

Making Better Communicators

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Presentation Notes

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Good morning. I've been studying the same thing--national security intelligence—for 15 years now, if you include the 4 years I spent working at CIA actually doing intelligence analysis. And about five years ago I started to transition from a student to an expert. I spoke at a conference last month in Sweden where they subtitled the conference after one of my papers, and asked me to introduce the subject to Europe. But that audience was made up almost entirely of intelligence practitioners; the conference was organized by the Swedish national criminal intelligence service and the attendees worked for various European law enforcement and national security intelligence agencies.

This conference is a little different in that I don't have a military background, and haven't worked on Strategic Communications. But it is possible for me to talk about what I know--and at the same time provide a perspective on Strategic Communications that might add something to the discussion. One of the objectives of national security intelligence is to learn about the adversary—or potential adversaries--and relay those understandings to decisionmakers.

That's because you can't effectively shape the behaviors of another without knowing what is important to them. Whether that is safety or security, wealth or power, influence or reputation, you can't get them to do something different—or to believe something different--unless you know what strings to pull. And this kind of understanding is an important aspect of any Strategic Communications effort as well.

You have to know a lot about the foreign audiences that matter to craft a message that they will actually receive as intended. That's because people act based on perceptions rather than reality, and shaping perceptions requires getting inside their world and seeing life from their perspective. Focusing on what you need to know to shape perceptions effectively should form the core of any discussion of how to do Strategic Communications, who should do Strategic Communications, and what they need to know.

In terms of the war on terror, I have an anecdote from my time at CIA. In 1996 and 1997, I was responsible for an account that covered the Arabian Peninsula. So years before 9/11 I had the opportunity to think about Islamic discontent, the nature of terrorism, and how the US might be able to effectively address the threat.

At the time there was rising discontent in the Islamic world—including among the radical fringe--and I took a stab at explaining “why.” As I put it at the time, “What is happening in much of the Middle East today is the same resistance to change that every culture has had when it began its path towards modernization. ...The one difference is that, unlike what happened here in America, the traditionalists have an outside force they can blame for their problems....the United States. ...To understand why they oppose the United States it is necessary to realize that they are doing their best to protect their way of life and their values. Only the radicalized fringe will reach for guns and bombs, but much larger groups resent both the political and cultural impact that the United States has on their countries and their peoples.”

At the time—1997—I believed growing numbers of people in the Middle East—specifically Islamic, and even more specifically, Arabic--viewed our policies as threatening to their way of life. I'm not saying that this explanation is complete, or even correct. But this kind of assessment is necessary in order to craft a policy—or message—that might shape the opinions of the audiences that matter to us.

If my assessment of the cause of Islamic discontent is correct, one way to reduce the terrorist threat would be to convince the bulk of the Islamic peoples that we are not a threat to their way of life.

Part of that convincing can be done through strategic policymaking, and another part of that convincing through tailored Strategic Communications. The point I'm trying to make is that you don't know what kind of policy to make or what kind of communication to send unless you understand the adversary. And to do that you have to ask a lot of questions that begin with "why?"

So how can we improve our understandings of the adversary? Or the potential adversary?

Over the past couple of years I have written a series of articles arguing that intelligence analysts should derive ideas for reform from medical best practices--because the processes used in intelligence analysis and medical diagnosis are very, very similar. But in the end I concluded that these medical ideas could be used to improve national security assessment more broadly—particularly the kind of assessments done by decisionmakers and their staffs—because just like doctors, decisionmakers act based on the information they acquire and their "diagnosis" of the situation. So what I'm saying is that even though I may talk about intelligence analysts, the points apply to decisionmakers—and strategic communicators--as well.

To understand the adversary, the other, requires a mix of art and science; structured knowledge combined with some intuitive ability to understand what is going on, and in the case of decisionmakers, what to do about it. The science part can be taught through education consisting of international relations, political science, area studies, history, foreign languages, and so forth.

This base of knowledge provides the raw materials that the artist then has to work with. You can teach the science to varying degrees—for example, specialists would have more of a knowledgebase than generalists--but you can't really teach the art. It's a skill set that each practitioner develops on their own through experience, and some are better at it than others.

So—to answer the question I posed earlier--improving our ability to understand the adversary will require improving both the art and science of national security assessment.

But improving the 'science' by creating a body of knowledge about the world in general can be hard to do in international relations. In my paper I put this under the category of 'epistemology'—or thinking about how you know what you know. Unlike much of the

natural sciences, international relations is not a hands on learning process. We can't do experiments. Instead, we have to approach the behavior of countries and terrorist groups the way social scientists do....to look for patterns in behavior that we can link to broader explanations for why they are behaving in that fashion.

But--compared to other social sciences--international relations has a small base of knowledge, mostly due to the relatively small number of cases we have to learn from. As a result, the theoretical base that intelligence analysts and decisionmakers use is very uncertain due to problems establishing causal hypotheses regarding human behavior.

For the most part existing knowledge about causation in international relations is very general and lacks the precision necessary to explain or forecast the kinds of specific events that we are interested in. For example, in the four years I was at CIA not once did anyone refer to the main schools of international relations theory—realism, neorealism, liberalism, or constructivism—during the analytic process. In fact, almost nothing about international relations theory that I learned for the comprehensive exam would be useful to a practitioner.

Yale University historian John Lewis Gaddis argues that social science methodology is overly reductionist; that it fails to capture the complexity of the real world. In addition, Gaddis argues that the artificial cause and effect distinction between variables that are inherently interdependent leads international relations to operate at “roughly the level of freshman physics experiments [and] that’s why the forecasts they make only occasionally correspond with the reality we subsequently encounter.”¹

Or—to paraphrase Columbia University Professor Robert Jervis--“the impediments to understanding our world are so great that ...(we) will often reach incorrect conclusions (because)...the world is not very predictable.”²

In other words, even though intelligence analysts and decisionmakers may be very educated and knowledgeable about the adversary, there is no way to know for sure why an adversary acts the way they do, or what kind of policy might lead to the preferred outcome. So in the end, much of national security assessment falls into the category of educated guesswork.

Yet it is possible to make the science of national security analysis more accurate over time. The key is in building good models from good data. More specific models built from intelligence data--rather than the general data that academics have to work with--might enable analysts to assess and predict events with greater precision and accuracy.

¹ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 57.

² Robert Jervis. “Improving the Intelligence Process: Informal Norms and Incentives.” *Intelligence: Policy and Process*. Eds. Alfred C. Maurer, Marion D. Tunstall and James M. Keagle. Westview Press. Boulder and London. 1985. 113.

But no one in the intelligence community does this. So to fill this gap I have recommended that intelligence agencies establish a unit of social scientists within the intelligence community devoted to production of useful theory and hypotheses.³

This would provide intelligence analysts—and decisionmakers—with an improved base of knowledge for finding meaning in the raw intelligence. In time, this improved ‘science’ might lead to more accurate assessments of foreign actors which decisionmakers can then use as they craft their policies or communications.

Of course, this might take a while—I’m thinking decades—and wouldn’t provide the kind of certainty that exists, for example, in much of medical diagnosis. But I think it would improve our understanding of the kinds of things we care about—the conditions under which ideologies are born and spread; or the causes of political instability, social change or even revolution.

Another way to increase the science of national security assessment would be to evaluate analytic methods against each other to determine their relative accuracy and reliability in different situations. There are many, many different analytic methods to choose from, but these analytic methods have not been rigorously tested.

So intelligence analysts don’t know if any particular method is better than any other. And in many cases they avoid the issue altogether. At CIA—and in the military, too—the dominant mode of analysis is unstructured intuition based on expertise rather than more rigorous methodology.

In 1999, Robert Folker—a military intelligence analyst—conducted an experiment in which he showed that using one particular analytic method—structured hypothesis testing—produced better analysis than intuition.⁴ Additional research in this area—the testing and evaluation of analytic methods—is greatly needed.

Steven Rieber—a scholar at CIA’s Kent Center—recently co-authored an article that recommended the intelligence community create a National Institute for Analytic Methods—modeled on the National Institutes of Health—to sponsor research on the effectiveness of analytic tools and techniques.⁵ In this way it will be possible to gain knowledge—scientifically—about the effectiveness of different approaches, rather than rely primarily on anecdotal evidence as is currently the case.

³ Stephen Marrin and Jonathan Clemente. “Improving Intelligence Analysis by Looking to the Medical Profession.” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*. V.18.N.4. (2005) 707–729.

⁴ Robert D. Folker, Jr. *Exploiting Structured Methodologies to Improve Qualitative Intelligence Analysis*. Masters Thesis. Joint Military Intelligence College. July 1999. 2.

⁵ Steven Rieber and Neil Thomason. *Creation of a National Institute for Analytic Methods*. *Studies in Intelligence*. Vol. 49. No. 4. (2005). 71-77.

As we develop useful science for finding the best way to understand and forecast the actions of an adversary, this can form the foundation of increased professionalism in the field.

But it is also possible to improve the craft of national security decisionmaking through a focus on the art rather than the science.

For both intelligence analysts and decisionmakers, I think its very important to understand your adversary or your target; understand who he is, what he wants, and what he'll do to get it. And this includes both intellectual understanding through substantive knowledge such as an education in area studies, language training, and—if possible—time spent in his environment and culture. But I also think it involves understanding the feelings of the adversary; his cultural context, religious beliefs, personal motivations and idiosyncrasies. In other words, for deep understanding, intellectual analysis should also be supplemented by empathy.

According to Ralph White—a former professor of psychology at George Washington University—“empathy means understanding others from the inside looking out, not merely from the outside looking in...To imagine what the world would look like through their eyes, as they watch what we do, and through their ears, as they listen to what we say.... Empathy means ‘being’ our actual or potential enemy.”⁶ In this way “empathy permits intelligence analysts to make assessments and estimates that will enable consumers to understand more precisely the target nation's policy-makers, to influence them more effectively, and to predict their behavior more reliably. Such knowledge will also enable consumers to pin-point the target's most likely areas of compromise, concession, and tradeoff.”

On a tactical level, that may mean using that knowledge to target the enemy, or create an effective counterinsurgency operation that uses both incentives and disincentives--to prevent those who may be sympathetic with the aims of our adversaries--from supporting or joining them. On a strategic level, that may mean using that knowledge to adjust US policies--or modifying the message that accompanies those policies--so as to lead to a better outcome for the US.

At a conference in 2000, Harvard University historian Ernest May suggested that the CIA assess the utility of analytic empathy. Doing so might provide a way to improve the art of national security assessment.

Another way to improve the art of national security assessment might be to look for ideas from the study of history to improve imagination. The 9/11 Commission Report criticized intelligence agencies for their lack of imagination. But the report provides no specific suggestions for improving imagination. However, ideas for improving imagination can be taken from John Lewis Gaddis' description of history as an “imaginative social science.”

⁶ Ralph K. White, “Empathy as an Intelligence Tool,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 58-59.

He describes history as similar to astronomy and paleontology because those scientific disciplines require imagination to piece together the fragmentary evidence available into a coherent narrative. One of the important skill sets of a historian is to be able to imagine the past, and create a convincing scenario that makes it real to those of us in the present. As a result, history is not “truth” but rather a historian’s ‘interpretation’ of what may have happened, relying on the historian’s imagination to bring it alive.

And the same thing exists in the national security world. Since most national security assessments are educated guesswork, sometimes it takes a good imagination to fit the pieces together into a story—or scenario--that makes sense. And it takes skill—the art of assessment—for that story to be more accurate than not. Modeling the methodologies that historians use to develop this skill set—that of the imaginative social scientist—may provide a way to improve the art of national security assessment as well.

My final point has to do with using the concepts of art and science to distinguish between the needs of a craft and a profession. If you think about it, a craftsman is really an artist whose skill is developed through training and experience, while a professional is someone who has been educated in the ‘science’ of his or her field, and then uses that knowledge in an applied way.

Crafts rely primarily on the skill of the individual practitioner--which does not change very much from generation to generation--while professions build on the knowledge of past practitioners and relay it to new professionals through their educational process.

Of course, many occupations have a mix of the art and the science. A good example is medicine, where a medical doctor spends a substantial amount of time in school to learn some of the knowledge that has been accumulated thus far on medical science—how to diagnose and treat the various diseases and problems that affect human health.

But the medical field also focuses on teaching skills development through an apprenticeship program and on-the-job training. Similarly, intelligence analysis—and most other kinds of national security assessment and decisionmaking--requires both academic knowledge and practical skills developed through on the job experience. But intelligence analysis has, for the most part, been practiced more as a craft than a profession.

For intelligence analysts, there has been no equivalent to Samuel Huntington’s “The Soldier and the State” which lays out the criteria for military professionalism. As a result, professional practices are still pretty rudimentary. But a profession has to start somewhere. Medicine wasn’t always a profession. 150 years ago it was actually a craft very much like intelligence analysis is today.

As my co-author--Dr. Jonathan Clemente—has pointed out, the mechanism that pushed medicine from mostly a craft to mostly a profession was the American Medical Association through its effort from about 1850 to about 1910. So we’ve argued that the

most effective way to professionalize intelligence analysis is through an association modeled on the AMA.⁷

This would include the adoption of centralized knowledge accumulation efforts and formal personnel practices such as: a structured selection process built around analytic competencies; training, education and development programs; performance standards; and a code of ethics. In addition, the creation of a centralized focal point for knowledge regarding best practices would enable intelligence analysis as an occupation to learn--and improve over time--in a way that it is currently unable to.

But even if my preferred mechanism for professionalization is not adopted, there is a growing consensus that some kind of improved professionalization process is necessary. Some of the pieces of this process are being put together at the DNI level already, primarily through the National Intelligence University.

But what I'm describing is the professionalization of intelligence, which may not be directly relevant to your work today.

The broader point—applicable to any organization that possesses strategic communicators—has to do with the extent to which you want to create formal personnel practices to shape the knowledge, skills and abilities of your practitioners. The key issue is to develop the kind of infrastructure appropriate to the tasks you are trying to achieve.

In the end, the one basic message I have is that in this Global War on Terror--or Global Struggle Against Violent Extremism--or the long war—or any particular effort involving shaping the perceptions of others--I think it will be important to improve both the art and science of national security assessment so as to understand our adversary better than we have been able to do thus far. Hopefully this will result in both better decisionmaking overall and an improved ability to communicate strategically.

⁷ Stephen Marrin and Jonathan Clemente. Modeling an Intelligence Analysis Profession on Medicine. *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*. Forthcoming 2006.