveyed only indications of progress and carefully avoided any bad news. The not-so-subtle implication was that their career prospects rested on their willingness to toe the line. Similarly, John Prados and Lawrence Freedman have argued that bureaucratic incentives caused Air Force intelligence to give higher estimates of the Soviet strategic threat than other intelligence agencies during the Cold War. Because the Air Force needed these estimates to justify greater investment in the U.S. missile and bomber fleet, analysts were under pressure to support the service’s institutional interests, and compliance was rewarded with promotion. “In intelligence as in other arenas of bureaucratic politics,” Prados concludes, “the rewards appeared to have gone to those who support the interests of their organizations.”
In both cases, bureaucratic interests constrained analytical freedom and made it difficult for military intelligence to remain objective. The same logic should apply at higher levels. If intelligence agencies clearly rely on policymakers’ largesse, then they will have obvious incentives to deliver favorable estimates. Policymakers should be able to recognize the opportunity to manipulate intelligence by exploiting its dependent position.

**Politicization as Policy Oversell**

Existing explanations of politicization focus on professional choices and organizational design, and proposed solutions are found at the individual and bureaucratic levels of analysis. Advocates of the personal proximity hypothesis believe that the best way to solve the problem of politicization is by convincing intelligence officials to keep their distance from the policy fray, and by educating policymakers about the capabilities and limits of intelligence. Advocates of the organizational proximity and organizational dependence hypotheses look for ways to decouple institutional interests from the content of estimates. If politicization happens because intelligence agencies are too close to policymakers, then the solution is to insulate them with additional layers of bureaucratic protection. Similarly, if intelligence agencies need to satisfy policymakers in order to protect organizational interests, then the solution is to legislate institutional procedures for reducing their vulnerability.

Instead of looking at individual- or bureaucratic-level factors, this book presents a theory of politicization based on domestic politics. It argues that domestic political pressures create incentives for policymakers to oversell the amount and quality of information on security threats, regardless of the nature of personal relationships or organizational design. Policymakers mobilize domestic support for controversial decisions by creating the image of a consensus within the national security establishment. Symbolic demonstrations of support, including joint appearances with senior diplomats and military officers, helps persuade domestic groups of the wisdom of policy. Intelligence agencies are particularly important to the consensus because of their control over secret information. Politicization is likely if they threaten to break away.

Intelligence is a uniquely effective public relations vehicle because it carries an aura of secrecy, which suggests that policymakers are privy to special information that is not available to anyone else. Although much of the information used in estimates comes from open sources, intelligence agencies also recruit spies and otherwise eavesdrop on adversaries. And because this information from these sources is classified, policymakers can use the intelligence imprimatur to invoke the national interest without having to be specific.
The problem, however, is that intelligence is inherently ambiguous. Precise estimates of foreign capabilities are difficult because the targets of intelligence conceal their activities and use elaborate denial and deception techniques to confuse intelligence collectors. Estimates of foreign intentions are even more difficult, because they usually require high-level human sources that can report on internal discussions. It is not easy to convince a foreign national to spy on his own government, especially given the danger of being discovered. Intelligence services also worry that their human sources are actually double-agents working on behalf of the target state, meaning that even genuine information is received with caution. Finally, foreign intentions are subject to change. Even the presence of well-placed sources cannot ensure foreknowledge of future policy decisions. For example, Israeli intelligence cultivated a high-level source in the Egyptian government before the Yom Kippur War, who contributed to Israel’s belief that Egypt would attack only in concert with Syria, and only after it acquired long-range bombers. This was an accurate portrayal of Egyptian strategy at least until the summer, and it may have caused Israeli leaders to respond slowly to indications that Egyptian leaders had become more aggressive that fall.

Because of the inherent ambiguity and uncertainty of events in international politics, intelligence estimates attach caveats to their conclusions and loathe making exact predictions. But cautious and conditional estimates are of little use to policymakers who need to rally domestic support for their plans. Elected leaders cannot afford to be forthright about gaps in the existing intelligence picture when they are trying to make a convincing argument about the need for action, and they certainly cannot provide realistic discussions about ambiguous data and uncertain future developments. As a result, policymakers have large incentives to misrepresent intelligence in public, even if that means pressuring intelligence to change its conclusions. Intelligence works best as a public relations vehicle when it is stripped of any indications of uncertainty or doubt, and intelligence products are most persuasive when they appear to represent the collective wisdom of the intelligence community. Signs of internal disagreement are counterproductive, so they are removed.

Policymakers’ interests are not always fixed, of course. They express clear views on some issues, but at other times they determine their preferences through interaction with domestic advisors and foreign counterparts, much as business interests are determined not by market factors alone but by evolving negotiations with producers, consumers, and regulators. At times policymakers enter office with little knowledge of looming foreign policy dilemmas, and intelligence agencies have an opportunity to influence policy before policymakers settle on a particular course. The influence of intelligence declines as policy interests become more rigid.
likelihood of politicization simultaneously rises because leaders turn to intelligence for advocacy rather than for new information and insight.

Two conditions make politicization likely. Both are necessary for politicization; neither is sufficient. First, leaders who make public commitments are tempted to use intelligence to backstop the logic of action. Public commitments bind policymakers to specific positions, making them less receptive to contrary intelligence estimates. Leaders put their reputations on the line when they go public, and they risk appearing irresolute if they rescind their commitments later. According to one longtime practitioner, “intelligence... receives a cool reception when its messages are uncongenial and do not necessarily support particular policies being advocated at the time.” Second, the emergence of a critical constituency creates incentives to bring intelligence more visibly in support of policy plans. I define a critical constituency as any domestic group with the ability to damage the policy objective or political future of the policymaker. Absent these critics, there is no need to oversell policy decisions. Leaders have no reasons to use intelligence if their public commitments are met with approval at home.

The oversell model also holds that the type of politicization is a function of the magnitude and intensity of the potential political costs. Direct politicization is likely when the values on each independent variable are very high. Credible threats to key policy initiatives create large incentives to use intelligence for the purpose of public advocacy. When policymakers issue strong public commitments in the face of substantial domestic opposition, they have an interest in forcefully bringing intelligence into the policy consensus. When commitments are less strong, or when critical constituencies are manageable, indirect politicization is more likely.

The incentives to use intelligence as political oversell exist regardless of individual or bureaucratic level factors. Policymakers who are generally receptive to intelligence will politicize estimates when domestic pressure is high. The nature of the personal relationship between intelligence officials and policymakers is unimportant. Politicization can occur whether intelligence officials are very close or very distant from their policy counterparts. Similarly, the degree of organizational proximity or dependence does not determine whether or not the oversell model is operative. Sufficient domestic political pressure will cause policymakers to manipulate estimates regardless of the organizational design of the intelligence community.

**Understanding Failure: Key Episodes of Intelligence-Policy Dysfunction**

I assess the theory in six case studies arranged in three paired comparisons. The empirical section of the book includes two cases from the Vietnam War,
two cases on estimates of the Soviet strategic threat in the 1960s and 1970s, and a comparative analysis of British and American intelligence-policy relations before the war in Iraq. The subject lends itself to qualitative analysis, because there are not enough cases of intelligence-policy breakdowns to justify a large-N research effort. In addition, it is not easy to characterize the policy response to intelligence in any given case without significant prior research. Episodes of politicization are particularly contentious because they are also accusations of policy misbehavior. Thus there is an obligation to demonstrate the fact of politicization before explaining why it occurred. I ask four basic questions in each case:

1. Is there a paper trail demonstrating that policymakers pressured intelligence to deliver certain findings? This is the most compelling evidence of politicization, but it is also the most unusual. Government archives will occasionally reveal telling documents suggesting that estimates have been manipulated, but smoking gun evidence is rare. Policymakers have good reason to cover their tracks because revelation of meddling would be politically devastating. If no strong documentation exists, I turn to the next three questions. Affirmative answers to all of them indicate that politicization has occurred.

2. Are accusations of politicization corroborated? Individual analysts may be overly sensitive to feedback from policymakers or their own superiors. For this reason, isolated complaints do not count as evidence of politicization. On the other hand, repeated accusations of policy pressure from multiple sources suggest that manipulation has occurred.

3. Do intelligence officers diverge from normal best practices in the estimative process? The sudden abandonment of routine methods is a strong indication that policymakers are pressuring intelligence agencies to come to certain findings. This is not to say that standard operating procedures are always optimal; intelligence agencies ought to refine their techniques over time. But sharp changes to existing analytical methods, especially during the production of a specific estimate, do not reflect efforts to improve the long-term quality of the process.

4. Do intelligence products go out of their way to eliminate uncertainty or views that are inconsistent with policy preferences? Intelligence cannot effectively serve policymakers if it is unwilling to provide firm judgments. Intelligence, after all, is meant to guide policy by reducing the bounds of uncertainty. But there is an important difference between making a judgment based on ambiguous information and consciously pretending that ambiguity does not exist. Estimates that cover up profound differences of opinion are suspicious, as are estimates that conceal important gaps in knowledge.
Each case of politicization meets at least three of these criteria. The cases on Vietnam and Iraq meet all of them. I include extensive justification in the empirical chapters.

There are several reasons to focus on the episodes described below, which together represent the major incidents of politicization in the United States over the last four decades. Successful theories offer wide explanatory scope. If the explanation based on policy oversell accounts for most or all of the cases in this book, then we can be confident about its generalizability. Moreover, the inclusion of one case from outside the United States provides an opportunity to see whether the model operates across borders. The architecture of British intelligence is fundamentally different from the United States. For this reason, theories of politicization based on organizational design are easily testable against the oversell model.

At the same time, the relatively small number of cases offers the chance to use process-tracing to provide fine-grained explanations for policymakers’ behavior. Process tracing allows researchers to isolate the important inflection points in any large decision to show how changes in key variables produce different outcomes. As a result, even if multiple theories make the same general prediction, we can assess which ones do a better job explaining the details and timing of events. As long as there is a sufficient historical record of the decision-making process, careful analysis can illustrate the causal mechanisms at work. A great deal of archival material has been declassified on the first four cases. Much less is known about events before the war in Iraq, but enough is available to make a reasonable judgment about intelligence and policy actions in Washington and London.

The sample provides an opportunity to approach the cases from different directions, using both the method of difference and method of agreement. The method of difference looks at similar cases with different values on the dependent variable, in other words, whether or not politicization occurred. Conversely, the method of agreement looks at cases in which the dependent variable is the same. Instead the Johnson administration reacted differently to Vietnam estimates in 1964 and 1967. Although both estimates challenged the logic of U.S. strategy, the administration ignored the former and politicized the later. The second pair uses the method of agreement to examine why the Nixon and Ford administrations, which had very different attitudes toward intelligence, both ended up politicizing estimates of the Soviet Union. The method of agreement also provides an opportunity to explain why British and U.S. policymakers, who appeared very different on the surface, both manipulated estimates on Iraqi capabilities and intentions.

The sample also provides critical cases for all three explanations. Critical cases are those with extreme values on the independent variables. Instead
of seeking out representative cases, researchers look for cases that make successful predictions especially likely or unlikely. Most-likely cases carry high values on the independent variables, and hypotheses ought to be able to explain these cases if they are plausible. Least-likely cases carry low values on the independent variables relative to other explanations. As Stephen Biddle explains, “For such cases, we would expect weak theories to be overwhelmed by confounding effects; if we nevertheless observe successful prediction, this surprise would warrant a greater gain of confidence than would a single confirmation under less extreme conditions.” The book starts with an easy test of the oversell model and proceeds to test it in cases where competing explanations are more likely to succeed.

Finally, the sample provides opportunities to explore some of the more idiosyncratic explanations for politicization. For instance, it may be possible that the personal attributes of key officials makes politicization more likely. Policymakers who are disposed to cajoling their subordinates, or who have a special psychological need for support on important policy decisions, may be more likely to browbeat intelligence officials. Unique personal characteristics are difficult to generalize, but they are worth examining because they figure so prominently in historical accounts of politicization and ongoing debates over how to prevent future intelligence-policy breakdowns. Richard Russell echoes many other observers when he concludes that politicization can only be avoided through the “personal integrity and courage” of intelligence officials.

The Johnson administration and Vietnam, 1964–67. The first pair of cases evaluates the policy response to estimates on the Vietnam War. In both 1964 and 1967, U.S. intelligence agencies threw cold water on the logic of U.S. strategy in Vietnam. In the first case, the Office of National Estimates (ONE) provided two estimates that cut against the prevailing domino theory and bluntly challenged the rationale for U.S. intervention. In the second case, the CIA challenged the military’s estimate of the order of battle in Vietnam, suggesting that the enemy was much larger and resilient than previously thought. If this was correct, then the administration’s theory of victory was fatally flawed. Although both estimates implicitly undermined the logic of U.S. policy, the Johnson administration responded very differently in each case. The analyses of the domino theory caused barely a ripple among policymakers. The order of battle estimates, however, led administration officials to apply heavy pressure on the CIA to accept the military view.

The Soviet estimate, 1969 and 1976. The second pair of cases deals with estimates on the size and purposes of the Soviet strategic arsenal. In the first case, the Nixon administration clashed with the intelligence community over the capabilities of the Soviet SS-9 intercontinental ballistic missile, and about the Soviets’ intention to seek a first-strike capability. In the
second case, the Ford administration bowed to right-wing pressure by allowing a group of well-known hardliners (Team B) to formally challenge the intelligence community’s estimate of the Soviet strategic threat. In both cases policymakers pressured the intelligence community to produce more ominous estimates.

U.S. and British estimates of Iraq, 1998–2003. The last pair of cases is a comparison of U.S. and British responses to estimates of Iraqi capabilities and intentions before the war in 2003. In Washington and London, policymakers pressured intelligence agencies to deliver unambiguous estimates of Iraq’s nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons capability. They encouraged analysts to indulge in worst-case assumptions of the threat, even though the existing data were limited, ambiguous, and unreliable. They also pressured top intelligence officials to hype the growing danger of Iraq by publishing their results in unclassified dossier and by appearing in public to demonstrate their support for policy plans. As a result, intelligence estimates became more ominous in the second half of 2002, despite the lack of new information to support such a change.