Paul Pillar shows that intelligence reforms, especially the measures enacted since September 11, can be deeply misguided. The attempts at reforming intelligence performance from a political standpoint often miss the sources that actually underwrite failed policy and lead to a misperception of our ability to read outside influences. Pillar goes on to say that political reform in the intelligence world also misinterprets the intelligence community-policy relationship and often enacts changes that weaken not strengthen intelligence-gathering operations.

In this book Pillar tackles head-on the intelligence myths that the general public has come to believe about national tragedies such as the one on 9/11, including the belief that intelligence has a profound effect upon every major national security decision and policy and that all intelligence failures can be corrected. Pillar states that: “[T]he lack of influence the intelligence community has on major policy decisions is one of the respects in which reality differs from mythology (Pillar pg.121).” This is not a proposition that Pillar purports alone; it is also demonstrated within the Central Intelligence Agency, as it states on its website: “Indeed, there
will be some policymakers who could not pass a rudimentary test on the facts of the matter but who have the strongest views on what the policy should be and how to put it into effect. We do not need to inquire as to how these men got that way or why they stay that way, we need only realize that this kind of person is a fact of life (https://cia.gov/library).” Does this mean that no matter how hard intelligence officers work and how well trained they are or how much experience they have, that a policy maker with literally none of these skills may just import his/her own view? Sadly yes, this is the reality on a daily basis in Washington.

The truly disturbing trend between Pillar’s book and the book “CounterStrike” by Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker is a running theme that intelligence gathering, analysis, and massive data collection have little impact on shaping how things are done, but yet when fiascos occur the intelligence community is the first to be blamed and revamped. Pillar’s book helps break through this dynamic and shows how the intelligence agencies have become patsies for the egregious decisions our elected leaders sometimes make, how intelligence reform seems to be synchronized with bureaucratic restructuring, and how our foreign policy is motivated by a subconscious self-serving need and sometimes a political unwillingness to accept the limitations of our knowledge about the plans and motivations of actual and potential enemies.

In Pillar’s section on “Scapegoats and Spectator Sport,” Pillar discusses how the American political machine pushes the notion that the intelligence community should be aware of each situation before it transpires and is thus blamed for not informing policy makers in advance of untoward events. In one case, Pillar talks about the day after North Korea invaded South Korea in 1950 and the Secretary of Defense and State appeared before the Senate
Appropriations committee. The committee was not concerned with the appropriations requested or other measures going into motion by the Truman administration, but more so why the nation had no advanced warning of the invasion (Pillar pg.177). This attitude is supported by the relative lack of understanding and familiarity with the intelligence community as that the American public wants their government to be open and public lives closed; intelligence is associated with the opposite of both (Pillar pg.178). Even if we expect our intelligence community to have the ability to read minds, see into the future and foretell events, at some point each situation they are investigating and conducting is subject to human error, a variable that cannot be calculated.

Pillar looks back at the United States foreign policy during the Cold War and points out the relatively small role intelligence information and analysis played in some of the most important decisions; Viet Nam comes to mind most clearly. He then reviews in detail the events of September 11 and as well as the invasion of Iraq in 2003, condemning the 9/11 commission and the George W. Bush administration for how they depicted the intelligence community. Pillar presents in his book an original approach to better informing U.S. policy, which involves isolating intelligence management from politicization. Pillar states that people in the intelligence community are often more worried about who reports to whom and to whom people owe their jobs than actually doing their jobs (Pillar pg. 312). If you can take politics out of intelligence analysis and let the analysts actually influence policy or have politicians take more direct roles in intelligence other than skimming a report, maybe policy will not be so misguided and could actually become targeted.