

THOMAS FINGAR ON THE POLITICS OF NIE/NIAS

Arms Control Wonk linked to this really fascinating Thomas Fingar speech at Stanford. Fingar, you'll recall, was one of the people at State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research who judged that Iraq wasn't getting nukes. He went on to serve as Deputy Director of National Intelligence where, in 2007, he oversaw the Iran NIE that judged Iran had stopped its active nuclear weapons program in 2003.

It's for Fingar's comments about the latter that ACW links to his speech—to highlight Fingar's revelation that the White House ordered declassification of that 2007 NIE.

This example is drawn from the highly contentious 2007 National Intelligence Estimate on Iran's Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities. It became contentious, in part, because the White House instructed the Intelligence Community to release an unclassified version of the report's key judgments but declined to take responsibility for ordering its release.

Remember, at the time Dick Cheney and Israel were both trying to force a military response to Iran's nuclear program ... but now we learn the White House ordered the NIE be released?

Was Bush (presumably with Condi's help) playing Cheney's games against him, releasing classified information without telling Cheney he ordered its release? As ACW notes, Fingar explains the logic behind the release—which was designed to show that there was time, but some urgency, to resolving the Iran situation diplomatically.

In other words, the message it was intended to send to policymakers was, "You do not have a lot of time but you appear to have a diplomatic or non-

military option.” Prior to the publication of this Estimate, the judgment of the Intelligence Community—and of many pundits and policymakers—was that there was no chance of deterring Iran from pursuing a nuclear weapon and that the only use of force—military options—could prevent Tehran from acquiring the bomb. The estimate also judged, and stated clearly, that Iran at a minimum had retained the option to pursue a weapon and that whether to do so would be a political decision that could be made at any time.

The entire speech is worth reading. Fingar provides an explanation for the crappy 2002 Iraq NIE.

In my experience, most policymakers ask themselves, and often ask their intelligence support team, whether the reported or projected development requires immediate action on their part or can be deferred while they work on more pressing issues or more attractive parts of their policy agendas. That is a natural and rational approach. To compensate for this, intelligence has a built-in, and on some subjects, like terrorism, a recently reinforced propensity to underscore, overstate, or “hype” the findings in order to get people to pay attention, and to fireproof the IC against charges that it failed to provide adequate warning. I note in passing that this propensity was one of the reasons for the errors in the infamous 2002 Estimate on Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction.

While the explanation is not a surprise, there are several implications of it—not least that the former Number 2 in DNI is suggesting that estimates about terrorism are overstated, with

the possible result that terrorism has remained a larger policy focus than other pressing issues. (Elsewhere, in his discussion about the Global Trends 2025 report, Fingar does note that the results of terrorism will be increasingly dangerous, largely due to bioterrorism.)

Which brings us to Fingar's description of the genesis for the climate change NIA.

I should probably take it as a badge of achievement that Members of Congress began to press for an NIE on global climate change in late 2006 and early 2007. The reason I say this is that I made improvement in the quality of analysis, notably NIEs, and the restoration of confidence in the quality of IC analytic work my highest priorities when I became Deputy Director of National Intelligence for Analysis and Chairman of the National Intelligence Council in mid 2005. By 2007, we had regained the confidence of a growing number of Members who began to request NIEs in order to have reliable and objective assessments of important issues. Or so they said. Many of these requests came from Democrats who may have had an additional motivation, i.e., to use NIEs as a stick with which to pummel the administration. That is a tale for another time; here I want to focus on climate change. The short setup for the story I'm about to tell is that whether climate change is occurring, the extent to which it is caused by human activity, whether the US was incurring too high a price for being out of step with its allies on the importance of combating global warming, and a host of other politically-charged issues provided the backdrop for the initial requests that the NIC produce an NIE on climate change. Another factor was the release and reception of former Vice President Al Gore's book and documentary

on global warming entitled An Inconvenient Truth.

In order to tell the story, I will compress a number of conversations with several Members and staff into a single and greatly simplified set of invented exchanges that accurately reflect the dialog.

Member: We need an estimate on climate change.

Me: We don't do climate change, talk to NOAA or the National Academy of Sciences.

Member: But we trust you and know we will get an objective assessment.

Me: Thank you, but the NIC doesn't know anything about climate science.

Member: But we trust you, and the NIC does analyze geopolitical developments, right?

Me: Yes, but we still don't have any expertise on climate change.

Member: OK, then do an NIE on the geopolitics of global climate change.

She had me. Congress eventually ordered us to produce an Estimate on the geopolitical implications of global climate change.

(While Fingar insists this was entirely fictional, the gender of his imagined interlocutory suggests Nancy Pelosi or DiFi as possibilities for the member asking for the estimate.) Again, not a surprise, but out of this request came—in Fingar's estimation—a document that provided some early resource allocation suggestions and red flags for dealing with climate change.

Most of the rest of the document talks about Fingar's attempts to improve the process of

collaborative documents like the NIEs and NIAs, which gives a glimpse of how our intelligence community attempts to improve its analytical process. Well worth reading the whole thing.