

From the Ivory Tower to the CIA: Reflections from a Career Intelligence Analyst

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Last year, I reached a career milestone of 15 years with the CIA, celebrated my 49th birthday, and watched my oldest child transition to her teenage years. As I begin the second half of my career, I have found myself reflecting on my journey from trained scholar to intelligence analyst. In this article, I discuss the reasons I left academia, socialization challenges I encountered at the CIA, and how I have tried to bridge the academy–practice divide. I also offer nuggets of career advice for prospective intelligence analysts.

THE ROAD TO LANGLEY

Despite my penchant for Tom Clancy books, I never intended to become a CIA analyst. For years, I wanted to teach political science at a liberal arts college, but on a whim I applied online for a CIA analyst position, mostly to avoid dissertation writing. I nearly dropped the phone when I was contacted weeks later for an interview. In hindsight, a career in intelligence appealed to me for four reasons:

Policy Relevance

As a graduate student in the 1990s, I focused on democratization (comparative politics) and international relations (IR) because of their relevance to world events, and only later did I learn that the CIA hired analysts with my particular background. In the 1990s, democratic transitions in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were well underway, and the first Persian Gulf War and wars in the former Yugoslavia were topics of interest to political scientists. Alexander George's *Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy* (1993) published in the same decade on the importance of policy-relevant theory also struck a chord with me. Consistent with his message, my dissertation examined a topic discussed in policy circles: the “democratic peace” and specifically the literature's offshoot on the war-proneness of democratizing countries (Doyle 1986; Mansfield and Snyder 1995; Russett 1993). I met with practitioners at the National Security Council, National Intelligence Council, Department of State, USAID, and other agencies, and those experiences hooked me on supporting policymakers.

Public Service

Studies (Feintzeig 2014; Katz 2014) point to declining interest in public service on the part of college graduates, but I had a

strong idealistic streak when I finished my doctorate that has helped keep me at the Agency this long. I believed that working at the CIA would allow me to both “give back” and focus on national security priorities. As a low-income undergraduate student, I received generous financial support from Pomona College and Pell Grants from the federal government. My graduate school, University of California, Irvine, also invested heavily in me. A government career seemed like an ideal way to give them—and myself—a return on investment.

Continuous Learning

From the outset, I wanted a writing-based career in which I would have the opportunity to change positions in order to develop new skills and expertise, which I believe is one of the main benefits of a career as a CIA analyst. Since its inception, the CIA has oscillated between prizing “expert analysts” with narrow expertise and “intelligence officers” with transferable analytical skills and flexible natures that enable them to switch accounts—on countries, regions, or general issues like counterterrorism—when additional resources are needed and without skipping a beat. Expertise has held sway since 9/11, but my generalist background and willingness to broaden my geographic reach have not undermined my career. As an undergraduate, I was the archetypal liberal arts student who viewed the world through an interdisciplinary lens, and as a graduate student I explored nontraditional IR topics such as political psychology without committing to a specific region. Rather than follow a typical career path at the CIA, which entails sticking with one office and a single country or region for years, I switched offices during my first year, leaving behind my initial account on a transnational issue to work instead on East Asia. I later decided to work on Latin America and then did several rotations in which I crossed disciplinary, geographic, and organizational lines.

Lifestyle

A CIA career conferred lifestyle advantages that I worried academia lacked at the time I entered the job market. One advantage was the government's salary and benefits package; my entry-level income at the Agency exceeded that of most assistant professor openings in IR. Another involved family. I wanted to avoid a commuter relationship with my husband, whose career drew him to financial industry hubs.

Hardly plentiful at the time, the majority of faculty openings in IR were located in areas that were not viable for him, but my husband had little difficulty transferring to his firm's Washington, DC office not far from CIA headquarters.

ADJUSTMENT PAINS

I did not fully appreciate organizational theory until I confronted the CIA's massive bureaucracy and the challenges theorists commonly associate with large organizations, such as inertia, hierarchy, and red tape. Aspiring intelligence analysts should think seriously about whether they want to work in such an environment because it is not for everyone. Few days go by when I do not think of the aphorism associated with Graham Allison (1971), "where you stand depends on

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where you sit," during sometimes frustrating interactions with CIA analysts outside of my office, counterparts at other intelligence community agencies, and US officials, most of whom cling to views consistent with their bureaucratic interests. I also learned quickly in this environment that academic credentials carry less weight than experience and relationships. Four additional factors further complicated my transition:

Loss of Autonomy

Adapting to the Agency's hierarchical and paternalistic culture probably was more challenging for me than for many other analysts because I was a thirty-something "mid-career hire" and not a typical analyst in my twenties with a newly-minted master's degree, though most new analysts groan about their lack of autonomy. When I joined the Agency, I lost unfiltered access to US officials, including contacts I developed while researching my dissertation. More frustrating, however, was learning to adapt to corporate analysis. All production, written and verbal, is coordinated with analysts who have equities on the topic. Post-9/11 intelligence reforms also mandated that analysts coordinate articles for the President's Daily Briefing with the 17-agency intelligence community. Additionally, the CIA's byzantine editing process, which involves layers of editors, is more daunting than what I experienced with academic journals, and I have less control over the topics I write about.

Pace of Work

I was ill-prepared for intelligence analysis's tempo, which is more comparable to a newspaper than a university, and is a factor prospective analysts should consider. I have mainly worked on "global coverage" accounts that are not top

intelligence priorities and are slower-paced than accounts like counterterrorism. Nonetheless, occasionally I have had to write short and long assessments under tight deadlines while monitoring incoming intelligence reporting, briefing officials, and coordinating with others' analysis. Because policymakers are extremely busy, analysts must adjust their pace and products to officials' meeting and travel schedules to ensure the timely delivery of intelligence.

Brevity and Clarity

Because academic writing bears little resemblance to the structure of intelligence assessments, the CIA requires all new analysts to participate in a months-long training program. I know former academicians who left the Agency in

part because they craved having more time to do in-depth research and preferred to write books using a more traditional writing formula. Whereas academia favors long publications infused with methodological details, US officials usually have only minutes to listen to a briefing or skim a paper. As a result, methodology is limited to footnotes or appendices, if that. Analytic subheadings and bullet items make it easier for policymakers to skim products, and analysts adhere to an inverted pyramid structure in their writing and briefings that is unnatural for most new analysts. Analytic judgments come first, followed by a few supporting points or raw intelligence reports, while adjectives and adverbs are a luxury. Despite this formula's merits, US officials frequently still do not have time to read beyond an assessment's opening key judgments.

Work-Life Balance

Balancing long hours at work with family did not prove challenging until I had children, and I continue to struggle with balance issues despite my part-time schedule. Indeed, I have pursued specific rotations because they were more family friendly than the schedule associated with covering traditional country-based accounts, which involves writing tactical "current intelligence" pieces for the president and other policymakers. Intelligence analysis in my view is a full-time job, and part-time slots are rarely accessible to applicants from outside the Agency. Some managers allow analysts to downshift schedules—usually for family or health reasons—but many do not because their units cannot spare the analytic coverage. The vast majority of CIA analysts work more than full-time, frequently coming in during the wee hours of the morning to brief (around 2:00 a.m. or 4:00 a.m. depending on who they are briefing), staying

late into the evening to oversee final edits, and working weekends to meet deadlines or write reports on breaking events.

SEARCHING FOR THE THEORY–PRACTICE SWEET SPOT

Much has been written about the theory–policy divide in political science and international relations because a substantial amount of scholarly work addresses esoteric topics or is not written in plain language that is accessible to non-experts (Avey and Desch 2013; Byman and Kroenig 2016; Drezner 2015; Walt 2005). I have looked for ways to narrow this gap because scholars have an advantage that many analysts lack: They have

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more time to devote to research that can help analysts put into context what we see in raw intelligence reports.

In my experience, academic knowledge that is of greatest use to intelligence analysts and policymakers tends to: 1) offer novel frameworks that increase analysts' understanding of an issue, such as counterinsurgency; 2) provide new empirical data not available elsewhere on topics like foreign publics' views of the United States or of Islamist extremism; 3) come from credible sources in other countries; 4) include insights that can be condensed into a few sentences; and 5) relate directly to a policy priority, such as countering nuclear proliferation. To tap academic knowledge, I have used a three-pronged approach:

Traditional Outreach

CIA analysts follow strict procedures in their interactions with academic experts—rules that are designed to protect analysts, the Agency, scholars, and their organizations. Prospective analysts would need to be comfortable operating within these limits. Analysts are prohibited from “tasking” scholars, meaning they cannot give academic experts questions to

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research, whether in the United States or overseas. Those constraints notwithstanding, CIA analysts look to experts for empirical data, frameworks, historical background, and novel insights to deepen their contextual knowledge and test their main judgments and assumptions. I have arranged for scholars to take part in roundtables at the CIA or offsite conferences, which almost always have been productive. However, experts who regularly interact with US officials, or who have worked inside the US government, are generally better at conveying their insights briefly and applying them to policy priorities.

Rotations

I have pursued several outreach-oriented rotations inside and outside the Agency that probably would be of interest to former scholars or graduate students contemplating a career in intelligence analysis. I was a national security fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center for a year, where I conducted in-depth research, published unclassified articles, and interacted with other fellows and staff. I also spent two years in CIA's Red Cell, a unit that focuses on out-of-the-box analysis and embraces academic outreach (Zenko 2015). My joint-duty rotation as an analyst in the Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research

(INR) gave me direct access to diplomats and academic conferences funded by INR's outreach unit. Years ago, I also organized a sabbatical available to advanced analysts, during which I worked with a local professor and department head on unclassified papers related to my account.

Translating Academic-Speak

I include citations of relevant academic work in my written assessments and talking points when they offer insights or context that other sources lack, which would be a natural tendency for former scholars or recent graduate students who are steeped in the latest research. The main challenge is to remove all jargon and summarize insights briefly. The CIA's economic analysts traditionally have used unclassified economic data in their work, and leadership analysts often have cited biographies.¹ However, I have noticed a growing number of citations of journal articles, quantitative studies, and think tank reports in other types of assessments. These sources do not feed into our main database of raw intelligence reports and require additional effort to locate.

FINAL MUSINGS

A career in intelligence analysis is not for everyone, and my hope is that the thoughts and experiences I have shared in this article will give job seekers a better sense of the benefits, demands, and challenges that one intelligence analyst has experienced during her career. I also identified key organizational factors and job requirements that prospective applicants should weigh carefully as they chart their career paths and highlighted the important role academic knowledge can play in intelligence analysis and policy support. ■

NOTE

1. See www.cia.gov for descriptions of the various analytic disciplines in the CIA's Directorate of Analysis, formerly known as the Directorate of Intelligence.

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