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# STUDIES IN INTELLIGENCE



A collection of articles on the historical, operational, doctrinal, and theoretical aspects of intelligence.

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## NOTES AND COMMENTS

*The writer of the following comment is Director of Intelligence, U. S. Air Force.*

We in the Air Force intelligence shop have for some time avoided using the words "capabilities" and "intentions" in any of our own work. We prefer to use "strengths," "courses of action which can be undertaken or continued," and then "probable damage to our interests." We consider "psychological strength" as being necessary to any course of action and that some measurement of psychological strength can be made in terms of "motives," "judgments," and "pressures."

There is much in Mr. Abbot Smith's article which coincides with our view. However, I believe our effort is unique in that it attempts to set up *all* causative things as *strengths* and deals with the "net capabilities" problem in terms of "probable damage to our interests."

Major General John A. Samford,  
United States Air Force

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*The writer of the following comment is JIC (London) Representative to the Central Intelligence Agency.*

### Away With Capabilities! \*

The amount of bedevilment created by the use of the word "capability" in intelligence had led me to doubt whether it has

\* All references are to "Articles on Capabilities" by Abbot E. Smith and Harold D. Kehm, *Studies in Intelligence*, January 1956.

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any value in this sphere. The following observations are born of this doubt and they have brought me at least to the conviction that other terms would serve the purposes of intelligence far better. It is not just a matter of word-splitting, for the term relates to the whole purpose of intelligence, military or national, namely, the fining down of what the enemy can do, to what he is most likely to do.

In mid-18th century England there lived the noted landscape-gardener, Lancelot Brown, better known as "Capability" Brown. The grounds at Kew and at Blenheim Palace, by the way, were laid out by him. The epithet came of his habit of saying that the grounds which he was asked to lay out had "capabilities." He meant of course that, as we would say, they had "possibilities" — i. e., undeveloped, latent faculties or properties.

Now I am sure that "Capability" Smith had the other main connotation in mind, an existing quality of being "capable" of doing this or that, which is, I take it, the sense the U. S. military term is meant to convey. The very term, however, offers scope for ambiguity which makes it unsuitable for use in national or military estimates. It carries with it the sense of "ability," "capacity" or even "strength," that is, ability regardless of intention, reasonableness or desirability; it can equally well on the other hand be used to denote a course of action within so-and-so's powers, or a reasonable intention. Much of the trouble with the word "capability" as used in intelligence seems to stem from an inherent imprecision and much heart- and mind-searching would be spared if the word were dropped altogether for a year. (After that time it would be found that there would be no need for it.)

In its place we could use several terms according to what was meant, and avoid confusion. First there is *strength* or *ability*, that which the enemy can muster or wield, always qualified in time and space if it is to be meaningful in relation to a given problem.

Next under the capability concept and in logical sequence there are *courses of action* (including inaction) which the en-

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emy could adopt in the light of reason. The intelligence officer has to be trusted somewhere, and who is better equipped to give the range of reasonable courses open to the enemy than the intelligence officer or branch, which for all its limitations of evidence is professionally best equipped with knowledge of the enemy's strength, methods and habits?

Logically we next come to the heart of the "capability" matter, the most difficult and the most important part of the whole task of intelligence, the selection of the *course most likely to be adopted*, which can be equated with the enemy's most probable *intention*. For intelligence to stop short of attempting to advise the commander, the Chiefs of Staff or the Security Council as to the most probable enemy intention would strike me as the gravest failure to carry the job to its responsible conclusion. Mr. Smith states (p. 2) that "the enumeration and description of enemy capabilities is the ultimate, or at least the penultimate, goal of military intelligence." I would say that it can never be the ultimate goal and must always be no more than penultimate.

This naturally raises the argument that the commander, who knows what he commands and can logically be credited with ability to use his resources most effectively to counter the various courses of action which the enemy could reasonably adopt, is therefore alone qualified to decide on the enemy's intention. This argument seems excessively purist. The commander, who has the operational responsibility, can if he chooses tell his G-2 that intelligence is useless, that he knows his enemy and, at the risk of punching blind, can go ahead with his operations. But that in no way absolves G-2 from putting forward his final judgment on the enemy's probable intention. If the commander does not think his G-2 worth listening to, he should sack him and get another in whose judgment he has a fair degree of faith, even though he does not think him an oracle.

The argument that the commander alone knows his own forces and intentions and can therefore best select the course the enemy is most likely to adopt presupposes, it seems, an intelligence officer who is not up to snuff. The intelligence offi-

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cer should have a pretty good idea of his own side's resources and dispositions, the basis of knowledge with which we should at least credit the enemy G-2. Thus equipped, and with his professionally best available knowledge of the enemy's strength and methods, is not the intelligence officer in a better position than the commander to select the enemy's most likely course, and is it not his duty to tell him? There have been many occasions when an experienced commander has disregarded his G-2, preferring his operational "hunch" as to the enemy's course, and has been shown triumphantly right. This still does not absolve G-2 from putting forward the G-2 selection.

Colonel Kehm states (p. 36) "Our current doctrine probably goes too far in playing down intentions-analysis. Going all out the other way would certainly be worse. It would encourage clairvoyance. . . . The stress on measurable physical facts is justified." The last thing any responsible G-2 wants is to be forced into the field of clairvoyance and make clear how far or how little distance his evidence takes him. Frequently he knows that his evidence can take him only a small part of the way and in such cases excessive "stress on measurable physical facts" is more likely to mislead the commander than is the exercise of judgment. The G-2 must admit his inability to give a firm opinion when he simply has no adequate basis for selection of the enemy intention; but where he has a strong enough basis for a preference, he should be honest and courageous enough, while pointing out the other possibilities, to indicate that preference. He is there to aid his commander to the utmost, not to protect G-2's reputation for infallibility.

If the commander is concerned with the most probable enemy reaction to a course he intends to adopt, does he not stand to open his eyes more fully to the range of enemy reactions if he tells his G-2 what that course is (in general terms), or tries out various plans on his G-2 to see how he gauges the enemy's reaction? All this has nothing to do with G-2 encroaching on the commander's prerogative. It is merely a question of the commander's making the most efficient use of his staff.

Another type of confusion appears to come from the use of the terms *gross capability* and *net capability*. These appear to

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be most closely related to *ability* to carry out a given course of action. What is "gross capability" other than "theoretical ability," and "net capability" than "estimated ability," the actual residue when all practical considerations of estimated reducing or opposing factors have been taken into account?

Mr. Smith makes the point (p. 5) that "the policy-makers need, in short, to know about *net* capabilities, not merely about gross or raw capabilities." Indeed commanders, equally, need to know about net capabilities, and increasingly so since in the nuclear age persistence in ignoring nuclear weapons, for example, as a reducing factor will lead intelligence into providing a grotesquely unreal picture of what the enemy can do. I would say the "gross capability" type of estimate has no place in finished intelligence and that it is no more than a working aid to arriving at what all good estimates should be—net estimates.

Although for simplicity of argument the foregoing has used the example of a field commander and his G-2, it seems to me after a number of years of concern both with operational military estimates and the national type of estimate that the principles are much the same with both; the differences are in complexity rather than in kind. I have in mind the complexity of treatment and the process, rather than the end product. Sometimes a national estimate looks deceptively simple (the consequences of error, however, are on a national scale and can be nationally disastrous). But when all the sifting of evidence on the enemy and the operational setting have been done and the various courses of action weighed, the end result, the summation and judgment of a national estimate or a field situation estimate, should be simple and clear. Is not the task of intelligence just that, the use of judgment to bring simplicity and clarity out of the confused, the fragmentary, the unreliable, the sound, and the irrelevant? *And the most probable out of the possible?* How about killing "capabilities" as the be-all and end-all of intelligence? For they are not.

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