

Addressing Politicization in Intelligence

by **Matthew V. Tompkins**

Both Sides Agree We're in an Intelligence Politicization Crisis. What Next?

We find ourselves in an epoch of intelligence politicization that should have every intelligence professional, leader, and consumer considering potential scenarios and how they might respond. Already, 2025 has brought a steady drip of incidents that may indicate or induce a growing lack of faith that the products and processes of intelligence are free from political bias:

May 2025. Removal of senior leaders at the National Intelligence Council (NIC) over Venezuelan gang assessment. Public statements from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) indicate that the dismissals were necessary “to end the weaponization and politicization of the intelligence community.”¹ Veteran Intelligence Community (IC) leaders have argued that when the NIC “refused a nakedly political request” to “relook” analysis that contradicted public administration assessments, “it cost them their jobs.”²

June 2025. Public disavowal of Iran nuclear program assessment, followed by new public conclusions. After the President rejected the IC’s March assessment that Iran was not currently attempting to build a nuclear weapon³, the DNI responded publicly that the earlier assessment was taken “out of context” and she agreed with the president that “America has intelligence that Iran is at the point that it can produce a nuclear weapon within weeks to months.”⁴ Responding to how “the administration change[d] its position,”⁵ the Ranking Member of the Senate intelligence committee noted that he was “hugely concerned” about political interference.⁶

July 2025. Declassification of internal tradecraft review of the 2016 Election Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA). Upon release of the ICA tradecraft review⁷, the Director of Central Intelligence stated that “agency heads at the time created a politically charged environment that

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triggered an atypical analytic process.”⁸ The now retired principal author of that report argues that there was no interference from above on Russia findings, and that it is “100 percent a political move designed to placate President Trump.”⁹

These are only select highlights, leaving out items like ODNI’s further declassifications and accusations of politicization around the 2016 ICA, publicly conflicting damage assessments after the strike on Iran’s nuclear sites, and any number of disputes that haven’t made it into the public eye.

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This article takes no position on any of these incidents or disputes. I don’t know enough about the decisions or the substantive content to have an opinion on their merits, and I am too committed to apolitical service to share one if I did. Besides, plenty of commentary exists on both sides of each of these incidents for anyone seeking to understand the arguments from one perspective or the other.

Regardless of which side you agree with in any of these incidents, there is one thing that both sides agree on: we are in a period of intelligence politicization with little precedent for a generation of analysts and processes developed in the era of post-9/11 intelligence reforms. When intelligence professionals are being dismissed or agencies’ analysis publicly disparaged and disavowed (all based on the content of their analysis) that fact alone means we have crossed the Rubicon, either because the criticism is warranted or because it is not.

Implications of Politicization

The implications of these developments can affect every part of the intelligence cycle: from skepticism of the raw reporting particular

agencies are disseminating to consumers seeing bias in any product they disagree with, and every step in between collection and the consumer. And this is not a one-sided problem: if intelligence loses the presumption of freedom from political bias, then content any consumer finds unwelcome will invite skepticism that it either reflects bias in the IC or has been corrupted by external bias.

Intelligence politicization and the reactions to it can disrupt **intelligence processes and relationships** in multiple distinct (but sometimes overlapping) ways:

First, pressure to skew intelligence content in response to the politicized environment—whether that pressure is external or self-editing, conscious or not, and supporting or undermining a particular policy preference.

Second, personal opinions or media silos that subconsciously affect “day job” judgments (always a concern, but one amplified by the specters of politicization and elevated outrage shadowing every incident and topic).

Third, the potential in response to these developments to either overcorrect or to miss detecting a novel source of bias.

To some extent, these dynamics reflect concerns about bias that are inherent to any human endeavor, and intelligence professionals have been working to understand and address ever since the earliest efforts to professionalize the field. But this contemporary reemergence of bias as a concern goes beyond human fallibility to disrupted institutions and counterproductive environments.

Once politicized dynamics start resulting in skewed reporting or analysis, there are multiple trickle-down **implications for the reporting and analysis produced:**

Disseminated reporting or analysis that results from political bias and seems to show it: Materials may clearly reflect poor quality, such as unreliable sources given undue credence or conclusions that reflect faulty logic or a preferred

hypothesis.

Biased material appears objective: A politically-influenced process may not be apparent in the final disseminated result, as when an unfavored hypothesis and supporting points are omitted, dissenting sources go uncollected, or indications of a source’s unreliability are ignored.

Reporting is objective but unexpected and misidentified as biased: When something deviates from the established analytic line in an environment tainted by bias, it can be difficult to discern whether it is accurately-reported surprise or a motivated divergence from existing conclusions.

Bias through omission: We will never know the reporting or analysis that goes unseen because it is not collected, drafted, or approved for politically skewed reasons.

Errant assumption of bias through omission: “We will never know,” so the absence of evidence for a particular hypothesis invites skepticism about the reporting “they” are withholding.

Low-confidence intelligence withheld to avoid misuse: Dutiful dissemination of relevant reporting from a source with low or unknown reliability is an important building block of intelligence, inviting further reporting and analysis to help validate it, refute it, or place it in context. But if a reporting officer or their leadership is constrained by worries over how it might be misused, it could seem safer to withhold it.

Of course, the overwhelming majority of reporting and analysis is unlikely to suffer from any of these shortcomings, particularly the farther you get from the most politically-charged topics. But with or without tainted materials, the politicized environment and processes I described above means that these dynamics can always justify confirmation bias: skeptical consumers can speculate that one of these flaws must be affecting material that diverges from their strongly held beliefs.

That last dynamic—confirmation bias being amplified by the mere possibility of politicization—makes intelligence politicization a bit like inflation: it can result from external causes, but expectations of politicization can also be self-fulfilling. Even if intelligence content has not actually been politicized and does not become politicized, the expectation of biased output can itself produce a politicized lens through which consumers view intelligence. So, it is imperative that we work to address politicization in every way we can.

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Addressing Politicization: How to Begin

These initial thoughts are only a start—it will take many perspectives and real-time lessons-learned to reach an effective path forward and this is a conversation to which anyone producing or consuming intelligence needs to be contributing.

ICD 203 is Essential, but Insufficient

For any intelligence professional trained in the last twenty years, the first answer on addressing bias—for many the only answer—is Intelligence Community Directive (ICD) 203, “Analytic Standards.”¹⁰ ICD 203 does provide an essential starting point.

ICD 203 is Still the Modern Foundation of Rigorous, Unbiased Intelligence

ICD 203 was the intelligence community’s reaction to two epochal intelligence failures: the 9/11 attacks and assessment of Iraq’s WMD. The

starting point for addressing politicization should be renewed attention to the baseline requirements it establishes for unbiased intelligence processes and products: material that is objective, independent of political consideration, timely, based on all available sources, and employs analytic tradecraft standards.

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ICD 203 was Never Sufficient to Address Political Bias

Structured analytic techniques and the other hallmarks of ICD 203 standards are well-conceived to address implicit and subconscious bias—the type that otherwise persists in even the most well-intended analysts. But when it comes to conscious political bias, output has always remained sensitive to policy priorities despite the best intentions of ICD 203 and those faithfully implementing it. To take an oversimplified and anecdotal data point, one can review the prominence of certain topics like climate change or immigration in the IC’s annual threat assessments (ATA) for the last fifteen years. You won’t see complete 180-degree reversals on these topics, but in each year’s ATA there is a clear sensitivity to which topics will find receptive consumers and which will invite skepticism or disinterest.

Sensitivity to political considerations is probably more inevitable and appropriate than ICD 203 enables

This is a controversial position to take, but something like molding the ATA to consumers’ policy priorities is not necessarily undue. Modern intelligence processes already address this reality to some degree, with things like

the regular reorientation of IC work around updated President’s Intelligence Priorities (PIP)¹¹ that are inevitably informed by administration policy priorities. There is not actually a bright line in law or policy between appropriate responsiveness to intelligence consumers’ priorities and inappropriate political influence. There are extremes that are obviously acceptable or not, but the middle is a grey zone rather than a line, with clarity to be found only in the details of context and process. ICD 203’s bright line standard of material “independent from political considerations” simply doesn’t allow for enough nuance to sufficiently account for this.

The intelligence failures that resulted in the creation of ODNI and promulgation of ICD 203 created relative consensus around the importance of intelligence that was politically objective even when it failed to support policy preferences. That consensus has eroded as people across the entire partisan spectrum have developed a reflex to doubt not just the accuracy of materials they disagree with, but the honesty and motives of their sources—a dynamic that can affect not only consumers but also intelligence professionals.

Intelligence represents a lattice of content and processes, and as segments of that lattice are embrittled by both actual bias and suspicions of bias, ICD 203 as a mere policy framework is proving insufficient. Intelligence professionals, leaders, and consumers need to be actively engaged in confronting the effects intelligence politicization, not behaving as if we are in a sanctified process that is immutably free of it. The remainder of this article propose some initial new adaptations to that end.

Fewer Grand Judgments (1) – Publish on All Competing Hypotheses

One approach to addressing a politicized intelligence environment is for analysis to make fewer grand judgments in published analysis by articulating evidence supporting and refuting all hypotheses competing to answer a question.

One of the structured analytic techniques used to implement quality tradecraft under ICD 203 is the formal analysis of competing hypotheses, or ACH. This tool is meant to ensure that we do not become so focused on prevailing judgments (regime survival imperatives will ensure the USSR's persistence as an adversary, or Al Qaeda lacks the capacity to attack the U.S. homeland) that analysis is blinded to the evidence supporting alternative conclusions.

In practice, the intent is to review in good faith all potential conclusions on the path to identifying the one which is most likely correct, and publishing only that analysis. If an ACH exercise is indeterminate it might result in a more rounded product that presents the competing theories and their supporting evidence for consumers, but that is not the norm. If the evidence and analytic consensus identify a conclusion that is most likely the right answer, standards of clarity and brevity discourage us from devoting much page space to answers likely to be wrong beyond a brief acknowledgement of a most likely or consequential alternative.

The problem at the heart of intelligence politicization is essentially willful confirmation bias: information that aligns with preexisting beliefs or priorities is welcomed and trumpeted, and material that does not is ignored, buried, or discredited. Depending on the nature of politicization, this can be happening with intelligence producers or consumers.

When that cherry-picking is done by consumers on either side of a policy debate, it is mostly a fait accompli that producers of intelligence cannot do anything about. But if everything is presented together, the conclusion to be credited by one side and ignored by the other will appear, with its supporting evidence, alongside the competing interpretation.

That approach may not do much to address individuals' politicized bias, since the need to address it in the first place means that it is either conscious and willful or a 'personal truth'

tied to identity. But the published ACH could do for the collective body politic what it does for the subconscious bias of analysts: prompt a fair consideration of all possibilities on a level informational playing field, where either a clear winner can become a little more apparent or the merits and faults of reasonably divergent conclusions can be spelled out.

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It may seem like a cop-out to go through analyzing competing hypotheses and identify a clear winner, but then still present them all side-by-side and leave it to the consumer to draw that conclusion. But any intelligence approach that is constrained by politicization is going to end up suboptimal (a theme that will be relevant for many recommendations and accommodations below). The goal of intelligence professionals and processes should not be to "be right" and need not be to produce products that are pristine by schoolhouse analytic standards. It should be to inform policy decisions with the most effective and comprehensive approaches available.

Fewer Grand Judgments (2) – Publish Smaller Building Blocks of Analysis

In a politicized intelligence environment, "small ball" judgments that draw tightly-focused conclusions in response to narrow questions are less likely to invite biased engagement than grand judgments with more direct policy implications.

It is common for major assessments to include multiple subordinate judgments in

support of an overarching conclusion. Often, the most politically contentious portions of those products are the ultimate grand conclusions; the individual supporting judgments may be simpler matters of fact or straightforward analysis that $2 + 2 = 4$, without major policy implications themselves. Such judgments can likely be published separately as stand-alone items with less friction than the grand conclusion they may eventually support.

Intelligence analysis in a politicized environment may need to trade brevity for exhaustive documentation.

To put it in terms of another era’s politicized intelligence, judgments of whether Iraq was trying to procure uranium yellowcake from Niger, or had ongoing nuclear research and development efforts, or was purchasing high-strength aluminum tubes for use in centrifuges, or was making dual-use procurements in support of nuclear enrichment, could each be published as stand-alone products wholly independent of an assessment of the overarching question of whether Iraq was trying to restart their nuclear program.¹²

Those separate small judgments can then either stand as they are with policy consumers left to ultimately do the final step of assembling them into a conclusion supporting policy action, or a more circumscribed effort can attempt to publish a “pull it all together” assessment once supporting items are published and in circulation.

Of course, either of those final outcomes could still be prone to political bias—whether subconscious and implicit, or knowing, deliberate, and explicit. But the independent publication of smaller judgments allows competing interpretations to draw from the same underlying materials. It also increases the prospects for those materials to see the light of

day without undue filtering, amplification, or modification from someone thinking more about the policy outcome than the intelligence content.

Show Your Work

Intelligence analysis in a politicized environment may need to trade brevity for exhaustive documentation. Whether piecemeal or still in larger assessments, intelligence analysis will be more durable in the face of biased skepticism the more that editorial and analytic processes are clearly documented and explained. ICD 203 already includes a requirement that credible intelligence not only implement, but also *exhibit* analytic tradecraft standards. But the current environment makes it time to take that farther.

Something like reporting from a source with low reliability or content that is only tangentially-relevant might reasonably be omitted from an analysis when plentiful better sources addressing the same point are available. But it is no longer sufficient to leave that detritus on the cutting room floor in the name of clarity or brevity. We need to memorialize each of those subordinate judgments in the drafting and analytic processes.

In a criminal investigation, there’s no need to give weight to the unfounded conjecture of a true crime podcaster when there is solid forensic evidence available.¹³ But if investigators do not want that wild theory to become the seed of reasonable doubt, it is worth the effort to consider every possibility with due diligence and provide explicit context and assessment. The same duly diligent coverage of all bases applies here.

Of course, it is possible that the dodgy reporting will be cherry-picked and over-indexed on, with the principal analysis ignored. But in an environment of extreme politicization that risk is present whether the cherry is picked off the cutting room floor or from within the analysis. At least within the analysis it can be presented with context and hopefully provide some inoculation

against accusations of withholding the material in a way that discredits entire processes, offices, or lines of analysis.

More Published Signposts and Indicators

When analysis results in unwelcomed conclusions, presenting it in conditional terms, focused on articulating indicators and signposts in lieu of explicit conclusions, can make it palatable enough to survive publication and consumption. Suppose that you are convinced that your friend's spouse is cheating, but they just cannot bring themselves to see it. Not only do they believe in their relationship and their partner, but they also want so badly to believe that they just get angry at you the more you try to convince them.

Instead of futile efforts to force them to see, you might try to just equip them with the right questions and considerations to be able to see it themselves when they are ready:

- Does he spend inexplicable or unexplained time away?
- Is she suddenly investing less time or effort in the marriage?
- Are explanations for odd behavior increasingly convoluted or unbelievable?

In exploratory analysis, this kind of indicators list is well-established common practice. "If the spouse is cheating, we would expect to see the following indicators:..." usually then listed with a related topical icon—maybe a broken heart—for *observed*, *partially observed*, and *not observed*. But if there is enough solid reporting to conclude with a reasonable degree of confidence that the spouse is cheating, it is typically presented as such with a clear analytic judgment.

It does not have to be, though. Analysis on politically-sensitive subjects can take an approach that acknowledges the question,

considers potential answers, and presents the deduced indicators (for both the politically-desired answer and the unwelcomed one) rather than identifying only the indicators that have been observed and proceeding all the way to conclusion.

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From there, perhaps future analysis can review observed activity against the previously published list. But when the environment or topic is so intensely politicized that publishing the conclusion is simply untenable, the list of indicators and signposts can be combined with the flow of reporting to arm consumers to see what they need to when they are ready.

Explicit versus Implicit Political Bias

The suggestions above have so far addressed the nebulous disruption of an environment of political bias, but what about when undue influence is direct and pointed? Some of us, at least sometimes in some situations, may encounter and have to respond to political bias that is explicit rather than implicit.

- It could be the leader that says, "we can't publish that," even if it's analytically sound.
- It could be the consumer saying, "Find me evidence of this," even when such evidence is lacking or unbelievable.

In some quarters, there may be a temptation to meet a political problem with a political response: to "work from within" to "balance out" the undue influence, so I want to at least acknowledge and address that temptation. It

could mean pulling in coordinating agencies or offices where countervailing bias is known to exist, in the hopes of overwhelming or outranking the undue influence. It might mean leaking what's being suppressed or ignored, or suppressing what's being exaggerated.

That balancing approach is a mistake. No matter what form it takes, a political response to politicization cannot be the way. The only answer to an unduly politicized environment is to double-down on apolitical service, not to compound it. Yet, that entreaty to remain apolitical leaves unanswered what to do when directed to publish what lacks credibility or dismiss what merits publishing – or any other inappropriate intervention.

That dilemma simply cannot be answered with hypothetical scenarios or a generalized

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answer. When directed to do something you consider wrong, the only appropriate choices for an apolitical professional are refusal with full transparency and acceptance of the consequences, or faithful implementation of established policies despite your disagreement. And every person in each individual instance must make their own judgment what undue request is beyond the pale and justifies refusal.

When writing previously about the importance of faithful implementation of policies even when you disagree with them, I have argued that “after the Nazis came to power, the police chief in Dachau likely reached a point

of personal moral responsibility for regime actions long before the postman did.”¹⁴ The same concept applies here: the specific context of each situation and each participant will be essential determinants between dutiful implementation and declared refusal. Moreover, factors deciding what breach is “too far” don't only include big questions like the nature of the inappropriate requirement or content manipulated, but practical personal matters like how much a given individual can afford something like a punitive reassignment or conscientious resignation.

If the sum of those factors is that the breach of standards doesn't meet an individual's “refusal threshold,” what remains is compliance and faithful implementation. This dynamic—having to accept politicization and being party to it—is why the other recommendations above have focused on oblique responses that emphasize avoiding direct interference or confrontation while minimizing deleterious effects of politicization.

Sophistry and Disingenuous Skepticism as Competing Hypotheses

With those most pointed and direct politically-skewed actors, sophistry and disingenuous skepticism may be the theories that intelligence is competing with. It is not new to note that much of the nation's partisan debate now exists in a post-fact era. Each side—particularly at the extremes—has their “truths,” and facts that challenge those truths are unwelcome. What is more recent is the intrusion of that epistemological approach into the national security questions intelligence is trying to answer.

When addressing actors operating from that perspective—whether intelligence professionals, leaders, or consumers—marshaling facts and logic in support of an analytic conclusion works differently.

- Assertions that are completely un-credible or even disingenuous need to be given equal

consideration alongside other competing hypotheses.

- Skepticism may come at an unreasonable extreme where all sources are viewed as equally deserving of either credulity or doubt.

It is like a murder trial defense witness presenting a very detailed theory about alien perpetrators that the prosecutor would typically object to. But then the prosecutor learns that one of the jurors runs an Area 51 “The Truth is Out There” website and the judge is her number one reader. Suddenly something too absurd to even acknowledge is a competing—or even leading—theory of the crime that has to be considered and disproven.

To some extent, the only thing to do in the face of this kind of reasoning is accept that this is our current information environment and respond accordingly with the evidence and analysis that considers the full range of theories.

But in some instances, there could be an opportunity to take an Aikido-like approach that redirects the momentum of bad faith or crackpot theories towards productive judgments. Disingenuous or absolutist skepticism can be aimed at dubious sources and theories too. The nuggets of credibility that make a conspiracy theory plausible can be emphasized in analysis that uses them to ultimately reach a more credible conclusion.

Make Intelligence Boring Again

This article has focused politicization because it is a challenge worth addressing, but it almost certainly is not yet common, let alone widespread or endemic. Most intelligence topics and processes are still too mundane and technocratic to be worth politicizing. We need to keep it that way and make the rest of intelligence boring again as well.

In between career stints as an FBI Supervisory Intelligence Analyst and currently

as senior intelligence coordinator at a non-Title 50 agency, this author spent seven years as a Foreign Service Officer (FSO). Every generalist FSO serves one Consular assignment, either assisting Americans overseas or adjudicating the visas of foreign nationals seeking to travel or emigrate to the U.S.

I was in the middle of my Consular tour in 2017 when a series of Executive Orders proposed different types of foreign national travel bans, each prompting energetic political response in the media, Congress, and the courts either in support or opposition. Those highest profile policy debates over visa and travel policy presented the appearance of a process in deep turmoil.

Yet for most visa adjudications for most applicants in most parts of the world, things proceeded largely unchanged. Students and tourists and journalists and skilled workers and immigrating fiancés and seasonal laborers

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who met basic qualifications still applied for and received visas as normal. The same is almost certainly true of intelligence processes and products now. Despite a disconcertingly consistent trickle of high-profile reciprocal accusations of politicization, most of the work of the intelligence community likely remains routine practices being implemented routinely.

Policy preferences or disputes obviously extend to just about any national security question intelligence might be seeking to answer. But when it comes to most routine work of gathering and assessing information on adversary capabilities, infrastructure protection, foreign actors’ intent, or ongoing threat activities, only a limited number of topics at any time rise to the

level of generating controversy, headlines, or pressure. Most other work can continue on as it has.

That fact does not undermine the danger posed by the politicization that has occurred, nor its potential to spread if left unchecked. But it is an important reminder that what we are talking about here is responding to the beachhead of politicization in institutions where much remains unaffected.

Politicization as a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Intelligence politicization can be like price inflation: expectation or worry (or confidence) can sometimes be self-fulfilling. I made a passing comparison above between politicization and inflation, and I am closing with it here even without a specific recommended action because it is an important dynamic of the politicized environment that can play out for good or ill.

When inflation warnings are widespread, businesses might raise prices anticipating the increased costs of supply and labor, and their customers may then seek higher wages in response to increased prices. Eventually, the compound aggregation of that activity can create the very inflation that was predicted—all driven by anticipatory responses to expectations rather than concrete macroeconomic disruptions.

Similarly, if intelligence consumers are anticipating bias in the material they receive, or intelligence professionals or leaders fear it from peers or senior leadership, the amplified skepticism can produce unfounded doubt in products and processes. This dynamic is especially likely to be triggered in response to intelligence on politically charged topics where bias is most expected, or on material that undermines your particular priorities or beliefs since confirmation bias will already make countervailing content ‘feel wrong.’

In the aggregate, these responses can create the politicization they fear: as collectors, analysts, leaders, and consumers each adjust in response to the bias they anticipate from the other parties, the content and processes can be skewed by those adjustments and responses.

From one perspective, this is the pernicious hopelessness of politicized intelligence. Even if the process is mostly still functioning as it should and the products still mostly reflecting sound tradecraft, the more that consumers, practitioners, and observers expect or fear politicization the more likely those expectations themselves will distort intelligence production and consumption.

But the power of expectations to become self-fulfilling is also why addressing intelligence politicization matters even if it seems like no single person or action is sufficient.

The more that collective efforts are openly working to address politicization, the more that participants in and consumers and observers of the process might start expecting not to see it and responding accordingly. Positive expectations can be hard to come by in a time of such public discord, but collective efforts can start working to build them. **IAJ**

Notes

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- 10 Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Analytic Standards,” June 12, 2023, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICD/ICD-203.pdf> [Accessed August 7, 2025].
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- 12 The Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction, “Report to the President of the United States,” March 31, 2005, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-WMD/pdf/GPO-WMD.pdf> [Accessed August 7, 2025].
- 13 I include a number of hypothetical examples like this one—true crime podcasters, cheating spouses, and murderous aliens—that are somewhat farcical and completely removed from national security intelligence. This is deliberate to avoid any possibility of touching on either classified materials or the topics currently drawing the most partisan responses.
- 14 Matthew Tompkins, “Safeguarding a Nonpartisan Foreign Service,” in *The Foreign Service Journal*, October 2016, <https://afsa.org/safeguarding-nonpartisan-foreign-service>