Intelligence Theory

Key questions and debates

Edited by
Peter Gill, Stephen Marrin and Mark Phythian

Studies in intelligence series

Intelligence Theory

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This book will be of much interest for students of Intelligence Studies, Security Studies and Politics/International Relations in general.

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an Insecure World (with Peter Gill, 2006); *The Labour Party, War and International Relations, 1945–2006* (2007); *Intelligence and National Security Policymaking on Iraq: British and American Perspectives* (edited with James P. Pfiffner, 2008); and *PSI Handbook of Global Security and Intelligence: National Approaches* (2 vols; edited with S. Farson, P. Gill and S. Shpiro, 2008), as well as numerous journal articles and book chapters.

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Introduction

Peter Gill, Stephen Marrin and Mark Phythian

This book results from a number of influences. Each of the editors has been studying and/or involved in the intelligence business for some time and, in their work, has sought to develop conceptual thinking as the study of intelligence has become a more mainstream activity than it was thirty years ago. At that time the literature on intelligence, such as it was, was dominated by two main sources: in the United States there was much writing around the consequences of the 'year of intelligence' in 1975, when extensive congressional inquiries produced revelations that led to much soul-searching regarding the propriety of intelligence activities both at home and abroad. These inquiries were mirrored to a lesser extent in Australia and Canada. In Western Europe, particularly the UK, there were no such inquiries and the literature was dominated by historical issues, especially those relating to the role of intelligence in the Second World War. Elsewhere, communist or military authoritarian regimes were the order of the day and there was really no literature at all.

Since then, much has changed. The waves of democratisation across Latin America and Eastern Europe have brought significant changes in intelligence communities, though not always as far-reaching as may appear on the surface from the plethora of new intelligence laws. However, democratisation has meant that academics and other researchers are able to write and publish about intelligence with a new freedom. Research and writing in the 'old' liberal democracies has also developed, in part because of the release of further historical files, but also because of the questions posed by the 11 September 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, DC, followed by others in Madrid, Casablanca, Istanbul and London. These attacks and US and Western responses, framed as the 'war on terror', injected an urgency into debates about intelligence, forcing it even further out of the shadows from which it had begun to emerge after the end of the Cold War. The failure to prevent these attacks raised questions about the effectiveness of intelligence. The apparently fundamental failures in relation to Iraqi weapons of mass destruction meant that intelligence was placed under a critical spotlight twice in a very short period of time.

At the same time, however, the editors share the view that, while the writing of intelligence history, discussions of organisational change and appropriate legal frameworks, and journalism have all increased tremendously, these have

not been matched by developments in conceptual and theoretical thinking about intelligence activities and processes. This concern has been most evident in the United States, where not just the intelligence community, but also the community of intelligence scholars, is larger than anywhere else. To that extent, this book is a direct descendant of an effort on the part of the US intelligence community to understand the conceptual and theoretical foundations of intelligence as – to use Sherman Kent's terms – knowledge, organisation and activity. This is reflected in the fact that most of the contributors to this volume are American. However, our aim has been to produce a book that does not simply address issues relating to US intelligence, but rather one that is seen as relevant by scholars of intelligence wherever they are based.

The specific origins of this volume lie in a workshop convened by the RAND Corporation and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence on the subject of intelligence theory, in which the editors and several contributors to this volume participated.[1] The driving force behind this workshop was Deborah Barger, the then-Assistant Deputy Director of National Intelligence for Strategy, Plans, and Policy, who had written a paper investigating the possibilities of transforming intelligence through a 'Revolution in Intelligence Affairs'.[2]

But transformation cannot occur effectively unless a better understanding exists of what is being transformed. Hence, Barger suggested assessing the conceptual foundations of intelligence; to include its definitions and theory. In sponsoring the workshop, she had three goals: first, to begin a series of debates about the future of intelligence writ large; second, to lay the intellectual foundations for revolutionary change in the world of intelligence; and third, to bridge the divide that has long separated intelligence scholars and practitioners. Many of those who attended the workshop believed that it met all three of these goals.

In 2006, Stephen Marrin organised a panel at the International Studies Association's (ISA) annual conference in San Diego on the subject of intelligence theory. This was followed by another organised by Peter Gill and Mark Phythian at the British International Studies Association conference in Cork December 2006 and a further panel at the March 2007 ISA conference in Chicago. This volume grew out of those meetings and discussions. In selecting and inviting contributions the editors have sought to represent a range of the most significant writing on intelligence theory to date and to represent a range of views and approaches that will encourage further consideration and debate by illuminating paths via which future scholars and practitioners may take the debate forward. Our hope is that the contributions here will encourage (and/or provoke) students of intelligence in Africa and Asia and elsewhere in the Americas and Europe to respond with their own writings that can form a future collection that will provide a better representation of global thinking on an issue that is so significant for people's safety, security and liberty.

Peter Gill
Stephen Marrin
Mark Phythian
December 2007

Notes

1 Gregory F. Treverton, Seth G. Jones, Steven Boraz and Philip Lipscy, *Toward a Theory of Intelligence: Workshop Report* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2006).
2 Deborah G. Barger, *Toward a Revolution in Intelligence Affairs* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2005).

4 Intelligence theory and theories of international relations

Shared world or separate worlds?

Mark Phythian

Introduction

Writing shortly before the events of 11 September 2001 (9/11), historian of intelligence David Kahn observed that:

> Intelligence has been an academic discipline for half a century now. Almost from the start, scholars have called for a theory of intelligence. None has been advanced. Although some authors entitle sections of their work 'theory of intelligence', to my knowledge no one has proposed concepts that can be tested.

Since then considerable work has been done on both sides of the Atlantic with a view to developing a solid theoretical basis from which the study of strategic intelligence, in the post-9/11 world more visibly central to our lives than at any previous time, can proceed.[1]

In part, this is a consequence of a general anxiety within the Intelligence Studies (IS) academic community that such a body of theoretical work needs to be generated in order to confer legitimacy on this developing subject area. Work to date has generated key questions about the role of theory, and whether the aim should be to seek an overarching 'theory of intelligence' or to generate theoretical bases for a number of key areas of inquiry. A related question concerns the relationship between attempts to theorize about strategic intelligence and existing theories of and within International Relations (IR). The aim of this chapter is to focus on this latter question, the role of theory, and its implications for the IS research agenda.

If IS is to further establish itself as a distinct subject area it clearly needs to develop those areas of study that are distinctive to it. Writing in 1993, Wesley Wark did much to define the subject area in identifying eight approaches to the study of intelligence, of which social science theorizing, somewhat vaguely termed the 'fourth perspective' by Wark, was but one (the others were: the research project; the historical project; the definitional project; memoirs; the civil liberties project; investigative journalism; and the popular culture project).[2] What, then, is the place of theory in IS? There seems little prospect of a unifying theory of intelligence because of the scope and complexity of the subject area

and, moreover, little need in that a significant part of the frame that this would provide already exists in the form of structural realist analyses. It is also worth noting that existing efforts to highlight links and commonalities between IS and IR have not got us very far. The starting point should be the definitional debate, one of Wark's eight 'projects', but one closely linked to the theory-building project by virtue of the fact that a solid definitional foundation is a necessary pre-requisite for theory-building. Indeed, it can be argued that this project itself borders on the theoretical.[3]

The meaning of theory

At the outset, though, it is worth discussing what we mean by 'theory'. There is much debate within IR over what constitutes a theory or theoretical approach, and whether or not IR as a discipline should be based on scientific principles. This debate has been variously characterized as being one between explaining and understanding, positivism and post-positivism, and rationalism and reflectivism. Within this, the form of theorizing that most closely approximates to the professional world of intelligence is explanatory or problem-solving theory. These are the theories most concerned with isolating and identifying the causal role of a given element and going on to draw conclusions and predictions from analysis. In this, explanatory theories have greater policy relevance than the critical approaches to be found in, for example, post-structuralism. Whether policy relevance should be an aim of IR theorizing is a separate debate,[4] but it seems logical that the professional world of intelligence should be drawn to theories that seek to explain the world it is tasked with monitoring and analysing, which employ a similar positivist methodology to that used in intelligence analysis, and which hold out the possibility of predicting state behaviour.[5]

Explanatory theory is based on firmly positivist foundations which emphasize the importance of vigorous scientific method, which can lead its advocates to question how far alternative approaches to IR actually constitute 'theory'. As Kenneth Waltz put it: 'Students of international politics use the term "theory" freely, to cover any work that departs from mere description and seldom to refer only to work that meets philosophy-of-science standards.'[6]

From this perspective, then, the purpose of theory is to facilitate understanding of the past and present and, through its predictive capacity, act as a guide to the future.[7] A theory serves to isolate the relevant factors and highlight the relationship between them, thereby constructing a theoretical reality. This isolation of a segment of activity in order to better explain it is fundamental to this approach to theorization. Isolation serves to expose patterns otherwise concealed by the mass of facts that exist around any phenomena. Where such isolation is impossible, theorization cannot proceed.[8] As understood by Waltz:

> Reality emerges from our selection and organization of materials that are available in infinite quantity … since empirical knowledge is potentially infinite in extent, without some guidance we can know neither what

> information to gather nor how to put it together so that it becomes comprehensible. If we could directly apprehend the world that interests us, we would have no need for theory. We cannot. One can reliably find his way among infinite materials only with the guidance of theory.[9]

For positivists like Waltz, theories exist to explain laws. In the social sciences these laws take the form of hypotheses derived from observation and/or measurement. We can distinguish between two different levels. First, there are 'laws' themselves, based on proven and inevitable links. Second, there are 'law-like statements'. These latter are probabilistic, derived from observation that demonstrates that a proposition is often and reliably proven but is still not inevitable, and therefore falls short of constituting a 'law'. Theory is then required to help us understand these observations. This is precisely the pattern – generating hypotheses ('laws') which call for theories to provide explanation and which can lead to corollaries or modifications to the hypotheses – that a number of IS academics have followed. For example, one of the leading figures in IS, Loch Johnson, in a series of writings including 'Bricks and Mortar for a Theory of Intelligence'[10] and (Chapter 3 of this volume) 'Sketches for a Theory of Strategic Intelligence', has developed propositions that require theoretical explanation. The titles of these pieces accurately convey the pre-theoretical nature of the propositions being outlined. The key point is that it is necessary to proceed from law to theory, by proposing hypotheses and then developing explanations of them.[11] As Waltz notes: 'A theory is born in conjecture and is viable if the conjecture is confirmed.'[12]

This kind of positivist approach also emphasizes that the use of models can be fundamental in facilitating theorization. The advantage of a model is that it, 'pictures reality while simplifying it, say, through omission or through reduction of scale.'[13] The model at the core of IS – the intelligence cycle – does just this. Moreover, 'this is how intelligence professionals conceptually think of their work',[14] notwithstanding the fact that the reality is inevitably more complex and qualified than the model suggests. Hence, it seems reasonable to suggest that the intelligence cycle should be at the heart of much of the theoretical work that marks IS out as a distinctive subject area.

From definitions to theoretical approaches

Following on from this, I want to argue that when the IS community considers the areas where theorization should be prioritized so as to continue to develop this distinctive subject area, there are some areas where it need not become bogged down, because the work has, in effect, already been done by an existing theoretical approach to IR. In order to get to this point, however, it is necessary to proceed from some discussion of the definitional debate.

There is considerable debate as to how intelligence should be defined. For example, should a definition embrace covert action, or does this constitute an 'allied activity'?[15] Is secrecy essential to it? To take just a few examples, for

Michael Warner, 'intelligence is secret, state activity to understand or influence foreign entities'[16] For Abram Shulsky and Gary Schmitt, it is 'information relevant to a government's formulating and implementing policy to further its national security interests and to deal with threats to those interests from actual or potential adversaries.'[17] For his part, Loch Johnson has defined intelligence as 'the knowledge – and, ideally, foreknowledge – sought by nations in response to external threats and to protect their vital interests, especially the well-being of their own people.'[18] For Gill and Phythian:

> Intelligence is the umbrella term referring to the range of activities – from planning and information collection to analysis and dissemination – conducted in secret, and aimed at maintaining or enhancing relative security by providing forewarning of threats or potential threats in a manner that allows for the timely implementation of a preventive policy or strategy, including, where deemed desirable, covert activities.[19]

While all of these vary, one thing that a number have in common is not just the idea of providing security, but also, implicitly or explicitly, that intelligence is sought and intelligence agencies organized so as to secure *relative advantage*. On this basis, if we were to ask why states regard intelligence as being necessary, we could answer that intelligence is the agency through which states seek to protect or extend their relative advantage. In this, intelligence and structural realism share a common core concern and, to an extent, employ a common language.[20] It is no accident that Shulsky and Schmitt titled their book *Silent Warfare* or that then Director of Central Intelligence Robert Gates should tell junior CIA officers that the 'nation is at peace because we in intelligence are constantly at war.'[21]

Intelligence and structural realism

Hence, there is a close relationship between intelligence and structural realism. Security and securing relative advantage are the job of intelligence and structural realism is the explanatory approach to IR most centrally concerned with security. The requirement for the former arises out of the latter's analysis of the international system and the understanding it invites of the likely behaviour of states under conditions of anarchy. This means that structural realism already provides a theoretical explanation for certain key questions in IS, such as why intelligence is necessary and why, particularly in the case of the US, intelligence agencies did not wither away with the passing of the Cold War.

It has been suggested that intelligence has attracted little attention from IR scholars.[22] However, intelligence actually occupies a central place in structural realist thinking, albeit one that is sometimes more implicit than explicit.[23] As noted above the need for it arises out of the core assumptions about the nature of the international system that structural realists make. For offensive realists, and as outlined by John Mearsheimer, these are that:

1 great powers are the main actors in world politics, and operate in an anarchic international system;
2 all states possess some offensive military capability;
3 states can never be certain about the intentions of other states;
4 the main goal of states is survival;
5 states are rational actors.[24]

It is the combination of these factors that, for structural realists, generates an unending security competition. In particular, it is the third of these assumptions that explains the need for intelligence, as is clear from Mearsheimer's discussion of it:

> States ultimately want to know whether other states are determined to use force to alter the balance of power, or whether they are satisfied enough with it that they have no interest in using force to change it. The problem, however, is that it is almost impossible to discern another state's intentions with a high degree of certainty. Unlike military capabilities, intentions cannot be empirically verified. Intentions are in the minds of decision-makers and they are especially difficult to discern.
>
> One might respond that policy-makers disclose their intentions in speeches and policy documents, which can be assessed. The problem with that argument is policy-makers sometimes lie about or conceal their true intentions. But even if one could determine another state's intentions today, there is no way to determine its future intentions. It is impossible to know who will be running foreign policy in any state five or ten years from now, much less whether they will have aggressive intentions. This is not to say that states can be certain that their neighbours have or will have revisionist goals. Instead, the argument is that policy-makers can never be certain whether they are dealing with a revisionist or status quo state.[25]

Hence, acceptance of the validity of these assumptions underpins state investment in intelligence. The job of intelligence, through collection and analysis, is to reduce this uncertainty about other states' current and future intentions, to attempt to uncover 'impossible' knowledge, and thus to provide advance warning of any trouble ahead and so reduce fear. State investment in intelligence is premised on the existence of international anarchy wherein trust among states is low and, as Kenneth Waltz puts it, wars can occur, 'because there is nothing to prevent them.'[26] It is also premised on the fact that the international system is a self-help one where, as Mearsheimer puts it, 'there is no higher authority to come to [states'] rescue when they dial 911'.[27] Because of this, states that can will organize agencies to act as needed, and as secretly as necessary. This will include engaging in covert actions designed to protect or extend relative advantage.

As this suggests, a structural realist perspective also provides an explanation for the centrality of secrecy to intelligence. In a self-help system secrecy is

essential to the success of operations, the prospects of their successful repetition, and to minimizing the risk of reaction from other states (or non-state actors), given that states can rely on no one else to provide for their security. In an inherently competitive realm secondary states will seek to imitate and emulate the intelligence practices and innovations of the leading states no less than they will their military innovations.

Why are secrets secret? In any realm secrecy is related to the desire to secure advantage or avoid the development of disadvantageous situations. In this context secrecy is essential because the knowledge it conceals is considered a constituent part of a state's relative advantage, which could be eroded by disclosure. Hence, a structural realist prism serves to highlight how both covert action and secrecy are fundamental to intelligence, an issue of some debate within IS.

Moreover, structural realism can provide explanations as to why even the strongest state(s) must maintain significant intelligence capabilities, by suggesting that where secondary states have a choice they will

> flock to the weaker side; for it is the stronger side that threatens them. On the weaker side, they are both more appreciated and safer, provided, of course, that the coalition they join achieves enough defensive or deterrent strength to dissuade adversaries from attacking.[28]

This holds out the risk of the emergence of a balancing coalition, early warning of the development of which is essential to its prevention and the maintenance of relative advantage.

Although there are clear differences between how offensive and defensive realists see the world, the need for intelligence is writ large in both approaches. The principal difference lies in the fact that the defensive realism of Waltz rests on just two assumptions – that the international system is anarchic and that states seek to survive. It does not assume that states always act rationally. However, the absence of this assumption simply makes the need for accurate intelligence all the more pressing. Hence, just as structural realism can provide explanations of other phenomena, for example, the conditions under which states seek to engage in nuclear proliferation, so it can also explain the conditions that give rise to the need for intelligence.[29]

If the growth of foreign intelligence communities in the leading Western states was premised on the Soviet threat, why did they survive the Cold War largely intact? Structural realism explains this by reference to the uncertainty principle discussed above and through highlighting how, regardless of the existence of any specific threat, the strongest and wealthiest states will invest most heavily in intelligence because they have the strongest interest in the maintenance of the existing configuration of forces in the international system, the one that gives rise to their relative strength.[30] Even in an environment where a preponderant power, such as the contemporary United States, feels relatively secure because of the limited likelihood that another state will attack it directly, it will still require a broad-based intelligence capability, because:

> war among the lesser great powers is still possible, because the balance of power between any two of them will at least sometimes be roughly equal, thus allowing for the possibility that one might defeat the other. But, even then, if the preponderant power believes that such wars might upset a favourable international order, it should have the wherewithal to stop them, or at least make them unusual events.[31]

Intelligence, then, is also the early warning means by which such powers seek to manage the international system to their continued advantage. Such international management is essentially reactive and, as such, good intelligence is of fundamental importance. This logic also suggests that preponderant powers are the most likely to intervene in areas of instability, with all of the attendant costs – human and financial, but also political – and so have the strongest incentive to gather the best and most extensive (not always the same thing) intelligence on these areas, allowing for a timely and effective policy response to potential or actual instability, and thereby minimizing the costs. This need provides the context for Loch Johnson's invitation to:

> Consider the intelligence focus of the United States compared to New Zealand, or even Israel in its hostile setting. America's intelligence failures have been extensive in recent years, including (most painfully) the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001, the mistaken targeting of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, and the inability to find the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein in 1991, the Somali warlord Mohamed Farah Aidid in 1993, or the Al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden in 2001–2002. While New Zealand may falter from time to time in its efforts to track illegal Japanese fishing for albacore tuna in its seas, and Israel may suffer the more hurtful inability to anticipate the next suicide bombing, the tasks of the intelligence services in these smaller nations are much more focused and manageable.[32]

A few caveats are in order. Firstly, structural realism was not conceived as an explanation of all international activity. Especially in its offensive realist variant, it is designed to be a parsimonious theory which, because it omits a broad range of actors and factors from its explanatory apparatus, has clear limits. Increased international co-operation at various levels presents a challenge to the theory, especially in the form of the European Union. Because it is a theory about state behaviour, structural realism has little to say about the post-9/11 'war on terror', a not insignificant omission. As John Mearsheimer concedes; 'there are limits to what realism can tell us about al-Qaeda, because it is a non-state actor, and there is no room for non-state actors in structural realism.'[33] Similarly, it has little to say about the security challenges posed by transnational organized crime, about environmental politics, or about intelligence co-operation and the role of intelligence in support of UN operations and war crimes prosecutions. Secondly, to anticipate some of the discussion to come, there is the question of whether struc-

tural realism, especially in its offensive variant, accurately describes the world as seen by everyone or is an approach which best describes it from a US perspective and in light of US interests. Structural realism may not be a theory *of* US foreign and security policy, but there is a sense in which it is a theory *for* US foreign and security policy; the prescriptions that arise from it are intended to secure or enhance US hegemony.

Nevertheless, in practice, both intelligence customers and practitioners tend to view the world through a realist/idealist dichotomy that does not easily accommodate or see the immediate policy relevance of post-structuralist or reflectivist approaches. Practitioners are unlikely to be highly receptive to approaches to IR which deny the possibility of uncovering objective truth when their task is to deliver the most objective analysis possible ('best truth'), and where failure can result from compromising this effort and, instead of telling 'truth to power', tailoring analysis to suit real or imagined customer preferences.

None of this is intended to exaggerate the claims that can be made for the explanatory power of structural realism. There are other approaches that can help explain, for example, the failure of intelligence agencies to wither away with the passing of the Cold War – bureaucratic politics, for one. Rather it is simply intended to show why in practice it is the foundation from which the practice of intelligence arises and the framework that *best* describes the world as seen, implicitly or explicitly, from the point of view of the intelligence professional and at least some leading figures in the IS field.

Two important final points emerge from this. First, if it is the case that intelligence activity is underpinned by either defensive or offensive realist assumptions, then intelligence clearly has a built-in offensive as well as defensive role. Second, if one or more of the core assumptions underpinning structural realism can be disproved, then the theory collapses. As Mearsheimer puts it, 'if you knock out an assumption, you cripple the theory.'[34] This has serious implications for intelligence. If the theory is flawed, there is no need for such a large, expensive, unwieldy intelligence community as that which exists in the contemporary US. More funding should be allocated instead to public diplomacy. Hence, intelligence professionals have a vested interest in general acceptance of the logic of structural realism. If it collapses, they might lose their jobs.

Theorization and intelligence studies: towards a research agenda

Structural realism, then, provides a theoretical basis for addressing key questions, but also has clear limits which IS needs to move beyond in developing its instinctive research agenda. In doing this, it needs to bear in mind Peter Gill's distinction between theories *of* intelligence and theories *for* intelligence.[35] In part this is a consequence of the need to bear in mind the difficulties generated for the outsider academic by the secrecy that attaches to its practice. The outsider academic can never hope to be as well-informed as the practitioner. This is no

different from the realities that exist in the field of Strategic Studies. With regard to this, Lawrence Freedman has suggested that:

> In terms of defining a field of study, the vantage point of a student of strategy is quite different from that of a practitioner. Efforts by the former to display some superior wisdom may well deserve to be treated with contempt. The most helpful role remains that which can be properly described as 'academic' (even though in the policy world this is all too often synonymous with irrelevant). The task is to conceptualize and contextualize rather than provide specific guidance. If it is done well, then the practitioner should be able to recognize the relevance for whatever may be the problem at hand.[36]

This does, however, also raise the question of the audience for whom the IS academic is writing. The natural assumption with regard to Strategic Studies is that this is the practitioner. This can, and probably should, be true *in part* for IS academics, but their role should go beyond this to educate publics and foster and engage in debate on issues of ethics, accountability and the liberty/security trade-off. IS and IS academics do not exist simply to be of assistance to intelligence agencies, their responsibilities are broader.[37] While intelligence can be a force for good by ensuring the security and well-being of the citizens in whose name it operates, history is littered with examples where, acting in secrecy, agencies have exceeded their mandate and violated human rights and/or civil liberties.

Recognising the utility of structural realism in explaining the emergence, persistence and resilience of intelligence agencies, by moving beyond this, I would suggest that the focus of theoretical work in IS should be on intelligence failure, intelligence ethics, and intelligence oversight and accountability, the first two of which at least hold out the prospect of other theoretical approaches in IR making a substantial contribution.

The core theoretical focus should be on the causes of intelligence failure, the study of which is rooted in the concept of the intelligence cycle and so potentially embraces all intelligence activity. Failure is that which, ideally, shouldn't happen.[38] The 'law' that this theorizing would respond to, if firm positivist foundations need to be sought, is that of Richard Betts on the inevitability of intelligence failure.[39] This focus gives IS theorizing a distinctive, *post mortem*, character. It is also an area where outsider academics are able to contribute in the manner suggested by Freedman in relation to Strategic Studies, drawing on insights from a range of disciplines and approaches including, for example, discourse analysis, cognitive psychology, and economics.[40] This reflects the fact that the existence of a relatively rich vein of case study material, and the increasing norm that acknowledged failures will result in public or other inquiries which publish reports and even the evidence underpinning them, has meant that the obstacle of secrecy is nowhere near as great as it once was, and outsider academics have the potential to make a genuine contribution to debates. This work

is far more than a service to the government of the day and its intelligence agencies. It is also important in terms of civic education and in informing debates about the kind of intelligence agencies a state requires and the nature of the oversight required.

This *post mortem* character also lends itself to analyses from a number of IR standpoints which can stimulate fresh thinking about the causes and extent of intelligence failure. Constructivism, for example, with its greater emphasis on agency and the social dimensions of IR and focus on norms, rules, language and the 'how possible' question, can inform thinking about the role of intelligence in, for example, the Iraq failure. From a constructivist standpoint, the causes of the war in Iraq and role of intelligence in this might be explained thus:

> It is now known that intelligence communities on both sides of the Atlantic got it wrong, in (falsely) believing that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. An explanation that the invasion was caused by Iraq's weapons of mass destruction is more accurately stated in the following terms. The reason for the invasion of Iraq, given by foreign-policy elites, was the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction. Whether these actors believed the intelligence or manufactured it, this 'reason' made the invasion possible. The reason was the means for persuading the US public, and US soldiers, that this was a legitimate act by their government. The reason was strengthened by the link made in political discourse between Saddam and the attackers on 9/11. The premise that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction, although based on false data, established the context for making a justification, that is giving a reason for the invasion. The reason was publicly accessible in political language. It constituted an action and a 'reality', that is the invasion. The intention to invade was embedded in these language games and in the act of invasion itself.[41]

This leads to the second area of the proposed IS theoretical focus – intelligence oversight and accountability – aimed at citizens and legislators, and of fundamental importance in a liberal democratic context. Much work has been done here in recent years.[42] Moreover, this is the area where most comparative work within IS has been undertaken, focusing in particular on developments in transition states and treating intelligence oversight as a central component of the democratization process. This work has generated studies not just on the usual suspects, but also on oversight in Poland, Argentina, South Korea, and South Africa, to name but a few. It has also facilitated the generation of propositions as to what effective oversight should look like.[43]

This second focus should be informed by a third, on intelligence ethics. Ethical issues are inseparable from intelligence activities and, like the question of failure, can take in the entire intelligence cycle. Targeting of 'friendly' states, the very notion of covert surveillance, and the more intrusive forms of collection, together with the question of covert action and other intelligence-led policy responses, all raise fundamental ethical questions. There is a growing body of

work on this subject,[44] most recently clearly informed by developments in the 'War on Terror', specifically the torture debate in the US[45] and the associated question of extraordinary rendition – in effect, the outsourcing of torture by the US. Hence, more than ever before, there is a need to adapt the just war paradigm to construct a concept of *jus in intelligentia*.[46]

Given their critical posture, there is a potentially important role for post-structuralist writings to play in thinking about intelligence. While subject to criticism on a range of grounds,[47] discourse approaches to intelligence do have the capacity to illuminate issues of key importance to publics in democracies. More a critical approach to IR than a theory or paradigm, post-structuralism generates critiques aimed at exposing assumptions underpinning states of affairs that have come to be regarded as natural or inevitable, thereby demonstrating that in fact they are not, drawing attention to the relationship between power and knowledge in the process. As explained by Michel Foucault:

> A critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest. We must free ourselves from the sacralization of the social as the only reality and stop regarding as superfluous something so essential in human life and in human relations as thought.… It is something that is often hidden, but which always animates everyday behavior. There is always a little thought even in the most stupid institutions; there is always thought even in silent habits. Criticism is a matter of flushing out that thought and trying to change it: to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed, to see what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such. Practicing criticism is a matter of making facile gestures difficult.[48]

In a sense, then, post-structuralism sees itself carrying out a form of oversight of power at the level of discourse. In the current 'War on Terror' this could involve analysis of the public language used by politicians to achieve the required degree of political and social consensus in using intelligence to justify pre-emptive or preventive war. Such critical approaches also have a clear role to play in the *post mortem* debates about the nature and causes of intelligence failure. A number of writers, such as Richard Jackson, have begun to focus on the construction of the 'War on Terror' in this way, considering the role of intelligence within this, and in so doing performing an educative function that has considerable importance given the context. For Jackson:

> The language of the 'war on terrorism' is not simply an objective or neutral reflection of reality; nor is it merely accidental or incidental. It is not the only way to talk and think about counter-terrorism. Rather, it is a deliberately and meticulously composed set of words, assumptions, metaphors, grammatical forms, myths and forms of knowledge – it is a carefully con-

> structed *discourse* – that is designed to achieve a number of key political goals: to normalize and legitimize the current counter-terrorist approach; to empower the authorities and shield them from criticism; to discipline domestic society by marginalising dissent or protest; and to enforce national unity by reifying a narrow conception of political identity. The discourse of the 'war on terrorism' has a clear *political* purpose; it works for someone and for something: it is an exercise of power.[49]

Such perspectives shift the focus of IS from the intelligence cycle and the production of intelligence to its impact, thereby encouraging and informing debates about ethics and oversight and accountability. They also focus attention on the problem of objective truth. Acceptance of the structural realist logic that underpins the existence of intelligence communities rests on the positivist assumption that there is such a thing as objective truth and reality and that, through careful collection and analysis, intelligence agencies exist to arrive at it. Acceptance, instead, of the impossibility of unearthing a single objective truth, of the idea that intelligence agencies through collection and analysis 'create' their own reality, coupled with the secrecy that attaches to intelligence, raises the key question of manipulation.[50]

The premise here, as Fry and Hochstein have noted, is that intelligence is not simply an objective 'eye' seeing and describing reality but one which, for a range of reasons, may introduce distortions with the consequence that intelligence, 'participates in the creation and reproduction of international political reality' and therefore, 'does not merely describe the world in which the state operates, but in fact actively "creates" that world for each state.'[51] This has potentially serious implications for democratic governance, well illustrated by journalist Ron Suskind's account of an encounter with an anonymous 'senior advisor' to President Bush in the build-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq:

> The aide said that guys like me [i.e., reporters and commentators] were 'in what we call the reality-based community,' which he defined as people who 'believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.' I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. 'That's not the way the world really works anymore,' he continued. 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors … and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.'[52]

There is an irony here, in that the question of trust emerges as being central to the IS agenda twice over. Firstly, at the international level it is the impossibility of permanent inter-state trust arising from the anarchic, 'self-help', international system that does much to create the requirement for intelligence in the first place. Secondly, at the societal level there is the question of how far trust can be

placed in intelligence agencies, a consequence of the political cultures of both the US and UK, but reaffirmed by pre-9/11 historical experience and post-9/11 developments around detention, extraordinary rendition, torture, destruction of evidence relating to torture and suspicion that co-operation with official inquiries is limited by a desire to protect intelligence bureaucracies and individuals within them. Hence, a 'trust deficit' leads to the creation of intelligence agencies, but their creation, in turn, generates a 'trust dilemma' at a societal level.[53]

Commonalities with terrorism studies

The above discussion of approaches to the study of intelligence rooted in different theories in and of IR cannot be exhaustive given limitations of space. A more comprehensive account would also have pointed to the various contributions that could be made by feminist, post-colonialist, globalization, and Marxist approaches[54] and, perhaps in particular in the current security environment, the international society approach of the English School. At the same time, intelligence activities represent a challenge for other theoretical approaches, such as democratic peace theory. In thinking about the potential for theorizing about strategic intelligence and the focus of such theorizing it is also useful to briefly consider the similarities in the approach of a related subject area, Terrorism Studies (TS) and the potential that academics in the two fields have to learn from and collaborate with each other.

There are parallels between IS and TS in terms of the definitional debates both have engaged in. As with IS, within TS these 'pre-theoretical' debates have in the past served as a substitute for advancing theoretical frameworks. Just as the focus of theorizing within IS is essentially limited to a small number of core issues, so it is in TS. Here, the key theoretical questions concern the causes of terrorism, and the conditions under which terrorist movements decline. The focus of the theoretical work can be at the level of the individual, societal or international. As with IS, the absence of any general agreement on a definition of the subject has implications for the development of theoretical work. For example, the debate over whether covert action is 'part' of intelligence has its counterpart in debates as to whether TS concerns just terrorism 'from below' or whether it also includes state terrorism. As with IS, it draws on insights from other disciplines – particularly psychology – for its impact. Like intelligence, terrorism is a term that describes a method, a process, a means to an end. It is similarly wide-ranging. As with intelligence, there is no overarching theory that explains the whole field. Indeed, as with intelligence, much writing on terrorism adopts the historically-rooted case study approach rather than seeking to construct theoretical frames to explain terrorist activity. Here too, a small multidisciplinary field mushroomed in the wake of 9/11. Both academic communities share the need to overcome the obstacle of secrecy. Both embrace concerns that they are not really disciplines in their own right.[55] Here too is concern that 'law-like' statements that have become cornerstones of the subject need further

theoretical testing and even qualification (for example, Brian Jenkins' assertion that, 'terrorists like a lot of people watching rather than a lot of people dead'),[56] and that, overall, its study, 'is widely recognized as theoretically impoverished, [and] stands to gain in theoretical scope, precision, and cumulativeness of findings.'[57]

Moreover, IS and TS have a number of concerns in common. Both are agreed on the inevitability of strategic surprise, whether framed as intelligence failure or terrorist occurrence.[58] Both communities have an important role to play in public education about the nature of the terrorist threat and public expectations concerning intelligence. The 'War on Terror' has seen both communities engage in controversies over human rights abuses arising from extraordinary rendition, the operation of black sites, imprisonment without charge or trial at Guantánamo Bay, and the use of torture, in general seeking to support normative principles relating to civil liberties at a time when they are ignored or bypassed in the name of national security. It may well be that these commonalities point to the need for joint research where ideas concerning the theoretical possibilities and limitations that each subject area confronts can be shared to the benefit and advancement of both.

Concluding thoughts

Strategic intelligence is a process, a means to an end. That end is security and the maintenance or enhancement of relative advantage. The overarching theory that explains the need for and persistence of intelligence agencies is the one that explains the prevalence of the threats and uncertainties that intelligence exists to provide early warning of in order to ensure that potential threats do not translate into actual ones. This is not a theory of intelligence, but a theory of international politics. Theorizing within IS, therefore, need not detain itself with these issues, and can instead focus on and further develop those aspects of IS that mark it out as a distinctive subject area – failure, ethics, and oversight and accountability. There is nothing permanent about these, and the research agenda should shift to reflect contemporary developments, but in the current international security environment each is of great importance.

The study of failure involves analysis of all the activities that comprise the intelligence cycle model. This represents the bounded realm within which factors can be isolated and connections made. It would be odd if one of the key areas for theorization did not centre on the model at the heart of the study of intelligence. As Loch Johnson has observed, for IS 'the central issue' concerns 'when intelligence is likely to succeed or fail.'[59] Stephen Marrin makes the point that, 'teasing out the causes of intelligence failure provides the same kind of theoretical foundation for intelligence studies that isolating causes of war does in international relations theorizing.'[60] Much work remains to be done here, particularly in explaining the way in which intelligence seems to remain stubbornly immune to the lessons of the recent past. Hence, even after exhaustive inquiries into failure relating to Iraqi WMD and subsequent reforms, the James

Baker-led Iraq Study Group in December 2006 was still obliged to report on the under-reporting of violence in Iraq by US intelligence officials, who in one instance recorded just 93 'attacks or significant acts of violence' on a day when the actual figure was well over 1,000.[61] Why was this? One possible explanation is that the intelligence–customer interface continues to merit serious attention and that, for whatever reason, politicization remains a major issue. Theorization is called for in order to best explain these phenomena.

At the same time, more comparative work is necessary with regard to failure to establish whether emerging theoretical propositions relate to intelligence *per se*, or whether they are essentially explanations of the US intelligence environment. A good candidate for such consideration is Loch Johnson's proposition that: 'Intelligence can become politicized in democratic regimes, but because of the countering influence of professional integrity this happens far less frequently than in authoritarian regimes.'[62] This also points to the fact that, while the bulk of the work to date with regard to IS theorizing has been undertaken in the US, the next stage will require the focus to shift somewhat to consider other intelligence environments, and thereby generate, test and establish general theories of intelligence that are more than theories of US intelligence. There is a sense in which this is what much writing to date, following on from the lead established by Sherman Kent, in fact represents.

Notes

1 See David Kahn, p. 4 above. Intelligence activities are carried out, and hence intelligence exists, at a number of levels from the international to that of the individual. Because it exists at a number of levels, theorization concerning intelligence can be conceived of as operating vertically, across levels, or horizontally, focusing on a specific level. Peter Gill and I have suggested that surveillance is a useful linking concept that facilitates vertical theorization. See, Peter Gill and Mark Phythian, *Intelligence in an Insecure World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), Ch. 2. The focus here is the level of strategic intelligence.

2 Wesley K. Wark, 'The Study of Espionage: Past, Present, Future?', *Intelligence and National Security* Vol. 8 No. 3 1993, pp. 1–13.

3 For example, Shulsky and Schmitt's final chapter 'Toward a Theory of Intelligence' merely revisits the definitional debate with which their book opens. See Abram N. Shulsky and Gary J. Schmitt, *Silent Warfare: Understanding the World of Intelligence* (3rd edn, Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2002), pp. 169–76.

4 On this question, see William Wallace, 'Truth and Power, Monks and Technocrats: Theory and Practice in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 22 No. 3 1996, pp. 301–21; Ken Booth, 'Discussion: A Reply to Wallace', *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 23 No. 2 1997, pp. 371–7; and Steve Smith, 'Power and Truth: A Reply to William Wallace', *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 23 No. 4 1997, pp. 507–16.

5 See, for example, Sherman Kent, *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966 [originally 1949]); Isaac Ben-Israel, 'Philosophy and Methodology of Intelligence: The Logic of the Estimate Process', *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 4 No. 4 1989, pp. 660–718.

6 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA, Addison-Wesley, 1979), p. 1.

7 In the realm of IR, it is often argued that a theory should be capable of performing four principal tasks: describe; explain; predict; prescribe. See Charles W. Kegley, Jr (ed.), *Controversies in International Relations: Realism and the Neoliberal Challenge* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995), p. 8.
8 Waltz, *Theory*, p. 8.
9 Ibid., p. 5.
10 Loch K. Johnson, 'Bricks and Mortar for a Theory of Intelligence', *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 22 2003, pp. 1–28. See also Loch K. Johnson, 'Preface to a Theory of Strategic Intelligence', *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, Vol. 16 2003, pp. 638–63.
11 Waltz, *Theory*, p. 8.
12 Ibid., p. 2.
13 Ibid., p. 7.
14 Johnson, 'Bricks and Mortar', p. 2.
15 See, for example, Michael Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War* (Cambridge: RIIA/Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 55–6.
16 Michael Warner, 'Wanted: A Definition of Intelligence', *Studies in Intelligence* Vol. 46 No. 3 2002, www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol46no3/article02.html accessed 18 October 2007.
17 Shulsky and Schmitt, *Silent Warfare*, p. 1.
18 Loch K. Johnson, 'Intelligence', in Bruce W. Jentleson and Thomas G. Paterson (eds), *Encyclopedia of US Foreign Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 365–73.
19 Gill and Phythian, *Intelligence in an Insecure World*, p. 7.
20 A number of academics and practitioners adopt implicitly neo-realist explanations of intelligence rooted in the idea of relative advantage. For example, Loch Johnson writes of how: 'Whether a president or a prime minister, a dictator or a king, leaders want to know about threats to their regimes, as well as opportunities for advancing their interests.' Johnson, 'Bricks and Mortar', p. 10.
21 Cited in Charles E. Lathrop, *The Literary Spy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 205.
22 See, for example, the discussion in Len Scott and Peter Jackson, 'The Study of Intelligence in Theory and Practice', *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 19 No. 2 2004, pp. 146–8.
23 It is not alone in this. For example, structural realism says little explicitly about the force of nationalism, although this is an important consideration in structural realist thinking. See 'Conversations in International Relations: Interview with John Mearsheimer (Part II)' *International Relations*, Vol. 20 No. 2 2006, p. 235.
24 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), pp. 30–1.
25 John J. Mearsheimer, 'Structural Realism', in Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (eds), *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 73.
26 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954), p. 232. See also, Robert Gilpin, 'The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism', in Robert O. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 87–8.
27 Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 33.
28 Waltz, *Theory*, p. 127.
29 See, Scott D. Sagan, 'Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb', *International Security*, Vol. 21 No. 3 Winter 1996/7, pp. 54–87; Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003). The reasons why states may be reluctant

to rely on intelligence sharing and the reasons why they may not trust in extended deterrence also bear similarities, rooted in neo-realist explanations.

30 Loch Johnson makes essentially the same point slightly differently in noting that: 'As the world moves further toward globalization, intelligence services are increasingly targeting nations or other entities that threaten the common good and sharing information with a wider set of coalitions then usual, including international organizations.' 'Bricks and Mortar', p. 7.

31 Mearsheimer, 'Structural Realism', p. 81.

32 Johnson, 'Bricks and Mortar', p. 3.

33 'Conversations in International Relations', p. 235.

34 Ibid., p. 234.

35 Peter Gill, 'Theories of Intelligence: Where are we, where should we go and how might we proceed?', in this volume, p. 212.

36 Lawrence Freedman, 'The Future of Strategic Studies', in John Baylis, James Wirtz, Eliot Cohen and Colin S. Gray (eds), *Strategy in the Contemporary World: An Introduction to Strategic Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 333.

37 This takes us back to the debate referred to in note 4, above.

38 As James Murphy notes:

> The very designation "intelligence failure", when we contrast it with our attitude towards law enforcement, tells us something important about what people expect from intelligence. Police officers enjoy considerable advantages over criminals – they even know most of them – yet they are seldom held responsible for preventing crime: we ask only that they act after the fact to arrest and prosecute the guilty.

James Murphy, 'How to Judge Which Spies Are Right', *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 June 2006.

39 Richard K. Betts, 'Analysis, War, and Decision: Why intelligence failures are inevitable', *World Politics*, Vol. 31 No. 1 1978, pp. 61–89, and in this volume, pp. 87–111.

40 See, for example, Peter R. Neumann and M. L. R. Smith, 'Missing the Plot? Intelligence and Discourse Failure', *Orbis*, Winter 2005, pp. 95–107; Richards J. Heuer, Jr, 'Limits of Intelligence Analysis', *Orbis*, Winter 2005, pp. 75–94; Ohad Leslau, 'Intelligence and Economics: Two Disciplines with a Common Dilemma', *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, Vol. 20 No. 1 2007, pp. 106–21; Paul Ormerod, *Why Most Things Fail … And How to Avoid It* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005). See also Gregory F. Treverton, Seth G. Jones, Steven Boraz and Philip Lipscy, *Toward a Theory of Intelligence: Workshop Report* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2006).

41 K. M. Fierke, 'Constructivism', in Dunne *et al.*, *International Relations Theories*, pp. 176–7.

42 Most notably, Hans Born, Loch K. Johnson and Ian Leigh (eds), *Who's Watching the Spies? Establishing Intelligence Service Accountability* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2005); Hans Born and Ian Leigh, *Legal Standards and Best Practice for Oversight of Intelligence Agencies* (Oslo: Publishing House of the Parliament of Norway, 2005); Loch K. Johnson (ed.), *Strategic Intelligence, Volume 5: Intelligence and Accountability – Safeguards Against the Abuse of Secret Power* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007).

43 Hans Born and Loch K. Johnson, 'Balancing Operational Efficiency and Democratic Legitimacy', in Born *et al.*, *Who's Watching the Spies?*, pp. 225–39.

44 See, for example, Michael Herman, 'Intelligence and International Ethics', in Herman, *Intelligence Services in the Information Age* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), pp. 201–27; Michael Herman, 'Ethics and Intelligence after September 2001', *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 19 No. 2 2004, pp. 342–58; Michael Andregg,

'Intelligence Ethics: Laying a Foundation for the Second Oldest Profession', in Loch K. Johnson (ed.), *Handbook of Intelligence Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 52–63; Alfred W. McCoy, *A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation, From the Cold War to the War on Terror* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

45 There is now a significant literature on this. For original documents and a good summary of the debate, see: Karen J. Greenberg, Joshua L. Dratel and Anthony Lewis (eds), *The Torture Papers: The Road to Abu Ghraib* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Karen J. Greenberg (ed.), *The Torture Debate in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

46 See, Michael Quinlan, 'Just Intelligence: Prolegomena to an Ethical Theory', *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 22 No. 1 2007, pp. 1–13.

47 For a discussion of the scope, merits and limitations of post-structuralism, something which is beyond the scope of this chapter, see Fred Halliday, *Rethinking International Relations* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 37–46; Steve Smith, 'New Approaches to International Theory', in John Baylis and Steve Smith (eds), *The Globalization of World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 165–90; Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); R. K. Ashley, 'The Achievements of Post-Structuralism', in Steve Smith, Ken Booth and Marysia Zalewski (eds), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 240–53); and Gill and Phythian, *Intelligence in an Insecure World*, pp. 20–38.

48 Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy and Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977–1984* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 154–5.

49 Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counter-Terrorism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 2. See also, for example, Philip Smith, *Why War? The Cultural Logic of Iraq, The Gulf War, and Suez* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), esp. Chs. 5–6.

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51 Michael G. Fry and Miles Hochstein, 'Epistemic Communities: Intelligence Studies and International Relations', *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 8 No. 3 1993, p. 25.

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59 Johnson, 'Bricks and Mortar', p. 1.
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61 Iraq Study Group, *Report* (Washington, DC, December 2006), p. 62.
62 Johnson, 'Bricks and Mortar', p. 11.