The Ethics of Decision-Making in National Security

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It is a great honor—and a bit daunting—to have been asked to deliver the second annual Charles W. Kegley lecture—particularly with Professor Kegley here, in the audience. His best-selling textbook, *World Politics: Trend and Transformation*, has had an enormously positive influence on generations of students studying international relations and his focus on ethics in his work and support for such efforts more generally is something I greatly admire. Nevertheless, I am thankful for the opportunity, as it gives me a chance to discuss a project I am just starting at Oxford on the ethical culture of decision-making in national security, which I hope will be viewed as an extension of such work.

This project is essentially an effort to record and strengthen the ethical norms that I was taught and tried to apply over the course of my career in national security decision-making as a lawyer, a policymaker, and ultimately as the head of the intelligence community. I plan to look to research and scholarship to enrich my understanding of these norms, the moral structure to which they are attached, and how they are effectively learned—but also for how to evaluate their impact and appropriately strengthen them at a moment in our country's history when I would argue we are in dire need of examining and strengthening the principles that guide us in making just, fair, and effective decisions in public life to promote the well-being of others.

As I am just getting started on this work, what I want to do today is give you some sense of the ethical principles I am focused on, convince you that such principles are not only critical to strategic decision-making but also fundamental to democratic governance and in the context of the broader crisis we find ourselves in, to illustrate how they are intricately tied to our democracy's survival. Before, however, laying out the principles, I thought I would start by telling you a personal story that had an enormous impact on me as a young civil servant in government. This story reflects on a number of the core ethical principles relevant to the decision-

making process that I later focus on while also illustrating why these principles are so important to the functioning of our democracy.

Shortly after starting as a young lawyer at the State Department over 20 years ago, I discovered that a significant number of international agreements had not been reported to the Congress as they should have been under a little-known law, called the Case-Zablocki Act.[1] I was in a small office as a junior attorney and my immediate supervisor was on vacation where he could NOT be reached when I made the discovery. I suspect you can imagine my nervousness in reporting such a disaster having only recently been hired, which had not happened because of some grand conspiracy but rather as a consequence of a series of human missteps, misunderstandings, and mismanagement.

I had only discovered the problem because we had received a letter from then-Senator Joe Biden who was on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations or SFRC, who explained that he'd taken note of media reports regarding "black sites" where detainees were being held, which he assumed required classified agreements with other countries that had not been reported.

He was essentially accusing the George W. Bush administration of withholding them in an effort to avoid Congressional oversight of their activities in what was then described as the global war on terrorism. In my search, I had—quite literally—found a cabinet full of agreements, none of which appeared to be relevant to Senator Biden's request for secret base agreements but nevertheless should have been reported under the Case-Zablocki Act.

I first sought the advice of a senior attorney who effectively indicated that I couldn't be right about this—I mean how could it possibly have happened? And furthermore, if I were right, it would probably be better if I didn't bring attention to it, as no good could come from such a discovery, which would undoubtedly lead to damaging recriminations against the legal adviser's office and ultimately be perceived as malfeasance by the State Department motivated by politics.

Moreover, he pointed out, if I do this while my boss is away, he will never forgive me as the entire situation will be perceived as his fault and so best to just keep quiet and provide a non-answer to the letter we had received from Senator Biden, indicating that there are no unreported secret base agreements regarding "black sites," which was true.

I went home that night and reflected on the situation, finally deciding to go to my boss's boss—the supervising deputy legal adviser, someone I had only met a few times. He was terribly intimidating—a brilliant lawyer who was definitely the person you want to talk to about thorny legal issues but was not well-known for enjoying management issues.

I was certain he would not be pleased with this revelation. I thought it likely he would react as the other senior attorney did but instead, he listened to what I had to say, asked a few penetrating questions, and then immediately pulled me into the legal adviser's office down the hall to tell him what we had discovered. This was, by the way, my very first meeting with the legal adviser at the time, William Taft IV.

As I look back on the situation with the benefit of hindsight, I can see how important this experience was to my education as a public servant and to the building of an ethical culture. Taft and his deputy immediately focused on the fact that we had not complied with the law, did not shy away from this fact once they were satisfied that I was right, and focused instead on who needed to be informed—the secretary of state most immediately but also the Congress—and what needed to be done to correct the situation as soon as possible.

1 The Case-Zablocki Act required, among other things, that the State Department transmit to the Congress the text of international agreements to which the United States is a party within 60 days of their entry into force. The law has been amended since, including the timeline for reporting such agreements. 1 U.S.C. §112b.

They never yelled at me or asked in frustration why I had raised this with them—making sure to incentivize me in future to give them bad news. They treated it as a given that we must comply with the law, that doing so was crucial, and that reporting on the situation in an honest way, revealing both the good and the bad of what had happened without trying to hide the less flattering details, was the right thing to do.

Perhaps this seems obvious and what you would assume would happen but there were a few who thought the ramifications of what we were reporting would likely be well out of proportion to the offense. They generally argued that to so clearly admit wrongdoing was a mistake—after all, the Executive Branch is regularly late in sending reports to the Congress. And in some ways they were right but what happened also reflected a material weakness in our internal controls that would only be revealed and addressed by acknowledging a failure.

Furthermore, at the end of the day, I don't think anyone truly doubted that there was a difference between missing the deadline on a Congressional report by several months or longer and failing to report hundreds of international agreements, however minor these agreements might seem. Thus, at some personal cost, including for example, the setting aside of a major professional award given the acknowledgement of a violation of law, these leaders demonstrated the importance of accepting responsibility, which enabled us to not only fix the problem but also to send a broader signal throughout the office that this kind of negligence would not be tolerated.

These events were unquestionably formative for me. I quickly grew to see Taft and his deputy as models I admired and wanted to emulate—you might call them "moral exemplars" as described by Lawrence Blum or better yet, Linda Zagzebski, in the context of her discussion of exemplarist virtue theory. The behavior they exhibited became part of a narrative that helped to shape a common tradition linked to a more abstract moral structure for me and other lawyers in the office who were watching these events unfold.[2]

When I talked to my friends and family about their actions at the time—I focused on the fact that they had put the country first, before themselves. They had acted with integrity by reporting to superiors a mistake and taking ownership of it—holding themselves accountable rather than trying to blame others. They were honest about what happened and that allowed them to take action to fix the management problems that had led to the oversight to begin with and they ensured that we reported the agreements that should have been reported.

Additionally, they were kind to me and my immediate boss, while also demanding action to address the problem and while clearly I was seeing some of the flaws of the institution I was working in, I also felt that this was an office and a leadership I could be proud to work for. As a result, I had no problem staying late and working hard to ensure that the situation was addressed and their example gave me strength in numerous moments over the years, helping me to see the value of acknowledging when I, or the institution I was a part of, made a mistake.

I also never forgot that underlying much of what happened was a sense from both Taft and his deputy, that their actions were guided by a special responsibility that they felt as public servants serving their country, and that this created an enhanced duty to act

2 Linda Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Virtue Theory*, 52. Professor Zagzebski points out that "[w]e identify admirable persons by the emotion of admiration, and that emotion is itself subject to education through the example of the emotional reactions of other persons." She proposes that, therefore, the "process of creating a highly abstract structure to simplify and justify our moral practices is rooted in one of the most important features of the pretheoretical practices we want to explain, the practice of identifying exemplars, and in a kind of experience that most of us trust very much—the experience of admiration, shaped by narratives that are part of a common tradition."

I was gratified to be part of something so important and the thought of disappointing those I admired by not living up to their example provided me with additional courage and determination to act with integrity when no one was looking.

with integrity in all that they did. That they were exercising authority on behalf of citizens who could not directly monitor their actions, making trust and integrity essential to the very functioning of our democracy.

This sense was reinforcing—I was gratified to be part of something so important and the thought of disappointing those I admired by not living up to their example provided me with additional courage and determination to act with integrity when no one was looking. This same sense grew even more acute later in my career as I had more opportunities than I wished, to pay tribute to those who had been mentally and physically injured in service and those who laid down their lives for our country, making the ultimate sacrifice.

Fundamentally, this initial event shaped my thinking on the ethics of being a public servant in government and the importance of moral courage.

It is also worth reflecting on the fact that in the end, political actors on both sides of the aisle acted responsibly to address the situation without allowing politics to dominate, in part because of the respect they held for each other and a shared set of standards governing their behavior that generated a certain level of trust amongst them. Secretary of State Colin Powell was, at the time, furious that these agreements had not been reported and how it might disrupt his relationship with the SFRC at a time when he needed their help on various issues but he trusted his legal adviser and let him address the situation. Senator Biden was also angry, as was Senator Richard Lugar—but they not only had respect for each other but also for Secretary Powell and Legal Adviser Taft, so when their staff was told that the reason the agreements had not been reported was because of a management issue, they didn't dismiss it out of hand even as they didn't simply accept it on faith. Moreover, everyone accepted without question the higher-level principle that adherence to the rule of law was important.

I watched the professional staff in particular, initially outraged on both sides of the aisle, eventually cool down as they accepted that this was really a management issue and not an effort by the Bush administration to avoid oversight, which helped to counter the early cynicism that was expressed about the inevitable—as some saw it—result of coming clean with the Congress.

I don't need to tell you that today's politics are much more divisive and this would have made the situation I described far more difficult. We have become exceptionally polarized in the United States, and that polarization is often characterized by animosity and distrust between partisan groups divided by fundamentally different worldviews and perceived realities. Such polarization undermines the very respect and trust that was so crucial in the events I described—and furthermore devalues honesty.

A Pew Research Center survey conducted in March of this year indicates that eight in ten U.S. adults—of both parties—say that when it comes to important issues facing the country, Republican and Democratic voters not only disagree on plans and policies, but also cannot agree on basic facts.[3]

3 See https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/07/30/most-americans-say-republican-and-democratic-voters-cannot-agree-on-basic-facts/. (This is one of the few things that Republicans and Democrats can apparently agree on: 83 percent of Democrats and independents who lean Democratic say voters from the two parties disagree on the basic facts, as do 79 percent of Republicans and those who lean Republican.)

A civil service that consistently engages in ethical behavior that, for example, prioritizes honesty, as well as timely, apolitical, and evidence-based advice can serve as a bulwark against such politicization but perversely, such polarization also makes it more difficult to do so, particularly when basic facts are called into question. We've seen this, for example, in the context of domestic terrorism and climate change where the line becomes blurred between fact and opinion, creating an environment in which the truth is perceived as subjective—fueled by partisan polarization and an information ecosystem that promotes disinformation and partial truths.

Most people would also, I suspect, agree that having a strong ethical culture in our public institutions is fundamental to generating trust in government yet in my experience even when such an ethical culture exists, it does not necessarily lead the public to trust government. Trust in the government has been in decline in the United States since the 1960s[4] for a range of factors, including Watergate; revelations made regarding the Vietnam War; a fragmented, conspiratorial, and partisan information environment; and citizens' perceptions of government performance that tend to be mismatched with their expectations, but among these factors is also the increasing political polarization in our country.[5]

The importance of polarization to trust in government is made especially clear in polls that demonstrate that an increasing number of people over time trust the government more when their party controls the presidency and less when their party does not.[6] Surveys also make clear that this distrust is not symmetrical: Republicans lose confidence in institutions when Democrats hold power far more than the reverse.[7]

The public also often conflates the civil service with elected officials and political appointees, which is at the root of at least some of the distrust expressed. This becomes clear when looking at survey results that force people to focus on whether they trust, specifically, civil servants as opposed to political leaders. In a recent survey close to half of the country—49 percent—say they trust civil servants, as compared to only 33 percent who trust the government as a whole and two-thirds of Americans who say that the federal government is corrupt.[8]

This level of polarization is affecting the public's perception of certain long-held ethical principles applied by the civil service. For example, although an overwhelming majority of Americans—87 percent—agreed in 2024, that a nonpartisan civil service was important for having a strong democracy, this year that number dropped to 66 percent.[9]

4 Pew polling dating back to 1958 shows that public trust in the federal government, which was at 73 percent in 1958 and reached as much as 77 percent in 1964, has been low for decades but as of May 2024 reached a near historic low at 22 percent. See https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/public-trust-in-government-1958-2024/.

5 A great deal has been written on this topic over the years. Books that reflect on these factors include J.S. Nye, P.D. Zelikow, and D.C. King, *Why People Don't Trust Government* (Wiley 1997) (reflecting on, among other things, the information environment and the gap between citizens' perceptions of government performance); G.M. Graff, *Watergate: A New History* (Simon & Schuster 2022) (reflecting on, among other things, the degree to which the Vietnam War, the Pentagon Papers and Watergate "fundamentally rewrote the relationship between the American people and their government, and caused a collapse in the public's faith in those institutions that our nation's leaders are still struggling with today."); J.E. Campbell, *Polarized, Making Sense of a Divided America* (Princeton University 2016).

6 For example, this year 42 percent of Republicans say they trust the federal government, which is four times higher than the 10 percent who did so one year ago. See https://ourpublicservice.org/publications/the-state-of-public-trust-in-government-2025/.

7 Ibid. While 42 percent of Republicans say they trust the federal government as compared to 10 percent who did so a year ago during a Democratic Administration, the decrease in Democrats who now trust the government with a Republican in office is considerably less, going from 39 percent last year to 31 percent this year.

8 See https://ourpublicservice.org/publications/the-state-of-public-trust-in-government-2025/.

9 Ibid.

One wonders if the public no longer thinks it is possible for the civil service to be nonpartisan or perhaps they just don't trust civil servants to adhere to the principle. Either way, consistent with this trend, last year, 72 percent of the population opposed presidents having the right to fire civil servants for any reason but this year, only 52 percent are opposed.[10] I highlight this because it demonstrates how partisan politics can erode support for certain ethical principles in government and moreover, how quickly the foundations for these principles can shift.[11]

When we need a professional merit-based, nonpartisan, and ethical civil service the most, partisan politics are making it harder than ever for public servants who are attempting to apply the ethical principles they've been taught to value. Perhaps the most pernicious aspect of the current polarization is the ruthless targeting of qualified civil servants for doing their jobs as a way of discrediting them for taking positions or disclosing facts that are inconvenient—harming their reputations, making it harder for them to obtain employment even outside of government, threatening them with lawsuits, and generally upending their lives by putting them in the center of a political maelstrom they are told to keep out of as civil servants.

Not only is this the opposite of the moral exemplar I reflected on in my initial story, disincentivizing our public servants from speaking truth to power or acting with integrity rather than inculcating an ethical culture—it is an intimidation tactic that promotes fear and cynicism about the very ethical principles that we seek to strengthen and protect. The broader democratic crisis we find ourselves in today and the number of serious urgent and escalating long-term strategic challenges we face as a country, make the existence and application of these ethical norms within the government crucial and we will need the public's support if we have any hope of instilling them in future generations.

My perspective is grounded in a career in the U.S. government, working in all three branches at various levels of seniority and in a range of roles related to national security and foreign policy. And it is probably worth noting that in my roughly two decades of service, the vast, vast majority of the thousands of public servants I encountered cared deeply about the integrity of their work and put their country first, often at great personal sacrifice.

Furthermore, these experiences have given me a rare appreciation of the importance of the norms that guide our decision-making but before going further, let me talk a little about how these ethical principles are articulated in government and translated into guidance relevant to different aspects of the decision-making process.

High-level ethical principles are typically issued and discussed in the civil service within each department and agency in a range of forms but not surprisingly the different codes have a great deal of overlap and typically remain in place without regard to political shifts in leadership. Within the U.S. intelligence community or IC, for example, the principles of professional ethics that were issued by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence or ODNI in 2014, under Director James Clapper's leadership who had been nominated by President Barack Obama, remained the same through the first Trump administration and the Biden administration.

10 See https://ourpublicservice.org/publications/the-state-of-public-trust-in-government-2025/.

11 This is not the first time the country has debated this issue. Teddy Roosevelt, who was a New York State assemblyman at the time, partly in response to the rampant corruption in government, argued that government could never work properly until a professional civil service replaced cronyism: "The spoils system of making appointments to and removals from office is so wholly and unmixedly evil, is so emphatically un-American and undemocratic, and is so potent a force for degradation in our public life that it is difficult to believe that any intelligent man of ordinary decency who has looked into the subject can be its advocate." By early 1883, the Congress passed landmark administrative reform that abolished "assessments" and instituted a merit-based system of public appointments. See *Cosmopolitan, Volume 13*, page 66.

These principles could be found on ODNI's website, in the *Intelligence Community Legal Reference Book*, and framed on the wall of my office. They were drawn from pre-existing principles that could be found within IC elements' documents decades before the ODNI was established that were quite similar. The principles issued in 2014 were Mission, Truth, Lawfulness, Integrity, Stewardship, Excellence, and Diversity.[12]

In an effort to learn from the approach of other countries interested in promoting an effective and democratic culture within their public administrations, I began to research whether others have done something similar and I found that not only have most democratic governments codified ethical principles for their public service in law but they also typically emphasize many of the same principles that we do, including in particular the importance of impartiality or apolitical conduct, integrity, and accountability.[13] While this doesn't mean these are the "right" principles for every democracy, it is apparent in reading through the preambular language that accompany these different codes of conduct that we are not alone in coming to the conclusion that these principles are crucially important to the effectiveness of our public service and the health of our democracy.[14]

Of course, broad principles such as "Truth" and "Integrity" can mean a great many things to a great many people and consequently are more meaningful when translated into specific guidance that is intended to help public servants apply them in their daily work.[15] This is usually accomplished in regulations, directives, broad statements, or other guidance that is connected to specific principles. To unpack how this works, I thought I would provide an example that illustrates certain paradigms.

12 See, e.g., https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/OGC/IC-Legal-Reference-Book-2024.pdf.

13 Australia's Public Service Act lists the following values intended to govern the behavior of its public servants: Impartial, Committed to Service, Accountable, Respectful, Ethical, and Stewardship. While you will note different areas of emphasis, the language used to explain each principle makes clear how close our lists are in substance even if the high-level terms are not exactly the same. For example, when we refer to "Truth" we say that it is about obtaining, analyzing, and providing intelligence "objectively" which in various standards documents within the IC is further articulated as, among other things, providing timely, rigorous, objective analysis that is independent of political considerations or policy biases, which is similar to how Australia interprets the value of being "impartial", which the Act further explains means that the public service is expected to be apolitical and to provide advice that is "frank, honest, timely and based on the best available evidence." Similarly, Canada has a Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector that identifies five core values: Respect, Integrity, Stewardship, Excellence, and Democracy. Again, fairly similar—though the explicit addition of Democracy is interesting; for the others this value is implicit. The United Kingdom has something called the Nolan Principles, which are seven principles that outline the ethical standards those working in the UK public sector are expected to adhere to and they are: Selflessness, Integrity, Objectivity, Accountability, Openness, Honesty, and Leadership. These principles are generally accepted and have been incorporated into individual department codes of conduct. New Zealand has a code for its state services called the "Standards of Integrity and Conduct," which indicates that anyone working in a department or in a Crown entity must be Fair, Impartial, Responsible, and Trustworthy.

Even as you move beyond the Five Eyes countries, which of course have a common heritage, to other democracies, there are various codes that encompass similar elements. For example, ministers in the European Council have adopted codes of conduct for public officials that state that public officials are expected to carry out their duties "in accordance with the law," "in a politically neutral manner," and "to be honest, impartial and efficient," while also performing their duties "to the best of [their] ability with skill, fairness, and understanding, having regard only for the public interest and the relevant circumstances of the case." Japan's National Public Service Ethics Code mandates "fairness," "public interest focus," and avoiding actions that "create public suspicion." South Korea's multi-act system also emphasizes similar core principles such as "good faith," "kindness and fairness," integrity," and "political impartiality."

14 While I believe that certain ethical principles applied by the citizens of a representative democracy are critical to the health of that democracy, I do not want to suggest that other forms of democracy or even other political systems are unethical.

15 "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

As I noted, every democracy whose code I looked at stresses the importance of impartiality or apolitical conduct within the civil service. It is easy to understand why this would be a crucial principle to guide public servants in any democracy, in that if you have career public servants who are expected to serve the government and the people of our country regardless of which political party is elected to lead the government, you presumably want to be confident that such public servants will not seek to undermine the agenda of politicians who have been duly elected but are not of their party. An underlying assumption that drives the need for such a principle is that there is value in expertise and professionalism within our public institutions, which requires a career staff—as opposed to firing everyone at the end of an administration and hiring new staff from the new administration's political party.

Joel H. Rosenthal and Avril D. Haines. CREDIT: Bryan Goldberg Photography.

In my experience, most leaders accept this as a given and want the civil servants who work for them to give them honest and well-informed advice that enables them to get things done, allowing them to achieve whatever policy outcomes they are pursuing and for which they were elected. One can see how this principle, primarily embodied in ODNI's principles as "Truth," is intended to make the government more effective and is supportive of a healthy democracy but of course in practice, and particularly in an especially politically polarized environment, its application is more complicated.

One aspect of intelligence work in which this ethical principle is often discussed is analysis—or what I refer to as analytic integrity. There is an intelligence community directive on "analytic standards" that states that the standards "promote a common ethic for achieving analytic rigor and excellence and for personal integrity in analytic practice."[16] The standards listed are: objectivity, which covers policy bias; independence of political consideration; timeliness; analysis that is based on all available sources of intelligence information; and the application of tradecraft standards, which includes issues such as guidance on how to express uncertainty and to properly describe factors affecting source quality and credibility.[17]

It is important to understand that through the application of tradecraft standards, analysts seek to test their judgments and more effectively communicate their findings to decision-makers in ways that help to explain why they've reached the conclusions they have reached without policy or political bias. Doing so promotes rigor and allows for a more sophisticated conversation between analysts and policymakers, for example, as it allows them to take issue with any assumptions that are otherwise embedded in an analytic conclusion.

The directive and the underlying guidance is quite detailed and one can intuit how this guidance, in combination with robust analytic training and analytic ombuds throughout the community helps to promote written analysis—regularly written and reviewed by multiple officers—that is rigorous, evidence-based, and apolitical.[18] One can also draw a clear line between the guidance and the language used in the IC's high-level principle of "Truth," as well as "Integrity" and "Mission."[19]

Interestingly, over the years what is most often discussed publicly with respect to analytic integrity is a challenge that is less about civil servants being political and more about politicians rejecting or ignoring apolitical analysis, demanding that analysts write something that is not supported by the evidence to satisfy a policy or political agenda—or stopping analysts, sometimes directly and sometimes through intimidation, from writing or saying what they don't want to hear.

16 See https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICD/ICD-203.pdf.

17 Ibid.

18 Analytic work, it should be understood, is not generally produced by one analyst alone or done as a compilation of a series of analysts views but rather as a kind of "corporate" product that reflects the analytic office of an element or the IC analytic community as a whole.

19 For example, the Principles document lists "Truth" as the first principle and states as follows: "We seek the truth; speak truth to power; and obtain, analyze, and provide intelligence objectively." See https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/OGC/IC-Legal-Reference-Book-2024.pdf. What constitutes the "truth" is, of course, often highly contested and a topic of scholarship for, I suspect, as long as scholarship has existed. The intelligence community, as reflected in the "Intelligence Community Directive that addresses Analytic Standards," teaches analysts that analytic products should apply expertise and logic to make the most accurate judgments and assessments possible, based on all relevant information available and known information gaps—properly expressing and explaining uncertainties, distinguishing between underlying intelligence information and analysts' assumptions and judgments, and incorporating analysis of alternatives (i.e., the systematic evaluation of differing hypotheses to explain events or phenomena, explore near-term outcomes, and imagine possible futures to mitigate surprise and risk). See https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICD/ICD-203.pdf.

There are, of course, numerous historical examples of why this form of politicization can be disastrous. I, along with two of my colleagues, wrote about this challenge a few years ago and used as an example, the tragic consequences suffered by millions in Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia as a result of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident that occurred in large part because the work of Soviet engineers who were trained to analyze complex systems based on inferences drawn from objective facts was politicized.[20]

Instead of relaying the truth as they saw it, the engineers were intimidated by their government to conceal the true dimensions of the catastrophe unfolding and of course the result was the worst nuclear disaster in history. Good policy decisions require rigorous, fact-based analysis. Decision-makers can obviously come to a different conclusion than those who have written the analysis but they should be prepared to articulate why they've come to a different conclusion and the experts who have studied the issues should have a chance, time permitting, to engage in that discussion.

In today's polarized environment, however, politicians often appear to assume that analysts who write a piece that they perceive as insufficiently supportive of a worldview they hold or a policy they are pursuing, are acting out of political motivations rather than adhering to analytic integrity. And analysts, for their part, are increasingly wary of writing on issues that are perceived as politically controversial. This is understandable—they may fear the response against them personally but also their colleagues and may rationalize that whatever they write is unlikely to change a policymaker's mind on the topic.[21] Even assuming they are right, such behavior can have broader ramifications that are concerning. If you don't adhere to a norm in the smaller moments, when it may matter less, it is even harder to do so when it really matters. My experience has indicated, as scholarship suggests, that getting into a habitual practice of doing the right thing is crucial to engaging in normative behavior when there is pressure not to do so—it is also clear how this can have devastating consequences for national security. In other words, not saying anything can often be as bad as providing inaccurate information or telling policymakers what they want to hear, as it ultimately results in a discussion about what to do without the benefit of the best, relevant information and analysis we have about what is under discussion.

But there are still other challenges associated with implementing analytic integrity, even when you are not dealing with such a toxic environment, that highlight the complexities and the value of talking through particular scenarios.

For example, as you will have noted, the directive described above is primarily focused on written analysis, yet much of the decision-making process in national security occurs in meetings. While papers are often circulated as read-aheads for such meetings, the intelligence community officer who attends is generally expected to provide an oral brief of the material and in so doing, the ethical culture of the institution will be an important guide on how that brief is delivered, for in many ways it is much harder to be direct and honest in person, when faced with colleagues

20 See https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/28/trump-cia-intimidation-politicization-us-intelligence-agencies-could-end-in-disaster/.

21 The question of how fear manifests itself in such moments is worth further study, especially if we are to have any hope of creating habits and structures that help to counteract the impact it can have on pursuing the truth. In a famous First Amendment case, *Whitney v. California* (1927), about a woman who was prosecuted under the state's criminal syndicalism act, Justice Louis Brandeis noted in a concurring opinion joined by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes that "[i]t is the function of speech to free men from the bondage of irrational fears." He developed the theme that fear is what drives us in the first place and that we need courage to replace it. 274 US 357, 376.

who may disagree and where other emotional or institutional factors come into play, than by writing and sending a note on the same subject.[22]

For example, many intelligence officers over the course of several administrations, myself included, have sat through meetings on Afghanistan in which the analytic judgments made by the IC were different from the judgments of the U.S. military regarding the capabilities of the Afghan National Security Forces. In such meetings, I have seen some officers be blunt about the differences and others less so, sometimes by saying less and sometimes by eliding over the specific areas of tension and focusing instead on areas of agreement.

The decision-making process is not well served in those moments if the briefer is not surfacing a fundamental difference in analysis for a decision-maker. While there are times when this might occur as a consequence of political pressure, it is often a consequence of other factors, such as a sense that you don't want to be perceived as disagreeing with a colleague whose support you want on other issues or they are a friend—or a respected mentor—and you don't want to be perceived as insulting them by effectively delivering the news that the policy they have dedicated themselves to is not working. While other ethical principles should guide your delivery of the analysis in ways that are kind and respectful of those in the room, it is crucial that you deliver the best analysis you have to support better decision-making.

Different people have different mechanisms—or habits—for ensuring that the integrity of the process is maintained.

For example, when I was the deputy director of the CIA, I sought to have the analysts who prepared the paper for any contentious meeting on this subject brief my military counterpart before we ended up in a deputies meeting discussing it for the first time, so that they would not be surprised and so that they could ask questions of the analysts, which helped us to refine and clarify differences of view.

In a similar vein, my deputy when I was the director of national intelligence, would typically call his military counterpart to discuss the analysis and work together to ensure that any differences that existed would be clearly presented. As with so many of these principles, mechanisms like this are not written down anywhere but are learned through observation, handed down from mentors, or derived out of practice, learning what does and does not work—yet they are essential and implicitly they recognize a kind of hierarchy of organizational ethics in which, for example, the ethical obligation to deliver the best, unvarnished truth given how important doing so is to the best interests of the country, should be prioritized over demonstrating respect to a colleague.[23]

22 It is worth noting that there is a debate on the degree to which IC officers should be included in every aspect of the decision-making process, so as to avoid to some extent the challenges I reflect on here and instead minimize their presence and/or provide papers without being present for as many meetings. In my experience, this is worth a discussion. For example, in the Obama administration the ODNI briefers would leave the oval office after delivering the president's daily brief (PDB) and the remaining policy advisers would then have a conversation with the president about the policy issues associated with the intelligence brief discussed or other policy matters of importance. By way of contrast, during the Biden administration, I and the ODNI briefer who accompanied me, remained in the Oval Office for the entire PDB but we were careful not to comment on the policy issues under discussion. Either way, though, there are inevitably times when it makes sense for the IC to be in the room for the policy discussion, which often cannot be easily segregated and I would certainly argue that IC participants remain in the discussion for deputies, principals, and National Security Council meetings so that they are able to follow the conversation and understand what intelligence is most likely to be of use in the context of an ongoing debate. This nevertheless augurs for conducting oneself in such meetings with care, so that the IC is not perceived as blessing a particular policy or as influenced in its analysis as a consequence of what the policy position is of the political leadership. This is also a reason to back up briefings, when possible, with paper that is fully vetted and consistent with the tradecraft standards articulated in IC guidance.

23 The helpful phrase "hierarchy of organizational ethics" was coined by Garrett Graff.

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Of course, all of this is predicated on actually having a decision-making process that allows departments and agencies to surface relevant information, test hypotheses, and debate proposals. As we face such an extraordinary number of serious interconnected immediate and long-term strategic challenges and opportunities that require substantial expertise, as well as coordinated and sustained responses across government and with international partners, having the information needed for the purpose of making better strategic decisions could not be more important—but the political leadership has to agree that this is the case for it to have impact.

All of this said, I want to make clear that I am not suggesting that if we have a robust ethical culture in our civil service that supports a functioning decision-making process, we'll always make the best possible strategic decisions or even that our democracy will be safe. An ethical culture is necessary in my view but insufficient.

Among other things, our political leaders matter, as do the effectiveness of the political structures and decision-making processes within which the civil service operates. Without a civil service that adheres to certain fundamental ethical principles in decision-making, however, I think our chances of success drop dramatically, which is why I want to do this work.

There are a range of principles related to decision-making that we haven't discussed and many of them are equally complex and important. For example, respect for the rule of law and legal traditions, respect for human dignity and the values of our democratic system; understanding and recognizing the contours of one's position in the decision-making process as, for example, a lawyer, a policymaker, or an intelligence officer; participating and designing an appropriately inclusive and diverse decision-making process; transparency and accountability, and what it means to act as a good steward of government resources. The list goes on.

Moreover, as our work in national security changes, so will our way of applying such principles. For example, as we began using artificial intelligence (AI) in the IC, principles were issued to guide IC personnel as they developed and used AI—making clear that the high-level principles we apply elsewhere would also be applied with respect to AI while also addressing some of the particular issues associated with AI. These principles and the framework associated with them obviously do not answer every question but they are a start, and as AI and other technologies evolve, we will need to continue to develop thinking about what this means for every aspect of our work. For example, in the context of analysis, a key question is how to address explainability and another, particularly as we get closer to artificial general intelligence (AGI), will be how to ensure that AI's tendency to prioritize pleasing the user over providing objective information does not undermine analytic integrity.

Over the course of this year, I hope to work through a range of principles to see if I can not only better explain how they have been applied, including the challenges they pose, but also to think through how they might be strengthened. In particular, I am convinced that the body of scholarship that highlights how experiential learning and the formation of good habits can more effectively promote education and create impact, will allow me

to develop specific interventions that may improve our capacity to inculcate an ethical culture in the U.S. government.[24]

As a general matter, though, what may be most important about this work is facilitating a broader conversation in the public about the importance of the ethics that guide our civil service. Without the public's support in this moment, I worry they will be eroded and I see the ethical culture of our civil service as intricately tied to our democracy's survival.

I think it is fair to say that over the course of the last century, we've seen a remarkable trajectory for democracies. At the end of the Second World War, there were only 12 established constitutional democracies in the world. By the late 1980s, there were over 60 and by 2003, there were more than 120 out of 191 member states in the United Nations. But over the last two decades, we have seen a dramatic decline in democratic governance with dozens of countries demonstrating signs of democratic erosion and at least a third of the world's population living under authoritarian rule.[25]

While we have seen some democracies overthrown, the vast majority of backsliding is among governments that retain the formal trappings of democracies, including for example elections, while nevertheless flouting the norms and values on which constitutional democracies are based. If nothing else, these last two decades have taught us that institutions are not enough to rein in elected autocrats—they must instead be defended by political parties and organized citizens—but democratic ethical norms, including the ethical

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principles we have long applied to our civil service, are crucial. As the authors of *How Democracies Die* noted in their seminal work, "Without robust norms, constitutional checks and balances do not serve as the bulwarks of democracy that we imagine them to be."[26]

In a constitutional democracy, the principle of self-government demands not just that leaders be chosen through a contested election but also the establishment of institutional arrangements that ensure elections will be free and fair and that certain basic rights are respected. To reliably do so, institutions are bolstered by a constitution that provides checks by way of a separation of power among those who make the laws, those who execute the law, and those who engage in judicial review—but all of these institutions are made up of a combination of political leaders and careerists who must be guided by some shared set of standards governing their behavior that generates sufficient trust to allow for the effective resolution of disagreement—the ethical principles we apply in decision-making are that set of standards.

Furthermore, outside of governmental institutions there is a need for active civil, social, educational and political organizations that facilitate debate while also uniting society,

24 Even just reading Thomas Schelling's fascinating book on *Micromotives and Macrobehavior* (W.W Norton & Company 1978), I have been thinking about the dynamics of meetings and how it is often the case that early interventions by individuals can create a kind of momentum that shapes the aggregate behavior of a group in ways that sometimes produce surprising results. Or how, when a series of senior officers speak forcefully in favor of a proposal or provide a uniform perspective regarding the facts, how much harder it can be for a junior officer to contradict them, even if their ethical principles warrant doing so. Such work may prompt thinking, for example, on useful ways to structure such meetings, so as to make it easier for junior officers to speak up and apply the ethical principles they have been taught.

25 See, e.g., the Economic Intelligence Unit's 2024 Democracy Index, which reports that 39.2 percent of people in 60 countries are living under authoritarian regimes, while only 6.6 percent of the world's population in 25 countries live in full democracies, down from 12.5 percent in 2014. https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2024/.

26 Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (Penguin Random House 2018), pp. 5-6.

as John Stuart Mill put it in *Considerations on Representative Government,* "by common sympathies" that may be grounded in identities of descent, language, religious beliefs, and a national history and narrative—and that narrative must be connected to the one that resides within our government.[27]

Together—both inside and outside of government—we need to ensure we have the right set of shared ethical standards that can bring us together.

I have a colleague at Oxford, Lucia Prauscello, who has written a book on citizenship as conceived by Plato.[28] She opens her terrific book on this subject noting that the "Ancient Greeks repeatedly claimed that what makes a polis is not territory or buildings, and not even its institutions, but its inhabitants . . . its citizens: it is the disposition of the rulers and ruled toward each other and towards the city as a whole that decides the quality of governance."[29]

I absolutely believe this and I see the norms that shape our behavior in decision-making as closely tied to the quality of governance in any democratic system. It is because I know the quality of those I have had the great privilege to serve with and for, and because of the extraordinary intellectual community that exists here and in other such institutions that I am privileged to work with inside and outside of government, that I have such optimism for the future but I know it will take work and courage.

Thank you for your kindness and patience in listening and also, in advance, for your advice and thoughts.

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27 John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (Cambridge University Press 2011) Chapter XVI: Of nationality, as connected with Representative Government.

28 Plato's concept of citizenship is reflected in both the *Laws* (University of Chicago 1980) and the *Republic* (Oxford World's Classics 2008), which explain, among other things, the importance of inculcating virtue in citizens.

29 Lucia Prauscello, *Performing Citizenship in Plato's Laws* (Cambridge Classical Studies 2014), pp. 1.

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The Kegley Lecture was established in 2024 to invigorate the inquiry into the connection between moral concerns and the pressures and realities of world politics. The lecture honors Carnegie Council former trustee, Charles W. Kegley, Jr., the author of the best-selling international relations textbook, *World Politics: Trend and Transformation*, and a role model for those who ask and try to answer the most challenging questions of ethics in international affairs.

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