Horrible Thought

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The headshrinkers' literature is full of remarks about the efforts of mankind to avoid thinking. As a matter of fact, I rather imagine that a very small proportion of the brainpower of the most creative thinker alive is ever devoted to creative thought. In our society a fairly large proportion of this small amount of creative thought is devoted to finding ways to help mankind avoid thinking. Games, alcohol, tranquilizers, TV, and business routine can all be used to help an individual fill 24 hours a day without ever having a creative thought. We like cliches because they help us sound confident without thinking. This does not mean that the average man is idle. On the contrary, he is probably a very active and useful citizen. As a matter of fact, idleness is generally abhorred because it leaves a vacuum that is an invitation to thought.

You and I may be exceptions to this general pattern in some small degree, but I want the reader to recognize that if this paper contains one small original thought, it will be here only as a result of tremendous psychic effort spent in overcoming my own urge not to think, and that if this thought, in its turn, stimulates any creative thinking in the mind of the reader, it will be only over the opposition of your shrewd and dogged subconscious which tries so hard to protect you from the rash act of thinking.

Having drafted this challenge to the reader's subconscious, I now propose that we think about some of the problems of intelligence. (I almost said "look at some of the problems of intelligence." This just goes to show you how my subconscious abhors the sound of the word

"think.") To pose the problems that I would like us to think about, I want first to go back into a little intellectual history. Some of the readers will be much more familiar with the events that I am about to describe than I am, but here at least is my version.

In the early days of the postwar intelligence effort, the attention of the intelligence community was focused primarily on the interpretation of surface phenomena. Some of the questions at issue were almost unbelievably naive. For example, there was not complete agreement on the general nature of the Soviet Communist system, and there was a great deal of discussion about the role of local Communist parties; some people feeling that these were indigenous parties, and other people feeling that they were part of the Soviet apparatus. During this period there was no agreement concerning standards of analysis in the intelligence community. At one extreme, some people used biased and emotional arguments without regard to system. At the other extreme, some people claimed that local Communist parties were not part of the Soviet apparatus because there was not enough evidence on this question to settle the matter in a court of law. As time went by, however, the intelligence community more and more came to accept the standard techniques of political sciences, economics, sociology, and so forth, and attempted to conform to academic standards and rule of evidence.

General agreement on standards of thought tended to shift the major problems in intelligence into the realm of facts. If it was agreed that a given situation should be interpreted by the use of the techniques of economics then the size of the gross national product of a country involved in the situation under study became an important fact, having great bearing on the final analysis of the situation. The intelligence community, therefore, went through a period several years ago in which major questions of the fact were important issues. Some of us remember the blood and sweat shed over the numbers of Soviet planes produced, the size of the gross national product of Communist China, and the adequacy of the Chinese railroads. The list could continue ad infinitum.

The focusing of the intelligence community on major questions of fact led to the development of additional techniques for the establishment or verification of facts. Some of these techniques, like the factory markings program, could be generally understood and accepted throughout the community. Even in this field, however, and in related fields involving sophisticated statistical techniques, acceptance of the new method was

neither immediate nor complete. Other techniques of analysis in political and social fields also left some members of the intelligence community gasping in their wake. At this point, the intelligence community entered a stage which will always be with us to some extent. It is the stage in which arguments about fact are caused by the technological gap between the informed and the uninformed analyst. This is a gap that training and experience have narrowed considerably and which probably can be narrowed even further in the future, but it probably will exist to some degree as long as some parts of the intelligence community develop new methods and new ways of thinking and other parts of the intelligence community lag in knowledge and understanding. It is not necessarily a bad phenomenon. It at least means that somebody is out in front and doing some thinking. It keeps the other fellows on their toes.

As a result of over 10 years of development, the intelligence community has now reached a high level of sophistication in the application of standard techniques of analysis to intelligence problems. Subsidiary methods such as style of writing and the manner of presentation are excellent. The community seems to have learned how to produce very good answers to intelligence problems without generating an undue amount of internal friction. All this is cause for considerable pride and satisfaction.

As good as we may be, however, we are obviously not good enough. We have just seen a classic example of one of our major outstanding difficulties in the question of US policy toward the launching of the Soviet earth satellite. There was no failure of intelligence to report the facts relating to the Soviet satellite program well in advance of the event, and intelligence also pointed out that this event would be of distinct advantage to the Soviet Union in the field of political prestige. Intelligence had done the job our customers normally expect of us, and yet in a real sense, the US was caught napping. The US prepared a plan of what to do after the Soviets had launched a satellite, but we did not take any action or even decide to take any action before the event. In other words, our planners did not fully recognize the magnitude of the blow the Soviet launching would give to our prestige. It would be very easy for us to sit back smugly and blame the unfortunate consequences on the policymakers, who were adequately informed in advance but who did not take adequate action in advance. Could it be that we have not yet established adequate confidence in our product in the minds of our consumers? Could it be that the fault still lay with the intelligence community? Could it be that we have not yet devised the proper method

of presentation which would permit us to say "damn it, we mean it!"

If we are willing to recognize that it is possible for intelligence to "fail" even when it is shrewdly accurate and timely, we might find further food for thought in looking at the problems that we are being shrewdly accurate and timely about. They tend to be problems that have a fairly immediate practical application. No one could object to our tackling such problems. When one looks for analysis in depth or in terms of long-term trends, however, we find that it is generally lacking in our formal publications. The bold analysis, the sharp intuition, the long step ahead, and the provocative ideas are generally found in informal bull sessions; in "think" pieces that have no true status; in the internal staff memoranda of ONE, OCI, and so on; and in some of the briefs and background material used by the DDI on an ad hoc basis. They are almost never found in the formal papers put forward by the community for the sober guidance of our planners and policymakers.

There are strong conservative influences in our present system of producing intelligence which would tend to resist change in anything involving method and type of analysis, form of presentation, and so on. Might we not be at a point of development, however, where we need to make a quantum jump in the conduct of intelligence? Is there any way in which intelligence can learn to say better "we mean it ," "these are the problems that may arise in consequence," "these are the decisions that must be decided?" How can we extend our analysis in time and depth beyond present dimensions and yet carry with us the conservative elements in the intelligence community?

There might be changes in organization or in the mechanics of presentation which might improve our impact on the formulation and execution of national policy. These things should be explored, but no such changes could create, by themselves, the change in the intellectual and visceral impact of intelligence that we must aim for. The only sure way to conduct national affairs with greater wisdom is for the responsible officials to think smarter thoughts. There is no mechanical or organizational substitute for brains. Intelligence is an important and integral part of the process by which we conduct our national affairs, and intelligence officers, therefore, have a tremendous responsibility to apply themselves to new ways of thinking which will give us a more brilliant insight into the dynamic world and our constantly changing place in it.

The real area in which we must seek improvement, therefore, is in that related to analysis. Perhaps we must learn to pose a different kind of question to ourselves. Perhaps we need to learn to think on a different time scale. Perhaps we need to develop even more new methods of analysis. Perhaps we need to do some combination of all of these things, and many others as well.

There are probably many different ideas that should be examined. Here is a sample of the kind of thing that we might think about. Might it not useful for us to engage systematically in backward analysis from hypothetical cases? For example, intelligence predicted the launching of the Soviet earth satellite and said that it would have unfortunate consequences. But let us suppose that several years ago we had posed the following question: "What would be the impact on the policy situation of the US and on its prestige if the Soviet Union were to accomplish some technological breakthrough which would support a Soviet claim for Soviet supremacy in the field of science and technology?" If we had had this sort of analysis, it might have been possible for us to point out in a much more meaningful manner the way in which the Soviet missile program and the development of a Soviet earth satellite might place the Soviet Union in the favorable situation envisaged in our hypothetical analysis. We could pose other similar questions such as: "What will be the effect on the world political situation when Soviet industrial production equals US industrial production?" "What would be the consequences if all of the 'third force' groups backed by the US came to power and 'right wing' parties disappeared?" "What would the world look like after 20 years of disarmament and 'peaceful coexistence?'" Analysis of these questions might put a vastly different light on intermediate developments leading toward the hypothetical situation we have posed for ourselves.

There is undoubtedly room for improvement in our work, but unfortunately as we get better and better, we have more and more justification for continuing to think and do exactly as we have been thinking and doing. This is more and more justification for not thinking creatively about improvement. We know, however, that there will always remain an important challenge to us in intelligence as long as the US does not act to accommodate itself adequately to world developments. What do you think that we should do about it?

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