Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know about the People We Don't Know

Malcolm Gladwell. (Little, Brown, 2019), 388 pp.

Reviewed by Dr. Bowman H. Miller, PhD

Having read Gladwell's *The Tipping Point* and teaching conflict analysis at National Intelligence University (NIU), I picked up *Talking to Strangers* in anticipation of another thought-provoking treatise for generalists from this widely acclaimed thinker. Little did I realize that nearly one-third of this volume is devoted to major US counterintelligence and counterterrorism cases.

It begs to be read by a wide array of IC practitioners, including, but not limited to, those in the education enterprise. Gladwell, in my estimation, is onto something that spy masters, counterintelligence professionals, interrogators, and even polygraphers would do well to consider in reflecting on their crafts. Not everyone in the business of intelligence will necessarily agree with all of his findings and they may analyze his chosen cases differently, or at least from a different perspective, but his observations are worthy of our attention.

Gladwell builds his argument on three basic premises. First, as he points out in the cases of Aldrich Ames and Ana Montes among others, we as humans have, as our default position, a basic inclination to believe that people we meet (and even investigate at times) are truthful. As he lays out, in sometimes lurid detail, we would have identified and zeroed in on Ana Montes as much as five years earlier had investigators, colleagues, and coworkers not wanted to believe her until fully convinced she was lying. In the broader Cuban context, Gladwell—relying on sources he names as credible and who are first-hand reporters with IC experience—also claims that virtually all of CIA's Cuban penetrations had been doubled by Cuban intelligence and that Havana was feeding what Fidel Castro wanted the United States to hear and believe. Gladwell insists that we "are so bad at the act of translation" in part because we misread strangers and are over-confident in our ability to take the measure of someone based on a personal encounter; we fall prey to the false assumption that they mean what they say and that their tone and demeanor vouch for that. How often have world leaders, at least in the West, claimed to have "looked into another leader's soul" and found him or her to be genuine. Gladwell goes to some length to illustrate this in the tragic case of Neville Chamberlain and Adolf Hitler, whose belligerent intentions and faked honesty the British prime minister thoroughly misconstrued. In her day, UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was among the first to claim that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was "someone we can deal with." In her case, however, she proved to call it correctly. The 45th US president claims that he can read other leaders' mindsets and intentions from a distance, be they a Vladimir Putin, Kim Jung Un, or Xi Jinping. Of course, Gladwell's finding of our widespread misreading of strangers is not without precedent. Recall, for instance, the seminal work of Richards Heuer in his *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis*, in which he cautions against mirror imaging others as being "just like us."[a]

Gladwell's second key conclusion is that we all too often fail in the area of transparency. How often do we interpret someone's expression or behavior incorrectly? We misread the signals of strangers much of the time, it would seem. In his words, "Transparency is a seemingly commonsense assumption that turns out to be an illusion." (239) That fallacy's impact can range, as he notes, from the Italian police seeing guilt in the eccentric behaviors of Amanda Knox, whom they wrongly charged for the capital murder of her roommate, to campus and other sexual encounters in which implied or explicit consent is in question.

This big issue gave rise to the #MeToo movement across the United States. Those two cases, in the middle of his book, have less to do with IC-specific instances, but their focus belongs in IC discourse nonetheless. How accurate are our human signal receptors when it comes to persons or situations we have not previously encountered?

a. Central Intelligence Agency, Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1999, at https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/psychology-of-intelligence-analysis/index.html.

Is a smile a sign of congeniality, openness, agreement, dismissiveness, implicit rejection, or something else? Even if we speak the other's language, can we read their sincerity, mood, intentions, or deceptions?

In a further surprise to this reviewer, Gladwell then examines the interrogation of Khaled Sheikh Mohammed in "What Happens When the Stranger is a Terrorist?" While he details the interrogation methods and intensity inflicted on KSM, his key point is trying to understand when a subject is totally committed to his chosen cause—come what may. This dichotomy, which many in the IC know first-hand, is what Gladwell terms a conflict between someone totally committed to keeping his secrets and interrogators going to great lengths to pry them out of him. Add to that the critical question of how, then, to analyze the credibility of the statements coming from a sometimes talkative, devious, major terrorist planner, who has been subjected to brutal questioning for weeks on end. Here we should also dust off our copies of Eric Hoffer's *The True Believer* and *The Nature of Mass Movements* (1951). Whether the believer in question is a malevolent like KSM or Usama bin Laden, or the woefully mistreated, heroic POW Senator John McCain, armchair philosopher-analyst Hoffer still offers applicable insights.

Gladwell concludes this thoughtful assessment with what he calls "coupling," i.e., causal factors that account for events and trends. Curiously, he examines suicide rates in England as related to the presence or later absence of gas ovens in British houses. His overall point is that we assume that when people seem intent on killing themselves, they will find alternative methods when their first choice either fails, is unappetizing, or is unworkable. His data in the British case strongly indicate otherwise. Suicide rates were coupled directly to the removal of such "primitive" gas ovens from homes. Indeed, their number were cut in half. So, we can also err in assuming that causal coupling is not a factor in our analyses.

In short, Gladwell has given us a lot to think about in a highly readable, conversational book. Students, educators, and, especially, case officers and IC analysts will do well to pay attention to what he has to say. Above all, this best-seller features some of the most devastating cases of espionage, terrorism, fraud, wrong-headed policing, and mixed messaging that the United States and we all have experienced—most of them in our lifetimes—but viewed from a perspective not informed by his insights.

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