

Date: Sat, 28 Nov 2009 19:38:43 -0500

To: "Dr. Baruch Fischhoff - Chair, National Academy of Sciences Study on Social & Behavioral Science and Improving Intelligence for National Security"

<baruch@cmu.edu>

From: Lloyd Etheredge <lloyd.etheredge@policyscience.net>

**Subject: Testing the Jervis Hypotheses & Beyond**

Dear Dr. Fischhoff & Colleagues:

You might want to recommend a DNI research program to test useful theories concerning political behavior and international relations.

The US intelligence community, when it consults academic social science, may not be aware of how poorly funded and poorly organized our research universities have become - i.e., for rigorous, rapid, and cumulative research about these problems.

For example, it would be useful for the DNI to test the Jervis hypotheses systematically, across the full range of historical cases that have become available since they were published. And it would be useful for the DNI to develop a protocol and staff checklist, like a standard medical exam of possible symptoms and initial tests (including, for the Jervis misperceptions) for current and new cases like Iran, North Korea, the Taliban leaders etc. Each National Intelligence assessment for President Obama should include [at least in the background] a systematic evaluation of our perceptions/misperceptions (and their misperceptions of us.)

### **Testing the Jervis Hypotheses**

As most members of your Committee will know, Robert Jervis, in his Perception and Misperception in International Relations (Princeton UP 1976) coordinated experimental studies of cognitive psychology with selections of historical material to recommend *hypotheses* of misperception in international relations. But - in 2009 - although the book is widely assigned, the Jervis hypotheses have not yet been tested rigorously and systematically, pre-1976 or for more recent cases.

### **Comparing Alternative Explanations & Different Policy Implications**

A sustained research program is important because many historical cases are

in dispute. And, even when misperception occurs, there can be alternative explanations and different policy implications depending upon the causal psychological processes that are active on the other side.

Here is an example of what I mean:

### **1.) Cognitive Mechanisms or Personality-Based Empathy?**

Misperceptions that occur solely because of errors in cognitive processes - such as undergraduates whose wagers and gambling in experiments differ from Expected Value rationality rules - can be considered as simple mistakes that might be corrected by pointing-out the mistake. Thus, in world politics: "You think they are predisposed to anger and hostility, but actually you have scared them and they are being defensive... Try saying something like President Reagan said to Mikhail Gorbachev after another tense Cold War meeting of accusations and talking past one another. Reagan stood up, started to walk away, then turned and said: 'Look this isn't working. Let's start over. I'm Ron. May I call you Mikhail?'"

- By contrast, my data from a sample of 126 US Foreign Service Officers showed that perceptions of Cold War Russia were partly personality-shaped - i.e. there was another mechanism: State Department professionals used the imagination and personality of the beholder, combined with cues from reality, and deployed the observer's own psychology for empathy and strategic calculation. They asked themselves: "Why would I be doing this, if I was in their situation?" *Thus, the more ambitious and power-oriented the observer, the more expansionist and dangerous they perceived Soviet leaders to be [and vice versa; and the modal personality of the institution produced a modest shift in this direction.] [By this model, Reagan and Gorbachev could drop a cloud of Jervis-hypothesis misperceptions and, in the spirit of "trust but verify," end the arms race. But Reagan's approach could not have succeeded with the intensely power-oriented and suspicious Joseph Stalin, who was murderous even toward his own associates and whose misperceptions of America had a different psychological mechanism that might have required years of therapy to change.]*

### **2.) Hierarchical Psychodramas: Another Line of Investigation**

My guess - which is only a guess at this point - is that the DNI will find major errors of perception and judgment are more varied, and have a wider range of causes, than Jervis proposed. For example, national or personal *hubris* creates a psychodrama of hierarchy and can invoke scorn and contempt (as well as

under-estimation): so long as the DNI mis-imagines drug traffickers as the lower-status and poorly educated underworld street hustlers in American inner cities, US agencies will fail - i.e. if the real opponent (my earlier memo) is the billionaire criminal mastermind, Guzman, who has been outsmarting *them* from his personal Valhalla in the mountains of northern Mexico.<1>

[It also, for example, is possible that there was a degree of pre-Obama Western cultural contempt, in viewing the Muslim world, that led to a history of American and Israeli misjudgments.<2> And this probably should be on the DNI's diagnostic checklist, along with other relevant hierarchical hypotheses - e.g., that the Iranians are "insufferable narcissists" and "know" that they will be able to acquire nuclear weapons because this is their rightful place and historical destiny, and that they - heirs to the Persian Empire - will be able to outsmart and outmaneuver the limited UN and other foreigners.]

Lloyd Etheredge

-----

<1.> The diplomatic history of 19th century British-Chinese relations and their military clashes is rich with messages of candid imperial contempt directed by the Son of Heaven at British monarchs - i.e., barbarians - who were trying to addict his people to Opium and using their military technology to invade his domain. And, reciprocally, hierarchical psychodramas generated perceptions on the British side: Lord Palmerston cheerfully viewed the uncivilized, poorly educated, and backward races - the Chinese, Indians, and many others - as requiring "a thrashing, every ten years or so" - i.e., an episode of war and violent atrocities - because of their limited cognitive powers and limited capacities for reason and reasonable behavior (and poor memories).

<2.> There is an unpublished early draft paper, reviewing a further range of research hypotheses, on my Website, "Is American Foreign Policy Ethnocentric?"

President Clinton's meeting with Chinese leaders - discussed in an earlier memo - may have encountered such a hierarchical psychodrama: Recall that Clinton was warned not to smile, else he be seen as "offending China by undue familiarity." To judge from his comments to Taylor Branch, Clinton may have seen this as a simple cultural quirk rather than a clue to an extraordinarily powerful, and shaping, national psychodrama that was invisible to him.

- Realities (& new realities) can be constructed. A DNI assessment could be that Clinton had the proper straightforward and friendly US strategy, the Chinese psychodrama notwithstanding.

Dr. Lloyd S. Etheredge - Fellow, World Academy of Art & Science  
Policy Sciences Center Inc.  
127 Wall St., Room 322 - Box 208215  
New Haven, CT 06520-8215  
URL: [www.policyscience.net](http://www.policyscience.net)  
301-365-5241 (v); [lloyd.etheredge@policyscience.net](mailto:lloyd.etheredge@policyscience.net) (email)