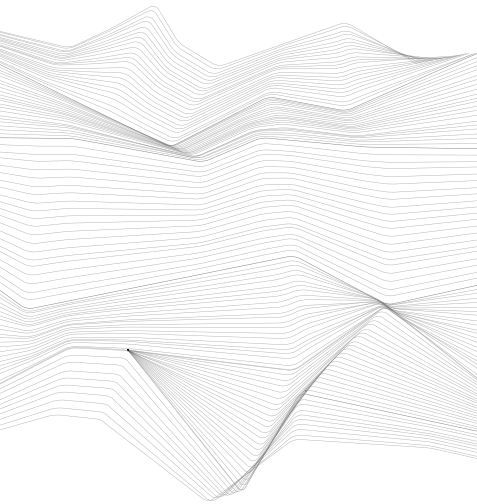


Analyzing Russia, Putin, and Ukraine at the CIA and Columbia

By Peter Clement



Author's note: *This essay was written before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. I've updated it because the war highlights the need for expertise on Russian and Ukrainian history, as well as the importance of a multidisciplinary approach in the analysis of unfolding events.*

My involvement in Russian and Eurasian affairs started with a single goal: To get a Ph.D. in Russian history and teach and write about Russian history and politics. Halfway through a doctorate program at Michigan State University, I realized that goal was perhaps overambitious, given the terrible academic job market. I left academia behind and sought a position in the U.S. government that would allow me to pursue my passion for all things Russian, which had started back in high school and college as I took a course in Russian history and read books by Solzhenitsyn, Pasternak, and Tolstoy. I ended up at the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence.

Upon entering the halls of the headquarters in Langley, Virginia, I discovered that my new employer was essentially a “mega-university” with large, regionally focused offices that covered the world: the Middle East, Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe, and so on. Each office housed analysts who worked on the politics, leaders, economics, and military-security issues of the many countries in each region.¹

By the early 1980s, I found my way to the Office of Soviet Analysis (SOVA), home to hundreds of analysts who did nothing but work on the former USSR—in short, a dream for someone like me. I quickly discovered how much it resembled what I had

been doing in grad school: dissecting Communist leaders' speeches, scrutinizing photographs of Soviet Politburo members standing atop Lenin's tomb as I searched for clues about succession politics in the late Brezhnev and Gorbachev years. Even better, I worked during times of historic change in Soviet history: the late Brezhnev “era of stagnation,” Gorbachev's failed attempt to reform the Soviet system, the ultimate collapse of the USSR, and the chaotic Yeltsin decade that followed.

A highlight in those early years was the opportunity to apply these analytical skills to a critical moment in Soviet history. I arrived in Moscow—my first-ever trip to the Soviet Union—in March 1985 on the night of Konstantin Chernenko's death, which started a much-anticipated succession process. I recall thinking then that there couldn't be a more exciting time for a junior political analyst to be in Moscow! Ultimately, Mikhail Gorbachev was selected Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) General Secretary—but that was not a foregone conclusion as several other ranking Politburo members were vying for the post.

My early SOVA accounts focused largely on Soviet foreign policy and decision-making, covering such hot issues as Soviet-Cuban collaboration in Africa, Soviet influence-building in Nicaragua, and later Soviet policy in the Middle East. (As time allowed, I tried to develop some academic credentials, writing journal articles and book chapters on Soviet foreign policy, as well as teaching evening courses on the same topic, and on 20th-century Russia. I even took a brief leave to complete my doctorate

at Michigan State. Once I assumed greater responsibilities as a SOVA branch chief, ever-longer work days at Langley headquarters precluded such activities.)

In early 1990, as Gorbachev's USSR was imploding, SOVA senior leaders created a new "Republics Division," deploying a large cohort of analysts to closely monitor and assess developments in the non-Russian Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs). I was named deputy chief of that new division, responsible for substantive and editorial review of division analysts. Fortunately, many of those analysts had strong regional studies backgrounds (several were Harriman Institute grads). Through their research papers, memos, and current intelligence reports, I was able to quickly build upon my basic knowledge of the history, culture, and political dynamics within those non-Russian SSRs.

Interestingly, despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, those Kremlinological skills—the use of detailed chronologies, the thorough reading of the media and Soviet leaders' speeches, the uncovering of personal networks and relationships among the political elite—remain essential today as we look for clues about who might one day succeed Putin, who might be the Kremlin's key decision makers on Middle East policy, relations with China, and so on.

Russian policy toward Ukraine, not surprisingly, has been a central issue in the CIA's analytic work since the collapse of the USSR in December 1991. Indeed, Ukraine's President Leonid Kravchuk was a key player in the Belovezha Accords that formally dissolved the USSR. The tension between Russia and the West about

policy toward Ukraine dates back to the first decade of the Putin era—whether about the Orange Revolution of 2004, in which Putin's favored candidate Yanukovich lost after protests in Kyiv and Western pressure led to a revote to correct fraudulent vote-counting; or the April 2008 NATO announcement that Ukraine "will become a member of NATO"; or the natural gas pricing crisis in early 2009 that prompted a Russian shutdown of natural gas through Ukrainian pipelines, leaving several European countries without gas. Collectively, these thorny issues boiled down to one core question: Would Ukraine be aligned with Europe or be integrated within Russia's sphere of influence?

Since Russia's first invasion in 2014, we've seen a renewed interest in the 1994 decision by Kravchuk to return to Russia nuclear missile systems situated in Ukraine. In the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, Kravchuk agreed to bring Ukraine into the Non-Proliferation Treaty; in return, Kyiv received "security assurances" from the U.S. and UK, financial aid to help transfer the missiles, and most importantly, Moscow's agreement to observe Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

At the time, CIA analysts working on Ukraine had seriously debated what Kravchuk would do. The consensus was that with the right incentives, Kravchuk would ultimately send the nuclear systems back to Russia—a view that I shared. (The division chief—my direct boss—was the outlier, arguing that no rational state leader would give up nuclear weapons.) That debate has been resurrected since Putin's invasion. Some Ukrainian officials and scholars argue that a nuclear



capability would have deterred Putin; others believe Kravchuk had little choice but to give them up, since the command-and-control systems resided in Moscow and Ukraine had no nuclear fuel enrichment facilities. These factors would have made it extremely difficult for Kyiv to make the systems operational. Moreover, the political costs of going nuclear would have been great: Kyiv might have been shunned as a proliferator state akin to North Korea and likely would have lost access to Western economic aid and access to the IMF and the World Bank.

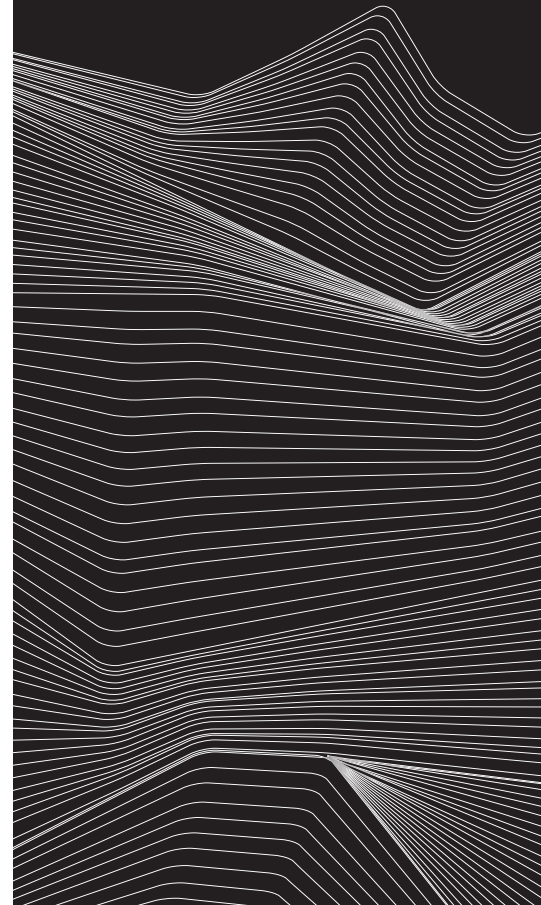
Throughout all this, my analyst colleagues and I consistently drew upon the expertise of the academic community. Each year, we not only invited outside experts to conferences sponsored by the intelligence community or by the CIA but also attended ones hosted by leading academic associations. By attending such events regularly since the late 1970s, I was able to meet many top Soviet and regional experts, who shared valuable knowledge and insights that helped me along in my own intellectual development on Eurasian issues. At one of these conferences in the mid-1980s I met Columbia professor Elizabeth Valkenier and drew upon her excellent book *The Soviet Union and the Third World: An Economic Bind* (Studies of the Harriman Institute, 1983) in my own analytic work.

Occasionally, I continued to travel to Russia and many of the newly independent republics for work. There I was able to meet with my foreign analyst counterparts, exchanging information and identifying areas where we held different views. As a senior manager

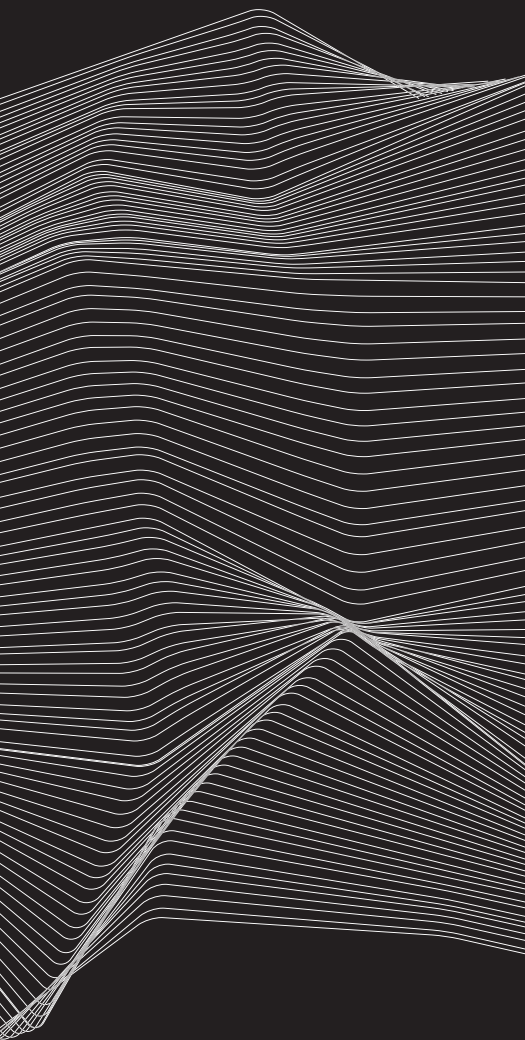
in the 1990s, I came to appreciate more fully the reality facing all intelligence analysts: our substantive work often gets mired in U.S. domestic politics. On the one hand, it was rewarding to think that our analytic work on Eurasia could help inform the deliberations and debates among U.S. policy makers—through various briefings and analytic articles in the President’s Daily Brief (PDB) and other intelligence publications. I also had a ringside seat, as a CIA representative, at senior policy maker meetings of successive U.S. administrations as they formulated policy toward Russia and the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union.

On the other hand, analysts on any substantive account—Russia, China, Iran, and so on—sometimes get caught in the crossfire of intense political debates over policy, or simply U.S. domestic politics. Occasionally, our analytic assessments would be used to support the positions of one political party or the other, leading to requests for “clarification” of one’s findings or critical commentary aimed at undermining the analysts’ judgments.

On the Russia account, such challenges have existed since the early days of the Cold War: How far ahead were the Soviets in the production and deployment of missiles, a.k.a. the “missile gap”? How much were the Soviets spending on their military and nuclear arsenal? Was Gorbachev a serious reformer who sought improved relations with the West, or was he engaged in a *maskirovka* (cover-up), using his reforms of perestroika and glasnost to cleverly deceive the West while quietly rebuilding the USSR’s strength? (More recently, during the Trump



Above and opposite page: Peter Clement during his first-ever trip to Moscow as a young analyst (March 1985).



Yeltsin's gambit sparked a huge new crisis when Duma deputies refused to disband and Yeltsin ordered the military to shell the White House Parliament building.

administration, Russia—and Ukraine—had become deeply enmeshed in U.S. domestic politics once again.)

Such challenges aside, it was always exciting to come to work and wrestle with the never-ending series of analytic problems posed during the Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin years. Just a few examples from the Yeltsin decade help explain that excitement and frustration. The 1990s under Yeltsin were a roller coaster of uncertainty and intrigue. Of course, no one could be surprised at Russia's trials and tribulations, considering that Yeltsin had to navigate Russia through a three-tiered revolution: Transitioning Russia from Soviet dictatorship to a democratic system; an unprecedented attempt to dismantle a massive planned economy to one based on market principles; and, perhaps as important, a psychological revolution in which Russians faced an intriguing identity crisis: What did it mean to be Russian again after 75 years as "Soviet citizens" in a multinational Soviet system? Indeed, this latter "identity" issue remains central to so much of President Putin's

narrative; he often decries what he calls the forced "statelessness" of some 24 million ethnic Russians who found themselves living in foreign countries the day after the dissolution of the USSR. Ukraine is central to his narrative, as ethnic Russians in Ukraine were the biggest portion of the millions he refers to. Putin's fixation on ethnic Russians outside of Russia's borders became even more obvious since 2014, as he cites the protection of ethnic Russians as largely justifying his invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022.

During Yeltsin's first years as president, there was a daily sense of excitement about what might happen next. And, of course, the intelligence community faced the usual challenge: divining the intentions of foreign leaders and their political adversaries.

In that regard, the summer of 1993 was especially tough. We Russia analysts at Langley sensed Yeltsin was reaching the limits of his patience with the recalcitrant and hardline opposition in the Supreme Soviet, which had been nearly successful at impeaching him that February. Based on old-fashioned Kremlinology, we drew upon Yeltsin's public hints and other clues in the Russian media to publish a forward-leaning analytic assessment that judged there was a strong possibility Yeltsin would dissolve the Supreme Soviet. For several weeks, until Yeltsin did dissolve it on September 23, we faced serious criticism from other Russia watchers in the U.S. government. Yeltsin's gambit sparked a huge new crisis when Duma deputies refused to disband and Yeltsin ordered the military to shell the White House Parliament building. Who says Kremlinology is dead?!²



Throughout the Yeltsin era, I interacted with senior U.S. officials often. I must confess, I did not envy them. This was especially true in the fall of 1993. At the time, U.S. policy makers were concerned about the growing influence of Russian communist and ultranationalist hardliners in the Duma and worked to fashion a Russia policy that supported Yeltsin even as he shelled the Parliament building. This lasted a few years.

A short tour as the acting director for Russia at the National Security Council (NSC) during the Clinton-Bush transition in 2000–2001 offered me a different window into Washington’s Russia policy. Apart from observing the handover of duties from one U.S. administration to another, that NSC post allowed me to meet and set up sessions with Russian Ambassador Yuri Ushakov and senior Russian officials, notably a close Putin associate, Sergey Ivanov.

As much as I enjoyed being a senior Russia watcher, the events of September 11, 2001, affected many of us deeply and spurred me to rethink my Agency career. It was already clear

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that analyzing Putin and post-Yeltsin Russia would continue to be fascinating and intriguing, so I considered staying on, perhaps in a broader intelligence community post, as the national intelligence officer for Russia. A voluntary tour serving as an editor for the President’s Daily Brief (PDB), however, exposed me to many other analytic challenges, such as ongoing plotting by Al-Qaeda, North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs, Iran’s missile program, Saddam Hussein’s maneuvering in the Middle East, and Mexican drug cartels, among other issues. Following this tour, I volunteered to serve as a daily PDB briefer and was selected to brief Vice President Cheney and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and her deputy Stephen Hadley.³

That yearlong tour proved to be an exhilarating and educational experience, reinforcing my belief that U.S. policy makers work terribly long hours and deal with a thicket of issues with few, if any, easy answers; I subsequently took another briefing assignment at the U.S. Mission to the UN. This tour ended quickly—and unexpectedly—as I was asked to take on duties as a deputy director of intelligence. The next eight and a half years on the Agency’s “seventh floor” (CIA senior management) provided a unique window not only into the entire Directorate of Intelligence but all the CIA’s other Directorates in existence at the time: operations, science and technology, and support. My tenure there is a story for another day. However, I do want to share a few observations related to the importance of regional studies in the Agency’s analytic work.

During my review of the President’s Daily Brief memos and an occasional



Peter Clement in the main lobby of CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, on his last day at the agency (January 2018).

research paper covering all countries of the world, I worked with many analysts with deep regional knowledge; they helped me become a bit more conversant on key issues in a particular region and to draw insights through comparative analysis across regions, such as identifying common and disparate tactics and strategies evident in dictatorships, market economics, and military programs, among other issues. In working with political analysts on Iran, for example, I was struck by some parallels in Iran's theocracy and the old Soviet system of governance. Both contained formal government structures, as well as a parallel power structure, be it the CPSU and its Politburo or Iran's Guardian Council; the CPSU had its KGB, while Iran has its Iranian Revolutionary Guards Force—both serve as the fearful enforcer beyond the conventional police entities.

The Arab Spring, too, was an incredible roller coaster, which reminded me of the late Gorbachev era—not fully parallel developments, to be sure, but with some strikingly similar variables: the sudden collapse of authority and an emboldened populace.

By the end of my tour as a deputy director of intelligence (DDI), I began thinking a bit more about my personal plan. I had spent some 30 years at the Agency, and yet I still wanted to teach. I was in luck. The Agency has a small Officer-in-Residence program, which provides for two years at a teaching institution. Through my DDI duties, I had come to know Professor Bob Jervis, who was a cleared outside reader for several sensitive and controversial intelligence community estimates, including the flawed National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). He kindly brokered introductions to faculty and administrators at Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) who approved my request to teach there from 2013 to 2015.

My two years at Columbia were an incredibly enriching experience. I have learned much from our talented students, who bring diverse experiences and perspectives to class discussions. Similarly, Bob Jervis's many faculty brown-bags and formal seminar sessions with such smart faculty pushed me into areas unexplored in my own studies as a history major. Equally exciting was the chance to return to my roots as a scholar of Russia, by teaching my "Contemporary Russian Security Policy" course and getting involved in a range of Harriman Institute activities.

Teaching that course when Putin annexed Crimea in February 2014 made me feel as though I were back at Langley, furiously trying to keep up with daily events in Kyiv, Moscow, Crimea, and the Donetsk-Luhansk region. There were days I missed my access to classified information, but I felt there was sufficient open-source material to make informed analytic judgments. I was convinced Putin's stoking of

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separatist sentiments in eastern Ukraine was significant for two reasons: greater autonomy for these regions inside Ukraine’s institutions would provide Moscow a critical tool to pull Kyiv away from NATO and the EU. Moreover, NATO rules about ongoing territorial disputes meant Ukraine could not be considered for membership.

Following my two years at Columbia, I returned to the CIA, to the surprise of my analyst colleagues, who had assumed I would retire and teach at a local college. In early 2015, I was asked to help set up a new “Mission Center” on Europe-Eurasia and serve as its deputy director—part of the biggest reorganization in CIA history. CIA Director John Brennan broke much bureaucratic and cultural china by integrating officers of the Agency’s four Directorates into some 10 Mission Centers. This, too, is a story for another day, but I should mention one last big Russia episode from my two and a half years at the Mission Center: the January 2017 publication of the Intelligence Community Assessment “Russian Interference in the U.S. Election.” Mission Center analysts helped draft this assessment, which provided me a

bird’s-eye view of the production and review of the assessment. Accumulating evidence showed that Russia had been interfering throughout 2016, but President Obama was reluctant to have the Intelligence Committee write on this subject, fearing it would be perceived as a means of supporting Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton. Once the election was over, Obama felt it was important for the full story of Russia’s interference to be told; so on December 5, 2016, he tasked the CIA, FBI, and National Security Agency to produce a highly classified assessment—and an unclassified version as well.

A month later, the unclassified version of that Intelligence Community Assessment appeared. The paper speaks for itself, but I would add one important note: When analysts drafted the paper, they were not aware of Russia’s use of social media—using fake American personas on Facebook, for instance, or orchestrating rallies by nonexistent partisan groups to fuel anger and polarize the U.S. electorate. Had we known, the judgments on the extent of Russia’s interference would have been even stronger. Those activities

Peter Clement with Mikhail Gorbachev in Washington, DC (circa 1997).



Opposite page: Peter Clement receiving a distinguished career intelligence medal at his retirement ceremony at CIA headquarters (June 2018).



were more fully documented in the March 2019 “Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election” (the Mueller report). Much of my last year at the Agency revolved around the Intelligence Committee’s core mission: informing U.S. policy makers as they wrestled with myriad issues related to Russia and other key players in the region.

I retired from the CIA and returned to teach at SIPA in 2018. As I look back on the central role Russian issues played in my Agency career, I realize that I inhabit a parallel universe here at SIPA and the Harriman Institute. It is my good fortune, as it was during my years as a Russia watcher at the CIA, to be surrounded by SIPA and Harriman scholars and practitioners, and Harriman’s regional experts, to help me think through issues about Russia and its foreign policy. In the past few months, I have been wrestling with the same question vexing everyone: “What does Putin really want?”

As I try to answer this question, many threads of my CIA-era analysis of Russia and Putin have come into play. For example, I distinctly recall wondering in 2000 why Putin found time in his

first year as president to visit Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the famous Soviet-era dissident who later won a Nobel Prize for his writings about Stalin’s forced labor camps. How ironic, I thought, that a former KGB officer—the same KGB that hounded Solzhenitsyn into exile for his subversive writings—was now paying homage. Perhaps Putin was being a shrewd politician, identifying himself with a popular Russian literary giant. Maybe . . . but did that fully explain Putin’s continued fascination with the dissident writer? Putin granted Solzhenitsyn the Russian State Prize (the highest civilian honor), named a Moscow street after him, attended his 2008 funeral, and later personally unveiled a Moscow statue to him. I am now convinced that Ukraine is key to understanding this curious affinity. In his 1990 short book *Rebuilding Russia*, Solzhenitsyn argued that parts of Ukraine were intrinsically Russian—a central argument in Putin’s startling July 2021 treatise, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians” (though Putin, of course, went even further than Solzhenitsyn, asserting that Ukraine never really existed until the Bolsheviks created it in 1918). I was worried about the gradual buildup of Russian forces on Ukraine’s border throughout 2021, but it was Putin’s July

treatise that convinced me that Putin actually would invade Ukraine.

Putin’s affinity with Solzhenitsyn, his age (he turned 70 in October), and his near obsession with Russian history suggest a fierce desire to secure his place in that history. These factors help explain his risky invasion of Ukraine this year—one far riskier than his interventions in Georgia and Syria. This focus on legacy also suggests that Putin is unlikely to settle for anything less than major territorial gains in Ukraine.

As Russia’s horrific war on Ukraine continues, I am grateful to be at Columbia, in the thick of these challenging analytic debates. I couldn’t have asked for more from my career. The return to SIPA and the Harriman Institute in 2018 represents a life come full circle, with my initial graduate school goal realized, albeit circuitously—I did become an academic of sorts through decades of studying and analyzing Russia and Eurasia, and more, only I did so at the CIA. ■

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¹ Apart from these regional offices, the Directorate of Intelligence also housed important functional offices whose analysts were expert in nuclear programs, missile systems, CW/BW, nonproliferation, counterterrorism, global issues, counterintelligence, counternarcotics, etc. These talented officers brought incredible knowledge to their accounts. One of my favorite memories was a meeting with several technical analysts explaining North Korea’s missile program; their briefing became quite technical and at one point I asked, “Wait, are all of you rocket scientists?” to which they all nodded, “Why, of course—that’s what we do.”

² I wrote a full account of our daily work during the 1996 election for *Michigan State Alumni Magazine* (Fall 1996), 22–25.

³ For a fine history of the PDB and the work of the PDB staff, see David Priess, *The President’s Book of Secrets: The Untold Story of Intelligence Briefings from Kennedy to Obama*; and John Helgerson, *Getting to Know the President: Intelligence Briefings of Presidential Candidates and President-Elects 1952–2016*, 4th edition.