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Intelligence Challenges: An Historical Perspective

Mark Currie

What follows will essentially be a series of observations and insights about ways to think about countering political violence and associated intellectual challenges. I will pick up on some of the themes that have emerged so far in this conference. Accordingly, my focus will be on:

- Memory and lessons learned;
- Demons and predators; and
- Organizational design.

I offer examples from historical British and current academic experience that, by analogy, may be of relevance and interest to present-day challenges faced by the United States and allies.

Memories and Lessons Learned

I would suggest that intelligent responses to political violence depend on a knowledge of the relevant past. Professor Christopher Andrew’s magisterial official history of MI5, the UK’s security service, draws attention to a condition he names ‘Historical Attention Span Deficit Disorder’ (HASDD). He writes, “Short-termism has been the distinguishing intellectual vice of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. For the first time in recorded history there has been a widespread assumption that the experience of all previous generations is irrelevant to present policy.”¹ This might seem to some of us, and certainly it does to me as citizen and taxpayer, careless and unnecessarily wasteful.

A recent volume, Empire of Secrets, by one of Professor Andrew’s pupils, demonstrates convincingly that the decolonization of the British Empire in the last century was beset by problems of HASDD. The same mistakes were repeated as Great Britain, faced with violent opposition to its continuing rule, pulled out of Malaya, Kenya, Aden, Palestine, and Cyprus. These serial lapses included an initial reluctance to invest adequately in police, military, and intelligence; brutal treatment; acts of revenge; and ignorance about what the ‘enemy’ was doing and wanted.²

Were lessons ultimately learned in these theatres applied to the Troubles in Northern Ireland? You will have your own views, but to this observer the answer is eventually ‘yes’, but after an unfortunate period of, yet again, making many similar mistakes. My evidence would

include the use of internment without trial, as well as coercive interrogation techniques, which, while they lasted, were gifts to IRA recruitment.

Perpetrators of political violence do not suffer from HASDD. Their identities are, in part, formed by memories of both past glory and past trauma. Those who think of themselves as victims—nations subject to attack, as well as terrorists and insurgents among others—have long memories indeed and wish to avenge their grievances. Citizens of North America remember the Alamo, remember Pearl Harbor. Salafi jihadists remember the Crusades. The atrocities committed by the British in Afghanistan in 1842 after their defeat and retreat of the previous year are still part of the oral traditions of that country. And I doubt that Iraqi folk memory will have forgotten the cavalier punishment of civilians during the revolt against the British Mandate in Mesopotamia (Iraq) following the First World War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

Killing and torture in the Global War on Terror will similarly be remembered and inspire our enemies for generations. The shame will live on to the lasting benefit of those whose murderous activities we wish to stop, prevent, or at least contain. We heard earlier from Daveed Gartenstein-Ross the suggestion that perhaps national security communities might learn from the sporting world where evaluation of performance and adjusting practice in the light of such review is a long established, accepted, and essential habit.

Is this something that is sufficiently done in the worlds of intelligence and national security? Are these communities sufficiently rigorous in conducting cost/benefit analyses of their investment in, for example, homeland security? Studies published by the Oxford University Press in 2011 and 2016 concluded that cost/benefit analyses had barely featured in the US Department of Homeland Security responses to 9/11, notwithstanding the spending of an additional one trillion dollars in domestic counterterrorism. Have your investments in national security at home

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7 Alex Danchev, On Art and War and Terror, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2011): ‘Shame is enduring. In the Muslim world the story of the shame will be told, Scheherazade-like, for years to come. In the United States and its satrapies awareness will sink in, slowly, painfully, like dripping water on the Western conscience.’ p. 189.
and overseas since 9/11 enabled the citizens of this great country to feel safer? These two studies, on the basis of extensive polling data, suggest the answer is resoundingly in the negative.8

**Demons and Predators**

Victims of grievances, including most terrorists, not only have long memories, they know that their violence is justified and what they do is right. They know that their problems—past, present, and future—are the fault of others (often us). They tend to see themselves as ordinary people who reluctantly (in most cases) have become warriors in order to fight in a righteous cause to protect their culture, identity, territory, kith, and kin against an aggressor at whose hands they feel they have suffered.

There is a fascinating and compelling literature on this—including by my colleague from St Andrews’ Department of Psychology, Professor Stephen Reicher—with significant implications (at least in my view) for effective countering of political violence. People who do atrocious things—terrorists, torturers, war criminals, insurgents, killers in genocide—are our fellow human beings. With exceptions mentioned helpfully by Gary Ermutlu earlier in this conference, they are mostly like us. They are ordinary and do these terrible things because they believe that to do so is right.9

Do you know Leonard Cohen’s poem “All There is to Know about Adolph Eichmann”? It makes this point vividly: 

- **EYES:** Medium
- **HAIR:** Medium
- **WEIGHT:** Medium
- **DISTINGUISHING FEATURES:** None
- **NUMBER OF FINGERS:** Ten
- **NUMBER OF TOES:** Ten

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INTELLIGENCE: Medium

What did you expect?
Talons?
Oversize incisors?
Green saliva?
Madness?²⁰

An intelligence challenge is to get inside these ordinary people’s heads, to get as far as we can in empathizing with them in order to understand what they want, how they think, to understand their aspirations, what attracts them to their cause, their cultural products¹¹, their mythology, and their imaginaries. For, as Alan Wolfe wrote in his Political Evil, “Unless we are clear about the nature of what we are fighting we are likely to fight it the wrong way.”¹²

This suggests that great care needs to be taken with the terms of public debate. After all, remember the delighted enthusiasm with which people in Great Britain and Germany went to war against each other in 1914. Othering our enemies and describing them in terms of a Manichean struggle, while powerful, can, in the light of history, also be seen as unwise. Among other consequences is the reinforcement of the overestimation of what human violence can achieve.¹³ When we have been convinced that our enemies are demons—they are sub-human, evil, vermin, parasites, or contagious pollutants¹⁴—it becomes all too easy to torture and kill.

¹⁰ I am grateful to the late and great Professor Alex Danchev, a wonderful St Andrews colleague, an original and courageous scholar, as well as an inspiring teacher, for drawing attention to this poem by using it as an epigraph in his 2016 volume, On Good and Evil and the Grey Zone (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press) p.194.
¹¹ This is a reference to Professor Thomas Hegghammer’s ‘Why do Terrorists Weep?’, the text of his Paul Wilkinson Memorial Lecture, 16 April 2015 available at hegghammer.com
¹⁴ A poem by Sam Keen, To Create An Enemy, helps to make this point:
Exaggerate each feature until man is
Metamorphosed into beast, vermin, insect.
Fill in the background with malignant
Figures from ancient nightmares – devils,
Demons, myrmidons of evil.
When your icon of the enemy is complete
You will be able to kill without guilt,
them, to revert to the response of predation. And they, the other, ‘the dog-headed cannibals’\(^{15}\), become legitimate prey.\(^{16}\)

It is perhaps not a coincidence that our weapons and fighting formations are so often named according to this trope of predation.\(^ {17}\) Has there been sufficient cost/benefit analysis in relation to the use of Predator drones? How does the cost/benefit equation work out here when the death of innocents, associated reputational damage, and the effects on recruitment to the causes of terrorists and insurgents are taken into account?

**Organizational Design**

My question here is whether national security arrangements have the optimum balance between competition and cooperation? Some reflections on how we manage, or fail to manage, working across organizational boundaries in academia might be instructive. The short answer is that mostly we are not good enough at this. The St Andrews and Georgetown cooperation exemplified by the organization of this conference is a wonderful exception, thanks in large part to the legacy of Professor Paul Wilkinson and the continuing determination of his successors as well as of his co-founder of St Andrews’ Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, our host today, Professor Bruce Hoffman.

We, at least too often in the UK Academy, seem to be particularly susceptible to what Freud called the “narcissism of small differences”. We love the stovepipes of our different departments, disciplines, and areas of expertise. We use, of course, professional short hand just as all professions do but so often this can be used to obscure rather than to illumine. We seem unusually attracted by binary distinctions. The conventions of debate do not always help.

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Slaughter without shame.

\(^{15}\) This is a reference to Pope Gregory IX preaching crusade against the Mongols. See Edmund Leach, *Custom, Law and Terrorist Violence*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997) p. 35.


\(^{17}\) A particular example is the name of the current drone of choice used by the US for remote surveillance and killing, the Predator. Other examples abound: ‘For example … U.S. aviation squadrons such as the Black Lions, Blue Wolves, Tigers, Wildcats, Red Lions, Wolfpack, Jaguars, Grey Wolves, and Cougars. Americans soar into battle in aircraft with names like Harrier, Hellcat, Cougar, Raptor, and Tigershark, while the Chinese pilot the Flying Leopard and Fierce Dragon.’ Also, ‘Serbian Tigers’, ‘Tamil Tigers’ and the ‘Wolf Brigade’ militia. Smith, op. cit. Endnote 56, pp 251-2.
The assumption that “contested societal issues can and should be resolved through debate” can be unhelpful. “Debates are combative in nature, and are about listening for flaws, defending assumptions and pursuing a predetermined outcome. They are about winning and losing. Furthermore their outcomes are vulnerable to bias….Debate increases polarization… [This] recognition that debate [can have] unhelpful outcomes is not novel; it was the flawed nature of debate that motivated Socrates to propose dialectics as a preferred alternative.”

Furthermore, “…the words we use to describe intellectual effort are aggressive words. We attack problems, or get our teeth into them. We master a subject when he have struggled with and overcome its difficulties. We sharpen our wits hoping that our mind will develop a keen edge in order that we may better dissect a problem into its component parts.”

What can we do in our different worlds to remedy any of this? The answer, if there is one, lies in leadership to promote cooperation and to sideline unconstructive, rivalrous competition.

Conclusion

So, what does anyone facing the challenges we have been contemplating need to know in response? I suggest that it would help:

• To pay due attention to our past mistakes, and to evaluate and learn lessons from our more recent and current performance;
• To invest in even better knowing our enemies, ensuring that we have access to expertise that enables this, and to what can be done—another leadership challenge—to seek to ensure that such insights carry weight at all levels of decision-making, including the political;
• To take extreme care of the ways in which our enemies are characterized in political rhetoric and public debate. As a species we are outstanding at peaceful cooperation, dispute resolution, empathy, and altruism—without these qualities we would not have our extraordinary cultures and civilization—but all too quickly we can be persuaded of the need to counter violence with violence, evil with evil. And the results of this in the modern world could be devastating indeed.

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18 Time for Change? Climate Science Reconsidered, London: University College, 2014, p. 103. This report investigated the reasons why climate science had seemed to have had less than optimal impact on public understanding of the issues.
20 Smith, op. cit. p. xvi.
And finally, two questions:

- Might the terms of our public debate become more inspiring than that of those who seek to destroy us? Might we get beyond rhetoric that carries with it the danger of dividing our societies and that can all too readily get mired in arguments about what to call IS, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh, rather than inspire in relation to more strategic issues? Might we find things to say that would appeal even more to deracinated youth than the calls of death and destruction of AQ and ISIL?²¹

- And do we understand sufficiently the extent to which the threats associated with terrorism are constructs of our counterterrorist, foreign, and security policies and practice. I would suggest that this is a major research challenge for the communities that are represented at this conference.

About the Author

Dr. Mark Currie is a Senior Fellow at the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St Andrews. He studied Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge and Theology at Oxford. His doctorate on Islam in South Asia, also from Oxford, is published by the OUP as The Shrine and Cult of Muin al-din Chishti of Ajmer. He is co-editor of the series, New Directions in Terrorism Studies, for which he has contributed to three volumes. As well as supervising a range of research projects, he teaches a Masters course, Fundamentals of Terrorist Violence: Enablers, Constraints and Implications for State Responses. Before joining St Andrews, he pursued a public service career in diplomacy, defense and education.

²¹ This point is made powerfully in Philippe-Joseph Salazar, Paroles Armées: Comprendre et combattre la propaganda terroriste (Paris: Lemieux Éditeur, 2015). An English language review of Armed Words: Understanding and Fighting Terrorist Propaganda by Agnès Poirier with a helpful summary may be found in The New Review, The Observer, 29/11/15, p. 4