

Foreword

It's tough living with a legend. The legacy of Sherman Kent is never far from the thoughts of Kent School faculty members—and his portrait looks down on us from the wall—as we go about the business of teaching the principles and practice of intelligence analysis to yet another generation of DI analysts.

Sherman Kent's three decades as an analyst in OSS and CIA included over 15 years as the chief of the Office of National Estimates. Under his leadership, the Intelligence Community's "Cadillac" product was defined and developed. During the interval between his World War Two service and his return to CIA in 1950, Kent wrote one of the most influential books ever published on intelligence analysis, *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy*. Later, Kent was the instigator and head of the editorial board for *Studies in Intelligence*, the professional journal of intelligence officers. In short, Sherman Kent was more than "present at the creation" of the intelligence profession; he was the "father" of our craft.

Jack Davis's engaging essay captures both the history and some of the colorful spirit of this larger-than-life character. In it we read of Kent's rare blend of demanding intellect and disarming expression. He was the theorist who formulated "Kent's Law of Coups" (i.e., "those coups that are known about in advance don't take place"). He was the practitioner who painstakingly insured that the Estimates he forwarded to the Director of Central Intelligence met high standards of policy relevance, analytic rigor, and clarity. At the same time, he was the politically-incorrect jokester—by today's standards—whose off-color remarks dispelled tension and put people around him at ease. He was the doting grandfather who wrote an adventure book for his grandsons (*A Boy and a Pig, But Mostly Horses*). And he was the tongue-in-cheek, renaissance man who developed a set of 64 hardwood blocks for use by the "puzzled high powered executive" to produce hundreds of combinations and designs in geometry (Buffalo Blocks).¹ Kent truly was a character who possessed character.

We at the Sherman Kent School for Intelligence Analysis hope that this short biographic sketch will help others to know the man better. He continues to look over our shoulders as we carry on the work he did so much to inspire.

Dan Wagner
Dean, Sherman Kent School

¹ Robin W. Winks, *Cloak & Gown, Scholars in the Secret War, 1939-1961* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1987), page 453.

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Sherman Kent and the Profession of Intelligence Analysis

Jack Davis
Sherman Kent Center

In the 1930s, Sherman Kent believed that life provided no more worthy professional calling than persuading Yale University undergraduates that an understanding of history was essential to development of a first-rate intellect. Professor Kent's tools of persuasion included a reputation for tough grading, a colorful personal style, and an enthusiasm for drawing wisdom from the study of History 10, "Development of European Civilization."

With the onset of World War II, Kent, like most Americans, changed priorities to serving the nation's defense. Not quite suited for the front lines of combat or espionage, in 1941 he joined a cadre of scholars in the newly formed Research & Analysis Branch of the Office of Strategic Services (forerunner of the Directorate of Intelligence). Kent showed uncommon talent for adapting scholarly methods to the rigors of producing intelligence analysis in support of the war effort, including cajoling egotistic professors to work as teams, meet heroic deadlines, and satisfy the needs of action-oriented customers.

At War's end, Kent delayed returning to Yale to join the prestigious civilian faculty at the new National War College and later to produce *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy*, a book he felt compelled to write to ensure that first-rate intelligence analysts would be enlisted to support postwar security. In the autumn of 1947, Kent did return to Yale to relaunch his professorial life. But *Strategic Intelligence*, published in 1949, attracted the attention of leaders of the new Central Intelligence Agency, including its no-nonsense Director, General Walter Bedell Smith, who "ordered" Kent to return to intelligence work. Kent stayed this time, from 1950 until his retirement in 1967.

Of the many individuals who paved a pathway for the development of intelligence analysis as a profession, Kent stands out—both for his own contributions to analytic doctrine and practice, and for inspiring three generations of analysts to build on his efforts to meet changing times. Kent's tools for leadership once again were tough standards, color and wit, and enthusiasm for drawing lessons from intelligence challenges. If intelligence analysis as a profession has a Founder, the honor belongs to Sherman Kent.

This essay: (1) sketches Kent's pre-CIA background, (2) tries to capture his colorful personality, (3) catalogues his contributions to the profession, (4) sets out his main analytic doctrines, and, finally, (5) outlines some of the unresolved challenges he left for later generations. No statement better captures what Kent believed than a sentence he penned himself:

Whatever the complexities of the puzzles we strive to solve, and whatever the sophisticated techniques we may use to collect the pieces and store them, there can never be a time when the thoughtful man can be supplanted as the intelligence device supreme.²

Master of Historical Methods and Salty Quips

Sherman Kent was born in 1903 into a California family prominent in both business and politics; his father served three terms as a US Congressman. Kent, rejecting family paths, chose a life of scholarship. He took his doctorate in history at Yale University and then joined the history faculty there. More than most professors in the 1930s, Kent saw the study of history as a series of definable methodological and cognitive challenges. To derive useful lessons, you had first to test the authenticity of sources, and then to curb your own “predilections and prejudices” in support of convenient answers. In 1941, he set down precepts and procedures for historical research in *Writing History*, a ‘bible’ for a generation of undergraduates charged with completing a competent term paper.

Kent was an unusually colorful character for an Ivy League professor in a rules-bound era. As an undergraduate, friends dubbed him “Buffalo Bill the Cultured Cowboy.” As a teacher, he continued to mix scholarship with showmanship almost by second nature. His ruthless grading of students was common enough; he was not the only professor to punish indolence and superficiality. But none could match his mastery of the earthy story and off-color quip. One well-qualified observer attributed to Kent “the saltiest vocabulary ever heard in a Yale common room.” Not all students were impressed with Kent’s insistence that an investment in history was a prerequisite for meeting life’s mental challenges, but many were ready to tolerate his rigorous grading standards to witness the campus showman perform.

Based on an autobiography composed some 50 years later and published privately (*Reminiscences of a Varied Life*, 1991), Kent was quite pleased with the professorial life in the 1930s. He likely would have been content to continue indefinitely as a faculty member searching for the lessons of history and contributing to the education of undergraduates, slackers as well as enthusiasts. That said, by 1940, war in Europe was beginning to upset the plans of many Americans on campus and off.

Signing Up with the “Bad Eyes Brigade”

With the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, remarkable numbers of men and women—millions—were ready, many even eager, to serve in uniform. Millions more sought some other way to contribute to the nation’s defense. For example, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), created in 1941 as the Coordinator of Information, drew to its espionage and operations branches no fewer than four future CIA Directors (Allen Dulles, Richard Helms, William Colby, William Casey). These branches without argument produced the best postwar OSS memoirs and stories. Whether they contributed the most to the war effort, however, is problematic.

² Kent, *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy*, preface to the 1965 edition, p.xviii.

Many historians would give that honor to the Research and Analysis Branch (R&A), the self-named “Bad Eyes Brigade.” Here, the most potent weapon was the index card crowded with information and insight for understanding and defeating the enemy, while also keeping an eye on secretive allies, especially the USSR. There may be some bias at work, since hundreds of historians—both tenured and future professors—filled the ranks of R&A and subsequently touted its achievements.

Assistant Professor Sherman Kent, then 38, signed on with R&A shortly before Pearl Harbor. His first position was as first-line supervisor for North Africa. In 1943, he was elevated to the equivalent of office director for Europe and Africa, where he contributed to major projects including studies that helped shape governmental structures for post-war Germany. To his displeasure, he then saw himself as more administrator than analyst. For a while, in 1945, when OSS was disbanded and R&A was foisted on a reluctant State Department, Kent served as the equivalent of “acting Deputy Director for Intelligence.”

Kent’s rise over more pedigreed academics reflected his understanding that scholarship, while essential for getting the job done, had to adapt to the conditions and commands of wartime. Deadlines were set by operational demands, not personal schedules and egos. Thus, analysts had to deliver as teams, not as star scholars. One of Kent’s legendary achievements was to talk reluctant economists into serving under the direction of an historian. Most important, R&A had to gain the confidence of military men who, as a rule, looked down on civilian scholars, save perhaps scientists. The story goes that the chief R&A librarian, in order to win a larger office from the Army colonel in charge of logistics, listed himself as an etymologist.

Kent’s landmark R&A accomplishment, one he spoke of proudly over the postwar decades, was to lead his team in 1942 to produce in record time a series of studies on the ports and railways of North Africa, in support of the badly-kept secret of an impending Allied invasion. To get the job done, professors who were accustomed to sensible office hours had to revert to their undergraduate “final exam culture” and pull a series of “all-nighters.” The military customers, according to Kent, couldn’t believe so much useful information existed, much less could be written up with authority so quickly.

The North Africa reports helped make R&A’s reputation with the military as a valuable win-the-war asset. The event also made Kent’s reputation as a rising star in the new world of intelligence research and analysis.

The Book Kent Had to Write

Kent’s bubble burst with the callous treatment of R&A analysts after the abolition of OSS in October 1945. The Department of State, unenthusiastic inheritor of the unit, had minimal respect for academically trained analysts, some foreign born, some with unorthodox views of the future of the overseas world. Besides, Foreign Service Officers believed themselves to be the leading authorities on foreign countries and thus were their

own intelligence experts. The scheme was to break up R&A, now called the Office of Research and Intelligence, and send the thinning ranks of intelligence analysts to work under policy officers in the various regional bureaus.

Kent escaped this fate in 1946, not to return to Yale, but to ask for another extension of his leave of absence to take a position on the faculty of the newly formed National War College, a high honor for a civilian. (George Kennan of “containment” fame and Bernard Brodie, a leading expert in the new field of nuclear war and politics, were two other civilians on the largely military faculty). Here Kent’s charge was a familiar one—to stimulate classroom discussion and supervise student research papers on the national security challenges of the postwar world.

In early 1947, with the benefit of a Guggenheim Foundation grant, Kent turned his energies to *Strategic Intelligence*—the book “he had to write.” Just as a dedicated intelligence analysis unit stocked with university-trained talent had helped win the war, Kent argued that a similarly talented, bureaucratically independent unit was needed to win the peace.

Initially, publishers were reluctant to commit to a book on intelligence with a focus on analysis rather than the heroics of espionage and covert action. Finally, Princeton University Press agreed to publish it in 1949. The timing was right, for the publisher as well as Kent. Professors and their students in burgeoning national security courses, newly-formed associations engaged in expanding the US world role, and, not least, leaders and managers in the recently-launched Central Intelligence Agency boosted the book’s sales and Kent’s reputation.

Kent Returns to Intelligence

Seemingly content that, partly because of his lobbying, promising organizational structures for bureaucratically independent intelligence analysis had now replaced OSS, Kent had returned to New Haven in the fall of 1947 to re-establish his professorial life. In the late 1940s, he served as an occasional consultant, first to the Central Intelligence Group (CIG) and then to the Central Intelligence Agency.

The outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 had a profound effect on both Kent and the Agency. Kent was of the conviction that Stalin had replaced Hitler as a menace to democracy and--through North Korea and China--was in position to ignite another World War. A secularist in personal philosophy, Kent said that this concern moved him to attend a church service, a rare event in his adult life.

DCI “Beetle” Smith had his own epiphany. Kent once described the ulcer-riddled Smith as having the most even temper of any man he ever knew—*always sore*. Smith expressed first amazement and then anger at the absence of a pre-attack intelligence estimate on Korea. In fact, despite the lessons of Pearl Harbor, no unit existed to produce an analytic effort that reflected the coordinated views of all US intelligence organizations.

General Smith's plan was to establish a Board of National Estimates, made up of notables with intelligence, academic, military, and diplomatic credentials, that would oversee the estimates process. The Office of National Estimates also included analytic and support staffs. Kent was recruited first to serve as deputy and then to replace Harvard historian William Langer (wartime chief of R&A) as director of ONE and chairman of a Board of National Estimates.

According to Kent, 47 years old in 1950, he was summoned to Washington to meet on a Sunday morning with General Smith, who as DCI set out his plan for the Agency and Kent's role in it. Kent demurred by saying his experience was in research not estimating. Smith closed the discussion by shouting "Young man, if you think I make a business of coming down to my office on a Sunday morning to talk with people who aren't sure about taking the job, you've got another think coming!"

With the help of a personal letter from President Truman citing the Korean War as a national emergency, Kent was granted still another leave of absence from Yale University. In time, however, he would relinquish his professorship (in 1953) and commit fully to CIA until his retirement on 31 December 1967.

Kent's Leadership Style and Personality

Kent, as noted above, relished substantive challenges and abhorred responsibilities that focused on administration and management. Several ONE veterans who worked under him in the 1950s have said that Kent had no management style because he didn't manage in the conventional sense. He did, however, lead by setting an example of long hours and high analytic standards, and challenging others to follow suit. Corny as it sounds today, he continued his wartime style of surrounding himself with talented analysts who, both as a service to their country and for "the rewards of professional accomplishment," were willing "to work themselves numb" to get the job done. In return, he respected their work and defended their judgments.

Repeating the habits he had displayed as a young professor, Kent had a reputation at CIA as a master of barnyard language and bawdy jokes. Family members and professional colleagues insist that his colorful language was by no means an affectation, but rather a characteristic of his continuing lifestyle as the "cultured cowboy." His goal seemed to be to put people at ease, after that to soften a substantive disagreement or other tension, and only rarely to put someone down.

Add to salty--at times profane--language his penchant for bright red suspenders, and, until health concerns intervened, a wad of chewing tobacco, and the picture is complete. Whether substantive meeting, bull session, or cocktail party, Sherm (or "Buffalo," the name those closest to him still called him) filled the room. As one colleague put it in a memorial, intelligence in its early days needed both character and characters. Kent provided both.

The record would show, in fact, that Kent found individuality, eccentricity, and even “oddball thinking” valuable for a unit facing tough substantive challenges, so long as the analytic talent was there. He understood the absolute need for loyalty and discretion in a security agency. But when, in the early 1950s, McCarthyism threatened to force on the bureaucracy an unreasonable standard of conformity, he quipped:

When an intelligence staff has been screened through [too fine a mesh], its members will be as alike as tiles on a bathroom floor—and about as capable of meaningful and original thought.

Kent had a love-hate relationship with a series of DDIs. He recognized that the quality of National Intelligence Estimates depended considerably on the formal and informal contributions of a broad range of DI analysts (ONE had an analytic staff of only about 30, most of whom were recruited from elsewhere in the DI). But he resented DDI attempts to curb ONE’s independence, especially his authority to report directly to the DCI. On the one hand, he saw the credit paid to ONE when three DDIs in a row were former members of the Board of National Estimates: Ray Cline, R. Jack Smith, and Ed Proctor. On the other hand, he thought the first two tried actively to undercut the prestige of ONE and the NIEs.

Kent’s Contributions to Professionalism

Sherman Kent was probably the most colorful and best-known individual in the world of intelligence analysis, but was he the most influential? One of the oldest debates among both academic and amateur historians is whether historic times make heroes or heroes make historic times. By the former standard, if Sherman Kent had never moved his bully pulpit from Yale University’s History 10, first to R&A and then to CIA, intelligence analysis would still somehow have developed into a distinct professional calling. But Kent’s contributions arguably ensured that this development would occur more smartly, swiftly, and sure-handedly than would otherwise have been the case.

First of all, smartly. Professor Ernest May of Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, and a leading authority on the history of intelligence, was asked during a 1989 discussion on intelligence challenges why he was quoting *Strategic Intelligence*, a book Kent had written 40 years earlier. After all, when Kent wrote, the practice of intelligence analysis was in its infancy, and over a hundred serious books on intelligence had been written since. Professor May replied:

Yes, but with concept after concept, in 40 years nobody has ever stated things as smartly as Kent.

Kent also believed that precise language was needed to avoid confusing policy clients about the meaning of intelligence judgments. For example, he thought that American policy officials all understood the meaning of frequently cited odds favoring one or another sports team and that substantive uncertainty could effectively be expressed with similar expressions. He had the following argument with one of his chief deputies, who

preferred verbal estimative depictions (*good chance, real possibility, strong likelihood*) that Kent deplored as more colorful than meaningful.

Said R. Jack Smith: Sherm, I don't like what I see in our recent papers. A 2-to-1 chance of this; 50-50 odds on that. You are turning us into the biggest bookie shop in town.

Replied Kent: R.J., I'd rather be a bookie than a [blank-blank] poet.

As for *swiftly*, Kent's *Strategic Intelligence* and the articles and letters he wrote around the time of CIA's establishment, about the need to ensure that the US intelligence effort attracts the country's best minds, had a profound effect on the early Directors and their top aides. While recognizing the service to analysis that experienced diplomats, businessmen, and military careerists could provide, what America's intelligence needed most was America's scholars. In a memo Kent sent to CIG DCI Hoyt Vandenberg in 1946, when Kent was a part-time consultant, he named some two dozen professors he recommended be recruited for the analysis effort. Promising graduates were also to be recruited. Kent's lobbying paid off. By the mid-1950s, cadres of scholars, both impressive seniors and promising juniors, were already in place in the DI.

Finally, *sure-handedly*. For Kent, professionalization of intelligence analysis could not be ensured by proclamation or wishful thinking—or by one good book. To create a distinctive, robust profession required constant assessment of needs and lobbying for vital changes. His analytic code outlined below, perhaps Kent's most valuable contribution, was carefully refined to distinguish professional analysts not only from fortune-tellers and policy action officers, but also from academic specialists on national security affairs.

Kent lobbied successfully for a professional intelligence journal, and he served as first chairman of the editorial board when *Studies in Intelligence* was established in 1955. Articles by veteran practitioners and critical responses by their colleagues were needed to set standards and identify “best practices” on everything from estimative language to professional relations with policymakers. You have to start somewhere; one of the early debates argued the pluses and minuses of including source footnotes in intelligence assessments.

Kent also urged the creation of an “Institute for the Advanced Study of Intelligence” to examine recurring intelligence challenges and document the experiences of veteran practitioners. Here he had to wait until after his retirement, when the Center for the Study of Intelligence (CSI) was established in 1975. In retirement, Kent wrote several insightful articles on the history and practice of intelligence analysis while attached to CSI as an independent contractor.

Kent would have felt deeply honored by the establishment in 2000 of the Sherman Kent School for Intelligence Analysis. In retirement, he relished making presentations on analysis to what was then combined entry-level training for both Directorate of Operations and DI officers in what was called the Career Training Program. He no doubt would have enjoyed sharing his insights on analytic standards and challenges with

today's DI Career Analyst Program, and perhaps would have mused on the irony of the school being named for someone who had never been the DDI and who had locked horns with so many who were.

The DDI who eventually named the new DI school (John McLaughlin, now DDCI) was much impressed by the enthusiasm for intelligence analysis that Kent showed both in his writings and in a few personal encounters that McLaughlin had with him. McLaughlin recalls as a new analyst having the opportunity in a classroom to ask the esteemed Kent, "what after all is the purpose of analysis?" Kent, as ever, had a smart, swift, and sure-handed answer.

To elevate the quality of discussion in this town.

Kent's Analytic Doctrine

As an intelligence professional, Kent believed it best to stay out of the public limelight. He would not give interviews, even in retirement. In between publication of *Strategic Intelligence* and *Reminiscences of a Varied Life*, he would go public with his views on the importance of professional intelligence analysis, but not on its doctrines and practices.

He did publish several illuminating classified articles,³ and to the Yale University Archives he left a trove of official memos and post-retirement lecture notes that amplify his analytic code. Add to this the reminiscences of a good number of CIA hands who worked with him and there are ample "raw data" to identify his analytic standards, doctrines, and practices.

Because Kent saw the intelligence analyst as provider of information and insight for policy decision-makers and action-takers, his tactics and emphases would shift over the years as the needs of officials changed with the times. The underlying doctrine or professional code remained very much the same, however, and is well illuminated in a list first enumerated by Frans Bax, founding Dean of the Kent School and now President of CIA University.

1. Focus on Policymaker Concerns

Intelligence analysts are needed because policy officials face challenges that analysts can help them manage, Kent would argue, through mastery of background knowledge, evaluation and structuring of all-source material, and tradecraft expertise. While attentive to problems not yet on the policymaker's screen, the analyst's first responsibility is to accommodate clients by producing assessments timed to their decision cycle and focused on their learning curve. This includes providing "actionable" intelligence that can help with curbing threats and seizing policy opportunities.

³ Declassified as a collection in Donald P. Steury, editor, *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates: Collected Essays, 1994*.

2. *Avoidance of a Personal Policy Agenda*

Kent would have agreed with a policy official who advised analysts to provide assessments that serve to help *all* players iron out their differences in the often-adversarial policy game. He would have opposed providing analyses that were intended for use by one set of policy players to force its views on others. For estimative analysis, this requires paying serious attention to seemingly less likely outcomes. For action analysis, this means identifying and evaluating alternatives, leaving to policy clients the responsibility to recommend and choose.

3. *Intellectual Rigor*

Kent advocated sound analytic tradecraft as the key to supporting the policymaking process without lapsing into policymaking. In Kent's doctrine, information is rigorously evaluated for validity (countering Denial & Deception) and diagnosticity (managing "noise"). Estimative judgments are based on evaluated and organized data, substantive expertise, and sound, open-minded postulation of assumptions. Uncertainties and gaps in information are made explicit and accounted for in making predictions.

4. *Conscious Effort to Avoid Analytic Biases*

Kent saw no excuse for policy or political bias. He realized, however, that analytic or cognitive bias was so ingrained in mental processes for tackling complex and fluid issues that it required a continuous, deliberate struggle to minimize. From his days as a history professor, he taught analysts to resist the tendency to see what they expect to see in the information. He urged special caution when a whole team of analysts immediately agrees on an interpretation of yesterday's development or a prediction about tomorrow's. Especially regarding Vietnam, he also cautioned against a "been-to" bias; field exposure can be valuable, but a quick trip doesn't necessarily provide revealed truths. One path he recommended for coping with cognitive bias was to make working assumptions explicit and to challenge them vigorously.⁴

5. *Willingness to Consider Other Judgments*

Kent encouraged not only argument but also dissent, so long as the basis for the dissenter's judgment is made clear (such as, reliance on alternative assumptions and different interpretations of information). In Kent's day, before electronic coordination and review, it was common to assemble in a

⁴ This key point, like many others in Kent's thinking, was incorporated into DDI Douglas MacEachin's "linchpin analysis" concept in the mid-1990s. See [The Tradecraft of Analysis: Challenge and Change in the CIA](#) (The Working Group on Intelligence Reform, 1994.)

room 20 or 30 analysts with a wide range of factual expertise and points of view to review a draft assessment, at times fighting their way through the text paragraph by paragraph. The practice has persisted, and accomplished analysts will know their text's weaknesses as well as strengths and will learn how to draw the best final paper from these critical exercises.

6. *Systematic Use of Outside Experts*

As an additional check on analytic bias and blinders in dealing with complex substantive challenges, Kent would support taking account of a wide range of outside opinions. Certainly, analysts must keep up with the published and classified judgments of the policy clients they serve—not necessarily to agree, but always to seek distinctive information and assess underlying assumptions. News media accounts and general and specialized journals should be reviewed for the same purposes. More directly, analysts should cultivate working relations with outsiders in teaching, research, and business who follow the same analytic disciplines and accounts.

7. *Collective Responsibility for Judgment*

Judging from his practice, Kent would urge that analysts allow time for Directorate, Agency, and, when appropriate, Community coordination, not only to permit challenge and refinement of data and judgment but also for accommodation of collective responsibility. When face-to-face with clients, analysts should represent and defend the appropriate corporate point of view. When circumstances require an individual judgment, analysts should make clear the source of their authority to speak to the issue.

8. *Effective communication of policy-support information and judgments*

For busy policymakers, shorter is usually better, with key points stated quickly. But clarity of judgment is also essential. Kent recognized that uncertainty was an unavoidable factor in an intelligence assessment of complex and fluid issues. Compounding this inherent substantive uncertainty with analyst-generated confusion, however, was a cardinal sin. In particular, non-falsifiable judgments must be avoided. (For example, in Kent's view, the judgment that something "may" or "could" happen conveyed the meaningless message that the odds ranged from greater than 0 to less than 100 percent likelihood). If the tradeoff is between adding length and allowing brevity to cause confusion (or worse, banality), provide a carefully measured dose of detail.

9. *Candid Admission of Mistakes*

Analysts must strive to master their subjects and tradecraft, but there is no law or theory of analysis that guarantees success in tackling tough challenges, or

that eliminates the so-called *perils of estimating*. Kent believed that analysts should systematically review performance to search for improved practices as well as to study mistakes.⁵ Mistakes will be made, but analysts can learn vital lessons from critical review of failures, especially if review reveals recurring fault patterns such as mirror imaging, or assumptions that go unchallenged despite changing circumstances. Admission and explanation of analytic errors are likely to increase, not decrease, credibility with policy clients.

Challenges for a New Generation of Analysts

What will it take to ensure that professional analysts remain “the intelligence device supreme” for generations to come? Year by year, new, often tougher, substantive and tradecraft challenges emerge. Meanwhile, the competition from other sources of structured information and expert judgment grows ever sharper for access to and credibility with policy clients. CNN is always on the screen in the policymaker’s office, while e-mail from nongovernmental experts is on the desktop.

Sherman Kent, first as historian and then as intelligence practitioner, knew that professionals can never rest on their laurels. There are always fresh questions to tackle, fresh information to uncover, and fresh insights to test. Kent would have been among the first to recognize that the analytic challenge in helping policy officials understand and deal with global terrorism is starkly different from the analytic challenges regarding the former Soviet Union. The need for strenuous effort, tough-minded tradecraft, and openness to alternative views remains the same, but the priorities, processes, and deliverables of producers of intelligence analysis must adjust to the changing profiles and preferences of the consumers.

Kent, as-ever the tough-grading teacher, would urge the continual seeking of lessons from analytic failures as well as successes. His and his analysts’ failure to anticipate that the USSR in 1962 would introduce offensive nuclear missiles into Cuba, thereby touching off the most dangerous crisis of the Cold War era, particularly chastened him. He was convinced that the best-informed analysts in Washington had diligently and thoughtfully applied the analytic standards and practices he had helped develop—yet came up with the wrong answer. Kent would tell the present generation of analysts to look closely at its performance record regarding, say, Iraq’s “surprise” 1990 invasion of Kuwait to learn what practices can make still sounder an analytic approach based on the scientific method, while recognizing that estimating on such essentially one-of-a-kind issues remains vulnerable to error.

⁵ Kent’s typical reaction to an analyst’s work was something like this: “Great paper. Now, what are we going to do to make the next one better?” As always, he practiced what he preached. For the most important series of estimates produced by the Intelligence Community, the yearly NIE 11-3-8 on Soviet strategic programs, Kent required that analysts carefully critique the judgments of last year’s version before starting a new round of analysis.

Kent's post-retirement lecture notes indicate he knew he left to future generations many tough, unresolved challenges involving trade-offs in analytic values—brevity vs. credibility, speed vs. thoroughness, standardization of estimative language (“bookies”) vs. creative expression (“poets”). Although Kent probably would be pleased by the sharp increase in effective ties to policymakers in recent years, what he saw as being most difficult of all—balancing customized support of the policymaking process (danger of being too close to policy officials) with emphasis on objectivity and disinterestedness (danger of being too far)—remains contentious today.

Tough challenges indeed. But Kent gave future generations of analysts a solid, even splendid start. One thing is sure...Sherman Kent would have had great confidence that each new generation of intelligence analysts would pull its own weight in further strengthening and honoring the profession.

Sherman Kent, 1903 – 1986

Selected Career Highlights

- 1926 BA, Yale University
- 1933 PhD in History, Yale University
- 1935 Professor of History, Yale University
- 1941 Chief, Africa Section, Research and Analysis Branch
Office of the Coordinator of Information
- 1943 Chief, Europe-Africa Division, Research and Analysis Branch
Office of Strategic Services
- 1946 Acting Director, Office of Research and Intelligence
Department of State
- 1946 Faculty member, National War College
- 1947 Professor of History, Yale University
- 1949 Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy published
- 1950 Deputy Director, Office of National Estimates
Vice-Chairman, Board of National Estimates
- 1952 Director, Office of National Estimates
Chairman, Board of National Estimates
- 1955 First Chairman of the Editorial Board for *Studies in Intelligence*, the
journal whose creation he championed
- 1967 Retired from CIA
-
- 1991 Autobiography, Reminiscences of a Varied Life, published privately
- 1997 Recognized on CIA's 50th anniversary with posthumous "Trailblazer
Award" as one of 50 key officers whose contributions helped shape
Agency history
- 2000 Sherman Kent School for Intelligence Analysis established by
Directorate of Intelligence

Sherman Kent: Selected Annotated Bibliography

Davis, Jack. "The Kent-Kendall Debate of 1949," *Studies in Intelligence* (1991)

Evolution of Kent's doctrine on policy relations and its impact on Agency analytic practice.

Kent, Sherman. *Reminiscences of a Varied Life* (1991)

An autobiography based on dictated tapes; meant more for his family than for students of intelligence, but informative on his early life.

Kent, Sherman. *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy* (1949, 1965, 1966)

Kent's path breaking explanation of the various facets of intelligence analysis, as developed in OSS during World War II, and the vital role for analysis in national security policymaking. The 1965 and 1966 editions retain the original text and add an illuminating preface and some interesting footnotes.

Kent, Sherman. *Writing History* (1941)

Kent's guidebook for historical research and exposition, meant for college students but contains many of the themes he would later develop for analysts (for example, the need to evaluate evidence and suppress bias).

Steury, Donald P., ed. *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates* (1994)

In addition to a useful essay on Kent's CIA career by the editor, contains the following notable works by and about Kent.

Ford, Harold P. "A Tribute to Sherman Kent," *Studies in Intelligence* (1980)

Authoritative assessment of the man and the professional, by the contemporary who knew him best.

Kent, Sherman. "The Need for an Intelligence Literature" *Studies in Intelligence* (1955)

Makes the argument that a professional calling needs a professional journal.

Kent, Sherman. "A Crucial Estimate Relived," *Studies in Intelligence* (1964)

Kent's post-mortem examination of the flawed September 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis estimate.

Kent, Sherman. "Estimates and Influence," *Studies in Intelligence* (1968)

Final published defense (written in 1965) of the need for tough-minded and insightful analysis.

Winks, Robin W. *Cloak & Gown: Scholars in the Secret War, 1939-1961* (1987)

Informed coverage of Kent's early life, especially at Yale and in the OSS. Makes extensive use of Kent's papers at the Yale University Archives.