

History's Role in Intelligence Estimating

APPROVED FOR RELEASE
CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM
22 SEPT 93

CONFIDENTIAL

The estimator must cure the raw findings of the social sciences in the light of history in order to weigh soundly the probabilities for the future.

Cyrus H. Peake

A major responsibility of the intelligence analyst is to make estimates or forecasts of developments in the field or country of his specialty. What can a knowledge of history contribute to the accuracy of his estimates? It is frequently said that history cannot instruct the contemporary generation because it never exactly repeats itself. This negative viewpoint, held even by some professional historians, is of little comfort to the harassed analyst who is required to forecast economic trends and anticipate uprisings, election-results, coup d'etats, and even wars, when all too frequently he has observed that his effort to forecast an economic or political development on the basis of specialized knowledge provided by the methodology of economics, social or political science, or some other particular discipline, has missed wide the mark.

The reason for his disappointments in relying on these sciences, the historian might inform him, is that coming events, like past ones, are brought to occur through the decisions of men, men reacting to a complex milieu of interwoven economic, social, political, psychological and historical forces. There are no simple direct cause-and-effect relationships among these forces which might form the basis for a precise logical calculation of their composite resultant. Therefore the estimator has to be more than a specialist. He needs to have a grasp of

all aspects of a developing situation combined with an understanding of the personalities of the decision-makers involved.

There are two ways to acquire the broad and balanced sensitivity needed by the estimator, one through long residence in the area in question, with close observation and participation in its life and fortunes, and one vicarious, through thoughtful study of its history. The vicarious way is the practical one for most intelligence analysts, and it has the advantage of bringing a perspective which might be distorted in on-the-spot experience. Particularly in reaching this perspective, there is really no substitute for a profound understanding of the past in general, as well as the history of the particular nation or people with which the estimator is concerned. Armed with such an understanding, he will be able to protect himself against a number of fallacies to which the functional specialist falls prey.

Capabilities and Intentions

He will be better able to resist the temptation to project into the future simple cause-and-effect relationships and logical or rational deductions which have not been found valid for human affairs in the past. He will be protected, for example, against the assumption that an "objective" appraisal of a nation's capabilities is the same as that held by the nation's ruling elite, as well as the more fallacious assumption that the rulers' intentions are necessarily formed and limited by their capabilities.

Back in 1950 the opinion was widely held in the Washington intelligence community that the Chinese Communists would not enter the Korean conflict because their logistic capabilities were patently inadequate to win it and because they would want to devote their energies to consolidating politically and economically the hold over China newly acquired through military action. They ignored these inadequate capabilities, however, and came to the aid of their fellow-Communists. By hindsight, it seems clear that, aside from considerations of national security, their objective of political consolidation was served by the psychological erect on the Chinese people of fighting in defense of the "motherland" against "imperialist" America, and meantime the USSR was required to supply them with modern weapons and facilitate their development of modernized armed forces. The limitations on their capabilities need not have entered their calculations, since these

advantages could be gained without driving the UN forces out of Korea, and the limited objective of forcing the invader back from the Yalu involved appropriately limited military requirements.

Similarly bad estimating resulted from too much attention to the capabilities at the disposal of Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese militarists. Their war goals were far more ambitious than those of the Chinese in Korea, and many prominent and responsible individuals in their countries knew they did not have the capabilities to attain them. Yet with the willfulness, wilfulness, or desperation of human rulers, these men made the decision to go to war.

Historically speaking, the intentions or objectives born of men's ambitions, conceits, and hopes have more often influenced their decisions to go to war than an objective appraisal of their capabilities. Intelligence should of course estimate capabilities, but should use such estimates to determine whether courses of action would be successful or how long they could be pursued, not as the sole determinant of decisions on courses of action.

More Than Bread Alone

The estimator with historical perspective will be on guard against the error of extending a narrow unilinear analysis of a current situation into a general forecast, of automatically extending, for example, the analysis of an economic situation to cover the political and psychological future, on the mistaken assumption that economic laws determine the course of human affairs. Karl Marx, the most successful of the economic determinists in getting his theories tested in practice, has been strikingly unsuccessful in getting them confirmed by history. He theorized that Communism would come inevitably to those advanced industrial societies where capitalism was most developed; but approaches to Communism have taken best hold in the least capitalistic and industrialized societies, Russia and China, and have been most successfully resisted in advanced industrial societies, both East and West. And the nineteenth-century Communist prophecy that the rich would become richer and the poor become poorer in capitalistic economies has in the twentieth century proved patently false.

Human motivation is no more exclusively based on economic factors

than on Freudian principles. Even economic courses of action do not necessarily derive from economic motivation, as witness those of the materialistic Marxist states themselves, where "commercial considerations alone are seldom the moving spirit of [foreign economic] policies."¹ And elsewhere history has repeatedly shown that man is capable of denying himself immediate economic advantages in order to maintain dignity and self-respect or to acquire independence. In short, while everyone may have his price, his price or what he prizes is not always primarily economic.

How is one fully to explain the historical lag in the economic and technical development of areas such as pre-bolshevik Russia, pre-Communist China, and Latin America, all relatively rich in natural resources, as compared with the rise of modern industry in Japan or England, without a study of historically developed political and social factors? Economic factors alone cannot explain it.

The Elephant's Tail

The reading of history will keep the intelligence analyst aware that the interpretation of a development in isolation from the matrix of forces from which it arose can be used as the basis for only the most limited and strictly qualified estimate. Every development or issue or crisis has to be viewed and appraised in broad context; it cannot be "scientifically" separated out for sterile test-tube analysis.

The 1956 intelligence failure, for example, to gauge Nasser's reaction to the withdrawal of Western financial support for his Aswan dam project apparently arose from estimative concentration on domestic Egyptian reaction to the US-UK decision, with a view to Nasser's prospects for staying in power. The State Department analysts who were asked to consider this limited range of consequences² apparently did not feel obliged to take into account the international aspects of the situation and the motivations of world position and prestige which led Nasser to his dramatic seizure of the Suez Canal in answer to this Western "humiliation." The partial estimate that Nasser would be able to retain power, correct as it was, proved confusing and embarrassing in the light of subsequent events, if not definitely misleading. The analyst as estimator should not voluntarily view developments in isolation from their total setting, and should always relate his findings to the whole

configurative environment historically considered.

World Views and the Man

A detailed knowledge of history will bring home to the analyst the need to place decision-makers at the focal center of his thinking, rather than abstract concepts of the laws governing human affairs. The economic determinism of Karl Marx and his intellectual descendants, the Providential guidance pictured by Bossuet and others, the random chance of chroniclers and some contemporary historians, the inevitable progress of Turgot, Condorcet and Comte, the cyclic rise and fall of nations, dynasties, and civilizations conceived by Vico and others, the organic society of Spengler's biological analogy, even Toynbee's excessively abstract challenge and response, inner and outer proletariat, etc.-all these philosophies, whatever their validity or appeal, throw into the future a light too dim and uncertain to guide the estimator.

The estimator does, however, need to be aware of these grandiose general concepts of the past, because one or more of them may frame the historical thinking of the decisionmakers in his area; and a man's views of the past, whatever they are, are important in determining his decisions for the future. For man, endowed with memory and imagination, is capable of living simultaneously in the past, the present and the future. And his views of the past, which condition his actions in the present, he tends in turn more or less consciously to shape in such a manner as to justify his hopes for the future.

An estimator who does not consider with attention the personality attributes and characteristics of the decision-makers in his area and their views of the past has greatly reduced his chances of making a valid estimate. But biographic research needs to be an intimate and closely related part of economic, social, and political research, since an individual cannot be properly appraised apart from his time and milieu any more than the events which arise from his decisions and actions can be evaluated apart from the time and situation out of which they emerged.

Specific Parallels and Broad Trends

A grasp of the comparative history of civilizations, social and economic orders, empires, states, and societies will create in the analyst an imaginative awareness of the constancy of change. He will learn to look for trends in the society or state or institution he is studying, and for indicators of the direction in which it is moving. Is the trend one of flexible growth, enabling the organization or state to overcome the forces opposing it, or is it approaching the rigidity characteristic of economic, social, political or religious monopolies which suppress all competition and become inflexible in the face of changing circumstances? An awareness of trends and indicators of growth or senescence will help the analyst estimate not only the decisions which will be made, but the vigor of courses of action and the significance of events consequent upon these decisions. In other words, he will also be in a better position to assess decision-makers' capabilities to carry out their intentions.

Here we should return in conclusion to the statement that history never repeats itself and examine more carefully the validity of historical parallels. It would of course be absurd to suppose that any complex historical development is likely to be repeated in every exact detail; but it would be equally absurd to maintain because of this that developments separated in time and space are wholly dissimilar in their consequences and therefore cannot show parallel characteristic trends. One danger in using historical parallels lies in the tendency to jump to the conclusion that the end result or consummating event capping two similar developments will be logically the same. Another is the even more deplorable practice under which an interpreter of current developments, having made up his mind by other processes, searches the past for a roughly similar development to prove his point. This is a very easy and tempting thing to do: history is so rich a storehouse of strikingly parallel developments that it does not take long to find one to suit such a purpose.

If the analyst has a real grasp of history, however, he will be on guard against this easy temptation and will be able to utilize roughly similar developments of the past to stimulate reflection on the relative probabilities of a number of possible alternatives. He will be on the lookout not only for the striking parallels, but also for wherein the complex of factors and personalities entering into a current development differ from those composing the historical ones. With the aid of this process of detailed objective comparison and evaluation of historical events he will arrive at his estimate of the most probable outcome of a current development. In other words, a knowledge of history aids the

estimator to employ as "scientific" a method as it is possible to devise for prognostication in the realm of human affairs. The social sciences provide the methodology, but history offers the only laboratory—unfortunately lacking the exact measurements and controls at the disposal of the physical scientist—in which to test the theories and findings of the social scientist. The intelligence estimator, in utilizing the findings of the social and political scientist, needs to superimpose on them his own imagination, insight, and understanding in order to arrive at useful and valid estimates; and this insight he will have slowly gained through study of the past.

1 Stanley J. Zyzniewski, "Soviet Foreign Economic Policy," *Political Science Quarterly*, June 1958).

2 The question was not introduced at the National Estimates level Editor.

CONFIDENTIAL

Posted: May 08, 2007 07:18 AM