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ROGER ZANE GEORGE

Beyond Analytic Tradecraft

Since 2001, major changes have occurred in the way United States intelligence agencies are conducting analysis. Numerous important innovations have been made in the processes used to develop National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs), and more rigorous tradecraft techniques have been introduced across the Intelligence Community (IC) to guard against analytic bias and compensate for enduring intelligence gaps that lead analysts to rely too heavily on outdated analytic assumptions and mindsets. These innovations are important first steps to rectifying, if not entirely eliminating, the problems found in pre-11 September 2001 (9/11) terrorism assessments, or the more recent flawed estimates of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capabilities. That said, still more remains to be done. Analytical tradecraft improvements, even if implemented, are not enough, nor the cure for all the biases that perennially afflict intelligence analysis.

PROBLEMS WITH ANALYSIS: THE TAXONOMY OF ERRORS

The many studies of the U.S. Intelligence Community's performance over the years continue to identify the same nagging problems that accompany analysis. Finding techniques appropriate to remedy such problems first requires some way of characterizing the major categories of error.

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While they may be described in many ways, for simplicity's sake, the taxonomy of errors might include at least four major forms of bias: cognitive, organizational, cultural, and political. At times, these categories blend together and often, but not always, they reinforce each other. (See Figure 1.)

Source of Bias	Description	Analytic Symptoms
Cognitive	Uses mental "mind-sets," which filter and distort incoming information and cause analysts to interpret it in ways which reinforce existing beliefs about an intelligence subject. Often unconscious and deeply resistant to change.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holds to a "conventional wisdom" • "Sees what one expects to see" • Judges the status quo as prevailing • Dismisses contrary information • Rests on long-held "assumptions"
Cultural	Interprets phenomena and a target's behavior in terms of one's own culture. Often uses customs, standards of "rationality," and evidence common to oneself in judging the behavior of others. Ethnocentric judgment about the value or characteristics of other ethnic, cultural, or religious group.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applies "mirror-imaging" to a target • Uses "western" ideas of logic and risk calculation • Attributes specific behavior to groups • Reflects cultural superiority or insensitivity
Organizational	Establishes a shared sense of a "group" identity and mission that shapes how analysts view information and analysis that might challenge their own assessments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Justifies arguments by past record • Links unit's mission to analysis • Sees unit's successes more than failures • Coordination "waters down" judgments
Political	Tailors analysis to support a preferred policy preference, either because the analyst and/or the policy customer favor it. "Politics" rather than open inquiry drive the intelligence process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restricts search for contrary evidence to prevailing views • Permits misuse or selective use of analysis to support policy • Self-censors analysis • Answers intelligence questions that reflect political agenda

Figure 1. Taxonomy of Analytic Errors.

COGNITIVE BIAS

Essentially, cognitive bias is inherent to the “cognition” process every analyst uses to examine an intelligence topic. As analysts become more expert in their field—be it ballistic missile developments, Iranian domestic politics, or global energy resources—they develop a pattern of thinking (sometimes called a “mindset”) which is a working model of how missile programs develop, Iranian political leaders behave, or energy resources are discovered, exploited, and marketed. Normally, the more time an analyst works on a topic, the more knowledgeable and expert the analyst becomes; he or she begins to excel and receive acknowledgment from policymakers for excellent written assessments and oral briefs. This expertise and demonstrated skill at understanding one’s field naturally increases the analyst’s confidence in his or her judgments. Others rely on the word of such experts, and the analyst develops a reputation for being one of the office’s best and brightest. Over time, however, this expertise can develop a kind of paradox: that is, the more expert one becomes—relying upon a highly developed mental model of the intelligence target—the more the analyst becomes prone to missing major discontinuities or key changes in a foreign government’s politics or in an economic or technical phenomenon.

In almost every intelligence failure that has occurred in the past fifty years can be found some elements and symptoms of cognitive bias. Well-regarded Sovietologists, both inside government and outside, failed to recognize that Mikhail Gorbachev was a different sort of Soviet leader who fully intended to challenge his country’s prevailing order. Likewise, Israeli and U.S. military analysts failed to recognize Egyptian and Syrian activities in 1973 as “preparations for war” because they did not accord with their highly developed sense of what it would take for Egypt to decide to go to war. Or, more recently, terrorism analysts developed a view of al-Qaeda goals that focused on foreign U.S. targets but not on the American homeland. In each case, the symptoms of cognitive bias were there: adhering to a “conventional wisdom” of how the subject behaved, resisting any evidence that was contrary or inconsistent with the current explanation of the problem, and presuming that the future would look pretty much like the past.

CULTURAL BIAS

Often accompanying well-known forms of cognitive bias, analysts must often contend with a more culturally based form of analytic error. Although analysts’ task is to analyze foreign intelligence targets, they are still prone to view an adversary by referencing their own cultural norms, ways of behaving, and sense of what is “rational” behavior, a tendency often

referred to as “mirror imaging.” Typically, analysts must reach a judgment on a foreign government’s actions or decision on the basis of what they assume would be the most “logical” or “rational” choice. Unfortunately, for American analysts—or those of other Western services as well—to put themselves into the same cultural and political milieu in which foreign despots, leaderships, or terrorist cells operate is very difficult. What an intelligence analyst might view as the most logical way to calculate the risks and benefits of different actions is, perhaps more often than not, not the way leaders in Arab, Asian, or African cultures will calculate. The importance of tribal, religious, and ethnic customs—particularly as regards a ruler’s “status, his sense of “honor,” or the need for “face-saving”—can often complicate the analyst’s challenge in forecasting how a decision will be reached. What might seem to the analyst like the most likely or wisest course of action for maximizing a foreign government’s political, economic, and military interests may actually be less important to a leader who must keep the trust of his peers, or posture to ward off challengers to his rule, or find more culturally acceptable ways to defend the country’s honor, than the analyst might conceive.

Recall the puzzlement of most Western analysts in trying to determine why Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein refused to permit more intrusive United Nations (UN) inspections, if indeed he did not have any WMD programs to hide. Or, recall the analytic judgments in 1940–1941 that dismissed a Japanese attack on Hawaii’s Pearl Harbor or other targets beyond East Asia because the Japanese were considered to be inferior pilots and Japan’s engineers incapable of matching British torpedo technology that would permit attacking in shallow waters like those at Pearl Harbor. And, in 1973, similar culturally based sneers about Arabs being poor fighters and not a match for the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) predisposed analysts to disbelieve that the Arabs would launch an attack they had no hope of winning. Such culturally based stereotypes of adversaries often mislead analysts into believing that an adversary would naturally choose to behave or conduct weapons tests in the same manner as would the “superior” U.S. and Western democracies.

The key point is that Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and other IC analysts need to be cognizant of how often their own cultural biases seep into thinking about how a foreign adversary would behave. This is particularly true for U.S. analysts, due to an unspoken assumption that foreign adversaries need to worry about what the U.S. will do if their actions challenge American interests. Often, without knowing it, U.S. analysts discount more provocative or risky foreign behavior, thinking that “surely, these weak countries realize they are dealing with a superpower?” A poignant example of this was the 1962 NIE in which CIA analysts judged that the Soviet Union would not be so foolish as to place missiles

into Cuba because it must understand that the Kennedy administration then in power in Washington would have to react to prevent it.

ORGANIZATIONAL BIAS

Every analyst knows what it means to be part of an organizational culture with its distinct mission, operating procedures, and codes of conduct. Most take pride in working for the CIA or other analytic organizations in the U.S. government. Becoming an analyst—to be recruited, screened, trained, and acculturated into the norms of the specific “shop” within the assigned agency—was not easy. Analysts, in particular, take pride in the importance and quality of their work. Briefing busy policymakers, participating in interagency policy discussions, and often working around-the-clock to provide the needed support for negotiations, crisis decisionmaking, or other vital national security activities. All this reinforces a sense of worth and value in an office’s actions and authority. Hence, the disputes that arise within and among parts of the Intelligence Community, that amount to what is often termed “organizational politics” or “turf” wars, are no surprise. That is, the analyst is likely to believe that his organization’s view should prevail, in part to reflect the primacy of that office in following the topic in question. A CIA tradecraft expert, Jack Davis, has termed this phenomenon “tribal think”—to reflect the pressure within an office to preserve the prevailing paradigm, tamp down deviant views that challenge the office’s long held views, and reeducate younger analysts to understand and accept how an office perceives an issue.¹

Another variant of organizational bias crops up during the “coordination” process, both within a large analytic service and across the IC’s analytic ranks. The typical coordination process involves an analyst shopping a draft beyond his or her office to other elements that might have some competence in the same or a related field. My own experience with coordination suggests that few analysts welcome coordination, as it involves time and trouble “wordsmithing” their work to satisfy other analysts who might presume to know as much or more about the topic.

In the academic world, such peer review is customary; however, peer review can be accepted or rejected by the academics circulating their work. But it cannot be in the CIA. In the Agency, and in other intelligence agencies, only “one organizational view” of an issue can prevail. Such conformity defies both human nature and logic. Within any organization, individual analysts frequently reach different judgments about the quality of information, the correct interpretation of data, and the likely implications of any foreign development. Take, for example, the question of Mideast terrorism: regional analysts will tend to see terrorism in that part of the world differently from terrorism specialists looking at the

Mideast; their frames of reference are clearly different. Likewise, Middle East scholars at a university who are writing on terrorism may come to very different conclusions than their colleagues who are terrorism specialists who write on terrorism in different parts of the world. As former Deputy Director of National Intelligence (DDNI) for Analysis Thomas Fingar contrasted it a few years ago: "Imagine if Harvard or Princeton had a single view on an issue; that just would not happen." So, within the CIA and other analytic shops, the insistence is on a degree of conformity that is not natural and, in many respects, not accurate. Getting away from characterizing a viewpoint as being the "CIA's" or "INR's" (the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research) is probably healthy, as it helps to break down the unnatural tendency to side with one's own agency merely because the analyst is part of the office where one's career is made.

Individual analysts are often not sensitive to these organizational biases until they begin to work with other offices and agencies. As they begin their careers within an office, they can easily and quickly become captive to the office perspective without knowing it. A decade ago, in a session focused on Iraqi politics, a brave young analyst with only six months service in the office, made the comment that she had not realized how she absorbed the office's line on Iraq. Having the analytic courage to acknowledge these unspoken organizational processes is part of the solution to averting them. The danger of not acknowledging the power of organizational cultures is that offices will hang onto obsolete views of an issue too long, without recognizing that perhaps the issue has changed and the office's line should change as well.

POLITICAL BIAS

More than any other form of bias so far mentioned, political bias is a many-headed dragon. Coming in a variety of forms, it depends greatly on the interpretation of motives behind the intelligence analysis, not the judgments per se. Critics of CIA analysis often see political bias when perhaps there is more evidence of cognitive, cultural, or organizational bias at work. What appears to an outsider to be the CIA's bias toward a particular policy may instead simply reflect a prevailing mindset that has less to do with the partisan politics prevailing in Washington at the time. So, when defense hawks attacked the CIA's analysis of Soviet strategic developments in the 1970s as "politicized," they were dismissing the possibility that CIA missile experts had become convinced they understood how the Soviets developed and deployed weapons and could make reasonable estimates of production rates—which later turned out to be too low for a time.² Defense hawks never acknowledged that, after the infamous Team B exercise of 1976, CIA estimates rose well above what

turned out to be actual Soviet production rates, which hardly explains the CIA having a political bias in a single direction.

Admittedly, political bias in analysis does occur. But, it is much less frequent than the other forms of bias that crop up. Most political bias that can be proven is the result of analysts being pressured—or at least feeling pressure—from senior managers or outside customers to alter their views to accord with a prevailing opinion within an administration. The IC has taken steps to bolster the analysts' resistance to such bias by creating an Ombudsman for Politicization, who annually reports on the instances of politicization and is also available to any analyst who wishes to report a case of alleged politicization so that steps can be taken to rectify the situation. While those annual reports are not available, Select Senate Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) reports on prewar Iraq intelligence confirm that the actual instances of the CIA altering its views on critical issues such as Iraq are almost nil. But instances of CIA analysts feeling pressure to get it right and to resist any outside pressures to alter judgments are surely there. According to a 2004 SSCI report, the Deputy Director of the Office of Terrorism Analysis (OTA) commented:

I think there was intense pressure in the prewar period and I felt the pressure was on the tradecraft side to ensure we got this one right. We couldn't afford not to get it right. And rarely do you work in an intelligence environment, especially in an environment where everything you write has a potential to lead to conflict where American people are killed . . . the pressure was intense.³

Other OTA and Iraq analysts concurred that they had never felt such pressure, mostly placed on themselves by their own concern about getting it right, but also by internal organizational pressure to get it right.

This 2004 Senate report also highlighted the mislabeling problem of organizational bias becoming an alleged case of political bias. That is, analysts in the CIA's Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis (NESA) were concerned that terrorism analysts were drafting a speculative piece on the al-Qaeda-Iraq connection. In this piece of analysis, the OTA explored as an alternative analysis—not fully coordinated—how much could be made of this connection, knowing that the George W. Bush administration wished to believe such a connection existed. Upon investigation, the Ombudsman ruled—not in so many words—that the complaints were more a case of organizational bias in which terrorism analysts took a different and less cautious approach to that employed by NESA analysts; however, the OTA analysis was not “politicized.” Ultimately, NESA agreed with this judgment and accepted that the OTA and NESA go about doing their analysis in different ways:⁴

Cases of “politicization” occur most often in the misuse of analysis rather than the misconduct of analysts themselves. This form of politicization is the least internally controllable because intelligence agencies are ultimately producers, not users, of intelligence. How policymakers—both boosters and critics—choose to employ intelligence is not something analysts or their managers are able to control. But the question arises as to how much responsibility analysts have to “correct the record” when they feel their analysis is being misused or skewed for political purposes. Hence, the controversy over President Bush’s 2002 remarks on the Niger uranium case became a *cause célèbre*, in which CIA officers more than policy officials were taken to task for not preventing the misuse of intelligence or correcting the public record. Likewise, Vice President Richard B. Cheney’s remarks in the summer of 2002 on his certainty that Saddam Hussein would have a nuclear weapon caught then—CIA Director George J. Tenet totally off-guard, and reportedly other policy officials as well, as this went well beyond what official intelligence analysis would have supported.⁵

REMEDIES FOR BIASES

Employing better analytic tradecraft is the mantra usually heard when senior analytic managers address analytic errors. To be sure, a remedy for cognitive bias is better use of what are now generally called Structured Analytic Techniques (SATs).⁶ Those are specifically designed to uncover hidden cognitive biases and assumptions, as well as highlight intelligence gaps and alternative hypotheses for what analysts are observing.⁷ Do these techniques adequately address the other sources of bias—cultural, organizational, and political? Not entirely. First, structured analytic techniques are just that—processes for reviewing assumptions, data, and hypotheses. They do nothing to guarantee that the CIA has the right expertise or knowledge from which to reach judgments. Second, SATs cannot fully replicate the experiences and decisionmaking styles used by foreign leaders, which are often at the core of intelligence questions addressed by the CIA and the IC. Analysts often ask “How would the Iranian or North Korean leadership size up their situation?” No matter what techniques U.S.-trained analysts employ, they cannot fully appreciate, much less evaluate, how Iranian or North Korean leaders actually view their reality. Third, SATs can reveal to critics in other offices, agencies, or policy shops the how and why of analytic judgments on an intelligence question. However, they are not likely to entirely disarm many critics inside or outside the Intelligence Community.

So, what is to be done to address noncognitive bias beyond tradecraft improvement? In my experience of working in both the policy world as well as in the intelligence world, the CIA and the IC need to seriously take

four big steps forward to better handle cultural, organizational, and political bias.

First, the cultural bias will never be satisfactorily addressed until the IC seriously reviews its analytic outreach and hiring practices. So long as analysts are strictly limited to being U.S. citizens with virtually no existing ties to any foreign cultures, a huge cultural gap in the Community's knowledge of foreign decisionmaking is likely to persist. Major U.S. multinational corporations can hire Indians, Chinese, Arabs, etc., to give them the cultural sensitivity for how foreign businesses operate. They therefore have a decided advantage over the CIA and other IC agencies. A review of the IC's hiring needs should be conducted that accepts the challenge of crafting new security practices that can balance the need for second-generation Americans with continuing contacts with foreign cultures, or individuals with extensive foreign contacts, against the need to protect classified information. To date, the natural reflex is to steer clear of any potential employee who might require a more nuanced or extensive security screening as simply not worth the risk. To be sure, the IC's efforts to streamline the months-long process is to be applauded, but this accomplishment does not necessarily ensure that the hyphenated Americans needed in the analytic ranks can make it through the vetting process. Sadly, current restrictions still deter and exclude desperately needed experts.

Second, academic outreach must be seriously embraced and expanded. The DNI's IC Directive 205 has made this a new priority, but the CIA remains one of the outliers. It has chosen not to engage in serious outreach because of various counterintelligence concerns. Too often, the CIA remains risk averse and avoids a real risk-management strategy. To rectify this, the Agency ought to conduct a thorough review of its outreach policy with the goal of developing a more forward-leaning approach to dealing with foreign experts who have knowledge that cannot be replicated inside the CIA through language and academic training. Supporting IC efforts like the Global Futures Forum, which the CIA had previously sponsored, would be a good start. At a minimum, the Agency should survey analysts to determine whether recently established outreach policies have actually reduced their contacts with nongovernment experts rather than enhanced them. My view is that they have prevented rather than empowered analysts from reaching out to experts beyond their offices.

Third, the CIA, and the IC more broadly, must build a true National Intelligence University (NIU), where expertise and knowledge can be developed through the actual study of foreign cultures. Moreover, a true bricks-and-mortar NIU would permit much deeper CIA-IC collaboration than is currently possible. Allowing a few IC analysts to cross-register in courses at the Agency's Kent School does not constitute

real Community-building. And, at the moment, Directorate of Intelligence (DI) officers have little incentive to participate in community-wide training options, because the CIA believes it already has achieved the “gold-standard” in analytic training and therefore need not participate in many non-CIA training opportunities. Typical of this was my teaching experience while at the National War College nearly ten years ago. I found little senior management support for sending DI analysts to military service colleges. Yet, when one queries those CIA students who have participated in these programs, they almost uniformly say it was a critically important broadening experience for them. To break down some of the organizational turf issues—where the CIA believes it possesses the only “gold-standard,” while other analytic units feel dismissed by the CIA—joint training opportunities at both the junior and senior levels are needed. A career-long IC-wide training system to help remove the “we-they” phenomenon that often hampers cross-agency analytic coordination processes is necessary. An NIU would foster this, while also being the platform from which greater IC outreach to foreign experts might be attempted on a wide range of countries and topics.

Fourth, rather than rely on defense when explaining how DI analysis is conducted and what tradecraft is employed, the CIA must take the offense. That is, the Agency needs to develop an outreach program to policymakers in both the Legislative and the Executive branches. Analysts spend lots of time trying to understand the policy process to improve their support to policymakers. But no time is devoted to educating the policymakers themselves. I had the opportunity to see the impact of teaching policymakers about the intelligence process when I co-taught a classified intelligence elective to military and foreign service students at the National War College. They had fourteen weeks of seminars, ranging from collection to analysis to covert action. They became “educated consumers”—something the CIA aspires to develop but has so far really spent little time cultivating. So, a simple first step would be to develop a “new policymaker” intelligence course that provides an introduction to the basics of intelligence collection and analysis to help explain the strengths and weaknesses of intelligence. As the CIA’s former Deputy Director Richard Kerr has noted elsewhere, some policymakers bring with them high expectations and are disappointed, while others come in with low expectations and are pleasantly surprised. Helping set those expectations where they should be would make better sense. Educating policymakers about the analytical business might just reduce their urge to misconstrue or selectively present intelligence analysis, although it is no guarantee. At a minimum, they would thereafter understand more about analytical tradecraft and make better use of analysts.

In sum, more needs to be done than improving tradecraft to make CIA analysis more relevant, insightful, and respected. The recent attention paid to analytic rigor is not misplaced, but it is not a silver bullet. Moreover, it should not become an excuse for the CIA's ignoring important ways in which the analytic profession can be advanced. CIA analysis must, instead, be constantly improving through education, collaboration, and outreach to those who may bring entirely different perspectives to an intelligence issue.

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- ⁶ The author was involved in preparing a Sherman Kent School "Tradecraft Primer" to lay out a variety of Structured Analytic Techniques—among them Key Assumptions Checks, Team A/Team B, Analysis of Competing Hypotheses and Scenario Analysis—to address cognitive bias. It was recently released to the public and can be found at www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/Tradecraft%20Primer-apr09.pdf
- ⁷ The CIA's Deputy for Intelligence, John Kringen, laid out some of the tradecraft improvements put in place following the many investigations into the flawed 2002 NIE on Iraq WMD. See John Kringen, "How We've Improved Intelligence Minimizing the Risk of Group Think," *The Washington Post*, 3 April 2006.