

SECRET

6 April 1971

MEMORANDUM: Reflections on Premonitory Intelligence

1. The current intelligence analyst, caught in a relentless flood of paper and events, often finds it difficult to reserve the time and energy required for one of the primary missions of intelligence--warning and anticipation. OCI over the years has refined the techniques and methods of current reporting to a high degree of professionalism. It might be useful, however, to take an occasional look at the special problems posed by premonitory intelligence--a function that tends to fall between the routine missions of estimative and current intelligence and one that has been neglected in recent years by the intelligence community generally, perhaps in part because of the growing diffusion of functions and specialization and because of the preoccupation with military hardware and strategy.

2. There are two aspects of the problem of premonitory intelligence that might be characterized as the "nature of the beast" and the "human factor." The following quotations from observers who have pondered this problem may help to illuminate these features:

Nature of the Beast

It is much easier after the event to sort the relevant from the irrelevant signals. After the event, of course, a signal is always crystal clear. But before the event it is obscure and pregnant with conflicting meanings. It comes to the observer embedded in an atmosphere of 'noise,' i.e., in the company of all sorts of information that is useless and irrelevant for predicting the particular disaster. We failed to anticipate Pearl Harbor not for want of the relevant materials, but because of a plethora of irrelevant ones....There is a difference between having a signal available somewhere in the heap of irrelevancies, and perceiving it as a warning.

Roberta Wohlstetter Pearl Harbor--
Warning and Decision

The historian can never quite forbear to make retrospective prophecies, because he knows the end. But let us humbly remember, when we look at the past, that as far as the future goes the historian can foresee little and that his occasional predictions usually fail to come true."

--Golo Mann

Politicians act from one day to the next, from one year to the next; their improvisations are what historians later mistake for a grand design.

--A. J. P. Taylor

Foreign policy is largely irrational and comes up against elements that are also irrational. If it were rational, if there were not always behind it the urge to gamble, determination to have power, and deadly fear, it might be possible to find a compromise.

-- Golo Mann

The Human Factor

What these examples illustrate is the very human tendency to pay attention to the signals that support current expectations about enemy behavior. If no one is listening for signals of an attack against a highly improbable target, then it is very difficult for the signals to be heard. For every signal that came into the information net in 1941, there were usually several plausible alternative explanations, and it is not surprising that our observers and analysts were inclined to select the explanations that fitted the popular hypotheses. Apparently human beings have a stubborn attachment to old beliefs and an equally stubborn resistance to new material that will upset them.

There is a good deal of evidence, some of it quantitative, that in conditions of great uncertainty people tend to predict that events that they want to happen actually will happen. Wishfulness in conditions of uncertainty is natural and is hard to banish by exhortation-- or by wishing. Further, the uncertainty of strategic warning is intrinsic, since an enemy decision to attack might be reversed or the direction of the attack changed.

-- Roberta Wohlstetter

There is a tendency in our planning to confuse the unfamiliar with the improbable. The contingency we have not considered seriously looks strange; what looks strange is thought improbable; what is improbable need not be considered seriously.

Surprise, when it happens to a government, is likely to be a complicated, diffuse, bureaucratic thing. It includes neglect of responsibility, but also responsibility so poorly defined or so ambiguously delegated that action gets lost. It includes the alarm that fails to work, but also the alarm that has gone off so often it has been disconnected. It includes the unalert watchman, but also the

one who knows he'll be chewed out by his superior if he gets higher authority out of bed. It includes the inability of individual human beings to rise to the occasion until they are sure it is the occasion--which is usually too late.

Whether at Pearl Harbor or at the Berlin Wall, surprise is everything in a government's failure to anticipate effectively. The danger is not that we shall read the signals and indicators with too little skill; the danger is in a poverty of expectations--a routine obsession with a few dangers that may be familiar rather than likely. The planner should think in subtler and more variegated terms and allow for a wider range of contingencies.

-- Thomas C. Schelling

In the preparation of estimates with regard to Soviet policy, their actions and reactions, it is always well to have among the estimators one or two persons who are designated to play the roles of the devil's advocate, who can advance all the reasons why a Khrushchev could take an unusual, dramatic or, as viewed from our own vantage point, even an unwise and unremunerative course of action. Of course, one would reach rather ridiculous conclusions, and certainly wrong conclusions in most cases, if one always came up with an estimate that the abnormal is what the Soviet Union will probably do. It is well, however, that the policy makers should be reminded from time to time that such abnormalities in Soviet action are not to be excluded.

-- Allen Dulles The Craft of Intelligence

3. In the field of political intelligence, the primary task of premonitory intelligence is to identify and interpret those turning points, decisions and indications of imminent shifts in policy and intentions that may signal developments of direct interest and concern to the US. A substantial part of the premonitory mission can be performed satisfactorily through routine reporting and comment based directly on field reports and all-source coverage. Almost any current intelligence article can be said to be "premonitory" in the sense that it identifies problems, issues, vulnerabilities, assets, initiatives and plans or prospects for future action that carry a warning/anticipation dimension. This memorandum, of course, is addressed to the relatively small number of high priority questions

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on which "hard" information or "documentary" evidence is rarely, if ever, available. To confine political intelligence on these questions to the base of available documentary evidence would be to condemn intelligence to failure to provide some warning of almost every significant shift in the policies and intentions of major intelligence targets. Any strengthening of our capacities to provide warning intelligence in these areas must rest primarily on the analyst's personal skills and on methodologies that will enable him to extend his analytical reach and insights beyond the limits set by documentary evidence.

4. Part of the problem in improving performance of the warning mission is to find ways to deal with a "poverty of expectations" and an almost instinctive inertia that lead analysts to reject or downgrade the likelihood of change or departures from the well-established and the familiar. (This memorandum will not deal with another major part of the problem--organizational arrangements and coordination procedures that inject an additional element of inertia, inhibit alert and imaginative analysis, and hold interpretation within the limits of prevailing "popular hypotheses.")

5. The Office has experimented over the years with a variety of procedures to help guard against ex post facto charges of having been surprised by an important turn of events. The blanket approach of attempting to draw up lists of evil events that could occur all over the globe did not prove particularly useful. The "indications of political instability" experiment was a more promising venture in some ways but it had the disadvantage of focusing on a range of contingencies that was too narrow and too vaguely defined. A more useful approach--and one addressed to questions of greatest concern to our consumers--would concentrate

primarily on policy analysis.

6. The core of this approach would be a systematic examination of policy options available to the target government. The first step would be to define the problem in a way that reduces it to essentials; this would include a brief summary of the background and development of the problem. The second step would identify issues, both foreign and domestic, that must be considered if a government's policy and intentions are to be understood. A key element of this step would be an examination of the relationship of the government's foreign interests and options to its domestic political/economic situation and exigencies. The third step would articulate alternative courses of action and judge their relative advantages and disadvantages. The final step would rank the options in order of probability, indicate the likely preferred solution, and identify the main imponderables and elements of greatest uncertainty that might lead to a rapid or major reordering of probabilities.

7. Many analysts go through a sorting out and weighing process along these lines as a routine part of their work. Others are more reluctant to "stretch their minds"; they tend to allow their conception of a problem to be shaped primarily by the information and judgments gleaned from the flow of paper. The main value of a systematic, orderly procedure outlined above is that it would oblige the analyst to confront questions, possibilities and contingencies he might otherwise ignore if his attention were riveted exclusively on his in-box. This approach would help to stimulate a disciplined search for alternatives to the prevailing "conventional wisdom" and sharpen the analyst's capacity to ask important questions. It would act as a safeguard against the hazards of intellectual inertia that gives

rise to a "poverty of expectations." It would help the analyst in the essential task of placing himself "in the shoes" of the target regime and of trying to see problems, dilemmas and options through their eyes.

8. The systematic analysis of options proposed here should be applied to all major intelligence questions and targets--to both foreign and domestic policies. As a general rule, an options paper should be set in motion at an early stage of a newly emerging problem (for example, the ouster or death of a major political leader, the East-West Pakistan crisis) or when the stakes and issues in a long-standing problem seem to be altered by an initiative by one of the parties or by changes in the internal state of affairs of the countries concerned (for example, the Arab-Israeli contest, North Vietnamese political/military policy, West Germany's Ostpolitik and the Berlin talks).

9. Since the principal purpose of the options approach is to stimulate a constant and systematic search for new and "relevant" signals, and since the capacity to play the devil's advocate role with regard to one's own work tends to be rare in any organization (particularly one that operates under the kind of pressures inherent in OCI's mission), the options study system should take place at several levels. OCI's existing structure and procedures contain a variety of safeguards in the review process. But this process should be supplemented and balanced by an "options monitor" who is detached both organizationally and "intellectually" from the normal OCI production and review chain. His function would be to pose questions and formulate alternative interpretations from the vantage point of an "outsider" who is free of the pressures of daily production and therefore in a better position to resist the tendency to "select the explanations that fit the popular hypotheses." In a word, the "options monitor" would

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play the role of the devil's advocate prescribed by Mr. Dulles. Senior officers in OCI should be encouraged to contribute their own insights, suggestions and hunches to this multi-layered process--on any subject on the current agenda.

10. One way to stimulate such thinking and contributions would be to circulate brief options papers prepared by the branches to all division chiefs and deputies and staff officers. The monitor should be charged with canvassing the views of specialists in other DDI offices and ONE. Finally, the options monitor should be responsible for conducting postmortem examinations of intelligence production on a periodic basis on a limited number of priority questions, as well as special post mortems on "crisis" episodes. These postmortems would have the sole purpose of refining and developing the options study system through retrospective evaluations of OCI's record and performance in the premonitory mission.

11. A substantial portion of the options papers probably could be transformed into intelligence memoranda. Some of these would qualify for formal publication as memoranda or PDB items. Others could be circulated within the Agency or passed up the line to our masters as informal briefing papers. These premonitory memoranda would provide a device for breaking free of the limitations imposed by the USIB coordination process on the relatively few and infrequent occasions when OCI sees an obligation or opportunity to issue a warning item that probably could not be coordinated for CIB publication. These papers would be useful in calling attention again to those difficult and ambiguous areas of political intelligence where there will never be reliable "hard" information on the policies and intentions of major US intelligence targets--and in serving as reminders that alert

and experienced analysts can, on occasion, fill crucial warning intelligence gaps with their insights and informed projections.