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Perspectives

Intelligence Failures: As Old As Humanity Itself



US intelligence failures are rapidly becoming the center point of the presidential election debate. How could 9/11 have been allowed to happen? And how could the intelligence establishment have told the Bush White House that Saddam had significant stores of weapons of mass destruction?

The more tedious part of the debate is that of Democrats accusing the administration of forcing the CIA to come up with an answer justifying invasion and Republicans insisting that Saddam's WMD arsenal will still be found. The Democrats' accusation is silly because bi-partisan Congressional committees had the opportunity to accept or question supplied intelligence; they chose to accept, with the result that both parties supported the Iraq War. The Republican response is equally infantile. The fact is that no one in the US administration can know whether Saddam destroyed his weapons or hid them.

What's less mind-numbing than partisan politics is the consideration of why intelligence failures occur again and again, not only in global politics but in all human endeavors. It certainly isn't that we lack information; we're actually drowning in it. Post-9/11 congressional inquiries have revealed that out of all military intelligence gathered by the United States, less than 1% is ever looked at. Obviously, the capability to balance intelligence gathering and intelligence analysis is clearly not there.

Asking the Right Questions

But there's another, much larger problem. Human nature demands that we always have an answer. Have you noticed how many people have fervent opinions on complicated issues like the United Nations' approach to peacekeeping in Afghanistan or what the Fed should do with interest rates? It's pitiful—everyone who's listened to a pundit or read a newspaper article feels competent to voice an opinion. And the more inundated we are with information, the stronger the urge to form judgments.

In politics, the need to come up with “answers” becomes more compelling. The media trumpet their own viewpoints on what’s going on and what action should be taken, but the fact is that the media are precariously ill informed and, in most cases, have deep partisan sympathies. Who doesn’t know that the New York Times and CNN lean to the left, while the Wall Street Journal and Fox veer to the right? Yet, despite their biased viewpoints, they manage to influence the government to a significant extent, while also supplying pre-conceived viewpoints to their audience.

There isn’t much that can or will be done about that—after all, it’s one of the side-effects of democracy. But, despite that, it’s vital to understand that all this is going on. “Man’s dilemma, now and always, has been that he misidentifies his own intellectual artifacts as reality,” says psychiatrist David Hawkins, the author of *Power vs. Force: The Hidden Determinants of Human Behavior* (Hay House Publishing, 1995). In other words, we need to ask the right questions in order to get answers that are useful. Professor Hawkins also has this to add: “Understanding doesn’t proceed simply from examining data; it comes from examining data in a particular context.”

Context is Everything

Context, unfortunately, is far easier to understand and manage when it comes to a pig-headed and therefore highly predictable figure like Fidel Castro than when dealing with the wiles of Osama Bin Laden, Saddam Hussein or Kim Jong-il. To maintain context becomes even more difficult when the very intelligence service which is to supply data on Osama’s or Saddam’s wrongdoings happens to be the same group that put these ogres into power and later estranged themselves from their regimes. Anyone who’s read a John Le Carré novel knows what I mean.

And that brings me to a final insight David Hawkins presents in his book. He says that society becomes most unsuccessful and dangerous when it “expends its efforts to correct effects instead of causes.” And that is indeed what world powers spend most of their time on: correcting effects. Saddam and Osama were effective results of US foreign policy, just as their predecessors in South and Central Asia a century or two ago were the effective creations of Britain and Russia.

And like Russia and England during the days of the “Great Game”, the US is responding to effects of its own actions by using faulty intelligence. This is more than a case of an administration having bungled. It’s a case of systemic incompetence that transcends not only all US administrations, but all government. □

Publisher: Cavelti & Associates Ltd., Toronto, Canada.

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