

Book Review

Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War*

Reviewed by Farideh Farhi*

Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War*, (2010) Cornell University Press, Ithaca, ix +196 pages, Notes to p. 227, Bibliography and Index to p. 238.

In the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq, the blame game regarding the problematic motives of the attack as well as the less than perfect outcome has been a growing industry in the United States. Of particular focus has been the performance of the U.S. (and British) intelligence in collecting and evaluating information about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction programs. The reliability of sources has been questioned with suggestions that human intelligence were purposefully made deceptive by the Iraqi intelligence and security services, while exiles and defectors provided other intelligence seeking to influence U.S. policy.

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The quality of the intelligence analysis has also come under scrutiny. The failure to find weapons stocks or active production lines undermined claims by the October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) as well as statements by a variety of high ranking American and British officials. Charges have included outright distortion, selective use of intelligence, and exertion of political pressure to influence the content of intelligence estimates in order to provide support to the decision to go to war with Iraq.

Robert Jervis' book is one of the most systematic attempts to entertain all the explanations for the failures despite enormous resources spent to gather and analyze intelligence. Jervis is a long time student of international affairs and in his past work has highlighted the important role of perceptions and misperceptions in foreign policy decision-making. In this book, he continues the focus on the psychology and politics of understanding international events but shifts his attention to the way information is handled and analysis is produced within the intelligence community in the United States.

What makes the book unique is that instead of only considering Iraq, where charges of deception and politicization have been rampant, Jervis studies what he calls "two of the more spectacular intelligence failures" in recent memory: the mistaken belief that the regime of the Shah in Iran was secure and stable in 1978, and the claim that Iraq had active WMD programs in 2002.

The Iran case is based on a recently declassified report Jervis was commissioned to undertake by CIA thirty years ago and includes responses by CIA officials. The Iraq case is based on close readings of available documents and interviews.

In both cases, Jervis finds flaws not only in the intelligence but also in the later analyses of the failures. Although acknowledging their impact, he rejects as fully satisfactory explanations such as lack of coordination within the government, failure to share information, groupthink or even political pressures from policymakers to receive intelligence that supported their already made-up minds. From his



point of view, as laid out in an earlier opinion piece in Boston Globe, the problems are much deeper and derived from the way human mind works. In short, “the problems of the US intelligence system have less to do with information or misinformation and more about how human beings think.”

The problem isn’t usually - or at least isn’t only - too little information, but too much, most of it ambiguous, contradictory, or misleading. Disparate information can be connected in a variety of ways and only in hindsight the correct pattern seems obvious. Meanwhile, human intelligence aggregators and analysts are prone to flaws of human thinking.

They see patterns and meaning in the world they are examining quite quickly and then tend to ignore information that might disprove them. According to Jervis, “premature cognitive closure” lies behind many intelligence failures.” Like most human beings, intelligence analysts are quite good at forming opinions – Jervis calls it coherent picture – but less good at challenging assumptions and thinking about alternative explanations.

In addition, when there is a hunt for a specific kind of intelligence, such as clues to the existence of WMD in Iraq, lack of evidence is not treated as refutation of the existence but simply as no evidence rather than important information in itself. This tendency is compounded by assumptions that underpin the hunt which is usually that the enemy is engaged in extensive deception. To be sure, Jervis argues, this is not an unreasonable assumption but one that literally makes it impossible to disprove the existence of a program that gave rise to the hunt. In the case of Iraq, making sense of Saddam’s game of deception was even made more difficult by the fact that he was indeed involved in a game of deception, but one presumably based on a plan to bluff Iran by pretending that he had an active WMD program, perhaps because he under-estimated the possibility of an American invasion.

The path to better analysis is not only the gathering of more



information but also acknowledging the flaws in human thinking that lead even the best to jump to conclusions and stick with them. It is in developing explicit and systematic procedures to probe assumptions, ponder the reasons for information gaps, and solicit perspectives that challenge established views.

This process would encourage analysts to be more explicit about their reasoning processes by making them contrast their views with the ones they have rejected. Moreover, it would lead them to marshal their evidence in a systematic way

At the most general level, of course, Jervis' logic is impeccable. Intelligence traps are genuine traps of human reasoning. But Jervis' reasoning also runs dangerously close to whitewashing or exonerating huge policy blunders by political leaders and not holding them responsible for getting out of intelligence services the intelligence they wanted. This danger is revealed in Jervis's failure to adequately highlight the important differences that exist in the two cases he has examined.

In the Iranian case, as Jervis acknowledges, we are faced with an intelligence community not prepared for a world historical event. There was paucity of resources dedicated to Iran in the late 1970s. The CIA had assigned just two analysts to assess Iranian politics and two more to study its economy, supplemented by a small, unproductive station in Tehran. They were not connected to each other in significant ways and even interacted less with political officers in the State Department and US embassy in Tehran. To give an example, there was even little communication between CIA's political analysts located in the Office of Regional and Political Affairs and economic analysts located in the Office of Economic Affairs. Hence, unlike the Iraqi case, where a case could be made that there was too much information, there really was disconnected and inadequate information, including lack of information regarding the Shah's state of physical and mental health.

The Iran analysts initially assumed that the opposition was not a



threat because if it was the Shah would have engaged in more severe and systematic crackdown. In short, the criteria they used proved useless once the revolutionary crisis deepened since the serious crackdown never came. In parallel, the belief that the opposition would eventually split due to diversity was also proven wrong when it was already too late, hence depriving the analysts of early warning indicators. Very little was known about the role of religion and religious leadership and field reports were slow to pick up how Iranian nationalism had turned against the Shah because of the perception that he was an American puppet.

The larger challenge of course was – and continues to be -- that revolutions are almost impossible to predict. Neither those in power nor challengers know the outcome. Why should intelligence agencies be any more prepared in predicting them particularly since, as Jervis points out, they are in “the business of stealing secrets, but secrets are rarely at the heart of revolutions.” In any case, the information gatherers and analyzers in the CIA proved neither less nor more attuned to the unfolding drama in Iran than social scientists or Iran specialists in the academic world. To be sure, the CIA analysts could have gone beyond descriptive reporting, analyzed more, and foreseen the possibility of state breakdown at least as one future scenario. They failed to do so. But this failure is different than unearthing a non-existent secret that was nevertheless used as “solid” justification for war.

Unlike the Iranian case, in the run-up to the war in Iraq, a ferocious interagency battle raged about the significance of aluminum tubes that Iraq had been importing. The CIA believed they were intended for centrifuges to enrich uranium, hence part of Iraq's supposed WMD effort. Other government entities, including the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, insisted, correctly in hindsight, that the tubes were not well-suited to this purpose.

According to Jervis, these contentious debates were missed by



the CIA director George Tenet who was removed from them and presented the case for the existence of WMD to President Bush with certainty - the same sense of “certainty” that informed Colin Powell’s presentation of the case to the UN Security Council, which he ruefully regretted later. It was this certainty that was ultimately the real failure and prevented hard questions from being posed. But this certainty was backed by the earnest belief – or honest mistake, if you will - on the part of many analysts in the intelligence community that, given Saddam’s behavior and motives, the reconstitution of Iraqi WMD program was quite plausible.

But Jervis’ attempt to explain away the public justification for a wrong policy along the same lines as the failure to foresee the downfall of the Shah is less than convincing. In the Iranian case, there was a failure of imagination based on inadequate information and pre-existing biases towards the status quo. The result was the inability to analyze alternative possibilities until it was too late. But, in the Iraqi case, George Tenet’s “certainty” was at the core of the justification for war and there is good reason to think that this certainty, made possible by the plausibility of WMD in Iraq scenario but not determined by it, was very much the result of a political environment *and* leadership that wanted war as evidenced in Vice president Dick Cheney’s eight visits to the CIA to express his views. This was a leadership which, despite evidence to the contrary, according to George W. Bush’s recently published memoir, *Decision Points*, continues to justify the decision to invade on the basis that Saddam was “*pursuing WMD and supporting terror at the heart of the Middle East.*” By shifting the blame on the system and the way human mind works, Jervis in effect argues against political accountability. After all, if the decision to invade Iraq was merely the result of “plausible” but not critically challenged bureaucratic thinking, then charge of incompetence or outright wrongful conduct for political decisions becomes less of an issue.

In addition, Jervis’s lack of due attention to the qualitative



differences between the failure to foresee the Iranian revolution and providing wrong intelligence to justify the American invasion of Iraq leads him to ignore the reality that the tremendous demand on the intelligence community to focus on the WMD in Iraq underwrote an even bigger intelligence failure: the failure to foresee endemic violence, shattered state, non-functioning economy, decimated society as inevitable consequences of the breakage of the Iraqi state.

In the words of the leading neoconservative, Kenneth Edelman, the US invasion of Iraq was supposed to be a “cakewalk” – easy to accomplish with easily gained rewards for American geopolitical interests. Jervis completely misses the fact that the focus on Iraqi WMD left the American intelligence community devoid of any critical pre-war analysis of this wishful scenario.