

War and Chance: Assessing Uncertainty in International Politics

Jeffrey A. Friedman (Oxford, 2019), 195pp., appendix of source material, index.

Reviewed by Charles Heard (penname)

In 1964, Sherman Kent complained in print about analysts he peevishly called “poets.”^a Poets believed that communicating uncertain intelligence judgments to US policymakers required the full resources of the English language. Where Kent, who self-identified as a “mathematician,” saw a need for a well-developed lexicon of common terms for uncertainty, tied to numeric probabilities, his poet-opponents saw the need for rhetoric, for suggesting and hinting at possibilities. Kent’s article was itself something of an admission of defeat; by then he had campaigned for 14 years to get CIA to adopt a common lexicon, without success. For the remainder of the 20th century, excepting the odd experiment here or there, the dispute—if it could be called a dispute—over how to think and talk about uncertainty in the intelligence business was resolved in favor of the poets.

In the past 14 years, however, and especially this decade, the poets have had a tougher run of it. Following the establishment of the DNI in 2005, and the promulgation of IC-wide analytic standards beginning in 2007, lexicons have proliferated. Kent in 1964 talked wistfully about colleagues who wanted but could not put a lexicon at the back of every National Intelligence Estimate; now it is rote.^b In 2011, the DNI’s Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity (IARPA) began sponsoring a geopolitical forecasting contest, which it closed after two years because it was clear that people with a common set of characteristics, including training in some basic numeric probability, were winning going away.^c And in 2016, a researcher revealed that Canada’s Intelligence Assessment Secretariat (IAS) had been experimenting with the use of numbers to assess uncertainty, to great effect.^d

Among the leading academic researchers pursuing this question of how best to assess uncertainty in national security affairs is Dartmouth’s Professor Jeffrey Friedman. In *War and Chance: Assessing Uncertainty in International Politics*, Friedman shows he, too, has little patience for the poets of the world. In seven chapters and less than 200 pages, he raises every argument for avoiding numbers to think or talk about uncertainty in international politics—most of which will ring familiar to any analyst—and knocks them down one by one. Friedman’s book is not good-humored and avuncular, in the way Kent’s essay reads half a century later, but every poet in the intelligence business (and there are many) should make time to read and reflect on at least some of what Friedman has to say.

Think subjective probabilities are meaningless? Friedman would like to meet you in Chapter 2, where he, John Maynard Keynes, and General Stanley McChrystal argue (explicitly or by implication) that no policy analyst actually behaves as if this is true. Convinced that policymakers just want analysts to “make the call,” or that numerical probabilities will give customers a false sense of precision in your assessment? Friedman tested these hypotheses at the Naval War College with officers who will go on to be the customers of the future, and his results in Chapter 4 cast new doubt on these old chestnuts. Worried (though you might never say it aloud) that precise numeric estimates make it easier for policy makers to blame advisers for mistakes? Friedman in Chapter 5 argues that the historical record of intelligence failures indicates that a *lack* of serious engagement with uncertainty is as often the source of blame as its specificity.

If I have left practitioner “mathematicians” aside so far, it is not because they escape Friedman’s scrutiny. In the first chapter, he shows that the profusion of probability lexicons in US intelligence elements – a fact that by itself might reasonably be thought of as a victory for

a. Kent, “Words of Estimative Probability,” *Studies in Intelligence*, Fall 1964.

b. For a history of such efforts, see James Marchio, “By The Numbers: “If the Weatherman Can...”: The Intelligence Community’s Struggle to Express Analytic Uncertainty in the 1970s” in *Studies in Intelligence* 58, no. 4 (December 2014).

c. The resulting research was popularized in Philip Tetlock’s book *Superforecasting* (Crown, 2015).

d. Barnes, “Making Intelligence Analysis More Intelligent: Using

Numeric Probabilities,” *Intelligence and National Security* 31:3 (2016), pp. 327-344.

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the pro-numbers crowd – include nonsense charts and encourage analysts to keep their judgments vague. He calls for point precision (meaning, “75 percent probability” not just “70 to 85 percent”) in subjective uncertainty estimates, a position more radical than all but the most enthusiastic proponents of using numbers in this way, and shows by experiment that such point estimates can reflect real differences in assessment.

In support of his claim about the value of such estimates, and to frame his broader consideration of the use of numbers, Friedman at the book’s outset and again in the middle briefly discusses the well-reported exchange with President Obama and a range of advisors wherein the latter provided different numerical estimates about the likelihood that a curious compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, harbored Usama bin Ladin. Friedman chides the president—respectfully, to be sure, but also, it must be said, from the comfort of the pages of a university press—for concluding, based on the range of inputs he received, that the decision about whether to take action against the compound was “fifty-fifty” instead of the two-thirds or so chance those estimates should have represented. And fair enough: policymakers who go to the trouble of eliciting numeric probabilities should be prepared, or have with them people prepared, to make the best use of the results.

But it is at these moments in the book, when Friedman’s reasoning runs up against actual decisionmaking, that practitioners reading him will struggle with *War and Chance*. The volume covers important ground in a longstanding and fundamental argument about how best to execute intelligence analysis. But it does so in a way curiously devoid of foreign policy making’s necessarily competitive and *political* nature. That nature is a stew of world events, competing perceptions of national interest,

existing policies and commitments, bureaucratic infighting, domestic political guardrails, and personal idiosyncrasy. Many if not all of the behaviors Friedman calls “pathologies” of reasoning about uncertainty are explainable as extensions of this idea, that policymaking is aided, but not determined, by rigorous evaluation of uncertainty about world events.

That soft-pedaling of the messy reality of policy making also means the book does not address some other objections that will spring immediately to the practitioner’s mind. Friedman bemoans a pathology he calls “relative probability,” where advisers do not assess the likelihood of a policy’s success overall, but only relative to other options; but policy processes rarely reopen an entire policy framework in this way. More mundanely, policymakers, like all human beings (even intelligence analysts!), remember their own history with advantage, undermining Friedman’s use of some presidential critiques to demonstrate the need for numeric probability.

In short, *War and Chance* is an articulate, closely reasoned, empirically tested challenge to fundamental assumptions, which continue to shape analytic practice in the intelligence community, about how (and how not) to think rigorously and transparently about uncertainty. Its optimism, bordering on naivete, about decisionmaking is easy to pick apart and I suspect will be distracting for many. But the rigor and reasoning behind its challenge remains, and the debate is one that every analyst and analytic manager should regularly reflect on as professionals operating in this space. If such reflection should lead, at a minimum, to analysts at least not instinctively recoiling from numeric estimates, and instead considering how they might focus and sharpen thinking, in this reviewer’s view the volume will have done a valuable service.



The reviewer: Charles Heard is the penname of a CIA Directorate of Analysis officer specializing in counterintelligence.