



Published on *The National Interest* (<http://nationalinterest.org>)

Source URL (retrieved on Jul 26, 2012): <http://nationalinterest.org/article/the-cia-vindicated-the-soviet-collapse-was-predicted-572>

The CIA Vindicated: The Soviet Collapse Was Predicted

From the Fall 1995 ^[1] issue

| More ^[2]

Bruce D. Berkowitz ^[3], Jeffrey T. Richelson ^[4]

September 1, 1995

Bruce D. Berkowitz ^[3], Jeffrey T. Richelson ^[4]

"The CIA failed in its single, overriding defining mission, which was to chart the course of Soviet affairs." --**Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Quoted by Bill Gertz, Washington Times, May 21, 1992.**

"The CIA [has] come under legitimate attack from President Clinton for failing to predict the collapse of the Soviet Union." --**Morton Kondracke, Washington Times, April 26, 1995.**

"The CIA itself did not make much difference in the ultimate outcome of the cold war. Its analysts misjudged almost every major development in the post-World War II world, including the most spectacular misjudgment of all--the flat-out failure to predict the collapse of the Soviet Union." --**David Wise, Nightmover: How Aldrich Ames Sold the CIA to the KGB for \$4.6 Million (1995).**

"Has any government department goofed up more than the Central Intelligence Agency?... Their most egregious and expensive blunder about the Soviet economy we are still paying for." --**Mary McGrory, Washington Post, March 14, 1995.**

"Never has so much money been allocated to study one country; never have so many academic and government specialists scrutinized every aspect of a country's life. . . . Yet when the end came, the experts found themselves utterly unprepared." --**Richard Pipes, Foreign Affairs (January/ February 1995).**

"The CIA failed to alert the President and Congress about the inexorable Soviet collapse. The present DCI, in his starched white outfit wishing it all away, is in a curious state of institutional denial." --**William Safire, New York Times, April 6, 1995.**

Almost everyone, it seems, knows that the Central Intelligence Agency failed to anticipate the collapse of the Soviet Union. Indeed, the belief that the CIA somehow missed the single most important event of the twentieth century pervades virtually all discussions of U.S. intelligence these days, and may, in fact, be one of the few Cold War events about which both liberals and conservatives agree.

This unanimity comes at an especially difficult time for the intelligence community. Under fire today for other shortcomings, including, notably, its handling of the Aldrich Ames case, the agency is struggling to explain and justify its mission in the post-Cold War era.

The perception of failure in the Soviet case has become a key piece of evidence in current debates over plans to reform the U.S. intelligence community, part of the rationale behind both the Commission on Intelligence Roles and Missions and the current organizational shakeup at the CIA under its new director, John Deutch. Senator Moynihan regularly uses the CIA's supposed failure to predict the Soviet collapse as ammunition in his proposal for abolishing the agency and dispersing its various components among the Departments of State and Defense.

There is only one small problem: The critics are wrong. The intelligence community did not fail to predict the Soviet collapse. Quite the contrary, throughout the 1980s the intelligence community warned of the weakening Soviet economy, and, later, of the impending fall of Gorbachev and the breakup of the Soviet Union. Moreover, within the intelligence community the CIA was the most skeptical about the ability of Gorbachev to maintain control, and that skepticism grew greater the deeper one went into the CIA. Within the agency, the Office of Soviet Analysis (SOVA) was the most concerned about Gorbachev's future, and said so flatly.

Some intelligence officials and other political figures have tried to make this point, but so far they have largely been ignored. After the 1991 coup that ultimately finished Gorbachev and the USSR, the chairmen of the House and Senate oversight committees rejected charges that the intelligence community had failed to alert U.S. leaders. Shortly thereafter, Acting DCI Richard Kerr defended the CIA's record in a letter to the New York Times. Former DCI Robert Gates has also argued that U.S. intelligence charting the decline and fall of the Soviet Union was on the mark. Why then has the myth persisted? One reason is that, until recently, the intelligence itself has not been publicly available, and, even when the relevant documents have been released, critics of the intelligence community have not bothered to read them. Hard data have often been neglected for the sake of clever argument.

Another reason is that the intelligence community has indeed failed in other cases, and it is often easiest to paint with a broad brush. The most famous example is probably the intelligence community's failure to alert U.S. policymakers of the weakness of the Shah of Iran, the strength of his opponents, and, in particular, the support enjoyed by the Islamic fundamentalists. In that case, the evidence confirms that the failure occurred because the United States, in trying to maintain friendly relations with the Shah and the Iranian intelligence service, failed to develop independent sources of information within Iran. The Soviet case looks like the Iranian case--Uncle Sam betting on the wrong horse--and so people have assumed that it is the same.

Finally, critics have been able to claim that there was an intelligence failure simply because the United States seemed to fail to achieve its objectives: establishing a long-term partnership with Gorbachev and preserving the integrity of the Soviet Union. U.S. policy was thwarted by the sudden coup that eventually led to Gorbachev's demise; therefore, goes the argument, U.S. intelligence must have failed. But, as we shall see, the intelligence community--and the CIA in particular--performed quite well in anticipating the Soviet collapse. In some respects, its performance was exemplary.

Predicting the collapse of the Soviet Union involved three separate problems requiring analysis within progressively more restricted timeframes and roughly analogous to those encountered in predicting whether an attack will be launched by a hostile power: a "strategic" problem, a "tactical" problem, and an "indications and warning" problem.

The "Strategic" Problem: Detecting Soviet Decline

The failure of the Soviet economy and the unraveling of the Soviet social system were not as obvious as they may seem in retrospect. For much of the twentieth century, most experts in the West assumed that the Soviet system, though often brutal, was at least economically productive and politically stable.

Indeed, the Soviet economy did seem to work well during the 1950s and 1960s. The Soviet GNP grew at a rapid rate. In part, this growth reflected the fact that the Soviet Union was recovering from World War II, and in part that it was still in the initial phase of a newly industrializing economy, when growth rates are typically large. Moreover, the Soviet Union was very competitive in many areas of science and engineering (witness Sputnik), and was also able to sustain a tremendous military buildup. The Soviets, it seemed, were well on their way to building the industrial infrastructure that most Western thinkers believed was necessary for sustained economic growth.

True, the Soviets were behind almost everyone in producing quality consumer goods, but then so had the Japanese been in the mid-twentieth century. It is only in retrospect that mainstream opinion acknowledges that the Soviet heavy industry responsible for the apparent growth in GNP was inefficient, poorly planned, and, in many cases, environmentally disastrous. It is also important to remember that during the 1960s and 1970s many serious people actually debated the relative effectiveness of market economies and socialism. Thus, much of the problem of detecting the failure of the Soviet economy revolved around the difficulty of simply accepting the fact that such a failure was possible.

Even though there were debates during the 1970s over the size of the Soviet GNP and the size of the Soviet defense budget, the context was quite different from the debate that took place in the decade preceding the Soviet collapse. Intelligence analysts in the Defense Department argued during this earlier period that the Soviet defense budget and the Soviet share of GNP devoted to defense were both larger than that claimed by the CIA. However, the point that the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) was trying to make at that time was not that the Soviet Union was being stressed, but rather, that the Soviet Union was able to endure stress. DIA claimed that by underestimating Soviet military expenditures the CIA was underestimating Soviet military capabilities and the Soviet determination to achieve military superiority.

By the late 1970s, however, it was clear that, whatever the absolute size of the Soviet GNP and defense budget, the Soviet economy as a whole was faltering. The CIA and defense intelligence organizations continued to disagree on whether this would affect Soviet military spending--the DIA insisted that it would not, even up to the point of Soviet collapse--but there was general consensus across the intelligence community that a slowdown was occurring.

Indeed, the stultified, stalled-out condition of the Soviet economy was an accepted truth and was the "given" context in which the new regime of Gorbachev was analyzed. For example, within eight months of Gorbachev assuming office as General Secretary, the intelligence community issued a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on the prospects for Gorbachev and the Soviet economy. It stated:

"The growth of the Soviet economy has been systematically decelerating since the 1950s as a consequence of dwindling supplies of new labor, the increasing cost of raw material inputs, and the constraints on factor productivity improvement imposed by the rigidities of the planning and management system. The average annual growth of Soviet GNP dropped from 5.3 percent in the late 1960s to 3.7 percent in the early 1970s, to 2.6 percent in the late 1970s. Soviet GNP grew by only 1.6 percent per annum in Brezhnev's last years (1979-82). After reaching a low in 1979, GNP growth averaged

2.3 percent from 1980 to 1984. Growth in 1985 will probably be in the range of 2.5 to 3.0 percent. These recent improvements have been the result largely of disciplinary and incentive measures introduced under Andropov and Gorbachev. It remains to be seen if the upturn in growth can be sustained. . . ."

Thus, far from ignoring the Soviet economic malaise, by the middle of the Reagan administration the intelligence community understood as a matter of course that the Soviet economy had been consistently slowing down, slipping to mediocre--and, in some years, negligible--growth rates. The intelligence community also believed that Gorbachev knew that the Soviet economy was faltering. Its main question was whether Gorbachev was serious about economic reform, and whether he could implement reform without losing control and releasing forces that would bring down the Soviet system.

The intelligence community generally agreed that Gorbachev was determined, mainly out of necessity, to reform the Soviet system. It also generally agreed at the time that these reforms would not resuscitate the Soviet economy, but that the Soviet Union had not yet reached a crisis stage. For example, the 1985 NIE stated:

"The USSR is afflicted with a complex of domestic maladies that seriously worsened in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Their alleviation is one of the most significant and difficult challenges facing the Gorbachev regime. . . .

Over the next five years, and for the foreseeable future, the troubles of the society will not present a challenge to the system of political control that guarantees Kremlin rule, nor will they threaten the economy with collapse. But, during the rest of the 1980s and well beyond, the domestic affairs of the USSR will be dominated by the efforts of the regime to grapple with these manifold problems. The underlying cause of most of these problems is the repressive nature of a political system that discourages initiative throughout the society on which economic and social progress depend, and that limits the private freedom Soviet citizens desire. . . . Gorbachev has achieved an upswing in the mood of the Soviet elite and populace. But the prospects for his strategy over the next five years are mixed at best..."

In other words, the documentary record portrays an intelligence community that fully understood that the Soviet Union was in trouble; that the cause of these problems was the Soviet system itself, and its reliance on a command economy and political repression; and that Gorbachev faced a tremendous challenge in trying to reform the system without bringing it down around him.

It is notable that the five-year prediction of stability presented in the 1985 NIE stopped just short of the actual date of the Soviet collapse (1991), especially so in light of the assessment that the

CIA's Directorate of Intelligence issued in July 1987, as Gorbachev began to establish a track record. This assessment was even more pessimistic and, as it turned out, on the mark in its anticipation of developments to come:

"Judgments regarding Gorbachev's situation will appear somewhat less sanguine than those found in earlier CIA papers, for two principal reasons. First, the papers reporting on Gorbachev's progress through the winter of 1986/87 focused primarily on his success in consolidating his power rather than the concrete and difficult choices he would face in exercising power. Second, since the plenum of the Central Committee in January 1987, an accumulation of evidence from Soviet sources suggests that indifference and opposition on the part of party and government leaders and the average worker are more deeply rooted than was thought six months ago. . . .

Gorbachev's position could be undermined by the loosening of censorship over the written and spoken word and the promotion of limited democracy. If it suspects that this process is getting out of control, the party could well execute an abrupt about-face, discarding Gorbachev along the way. . . .

Growth of Soviet GNP dropped from an average of 4.0 percent per year in the period 1966-75 to 2.3 percent in 1976-80, and to 2.2 percent per year in 1981-84."

To be fair, the intelligence community can blame itself for at least some of the current controversy. In retrospect, it is clear that in trying to determine if the rate of growth was 2.0 percent or 2.5 percent, the CIA was pursuing false precision. In reality it is difficult to estimate--or, for that matter, even express--the actual size of a non-market economy in which there are no prices or true national accounts.

Henry Rowen, chairman of the National Intelligence Council from 1981-1983, recalls pressing analysts to focus even more on the non-quantitative signs that the Soviet economy was faltering, such as shortages of goods. Rowen devoted greater effort to highlighting how many Soviet economic activities that inflated GNP estimates actually yielded few productive benefits (e.g., high production of shoddy goods that went unsold). Rowen also began to emphasize the hidden costs that the Soviet military imposed on the Soviet economy (diversion of talent, unnecessary redundancy in production capacity).

By attempting to estimate specific growth rates, the intelligence community diluted its main message, which was that the Soviet economy was stagnating and--even more important--that there were no apparent or available means for it to be reinvigorated. This basic message, which was accepted throughout the intelligence community and was repeated in official estimates over the course of several years, was right on the mark.

The "Tactical" Problem: Will Gorbachev and the Soviet Union Survive?

As conditions in the Soviet Union continued to worsen, the main questions for the U.S. intelligence community were whether Gorbachev would be able to hold on to power, and whether the Soviet Union itself would break up. The United States had a major stake in both questions, and this is the real reason why the intelligence community is faulted for its performance in the final days of the Soviet Union.

By the late 1980s, U.S.-Soviet relations had improved significantly (as reflected by the signing of the INF treaty in December 1987) and Gorbachev was seen as being largely responsible. The Bush administration wanted to take these improvements in U.S.-Soviet relations even further. Under its policy of "moving beyond containment," the Soviet Union would be "integrated into the community of nations." While the Bush administration stopped short of referring to Gorbachev as an "ally," it did see him as a "strategic partner" in promoting stability in the world. It was clear that U.S. leaders wanted Gorbachev to remain in power.

Critics claim that the intelligence community should have warned U.S. leaders that Gorbachev was in trouble. Such warnings, according to these critics, might have enabled the United States to aid Gorbachev, or hedge its bets by opening channels to other leaders. At a minimum, the United States could have avoided the stigma of having backed a loser and, as a result, undercut its credibility.

The record suggests, however, that the intelligence community, and particularly the CIA's Office of Soviet Analysis, were keenly aware that Gorbachev was playing with fire. The CIA grew even more pessimistic about Gorbachev's chances of political success throughout the first year of the Bush administration. In an April 1989 assessment, the CIA noted that:

"It will be very difficult for [Gorbachev] to achieve his goals. In the extreme, his policies and political power could be undermined and the political stability of the Soviet system could be fundamentally threatened. . . . anxiety, fear, and anger [of the Soviet political elite] could still crystallize in an attempted coup, legal removal of Gorbachev, or even assassination."

In a September 1989 assessment, the CIA examined the gambles Gorbachev was taking in the nationality, economic, and political areas, characterizing his policies as being based on "questionable premises and wishful thinking." It concluded that the "unrest that has punctuated Gorbachev's rule is not a transient phenomenon. Conditions are likely to lead in the foreseeable future to continuing crises and instability on a larger scale. . . ."

Of all intelligence agencies, the CIA had the most pessimistic view of Gorbachev's ability to fix the Soviet economy and retain power. In the 1989 NIE, *The Soviet System in Crisis: Prospects for the Next Two Years*, the consensus view was that the situation would remain bad, but that the regime would be able to tough it out. The CIA disagreed, however, arguing that the situation was not manageable. By the following year, the intelligence community as a whole had come around to the CIA's position; the NIE on Soviet political conditions issued in November 1990, *The Deepening Crisis in the USSR: Prospects for the Next Two Years*, stated flatly in its key judgments that "the Soviet Union as we have known it is finished"--with the emergence of a loose federation of republics a possibility.

This reporting by the CIA had a direct effect on U.S. policy. Then-Deputy National Security Advisor Robert Gates recalls that in September 1989--two years before Gorbachev's fall, and at least in part as a result of the CIA's warnings--the Bush Administration established a "contingency planning group" chaired by the director of Soviet Affairs, Condoleezza Rice. The purpose of this group was to analyze specific options as to how to react if the Gorbachev regime fell. Knowledge of the existence of this group was strictly limited, so as not to increase concerns about Gorbachev's hold on power, but its creation represented a major move by an administration that was publicly committed to Gorbachev.

As the crisis proceeded, CIA documents continued to paint the bleakest picture of Gorbachev's prospects. "The Soviet Cauldron," a fifteen-page memorandum prepared for the nsc in April 1991 by the director of the Office of Soviet Analysis, George Kolt, stated that "Gorbachev's credibility has sunk to near zero." A May 1991 Intelligence Assessment published by the Directorate of Intelligence, "Gorbachev's Future" stated that within a year "a major shift of power to the republics will have occurred unless it has been blocked by a traditionalist coup."

In retrospect, the CIA was most prescient in anticipating events. Intelligence community assessments during 1989-91, and the CIA's in particular, were remarkable not only because the agency was willing to assert that the communist order was finished--a view that would have been unthinkable just a few years earlier--but also because of its sophistication in interpreting the interplay of factors that were at work, and how these factors constrained the range of potential outcomes. Specifically, the CIA:

- *Repeatedly mentioned a coup as a serious possibility, because the economy was in shambles and order was breaking down.

- *Noted that, if a coup were launched, it would be cloaked in the form of a "committee of national salvation" that would claim it was imposing emergency measures to restore order and preserve the moves

toward democratization and economic reform in the long term (almost exactly the formulation used by the hardliners in announcing their attempted takeover in August 1991).

*Predicted, however, that the long-term prospects of a coup were not good, that events in the USSR were being driven by tidal forces. The wave of nationalism and decay of public support for the Bolshevik regime could not be reversed; a coup would not alleviate the economic failure that was in large part responsible for events. Even if hardliners did manage to seize power temporarily, they would not be able to consolidate control.

In addition, the intelligence analysis laid down markers--that is, it presented facts that a reader would have to refute in order to reject the analysis presented in the assessment. For example, "The Soviet Cauldron" noted four months before the August coup attempt that:

*Hardliners had raised the possibility of using the military to restore order in public statements;

*Military officers inclined to support democratization had been moved out of important posts or retired; and

*The military and security organizations had demonstrated the logistics and capability of moving large numbers of troops into Moscow on short notice and establishing a command structure to control them.

In order to believe that the hardliners would not launch a coup, therefore, one would need to explain why they would have taken such potentially risky or costly steps.

Although the record shows that the intelligence community was aware of the untenable situation in the Soviet Union and gave ample warning that Gorbachev was in jeopardy, former high-level U.S. officials disagree as to how aware they were of these warnings. Some officials at the middle levels of the National Security Council, such as Rice, knew of both the range of opinion within the intelligence community and the degree to which they agreed Gorbachev was in trouble. Other officials we interviewed who had less routine contact with intelligence analysts tracking the political situation in the Soviet Union were not aware of these differences, nor that the CIA had an especially pessimistic assessment of Gorbachev's prospects.

At the highest levels, Brent Scowcroft, President Bush's national security advisor, does not recall receiving warning that was sufficiently precise to support action on the part of the United States. He believes that, if such warnings were given, they were "lost in the fog" of the volume on information that passed by on a daily basis. However, Gates recalls differently, and cites three

separate events that would indicate these warnings reached their target.

The establishment of the "contingency planning group" was one. The second, according to Gates, was a memo he sent personally to President Bush in the summer of 1990 citing the CIA's warnings of the deteriorating Soviet political situation; Gates described Gorbachev as the "Soviet Moses"--that is, the leader who would take the Soviet people to the promised land, but would not himself survive the Exodus. The final indicator was another memo that summer in which, Gates maintains, he told Bush that the United States should "stop knocking Yeltsin" because we "would eventually be facing him on the other side of the table." All of these actions, Gates asserts, were taken in light of the CIA's briefings and reports.

In any case, it is clear that the Bush administration chose to stand by Gorbachev in spite of the intelligence that argued his future was limited, not because U.S. intelligence suggested that this was a safe course to take. If a failure occurred, it was not an intelligence failure but a policy failure, and it may not have even been that. The administration had three powerful reasons for deciding to continue its support of Gorbachev, despite the intelligence at hand that suggested his position was precarious.

First, the Gorbachev regime had supported or acquiesced in many U.S. objectives--the reunification of Germany, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, withdrawal from Afghanistan, nuclear and conventional arms control, and, most significantly in 1991, the U.S.-led effort to liberate Kuwait in Operation Desert Storm. So even if Gorbachev could not hold power for much longer, there was a good argument to be made for backing him and working with his government while the opportunity was there. Not surprisingly, then, some administration officials say that they were indeed aware of the intelligence reporting that indicated Gorbachev was likely to fall, and that their response was to get as much as possible for the United States "before the window closed." These objectives included completion of strategic and conventional arms agreements, agreement over reunification of Germany, and dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. They believed that if they could reach such agreements with Gorbachev, they would be "locked in" and accepted even if a harder-line government replaced him.

Second, administration officials did not believe that they had anyone better to support, even if it seemed that Gorbachev was doomed. Yeltsin had made an unfavorable impression on administration officials during his September 1989 visit to the United States. They did not believe that he was committed to democratization, and considered him personally unstable.

Moreover, administration officials did not believe that they had an effective means for supporting anyone other than Gorbachev even if they had chosen to do so. As Scowcroft put it, "Some of the analysts kept saying that we should 'move towards Yeltsin,' but I didn't know what that meant." Officials were also concerned that the very process of seeking alternatives to Gorbachev would have the effect of undermining him, possibly hastening his fall and leading him to become less cooperative. Robert Blackwell, the National Intelligence Officer responsible for the Soviet Union at the time, recalls that the feeling in the administration was, "if you undermine Gorbachev, you won't get Yeltsin; you'll get a successful coup."

Third, U.S. officials believed that they could influence events. That is, the intelligence may have said that, as things stood, Gorbachev would fall, but U.S. leaders were in a position to influence the conditions on which these assessments were based. The intelligence community's estimate was based on its evaluation of nationalistic sentiment and the willingness of hardliners to take risks. It was at least plausible that these attitudes could be shaped or moderated.

For example, Bush has been criticized for the speech he delivered in Ukraine in early August 1991, warning of the dangers of nationalism (the so-called "Chicken Kiev" speech). Some critics assert that it started U.S. relations with the independent Ukrainian state on a sour note; some argue that acquiescing in the dissolution of the Soviet Union was actually in the interests of the United States. Whatever one thinks of the policy, had the speech dissuaded the Ukrainians from total succession, it would now be viewed as a classic example in which the United States demonstrated leadership and influenced events.

The "Indications and Warnings" Problem: Has the Coup Started Yet?

Scowcroft says unequivocally that he did not receive a warning that a coup was about to occur in mid-August 1991. He and other officials also note that they were in Moscow the week before the coup for the signing of the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (start) agreement, and that not only were there no signs of the plot but many of the eventual plotters took part in the ceremonies.

According to Beschloss and Talbott, however, the President's Daily Brief (PDB) for August 17 led with a report warning of signs of last-minute opposition to the Union Treaty. The treaty would have devolved most of the USSR's authority to the republics--exactly the development that previous CIA reporting had said might trigger a reaction by hardline Party, military, and KGB leaders. The PDB noted that the previous day Alexander Yakovlev had warned of an "influential Stalinist group" that was planning a "party and state coup."

Gates (who deals with this episode at length in his forthcoming book), recalls discussing the PDB report with President Bush at Kennebunkport on August 17. According to Gates, the president asked whether the report should be taken seriously, and he responded that, once the date was set for the Union Treaty to take

effect, the conservatives would face their last chance to take action. Since the conditions that the intelligence community had set as critical warning markers had been met, he added, the warning should indeed be taken seriously.

In any case, part of the reason why the coup was not detected with certainty was precisely because it was poorly planned and thus lacked many of the tangible signs of a major military operation. In January 1991, for example, the intelligence community had provided good warning of the Soviet crackdown in Vilnius, the prediction having been based in part on intelligence observation of the preparations being carried out by the Soviet military, such as the movement of troops, establishment of communications links, and other traditional warning signs.

In contrast, many military and KGB units were not even told of their mission in the August coup. The plotters also failed to take effective steps to capture Yeltsin (indeed, Yeltsin reported to the Kremlin on the morning of the coup and was turned away) and little or no effort was made to take potentially hostile radio and television stations off the air. Much of the Soviet military leadership itself did not know of the coup until after it had begun.

Once the coup was underway, the intelligence community quickly determined that, precisely because the signs of adequate preparation were missing, the plotters had little chance of success. This analysis enabled the United States to adjust its position quickly as the crisis evolved. In his first response to the coup, President Bush had referred to the plotters' action as "extraconstitutional"; by the end of the day, the president denounced the coup as illegitimate and endorsed Yeltsin's demand that Gorbachev be restored to power.

Lessons To Be Learned

There are a number of lessons to be learned from the myths concerning the intelligence community's performance during the final years of the Soviet Union. They pertain to observers of the intelligence community in and out of the government, the intelligence community itself, and policymakers.

1. **The Danger of the Conventional Wisdom.** The notion that the CIA seriously misread the situation in the Soviet Union quickly became accepted as fact -- although there does not appear to have been any attempt by those making such a pronouncement to investigate the matter seriously. Even after CIA officials disputed the claims of Senator Moynihan, no major newspaper or other organization appears to have bothered to launch an in-depth investigation of his serious charges. Others have been quick to accept the essence of Moynihan's claim without demanding evidence or analysis to support it.

Aside from the unfairness of stigmatizing those who provided intelligence analysis, such unwarranted claims create a presumption that drastic changes are needed. But "fixing" things that are not broken can make things worse than they are.

2. **The Limitations of Intelligence in the Policy Process.** One reason why critics claim U.S. intelligence failed is that the United States did not achieve all of its

objectives in responding to the collapse of the Soviet Union -- specifically, preserving the integrity of the USSR and the Gorbachev regime. But the decision to follow this policy had little to do with an intelligence failure, and the intelligence provided to U.S. officials should have made them aware of the risks of this policy.

Undesirable outcomes are not necessarily the result of faulty intelligence. Intelligence analysts do not make policy; policymakers make policy. Most supporters of democracy and responsible government prefer it this way.

3. Intelligence Analysts Are Not Psychics. Policymakers sometimes complain that intelligence analysis is not sufficiently explicit to get their attention. Just as intelligence analysts may miss warning indicators in the noise of day-to-day events, policymakers may not appreciate the significance of an intelligence product that is presented to them in the context of their routine business.

At times, the inability of intelligence to make the necessary impression on policymakers may reflect the fuzziness resulting from the process of coordinating national estimates, with compromise language replacing sharper language. But the complaint may also reflect an unrealistic expectation by some policymakers that specific future events can be precisely predicted well in advance.

Precise turning points in tidal changes such as the collapse of the Soviet Union depend on the confluence of many individual events that can not be predicted. As a result, it often is not possible to write the kind of specific, unconditional intelligence forecast that would cut through the noise (e.g., "hardliners will attempt a coup on the morning of August 19, and this will ultimately result in the collapse of the Soviet Union") -- especially if one demands such a definitive forecast weeks, months, or years in advance.

George Kolt's "The Soviet Cauldron" is an example of brilliant intelligence not because it made a correct exact estimate of when the Soviet Union would collapse or a coup would be undertaken, but because it laid out the basic factors that were driving events in Soviet politics in mid-1991, and the possible logical consequences, in succinct, blunt terms. The memorandum presented evidence of several necessary conditions that existed for a coup, and then left it to the policymaker to either refute this evidence, alter the conditions, or consider the risk the United States was willing to tolerate in maintaining its existing policy of supporting Gorbachev. Contrast this analysis with a case in which an intelligence failure does appear to have occurred, such as the fall of the Shah, when the intelligence community reported that Iran did not appear to be in "a revolutionary or even pre-revolutionary" condition.

Clinton administration officials today must make a similar evaluation of any evidence they receive suggesting that democracy and reform in Russia may soon collapse. They have to determine whether they are willing to accept whatever case the intelligence community makes, based on their own assessment of the potential risks and available options. But, as in the case of the fall of Gorbachev, the ultimate evaluation will be made by policymakers, not intelligence analysts.

4. The Intelligence-policymaker Relationship Needs To Be Improved. It is clear from our research that one problem limiting the usefulness of intelligence was that senior policymakers generally had to deal with intelligence analysts at arms length, through constrained channels of communication, and intermittently. As a result, policymakers were limited in their ability to appreciate why a particular conclusion had been reached, the assumptions or conditions on which it was based, and why there might be differing views within the intelligence community. The intelligence community can at least begin to address this problem by rethinking the intelligence process from its end.

Since World War II that process has been roughly as follows: Policymakers present the intelligence community with a problem; the intelligence community develops a consensus through a process of evaluating evidence and debating hypotheses; and policymakers are then presented with one set of conclusions that reflects the larger wisdom of the entire intelligence community (although a member of the community can note a dissent if it disagrees strongly with the consensus). The significance of this approach is reflected in the fact that community-wide products are generally accorded higher status than, say, products produced by a single agency (e.g., NIEs have higher standing than Intelligence Assessments produced by the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence).

This concept, which perhaps reflects the way people used information and analysis in the mid-twentieth century, may no longer be valid. Indeed, it runs counter to the way in which most consumers of information behave today. Because people have greater access to information and are generally less willing to trust authorities, they demand the opportunity to question the analyses with which they are provided, and to shop around for sources of expertise and analysis. They make their final decision based on a number of factors -- some objective, such as the track record and credentials of a source, and some subjective, such as prejudice or self-indulgence.

Indeed, as noted above, policymakers in the real world make decisions by considering a multitude of views. A more realistic approach to providing intelligence support to top policymakers on broad policy issues such as the future of Gorbachev -- or, today, the future of Yeltsin -- would allow such officials greater interaction with the analysts. The intelligence community could facilitate such direct interaction through the use of modern secure communications systems and data retrieval systems -- technologies that were notably absent when the classical concept of intelligence estimation was developed in the late 1940s.

Rather than attempting to generate consensus, the intelligence community should facilitate a process in which the intelligence consumer is fully aware of the different views held in the intelligence community and the reasons for these differences. Policymakers, who will decide which truth they will adopt anyway, should be the ultimate coordinators of intelligence, knowing that they will be held responsible for their decision.

More by

Bruce D. Berkowitz ^[3], Jeffrey T. Richelson ^[4]

Topics: Security ^[5]

Tags: Ames [6] As [7] BBC [8] Cambridge University Press [9] St. Martin's Press [10] the New York Times [11] Washington Post [12] Washington Times [13] al-Qaeda [14] American military [15] Cambridge University [16] Central Intelligence Agency [17] Congress [18] Department of State [19] KGB [20] Senate [21] White House [22] Alexey K. Pushkov [23] Bill Gertz [24] Bush [25] Carl Schmitt [26] Charles Krauthammer [27] Charles Krauthammer Washington [28] Condoleezza Rice [29] Daniel Patrick Moynihan [30] David Wise [31] Dimitri K. Simes [32] Edward Lee Howard [33] Francis Fukuyama [34] George Bush [35] George Washington [36] Gorbachev [37] Herbert Marcuse [38] Hitler [39] James Angleton [40] James Mann [41] Jonathan Clarke [42] Jürgen Habermas [43] Krauthammer Responds [44] Lee Hamilton [45] Martin Heidegger [46] Marvin Feuerwerker [47] Mary McGrory [48] Mary Ryan [49] Mikheil Saakashvili [50] Patrick Buchanan [51] Paul Wolfowitz [52] Richard Kerr [53] Richard Pipes [54] Ronald Reagan [55] Saddam Hussein [56] Stefan Halper [57] Stuart Rosenberg [58] Theodor Adorno [59] Vladimir Putin [60] W. Bush [61] William Safire [62] Academia [63] Age of Enlightenment [64] Al-Qaeda [65] Aldrich Ames [66] Beslan school hostage crisis [67] Boris Yeltsin [68] Caucasus [69] Central Intelligence Agency [70] Charles Krauthammer [71] Conservatism in the United States [72] Crimes [73] Critical theory [74] Double agent [75] Entertainment [76] Espionage [77] Foreign policy of Vladimir Putin [78] Francis Fukuyama [79] Frankfurt School [80] Georgian-Russian espionage controversy [81] German philosophy [82] Government [83] Government of Russia [84] Gulf War [85] Habermas [86] Heads of state [87] History of the United States [88] Illegal immigration [89] Illegal immigration to the United States [90] Immigration law [91] Intelligence [92] Invasion of Iraq [93] Iraq Study Group Report [94] Iraq – United States relations [95] James Jesus Angleton [96] Jürgen Habermas [97] Labor [98] Law [99] Marxist theorists [100] McLean, Virginia [101] Mikhail Gorbachev [102] Mikheil Saakashvili [103] Mole [104] Moscow theater hostage crisis [105] National Clandestine Service [106] Neoconservatism [107] Neoconservatism and paleoconservatism [108] New world order [109] Office of the National Counterintelligence Executive [110] Organizational structure of the Central Intelligence Agency [111] Paleoconservatism [112] Philosophy [113] Public [114] Public sphere [115] Saddam Hussein [116] Secretaría de Inteligencia [117] September 11 attacks [118] Social philosophy [119] Sociocultural evolution [120] South Ossetia war [121] Spies [122] Stefan Halper [123] United States Department of Homeland Security [124] Vladimir Putin [125] War [126]

Source URL (retrieved on Jul 26, 2012): <http://nationalinterest.org/article/the-cia-vindicated-the-soviet-collapse-was-predicted-572>

Links:

- [1] <http://nationalinterest.org/issue/fall-1995>
- [2] <http://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=250&username=nationalinterest>
- [3] <http://nationalinterest.org/profile/bruce-d-berkowitz>
- [4] <http://nationalinterest.org/profile/jeffrey-t-richelson>
- [5] <http://nationalinterest.org/topic/security>
- [6] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/company/ames>
- [7] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/company/as>
- [8] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/company/bbc>
- [9] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/company/cambridge-university-press>
- [10] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/company/st.-martin%27s-press>
- [11] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/company/the-new-york-times>
- [12] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/company/washington-post>
- [13] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/company/washington-times>

- [14] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/organization/al-qaeda>
- [15] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/organization/american-military>
- [16] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/organization/cambridge-university>
- [17] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/organization/central-intelligence-agency>
- [18] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/organization/congress>
- [19] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/organization/department-of-state>
- [20] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/organization/kgb>
- [21] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/organization/senate>
- [22] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/organization/white-house>
- [23] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/alexey-k.-pushkov>
- [24] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/bill-gertz>
- [25] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/bush>
- [26] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/carl-schmitt>
- [27] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/charles-krauthammer>
- [28] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/charles-krauthammerwashington>
- [29] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/condoleezza-rice>
- [30] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/daniel-patrick-moynihan>
- [31] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/david-wise>
- [32] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/dimitri-k.-simes>
- [33] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/edward-lee-howard>
- [34] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/francis-fukuyama>
- [35] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/george-bush>
- [36] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/george-washington>
- [37] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/gorbachev>
- [38] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/herbert-marcuse>
- [39] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/hitler>
- [40] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/james-angleton>
- [41] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/james-mann>
- [42] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/jonathan-clarke>
- [43] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/j%C3%BCrgen-habermas>
- [44] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/krauthammer-responds>
- [45] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/lee-hamilton>
- [46] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/martin-heidegger>
- [47] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/marvin-feuerwerker>
- [48] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/mary-mcgrory>
- [49] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/mary-ryan>
- [50] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/mikheil-saakashvili>
- [51] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/patrick-buchanan>
- [52] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/paul-wolfowitz>
- [53] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/richard-kerr>
- [54] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/richard-pipes>
- [55] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/ronald-reagan>
- [56] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/saddam-hussein>
- [57] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/stefan-halper>
- [58] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/stuart-rosenberg>
- [59] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/theodor-adorno>
- [60] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/vladimir-putin>
- [61] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/w.-bush>
- [62] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/person/william-safire>
- [63] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/academia>
- [64] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/age-of-enlightenment>
- [65] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/al-qaeda>
- [66] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/aldrich-ames>
- [67] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/beslan-school-hostage-crisis>
- [68] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/boris-yeltsin>
- [69] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/caucasus>
- [70] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/central-intelligence-agency>
- [71] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/charles-krauthammer>
- [72] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/conservatism-in-the-united-states>

- [73] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/crimes>
- [74] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/critical-theory>
- [75] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/double-agent>
- [76] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/entertainment>
- [77] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/espionage>
- [78] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/foreign-policy-of-vladimir-putin>
- [79] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/francis-fukuyama>
- [80] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/frankfurt-school>
- [81] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/georgian-russian-espionage-controversy>
- [82] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/german-philosophy>
- [83] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/government>
- [84] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/government-of-russia>
- [85] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/gulf-war>
- [86] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/habermas>
- [87] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/heads-of-state>
- [88] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/history-of-the-united-states>
- [89] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/illegal-immigration>
- [90] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/illegal-immigration-to-the-united-states>
- [91] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/immigration-law>
- [92] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/intelligence>
- [93] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/invasion-of-iraq>
- [94] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/iraq-study-group-report>
- [95] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/iraq-%E2%80%93-united-states-relations>
- [96] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/james-jesus-angleton>
- [97] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/j%C3%BCrgen-habermas>
- [98] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/labor>
- [99] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/law>
- [100] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/marxist-theorists>
- [101] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/mclean%2C-virginia>
- [102] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/mikhail-gorbachev>
- [103] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/mikheil-saakashvili>
- [104] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/mole>
- [105] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/moscow-theater-hostage-crisis>
- [106] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/national-clandestine-service>
- [107] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/neoconservatism>
- [108] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/neoconservatism-and-paleoconservatism>
- [109] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/new-world-order>
- [110] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/office-of-the-national-counterintelligence-executive>
- [111] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/organizational-structure-of-the-central-intelligence-agency>
- [112] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/paleoconservatism>
- [113] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/philosophy>
- [114] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/public>
- [115] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/public-sphere>
- [116] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/saddam-hussein>
- [117] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/secretar%C3%A1-de-inteligencia>
- [118] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/september-11-attacks>
- [119] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/social-philosophy>
- [120] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/sociocultural-evolution>
- [121] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/south-ossetia-war>
- [122] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/spies>
- [123] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/stefan-halper>
- [124] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/united-states-department-of-homeland-security>
- [125] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/vladimir-putin>
- [126] <http://nationalinterest.org/tag/war>