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Overcoming obstacles

Analytical Pitfalls and Stumbling Blocks

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Soothsayers used to examine the entrails of animals to predict the future. Today, we intelligence anaylsts rely on far more sophisticated sources to underpin our appraisals of what lies ahead. Nevertheless, we often do not appear to obtain much better results that our more primitive predecessors.

On some occasions our seeming inability to figure out what comes next is caused by the way we approach our work, rather than a failure of intellect or imagination. Moreover, there are times when we actually get it right but somehow are unable to persuade our superiors or the policymakers of the accuracy of our judgments.

The following is a list and disucssion of what I contend are several barriers to good intelligence analysis. Most examples relate to life in CIA's Directorate of Intelligence (DI). I believe that they also are generally applicable to intelligence producers in the community. I present this to alert junior people to potential problems and to remind seniors that there are traps for even the most experienced.

Defensive Analysis

Those analysts who are brave enough to make judgments usually make far more good ones than bad. The best and brightest analysts that I have known have never shirked from making a judgment, and promotions go more often to analytic risk-takers. If one wants to join their ranks, the following pitfalls should be avoided:

- Echoing the opinions of collectors in the field, who usually are not privy to all-source intelligence.
- Being comfortable as part of a consensus. You can have a lot of company in making a wrong judgment.
- Defining prediction so narrowly that you really do not do it at all.
- Setting up a series of distant hypotheses to avoid a short-term prediction. For example, an assessment of how a united Korea would likely deal with the US probably would not be helpful if it did not offer insight on when and how unification would be likely to occur.
- Establishing a straight-line projection in lieu of real analysis.

The Use of History

A look at a nation's or region's history is often the logical starting point for an intelligence officer. For too many, however, it also seems to be the stopping point, particularly in terms of analytical history. The fact that something occurred a certain way 10 or 20 years ago can easily become the basis for a judgment that the same thing is happening today. While such an approach often provides the correct answer, it almost guarantees failure in predicting new developments. In using history, always look for what is new. Are there real parallels, or are today's events being forced into yesterday's mold?

Applying Labels

To simplify presentation, we type individuals and issues. Everyone is put into his or her group—conservatives and liberals, reactionaries and radicals, hardliners and softliners. Too often the reader is expected to understand precisely what the terms mean. If there is a chance that your reader might be mislead, add a short definition.

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Underestimating Situations

For many years we put considerable stock in the permanence of repression. The cant was that "the regime's pervasive and efficient secret police will be able to handle dissent." We also invented the "long-suffering peasant" who would put up forever with a situation that would send Americans to the barricades. Finally, we seemingly closed the loop with the judgment that, in the absence of evidence of large-scale opposition to a system, the people had to have bought what their governments were selling. But from time to time, and especially during the past few years, intelligence analysts have been brought up short when highly controlled regimes rapidly fell apart. What did we miss?

I would argue that the myth we created of the degree of political control and the impact of societal inertia has been a major barrier to our understanding of change and our ability to recognize early the signs of an impending national or regional explosion. Once we conclude that a government is essentially unchallenged, virtually all resources and analytic effort can be focused on military and technological developments, leadership shifts, foreign policy adventures, and economic problems.

If we want to be relevant, bread-and-butter issues have to be at the top of our list. I do believe, however, that we have to pay more attention to understanding societal change.

This process often proceeds at a slow pace. To measure it, we identify and weigh the importance of small breaks with the past and evaluate how such change will affect a government's ability to survive.

Examples abound. The children of the revolution begin to replace their parents. Ideology is ridiculed. People begin to focus on the disparity between the haves and the have nots. Corruption erodes the leader's authority. Economic ineptness and bureaucratic bungling foster anger, resentment and frustration. Foreign wars fuel national rage as casualties mount. Young people reject the values of their own society for those of another. Although we have not ignored such changes, we have not concentrated on developing the analytic tools to the extent that they can help us do a better job in anticipating landmark events.

In looking at societal change, an analyst probably should not dwell too long on the differences between "them and us," to put much stock in "national character." People are likely to have the same needs, goals and desires wherever they live. Even though people adapt to the mores of their particular societies in order to survive, it does not mean that they have to like them. If logic suggests that people should be unhappy, they probably are. And at some point they will be likely to try to change their situation.

Publish or Perish

Intelligence officers use many different vehicles to transmit their messages. Many often appear to consider that the daily current intelligence publications have the most impact because the President, cabinet members, and other senior policymakers read them. Nevertheless, I see two serious problems stemming from the way we produce current intelligence—publishing too fast and too often.

In my view, many analysts and managers believe that the primary goal is to scoop the commercial competition. This approach sometimes means that ideas are vetted prematurely, before full analytical resources can be applied. As electronic dissemination is increasingly used, analysts will almost certainly come under even greater pressure to get a story out.

Some analysts have said that they also have been pushed to publish because they are the recipients of expensive-to-obtain technical intelligence. Using the material in a product supposedly justifies the cost of collecting it, even though it adds little to the body of knowledge.

Getting Locked In

On really "hot" topics, the policymakers invariably will want a continuing flow of information. The lack of new information or insights, however, can lead to the repetition of analysis, with the consequence that a judgment too often stated becomes difficult to change.

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This problem is compounded by a demand for continuity and consistency. Most analysts have been advised from time to time that it is bad form to keep taking their consumers up one hill and then down the next. There is, at least, an implicit command to stick to initial judgments until they are contradicted by strong evidence. From a public relations standpoint, this probably is the right thing to do. But this position would seem to impede the prompt transmittal of reports or messages to policymakers, thereby limiting their available options in dealing with the problems at hand.

At a minimum, analysts should do a periodic zero-based review of their key judgments to ensure that pressures to write are not interfering with their ability to determine the facts of a given situation.

Policy Relevance

In the Agency's early years, managers and analysts seemingly adopted the view that knowledge was sought for knowledge's sake. This led to a debate between those who believed that remaining aloof from policymakers was the only way to keep their analytical purity and those who believed that purity without relevance made no sense. The latter group won the argument.

Analysts and managers are now expected to establish effective contact with policymakers, and we have largely succeeded in plugging into the policy process. As a result of our efforts to march in step with policymakers, however, we appear less inclined to produce premonitory intelligence. This perception is based on a sampling of intelligence publications over time. I have gained the clear impression that most papers that I read now seem to emphasize what is happening and why, or what happened and why. In the interest of policy relevance we appear to be training a generation of intelligence newspersons and historians.

Overcoming Bias

A fair amount of time, energy, and emotion recently has been devoted to the debate on "politicization." There are a few points around the periphery of the discussion that are worth noting.

First, managers in the DI are likely to draw similar conclusions from the same overt sources of information as policymakers. I would further argue that under most circumstances intelligence managers probably are not captives of their consumers; they are likely to share the same view of the world, and they probably would be as skeptical as their clients if someone challenges what they see as reality.

Assuming these thoughts are generally true, an analyst meeting resistance from a supervisor to a change in judgment and seeking a higher probability of getting his or her new or different interpretation into print should initially assume that the manager does not find the new evidence or analysis compelling. If there is good will on the part of the reviewer, the analyst has a reasonable chance at overcoming the former's doubts and reservations. But if the manager's resistance is politically motivated—a far lower probability in my mind—then nothing will move him or her. Consequently, an analyst should envision a situation that will permit success.

Second, we focus on mangers as politicizers, and often forget that analysts can also have agendas other than producing the best unbiased analysis. There have been times in the past when one could question whether a particular line of analysis was aimed at enlightening or directing US policy. Even the way analysts package their judgments can lead to uncertainty about motivation. For example, I recall the plaintive remark of a branch chief: "I want to tell people the truth, but do we have to rub their noses in it?"

As to inadvertent bias in analysis, there are numerous traps. On many occasions we DI military analysts expressed delight that our views placed us dead center between the Defense Department ("on the right") and the State Department ("on the left"). That may have been the best place to be, but in 20-20 hindsight, one wonders how much of our analysis was influenced by our desire not to adopt the positions of our competitors.

While politicization can be a major impediment to providing the best intelligence, do not focus on it to the exclusion of equally important barriers. The key is to understand the nature of the problem.

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Writing to Communicate

One of the rites of passage for most new DI analysts is a briefing on the DI writing style. The ostensible purpose is to prepare people for formatting their products, but the end result frequently is to intimidate the new employee. The following is a composite of some of the briefings I have overheard:

> "Good morning, Mr. Phelps. Your mission, if you choose to accept it, is to learn to write in the DI style. This style is unique in the world; we believe that it came to the original intelligence analyst in a vision after he fasted for 40 days in the desert. We put our judgments up front, use topic sentences, keep all sentences short and to the point, avoid exotic words, and put an implications section at the back of the paper to transmit the full impact of the message. It will probably take you years to learn it, and the odds are that you will never succeed. If you fail, your branch chief will disavow ever knowing you."

I offer an alternative speech:

> "Good morning, Mr. Phelps. I have a mission for you that is far from impossible. I want you to take those skills that you have been using all your life, particularly analyzing and communication, and apply them to your job. We have a different format, but it should not be a problem. Put your judgments up front, and support them with clearly written, informative paragraphs. Some people can write better than others, but virtually all the people we hire should be able to write."

I have watched enough talented people stumble over intelligence writing to wonder whether our attitude towards it erodes their confidence and impedes their development. Why do analysts with advanced degrees and presumably much experience in writing sometimes fall apart when trying to put together a paragraph for an intelligence publication? How many cases of writer's block have we noted?

I suggest that as a test we modify our introduction to the intelligence arts by delivering a simple message at the outset: it is not mystical, it is communications!

Deadly Prose

When it comes to intelligence writing, analysts seem to be getting the message that boring is best, followed closely by dry, and uninteresting. Somehow the notion that we are just one of many sources available to consumers and that if we do not grab their attention we will lose them does not appear to be a prevailing view. The way our product is printed is first rate, our graphics outstanding, and even our formats are quite good. I am concerned that once a consumer starts to read, he or she may be turned off by soporific prose.

Far too often, scholarly equates to indigestible, and our titles could cure insomnia. I believe that many a DI analyst writing about the beginning of World War III could title his or her paper, "Massive Exchange of Thermonuclear Weapons Likely to Cause Severe Economic Disruption and Tax Most Medical Facilities." This is a straightforward, clear, and accurate title—and deadly dull.

I do not advocate using silly or irrelevant writing in our publications, but it seems reasonable to try and use our prose to engage policymakers. If I had to sell my paper, would anyone want to buy it?

Coordination

Most analysts appear to treat coordination with almost the same degree of enthusiasm as a trip to the dentist. One does it because it is required and not out of any expectation that the product might be improved. The implicit goal of the analyst seemingly is to take an article completely through the process without it being touched by other human hands.

Pride of authorship is just one factor in the distaste for coordination. We may also be recreating the norms of academic behavior. Professors and graduate students present their ideas and then defend them to the death. Although everyone is polite, it has never been clear to me whether anyone listens to anyone else—other than junior scholars who sit at the feet of the masters. On occasion, in convocations of academics, I have felt like I was attending a Borgia family reunion.

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Intelligence officers do not exist solely to impress anyone with their scholarship or to prove the fallacy of an opponent's views. Our responsibility is to provide policymakers with the kind of information and insight that will best enable them to do their jobs. If that comes from an individual effort, so be it. But in my mind there should be equal credit for the analyst who recognizes the clarity and relevance of another's ideas and incorporates them in his or her product. Thus, coordination should be an opportunity to gain additional knowledge or to test the validity of one's thoughts, not an exercise in stonewalling or one-upsmanship.

Assuming that being fair-minded and receptive are the starting points for effective coordination, there are a number of ways to improve the chances of getting a good result:

- Be clear in your mind why you have chosen your particular analytical approach. Explore the alternative explanations and also be prepared to depict your situation.

- Treat every suggestion seriously. "That is the stupidest idea I have ever heard" is not a response calculated to improve the coordination process.

- Be prepared to give ground. Ninety percent, or even 75 percent, of something is better than 100 percent of nothing.

- Be willing to change words as an act of good faith. Words often offend when ideas do not. You may be able to keep the same analytical line, if you define it differently.

- Be willing to be persuaded. Every old-timer can point to an occasion when he or she turned a piece 180 degrees on the basis of someone else's more perceptive argument. It does not happen often, but it is not a crime when it does.

- Take seriously the comment, "I do not understand what are you saying." We are in the communications business. If someone who is familiar with a subject is confused, consider the impact on the poor policymaker.

- If you disagree with specific coordination comments, write alternative words before consulting directly with the coordinator. With words in hand, you are in a much better position to influence the course of discussion.

- Be willing to concede several minor points to gain a major one. It is hard to resist, "I gave you what you wanted on these three ideas, can't you move closer on this other one for me?"

Still a Good Show

In presenting these pitfalls and problems, I would be remiss if I did not put them in perspective. I believe that we in the DI and the Intelligence Community as a whole generally have the right to be proud about the work we do and the printed and oral intelligence that we provide. What I have pointed to as needing attention are deviations from a product norm that is of high quality, thoughtful and relevant.

It has been a matter of pride to me, however, that intelligence organizations never rest on their laurels and are constantly be looking for ways to improve. If this were not so, it would have been pointless to write this article.

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