Intelligence and Foreign Policy

Robert Jervis

A Review Essay

Christopher Andrew and David Dilks, eds. *The Missing Dimension: Governments and Intelligence Communities in the Twentieth Century*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984.

Ernest R. May, ed. *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment Before the Two World Wars*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.

General Eisenhower pointed out that the U.S. Army treated intelligence as a "stepchild."¹ This characterization applied to most countries, at least until the development of surveillance satellites and other technological marvels. Within the military, intelligence has been the "slow track"; aside from a few mavericks, officers were generally shunted into the area when they were deemed unfit for more important tasks. This is not surprising: the job of the military is to fight, and so positions that directly represent this function will have the greatest prestige. Foreign ministries, of course, carry out diplomacy, and so one might think that they would value intelligence more highly because of its closer links to this mission. But most diplomats have prided themselves on being generalists and have tended to believe, often correctly, that they can understand other countries better than can specialized intelligence officers. Furthermore, intelligence operators are often an unruly bunch, and intelligence operations, if discovered, create frictions between governments which complicate the lives of diplomats, as the recent "Pollard affair" has done between the United States and Israel. Top decision-makers are more likely to value intelligence. In World War II, Churchill referred to code breakers as his hens because they brought him golden eggs. But he, like most leaders, cared more about raw information than about the interpretation and analysis.

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1. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (New York: Doubleday, 1948), as quoted in David Kahn, "United States Views of Germany and Japan in 1941," in Ernest R. May, ed., *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment Before the Two World Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 501.

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Thus, until recently, intelligence operated on the fringe of governments. Not only were many of the people involved rather peculiar characters, but efforts at both collection and analysis were unsophisticated and underfunded. To take the latter characteristic first, William Fuller notes that before World War I, the Russian military espionage office had "a staff of only four to five officers . . . [who] were so ill-paid that they all had to take extra jobs in the St. Petersburg district."² (The Russians, however, led the world in code breaking before World War I, and British successes in this area after the war owed much to Russian refugees.) A bit more support was available in European countries in the interwar period, but the British major who was appointed the chief intelligence instructor on the German army and POW interrogation at the start of World War II found the staff college library "scanty and out of date" and had to go to bookstores in Belgium for texts. Unfortunately, he planned his trip to Holland for May 1940.³

Many intelligence operations and much intelligence analysis was amateurish, especially in Britain and to a lesser extent in Germany—national stereotypes are not without some foundation.⁴ When the new British recruit was sent to Prague in the 1930s to set up an intelligence network, "he was given no training in the fieldcraft required for recruiting and running agents or in other forms of intelligence gathering. When [he] asked for tips on *how* to be a spy, he was told he could spend two or three weeks en route to Prague at Vienna where . . . one of the most experienced station chiefs . . . would give him on the spot training."⁵ Of course amateurism is not automatically bad, and professionalism does not always lead to effectiveness. The British code breaking establishment in World War II worked so well in part because it was able to assimilate eccentric intellectuals who could not have thrived in a normal professional bureaucracy. The other side of this coin is that several of the intelligence organizations in Nazi Germany were ineffective because

2. William Fuller, "The Russian Empire," in May, *Knowing One's Enemies*, p. 107. For similar comments about France, see Christopher Andrew, "France and the German Menace," in *ibid.*, p. 135. For England, see Paul M. Kennedy, "Great Britain before 1914," in *ibid.*, p. 186; and Christopher Andrew, *Her Majesty's Secret Service: The Making of the British Intelligence Community* (New York: Viking, 1986).

3. Andrew, *Her Majesty's Secret Service*, pp. 457–458.

4. Intelligence organizations concentrating on domestic subversion in the autocracies were generally more efficient and professional; this subject was crucial to the governments, and the undermining biases mentioned did not apply.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 347.

their approaches and values clashed with those of the irrational political system within which they had to operate.⁶

For all its glamour, intelligence has also been a stepchild to academics. In a way, this is odd: much of social science consists of analyzing other countries and so parallels the general mission of intelligence organizations, and it is no accident that many professors served in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). But academic neglect there has been, in large part because of the difficulty of gathering reliable information. The most important intelligence coup of the twentieth century—the breaking of German codes during World War II—was kept secret until the publication of F.W. Winterbotham's *The Ultra Secret* in 1974. Recently, a great deal has been published about current Western intelligence methods and operations, but of course we do not know which published accounts are correct nor which matters remain secret. Even the pre-World War II record remains spotty, with a great many documents missing or destroyed and many archives still sealed. Indeed, Christopher Andrew notes that while all the intercepted German messages during World War II are open to public inspection, the British intercepts of Soviet messages in the 1920s remain secret.⁷

In the United States, attention has concentrated on the legitimacy of covert operations and on intelligence failures, especially those culminating in surprise attack such as occurred at Pearl Harbor.⁸ The books under review here show that these are not the only interesting questions, that sufficient information is available to allow analysis of how intelligence has functioned during many periods and in many countries, and that this analysis is both intellectually legitimate and sheds a great deal of light on international politics.

Both the subject and the books under review cover so much ground that summaries are difficult. Indeed, strategic intelligence touches on so many facets of policy that it is difficult to generalize without constructing a theory of foreign policy, if not of international politics. So I will discuss only a few of the questions that these books raise. After briefly noting the nature of the

6. Michael Geyer, "National Socialist Germany: The Politics of Information," in May, *Knowing One's Enemies*, pp. 321–322.

7. Andrew, *Her Majesty's Secret Service*, p. 506.

8. The classic study of Pearl Harbor is Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962). But see also Kahn's remarks in "United States Views of Germany and Japan," p. 500. An interesting recent study by an intelligence officer who was active at the time is Edwin Layton, *"And I Was There"* (New York: Morrow, 1985). On surprise attacks in general, see Richard Betts, *Surprise Attack* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1982).

two collections, I will turn to Ernest May's arguments about the criteria for evaluating intelligence performance and examine how the powers judged each other's capabilities and intentions before the world wars. This leads to the broader topic of the relationship between intelligence and policy, and more particularly the limits on the impact of the former on the latter. In many cases, intelligence cannot, or at least does not, guide action because commitments to a policy are driven by powerful forces that are engaged before analysis of other countries can make itself felt. Furthermore, to understand each other's behavior, decision-makers usually have to understand how their own state is acting and how others see them. Although this would seem easy, in fact it is not. States have powerful and idealized, if not self-serving, self-images; they follow double standards and rarely appreciate the extent to which they menace others' interests.

For an edited volume, *Knowing One's Enemies* is remarkably coherent. In addition to excellent introductory and concluding essays by Ernest May, it contains studies of how each of the main adversaries saw each other in the years preceding the two world wars. Without being squeezed into a procrustean bed, each author discusses how his country carried out what today is called "net assessment." How did each country weigh the capabilities and intentions of others? How accurate were their views? What distortions and biases entered in? What was the role of bureaucratic interests and competition? How, if at all, was intelligence used by decision-makers? All the essays are of remarkably high quality. Although some readers will find more details about individuals and organizational structures than they really want, anyone interested in security policy will learn a great deal.

While May's focus lends coherence to the volume, it has one drawback: the sample of cases is biased. By looking at assessments before the world wars, the authors only examine cases in which the states did turn out to be adversaries. While this does not affect generalizations about perceptions of capabilities, it does limit the extent to which we can extend what we have learned about perceptions of intentions. A naive lesson from the book would be that states should always take a pessimistic view of others' policies. This is clearly the case for the 1930s and is arguably true in the pre-World War I period as well. While the authors do note some false alarms—the "May crisis" in 1938 and the false rumors of impending German attacks on Poland and Rumania in the spring of 1939—a fully balanced account requires studies of cases in which states made assessments of countries that the historical record later revealed were not in fact their enemies. Questions of how, when,

and why states perceive threats can only be answered by analyzing the full range of cases, including those in which wars resulted because one or both sides overestimated the other's hostility and those less dramatic ones in which peaceful outcomes were permitted by the recognition that neither menaced the other's vital interests.

The Missing Dimension by Andrew and Dilks is more like a typical edited volume. Although the essays are excellent, they are united only in dealing with intelligence in the twentieth century. Subjects as diverse as British intelligence in Ireland from 1914 to 1921, the CIA's search for legitimacy, and an intriguing if impressionistic account of "the Cambridge Comintern" (the British spies for the Soviet Union) are covered. There is no concluding chapter, and, given this collection of papers, no such chapter could have been written. Several of the essays concentrate on code breaking, however, a subject that gets lost in the broader essays in May's book.

One issue that has received a great deal of attention recently, especially from political scientists, is only touched on in the May essays, even though it bridges the subjects of policy and intelligence. This is the issue of the existence, causes, and consequences of defensive or offensive biases in military perceptions and planning. Offensive biases have been seen as an immediate cause of World War I, creating what we would now call "crisis instability."⁹ Western policy in the 1930s was differently but still adversely affected both by the overestimate of the immediate havoc that bombing of cities would bring¹⁰ and the underestimate of the power of a well-coordinated offensive.

Criteria for Judging Intelligence

One obvious question to be asked of past intelligence is how accurate it was. Of course one must be careful, as May is, not to oversimplify. Keeping a

9. The argument is an old one. The recent literature includes: Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision-Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), and the articles on "The Great War and the Nuclear Age," in *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Summer 1984). For a good critique, see Scott Sagan, "1914 Revisited: Allies, Offense, and Instability," *International Security*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Fall 1986). Beliefs about the relative efficacy of the offense and defense in the interwar period are discussed in Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); also see Williamson Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938-1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

10. See Uri Bialer, *The Shadow of the Bomber: The Fear of Air Attack and British Politics, 1932-1939* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1980).

scorecard, while fun, may not be analytically useful. If one wants to judge whether intelligence did well or badly, one must consider the information that was available at the time, the difficulty of the task, and whether the outcome was strongly determined or could have easily turned out differently. For example, information that could in principle have been available but in fact was not helps explain the Western belief that the Shah would not be overthrown. One reason why the Shah did not use all the force at his disposal in 1978 was that he knew he was dying of cancer and realized that even if repression put down the revolt, it would defeat his goal of turning over power to his son. If force were successful, the army would probably inherit his power, and his son was not capable of running as authoritarian a government as he was. But the Shah's illness was a deep secret, unknown not only to the United States, but also to the French, whose doctors were treating him.

Sometimes the information is unavailable even in principle, thereby rendering the task of intelligence particularly difficult. Thus Donald Watt notes that, in many cases, "the time gap between Hitler's decisions and the subsequent action was very short."¹¹ Of course, on occasion, intelligence can predict what another country will do before that country's decision-makers have reached a judgment—just as individuals can sometimes predict what their friends will do before they themselves know. But we cannot ordinarily expect such a profound understanding of the other side or the situation it is in.

May notes that a third reason why success is not the only criterion is that some crucial decisions could have easily gone the other way: intelligence often "made close calls which turned out not to be right" (p. 508). Thus it is not surprising that it was hard for Germany to predict when Russia would mobilize in 1914: "after all, the Russian general staff remained on tenterhooks for two days as the Tsar alternately issued orders for mobilization and rescinded them" (p. 507). Finally, intelligence may be right for the wrong reasons or wrong for the right reasons.¹²

11. Donald Cameron Watt, "British Intelligence and the Coming of the Second World War in Europe," in May, *Knowing One's Enemies*, p. 246.

12. See, for example, the instances cited in *ibid.*, pp. 251, 498. For a further discussion of the inherent limitations on intelligence, see Richard Betts, "Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures are Inevitable," *World Politics*, Vol. 31 (October 1978), pp. 61–89; and Robert Jervis, "What's Wrong with the Intelligence Process?," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, Vol. 1 (Spring 1986), pp. 28–30.

More fundamentally, May notes, "accuracy is not enough. British Foreign Office apocrypha tells of a retiree saying that for fifty years, year in and year out, he had assured Foreign Secretaries that there would be no major European war. In all that time, he boasted, he had been wrong only twice. . . . Nor is accuracy about important questions sufficient, for intelligence estimates are useful only if acceptable to the people who have to act on them" (pp. 503–504). But of course acceptability may mean merely catering to the preconceived notions of the policymakers, and so May argues, "a better test than either accuracy or acceptability may be simply whether assessments address the right questions: that is, the questions right answers to which could be useful guides to action" (p. 504).

JUDGING CAPABILITIES BEFORE THE WORLD WARS

May's conclusion is interesting but not entirely satisfactory: "By the test of whether the right questions were pursued, no government did well either before 1914 or in the 1930s. . . . Broadly speaking, governments of the earlier period were at their worst when estimating capabilities. Governments of the 1930s, on the other hand, made their greatest errors when judging proclivities" (p. 504). (May prefers the term "proclivities" to the more common "intentions" because the latter "suggests a single brain: does the United States ever really have *intentions*?" [p. 503]. The point is a good one, but I do not think the term "intentions" needs to carry this connotation, and because the term is a common one, I will continue to use it here.)¹³ "In gauging capabilities, pre-1914 intelligence bureaus got little things right but big things wrong" (p. 504). As the essays in the book indicate, each side was quite accurate in judging the size of the other's forces, their military skills, and with a few major exceptions, the characteristics of the weapons that would be used: "The facts were right, but the assumptions to which they were fitted were fantastic, supposing that soldiers could march through fields of fire and that politicians answerable to capricious publics would coolly negotiate terms as soon as their cash ran out" (p. 507). Thus the capabilities that were misjudged were not the narrow military ones of what one side could do to the other.

13. I have discussed some of the conceptual issues involved in *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 48–54.

It seems to me that there were three crucial errors, all linked to the common illusion that the war would be short.¹⁴ First, as both a cause and a consequence of this belief, all the continental powers had a great faith in the power of the offensive. If the offensive would carry the day, then the war would be short; if the war were to be short, only an offensive strategy could be effective. Second, the French misjudged where the Germans would attack, disregarding a large amount of evidence that they would move through Belgium north of the Meuse. Third, it was generally believed that states and societies could not mobilize the resources and stamina to fight a protracted war.

What was misjudged, then, were characteristics that military intelligence was ill-suited to estimate: the capabilities of the individual soldier on the one hand and societies as a whole on the other. Intelligence officers and commanders alike vastly overestimated the ability of the fighting men to attack in the face of withering firepower. Partly, of course, this was a misjudgment of the latter—the machine gun was particularly underestimated. But at least as important was the faith in the bravery and discipline of the men who were expected to keep charging even though those around them were dropping. Morale was central because the other side was expected to retreat not so much because of the physical damage it suffered, but because its fighting spirit was to be broken. But this, of course, required that the attacker's morale remain intact. How this was to be done (and how intelligence was to estimate whether it would be possible) was never systematically analyzed and, given the nature of the question, perhaps could not be.

The second misjudgment of capabilities was the French failure to judge the Germans' military plans correctly. This has been discussed at length elsewhere,¹⁵ and here I just want to note that it also rested on a failure to judge individual capabilities. The Schlieffen Plan was possible only because the Germans used reservists in the front lines. But this the French believed they could not do. Although much of their resistance to this idea was its implications for the standing of the military within the French political and social system, in part they failed to appreciate the ability of nonprofessional soldiers.

The most general misjudgment concerned not individuals, but the society and the state. Almost unanimously, people underestimated the willingness

14. The literature here is very large. See, for example, L.L. Farrar, Jr., *The Short-War Illusion* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-Cleo, 1973).

15. See the literature cited in footnote 9 above.

of the former to endure hardships and of the latter to mobilize national resources. It was believed that modern countries simply could not fight a long war because they would run out of resources. In part, this was a failure of imagination. Previous European wars had been short; the offensive had quickly broken the opposing army; it was hard to see how societies could withstand the strain and disruption of prolonged mobilization. The war indeed would have had to have been short if peacetime practices had been followed.¹⁶ To see that the state apparatus could direct civil society to an extent previously unknown would have required rare intellectual and moral boldness. Furthermore, two complicating factors inhibited such ideas. First, no part of the government was trying to imagine how the role of the state might be enlarged to permit a long war to be fought. Even in a society like Germany in which the military had high standing and prestige, it probably would have been seen as impertinent for the military to have undertaken such analysis. Second, and more basic, the belief that governments could do what in fact they did do during the war would have been directly contrary to the prevailing liberal ideology, especially strong in England but present in other countries as well, which sharply restricted the role of the government in civil society. Thoughts that the governments could, let alone should, manage the economy would have been quite literally subversive in that they would have attacked the normative and empirical beliefs that underpinned the prevailing domestic systems. To have concluded that the state could fight a long and total war by expanding its power would have implied that *laissez-faire* was not the only possible system and that the state could play a dominant role during peacetime as well. The implications for the possibilities of social change and reform would have been considerable.

JUDGING INTENTIONS BEFORE THE WORLD WARS

Analyses of others' intentions before World War I were more accurate, May argues: "Analysts and statesmen . . . identified and addressed most of the key questions" (p. 507), and "[f]or the most part, [decision-makers] understood the likely terms of debate in other capitals" (p. 508) and grasped what others' interests were. But neither May's conclusion nor the individual essays discuss this issue in sufficient detail to support this conclusion. The question,

16. See David French, *British Economic and Strategic Planning, 1905–1915* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982); and Paul M. Kennedy, "Strategy versus Finance in Twentieth-Century Britain," in Kennedy, *Strategy and Diplomacy, 1870–1945* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983).

of course, is a large one, covering many of the central issues about the origins of the war, and to have concentrated on it would have blurred the focus of the volume. But judgments of the other side's intentions are often a crucial element in a state's foreign policy, and many debates hinge on diverging analyses of what the other is up to. I think it is fair to say that in the years preceding World War I, leaders only rarely paused to carefully analyze the questions of whether the differences with their adversaries were unbridgeable and whether the other could be best influenced by threats or inducements. Documents like the Crowe memorandum and the replies to it were exceptional, if not unique. If World War I were avoidable—and of course this question is as controversial as it is fascinating—then there were crucial failures of intelligence as well as policy. In any event, it is hard to argue that the analysis of other states' intentions (or of the state's own interests) was of high enough quality to justify the momentous decisions that were made. Thus May's conclusion about perceptions of capabilities may apply to perceptions of intentions as well: "pre-1914 intelligence bureaus got little things right but big things wrong" (p. 504). While their short-run predictions were generally adequate, their grasp of other states' goals, motives, and perspectives were deficient. As a result, they may have missed chances for ameliorating conflict and avoiding the war that engulfed them.

Interestingly enough, in the 1930s, British and French officials paid more attention to these issues, but their conclusions were even less accurate. Why this was so has been endlessly debated, and May's three arguments are worth repeating. First, one should not exaggerate the sharpness of the distinction between "appeasers" and "anti-appeasers" and attribute nothing but blindness to the former and nothing but perspicacity to the latter. Many people held changing or inconsistent views, and the records "show almost everyone . . . making some statements that in retrospect seem stupid, others that seem wise" (p. 522). Furthermore, if the "appeasers" were wrong about Hitler's goals, the "anti-appeasers" had their own illusions, which were almost equally distant from reality: they believed that Hitler could be deterred by the threat of war (p. 520). Third, "concerning processes of decision, 'appeasers' and 'anti-appeasers' alike tended to imagine debates in Berlin comparable to those in London or at least Paris, with an adversary system pitting what Halifax's private secretary called the 'forward school' against 'moderates'" (p. 521).

I would add three points of my own. First, analyses of Hitler were deeply influenced by the "lessons of the past." Most statesmen in London, and

some in Paris, believed that World War I could have been avoided by conciliatory diplomacy. This predisposed them to avoid the previous error and to perceive Hitler as appeasable. Second, this belief was reasonable, indeed more reasonable than the view of Hitler that we now see to be correct. Given the enormous destruction that a war would entail, only a most unusual, if not insane, ruler would wage a major war to seek dominance. While all German leaders wanted to revise the Treaty of Versailles, none of the earlier leaders and few of Hitler's Nazi confidants would have been willing to fight Britain and France. Common sense indicated that while Hitler was an evil tyrant, he would be content with regaining Germany's pre-1914 position. Indeed until he took over the non-German portions of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, all his behavior could be explained by his drive for this goal. Third, neither the "appeasers" nor the "anti-appeasers" acknowledged what was in fact a sharp trade-off between securing British and French interests and avoiding war. As May notes, the "anti-appeasers" believed that a policy of firmness backed by strength would preserve the peace; the "appeasers" believed that concessions would reduce the dangers of war without allowing Hitler to dominate. To see that the actual choices were more distasteful than this would have been extremely painful, and so it is not surprising that the perceptions were inaccurate.

Intelligence and Policy

On these broad issues, intelligence communities are not likely to have a great deal to say or to have much influence. Why should intelligence analysts be better than journalists or decision-makers themselves—not to mention academics—at determining whether the other can be conciliated, the degree to which it is driven by unusual ambitions, or the extent to which it is reacting to perceived threats? The painstaking collection of detailed information simply will not yield answers to these questions. Perhaps a spy within the other side's circle of top decision-makers might provide real insight, but such instances are largely confined to fiction.¹⁷ Furthermore, questions of the other

17. Two modern instances come to mind. First, the U.S. may have received information from a member of Indira Gandhi's cabinet during the 1971 war. But Kissinger seems to have used these reports to bolster his preconceived and incorrect estimates of India's intentions and so U.S. policy was not improved. Second, Donald Maclean was privy to many aspects of Western policy toward the Soviet Union when he served at the British embassy in Washington from 1944 to 1948. Of course while we know what was said at many of the top secret meetings he attended,

side's intentions involve general political judgments which decision-makers are likely to want to make for themselves.¹⁸ We do not know a great deal about what determines these judgments. Personality may be important: for example, some people may be prone to see adversaries where others see only resolvable differences. General political beliefs, if not ideologies, are likely to play a role: general attitudes toward left-wing governments influence the degree to which Americans see Nicaragua as a threat. Not only are these factors beyond the reach of intelligence, but in most cases statesmen will have developed views about other countries before taking office. Thus it is not surprising that when people enter the government and gain access to classified intelligence reports, they rarely change their basic beliefs about other countries. People may change, but only in response to traumatic external events, not because of new or better analysis. For example, can we imagine any study of the Soviet Union and its foreign policy that would convince Ronald Reagan that his ideas about that country are incorrect?

The basic outlines of threat assessment then are rarely the province of intelligence, even though one could argue that this should be its most important function. David Kahn's conclusion about the United States before World War II may be extreme but could be applied with modifications to other countries as well: "Intelligence had little to do with American assessments of Germany and Japan before December 1941. The actions of the Nazi government convinced Americans, high and low, that the United States might someday be the target, if not the victim, of its aggression. On the other hand, American racism and rationalism kept the United States from thinking that Japan would attack it."¹⁹

In cases that did not appear to be so obvious, decision-makers usually employed large doses of intuition, without respect for the generally uninteresting debate over whether intelligence is an art, a craft, or a science.²⁰ In

we do not know what he reported, let alone what conclusions were drawn in Moscow. He and the Russians may have dismissed as rationalizations the fears of Soviet expansion, which he constantly heard, and Stalin might have been emboldened by the obvious inhibitions in the West against using its vast superiority in military and economic power. For a brief discussion, see Robert Cecil, "The Cambridge Comintern," in Andrew and Dilks, *The Missing Dimension: Governments and Intelligence Communities in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), pp. 185–187, 196.

18. See, for example, Michael Barnhart, "Japanese Intelligence before the Second World War: Best Case Analysis," in May, *Knowing One's Enemies*, p. 424; and May's discussion of the different judgments reached by Hitler and his generals, *ibid.*, pp. 514–519.

19. Kahn, "United States Views of Germany and Japan," p. 476.

20. However, a few relevant comments on this debate can be found in May, *Knowing One's Enemies*, pp. 3, 158, 191–192, 296, 424, 518.

his discussion of French military intelligence in the 1930s, Robert Young points to "the tension between knowledge and understanding,"²¹ a tension that existed in other countries and other periods as well. Accurate conclusions and disastrously wrong ones as well often ran far ahead of the available information. Thus as early as February 1933, Robert Vansittart, the permanent undersecretary of the Foreign Office who was to become a leading "anti-appeaser," said that the Germans were "likely to rely for their military power . . . on the mechanical weapons of the future, such as tanks, big guns and *above all* military aircraft." Eighteen months later, when criticizing the military for being slow to appreciate the rise of German power, he said: "Prophecy is largely a matter of insight. I do not think the Service Departments have enough. On the other hand they might say that I have too much. The answer is that I know the Germans better."²² But arguments about who knows another country better or who has the gift of prophecy are not easy to resolve.

COMMITMENTS AND POLICY PREFERENCES

The impact of intelligence on the broad outlines of the state's foreign policy is further limited by two other factors. First, the state may have little freedom of maneuver. While knowledge can multiply the effectiveness of national power, it cannot compensate for all weaknesses. As Norman Stone notes, "the heart of the matter [for Austria-Hungary before 1914] was simply that [the Empire] was trying to act the part of a great power with the resources of a second-rank one."²³ Similarly, Robert Young argues that because of its dependence on Britain in the 1930s, even the best intelligence about Germany could not be harnessed by France to an effective policy.²⁴

More interestingly, states sacrifice or limit their freedom of action in a psychological sense when they become committed to a policy, which often

21. Robert J. Young, "French Military Intelligence and Nazi Germany, 1938-1939," in *ibid.*, p. 306.

22. Quoted by Watt, "British Intelligence," p. 268.

23. Norman Stone, "Austria-Hungary," in May, *Knowing One's Enemies*, p. 52.

24. Young, "French Military Intelligence," pp. 287, 310, 307-308. A parallel conclusion was reached by the Commander-in-Chief of the British army in the Far East after the fall of Singapore: "There's no doubt that we underestimated the Jap. . . . But suppose we'd made a better shot and had got the Jap at his true worth, would it have made any difference? I very much doubt it. Our policy was to avoid a war with Japan as long as we could (or to make America cause it, if it was to happen) and we gambled on that policy succeeding (or if it didn't succeed on America bearing the brunt). With all our other commitments I don't believe that, however highly we had rated the Japs as fighters, we would have been caused thereby to improve the condition of our Services in the Far East." Brian Bond, ed., *Chief of Staff: The Diaries of Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Pownall, 1933-1944* (London: Cooper, 1974), Vol. 2, p. 92.

happens without the benefit of adequate intelligence assessments. As a result, policy often drives intelligence as much as intelligence drives policy. This can take place both with specific policies and with the broad outlines of the state's goals and approach, which are especially likely to be quite powerful and to predate analysis of what others will do. Holger Herwig's appraisal is not unique to Wilhelmian Germany:

In the final analysis, Germany's leaders based their grand strategies not upon available intelligence concerning potential adversaries but rather upon certain inflexible ideological convictions and military principles. One needs above all to understand and to appreciate that strange composite of historical determinism, racism, and autism which constituted the *mentalité* of Wilhelmian Germany. It cannot be stressed enough that German planners dealt not so much in day-to-day evaluations as in grand designs, whose sweep often encompassed the lives of a generation or two. The strengths and weaknesses of potential enemies were taken into account only after inflexible blueprints had been drafted.²⁵

As Herwig concludes, "it is likely that only a total realignment of the social fabric of Wilhelmian Germany could have permitted more realistic assessments or action in 1914."²⁶

Leaders who have become committed to a policy of expansionism will rarely perceive the obstacles in their way accurately. Michael Barnhart makes it clear that this was true for Japan: that country's "reluctance to appraise rationally America's vast economic predominance came from a feeling of indifference. It was futile, and perhaps treasonous, to suggest that any war with the United States was unwinnable. . . . Since the only alternative [to fighting], by 1941, was instant surrender, Japan's policy-makers elected to ignore contrary indications and believed that a limited and therefore winnable conflict was possible."²⁷ As a section chief of the General Staff's intelligence division put it when asked if he expected victory in a war with the United States: "A Japan–America war is necessary: it is no longer a question of victory or defeat."²⁸ Once a course of action is seen as necessary, great psychological pressures are generated to believe that it is likely to succeed; intelligence officers as well as decision-makers usually feel these pressures

25. Holger H. Herwig, "Imperial Germany," in May, *Knowing One's Enemies*, p. 95.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

27. Barnhart, "Japanese Intelligence," pp. 454–455.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 452.

and, if they do not, are likely to be ignored.²⁹ Thus it is not surprising that Wesley Wark's thorough study of British intelligence on Nazi Germany shows that, by and large, military estimates could be predicted by British policy rather than vice versa. Neither the swing to appeasement in the mid-1930s nor the swing away from it in the early spring of 1939 was based on changing analyses of German strength. Rather, estimates became more pessimistic as the appeasement policy gathered force and shifted quite dramatically toward optimism six months before the start of the war when it became clear that Britain would have to confront, and probably fight, Germany.³⁰ The British overestimate of German airpower and the misreading of how its air force would be used can similarly be explained in large part by the policy preferences of the decision-makers.³¹

The commitment to a policy may also operate at lower levels both of generality and of the bureaucracy. Various groups and sectors within the government need to hold a certain picture of the other side's likely strategy and tactics in order to justify the course of action or force structure that they prefer. For example, one reason why the French rejected information indicating that the Germans would use reservists on the front line in 1914 was that the French army was committed to keeping its own reserves in a secondary role in order to maintain its corporate professionalism, which was under attack from domestic political opponents.³² Thus in many instances, a state's military policy or doctrine influences its estimates of how the other side will fight more than being determined by such estimates. Paul Kennedy notes that "since [pre-1914] British doctrine required a decisive clash of battle fleets, German plans had to be construed as leading to such an outcome," even though there was little evidence pointing in that direction.³³ Similarly,

29. See Robert North, "Perception and Action in the 1914 Crisis," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 21 (1967). For a further discussion of this phenomenon, see Irving Janis and Leon Mann, *Decision Making* (New York: Free Press, 1977); Richard Cottam, *Foreign Policy Motivation* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977); Paul Schroeder, *Austria, Great Britain, and the Crimean War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972); Snyder, *The Ideology of the Defensive*; Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981); and Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

30. Wesley Wark, *The Ultimate Enemy: British Intelligence and Nazi Germany, 1933-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). Also see Wark, "In Search of a Suitable Japan: British Naval Intelligence in the Pacific Before the Second World War," *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 1 (May 1986), pp. 189-211.

31. For a further discussion of the self-deterrence involved, see Jervis, "Deterrence and Perception," *International Security*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Winter 1982-83), pp. 14-19.

32. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*.

33. Kennedy, "Great Britain before 1914," p. 185.

the size of the army, which the British believed would be necessary to strongly influence the outcome of a continental war, was determined more by the size of the standing army which could be created without political disruption at home than it was by an analysis of the military balance between the two sides.³⁴ The same effect occurs with narrower questions, such as the efficacy of various weapons and tactics. Thus Young points out that, in early 1939, French military intelligence:

suggested that the Spanish experience had made many German officers wonder if a tank was really worth its construction and maintenance cost. It is interesting to note that this particular example of faulty guesswork came only a few months after Gamelin's training directive for 1939, a directive which forbade exposing French troops—though not their officers—to German-style mobile maneuvers, for fear of confusing them as to what was appropriate doctrine and what was not.³⁵

Net assessment is often driven by bureaucratic and domestic needs at least as much as by disinterested analysis of the other side. What Christopher Andrew says about the French debate in 1913 over whether to lengthen the term of military service by one year in order to match similar German moves holds for many other issues as well: as the debate proceeded, "assessment of the German army played only a secondary role and sometimes almost disappeared from view."³⁶ The kinds of arguments that are made, the evidence that is deemed important, and the methods that are applied are often determined by the answers that are desired. Today, for example, the logic of net assessment cannot explain why doves look primarily at the numbers of warheads, and hawks look at throwweight or megatonnage. Indeed, if the strategic theories held by these two groups were driving their assessments, then those who were concerned about war-fighting would look to warheads, and those who emphasized the importance of assured destruction would stress gross explosive power. That this is not the case is primarily explained by the fact that the latter measure shows the U.S. to be way behind the Soviet Union while the former reveals parity or a slight U.S. lead. Net

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 193–195. At least some British generals were aware that they were being disingenuous: General Henry Wilson, the Director of Military Operations, told a colleague that the six divisions that were claimed to be decisive were probably "fifty too few." Quoted in Nicholas d'Ombra, *War Machinery and High Policy: Defense Administration in Peacetime Britain, 1902–1914* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 104. For another example, see Young, "French Military Intelligence," p. 297.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 303. For another example, see p. 142.

36. Andrew, *Her Majesty's Secret Service*, p. 138.

assessment is highly political; we should not be surprised that the analysis is often explained by rather than explains the conclusions. All too often, then, intelligence estimates tell us more about interests and foreign policy preferences of powerful groups in government than it does about what the other side's intentions and capabilities are.

As May demonstrates in his discussion of net assessment in Britain, Russia, and Germany before World War I, when key decision-makers come together for meetings at which the possibility of war is discussed, each often has good political and bureaucratic reasons to avoid a full and frank treatment of military strategy and military balance. Bureaucracies and the politicians who lead them do not want others meddling in their departments' affairs. Sharing of information and analysis often runs the risk of sacrificing power. Exposing assumptions to critical scrutiny can lead to divisive policy debates. The costs of honest and disinterested evaluation are immediate and involve pressing if often narrow interests; the gains are postponed if not hypothetical. Furthermore, these gains will accrue only if the other participants are able and willing to put aside their parochial blinders. In the familiar dilemma of public goods, any person or department taking the broader perspective runs the risk of sacrificing his or her individual interests and preferences without furthering the national interest.

BEST-CASE ANALYSIS AND WORST-CASE ANALYSIS

The policies, interests, and needs of the actors can help explain when actors will make "worst-case" estimates and when they will expect the "best case." Both errors are common; the argument that statesmen always, or even usually, expect the best or expect the worst cannot be sustained.³⁷ Many of the errors are no doubt random. Others are the products of cognitive predispositions and general beliefs about how states are likely to behave. But often the person sees what he or she needs to see in order to support the personal or organizational interests involved or the policy preferences that are held. Thus Donald Watt argues:

Assessments . . . tended to reflect *either* the expectation that the enemy would do what the branch of the armed forces making the assessment most

37. For examples of worst-case analysis, see May, *Knowing One's Enemies*, pp. 110, 114, 122, 125, 261, 301, 350–351; for the opposite error, see pp. 125, 146, 424, 433, 437–439, 445, 449, 455. For a debate about whether American estimates of Soviet military strength have more usually erred on the side of optimism or pessimism, see the articles by Les Aspin and William Lee in *Strategic Review*, Vol. 8 (Summer 1980), pp. 22–59.

feared or to which they felt most vulnerable, or the assertion that the enemy would follow a course of action to which the particular branch of the armed forces making the assessment would be the most effective counter—if only it had the lion's share of all present and future budgetary appropriations.³⁸

Similar forces operate on broader questions of net assessment. It is no accident that hawks and doves differ not only in their views of Soviet intentions but also in their views of Soviet military strength. While it is logically possible for the latter differences to have determined the former, in fact the opposite seems to be the case. General political judgments usually form first and strongly influence estimates of capabilities in a way that reinforces existing policy preferences.

IMAGES AND SELF-IMAGES

In all too many cases, assessments are also strongly colored by national or racial stereotypes.³⁹ Germans are seen as efficient, Austrians as undisciplined, British as soft, Americans as too preoccupied with business to fight, and Japanese as generally inferior. In many areas of intelligence, improvement is hard to find; but governments and public opinion do seem to have become much more sophisticated on this point. Because nationalism has become less virulent and racial generalizations are discredited, distorting prejudice of this kind no longer plays a major role. (I find quite unconvincing the argument that American policy in Vietnam was significantly influenced by racial stereotypes.)

At least as important, but less remarked upon, is the influence of self-images. The way states view others is partly a product of the way they think of themselves. Indeed, estimates of the military balance are often driven more by analyses of one's own strengths and weaknesses than by analyses of those of the other side. Thus in December 1940, when General Marshall discussed "keeping the fleet in the Pacific until a major offensive began against the Axis in the Atlantic, . . . he did not mention German or Japanese forces or plans and, indeed, did not seem to be thinking of them at all. He was concentrating on American capabilities."⁴⁰ Although this habit of losing sight of the adversary is unfortunate, it is not surprising. Decision-makers

38. Donald Cameron Watt, personal communication to Ernest R. May, quoted in May, "Conclusions: Capabilities and Proclivities," in May, *Knowing One's Enemies*, p. 541.

39. See May, *Knowing One's Enemies*, pp. 111, 216, 333, 356, 364, 446, 474, 477, 493, 505.

40. Kahn, "United States Views of Germany and Japan," p. 478. For other examples, see May, *Knowing One's Enemies*, pp. 359, 379, 449; and Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive*, pp. 197–198.

know more about their own forces than about those of potential enemies. Much of their time is spent listening to their generals and determining the size of the military budget and the shape of the armed forces. Furthermore, belief in their autonomy and efficacy can lead them to think that the outcome of any battle will be more strongly influenced by the condition of their armies than by that of the armies of the other side. This would explain why many people judge proposed arms control agreements severely; the restrictions on their forces loom larger than those on the adversary's.

This is not to argue that decision-makers are prone to overrate their own strength. Of course some cases when they do will receive our attention because they lead to disastrous wars, but underestimates of strength will often pass unnoticed because they will usually lead to peaceful and less dramatic policies (although under some circumstances, they can also produce preventive wars). But it does seem that variable moods of national revival and self-doubt strongly influence the optimism or pessimism of the judgments.⁴¹ When decision-makers look abroad, what they see is often heavily colored by their views of the condition of their own society. More importantly, elites and general publics alike not only think about themselves; they usually think well of themselves.⁴² When states are not consciously expansionistic, they tend to see their own actions as purely defensive and cannot believe that others feel threatened by what they are doing. Even cynical leaders are self-righteous. They rarely see their country as an unbiased observer would, let alone as others do. Indeed they often fail to grasp the nature of their self-images or the fact that others are not likely to share them.

As a result, states often underestimate the extent to which they are following double standards or infringing on the vital interests of others. Any hostility by the other side is more readily attributed to the other's aggressive designs than to a reaction to the state's own behavior. The failure to accurately perceive the other side is then often a product of the failure to grasp the nature of one's own policy. Thus Raymond Garthoff demonstrates with painstaking and disinterested analysis that a prime reason why Americans misjudged Soviet behavior during the period of détente was that they failed to understand that their country was "waging a vigorous competition along with the Soviet Union."⁴³ With the possible exception of the SALT commit-

41. See, for example, May, *Knowing One's Enemies*, pp. 111, 147, 169, 539–540.

42. Ralph White, *Nobody Wanted War* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968).

43. Raymond Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1985), p. 1083.

ments, it is hard to find any instances in which the U.S. restrained itself in order to conform to the principles of détente. Changes in public and Congressional attitudes (the “post-Vietnam syndrome”) account for what internal inhibitions operated during the 1970s, and even these are easy to exaggerate. During détente, American political competition with the USSR in the Third World did not slacken, and the U.S. pushed the Soviet Union out of the Middle East and courted China. But Americans, leaders and public alike, saw their country as willing to cooperate on reasonable terms and as following a code of conduct that should have been acceptable to any partner fit for cooperation.

Although we can know less about Soviet perceptions, they seem to have been similar. Even when the Soviets occupied Afghanistan, they could not understand that others were genuinely outraged and menaced. Therefore:

the U.S. reaction . . . failed to carry the intended message because the Soviet leaders could not believe that the American leaders meant it. They knew that Afghanistan was not a vital interest of the United States, and yet the American reaction implied it was. Since the Soviet leaders knew they were not threatening real and vital U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf, they did not credit the American explanations for the Carter Doctrine and the wide swath of sanctions. . . . The American action was seen not as a response to the Soviet move . . . , but as the line the U.S. leaders preferred, for which Afghanistan was just a pretext.⁴⁴

The problem is compounded for intelligence analysts because they are hampered not only by the general national self-images, but also by their ignorance of exactly what their country is doing. Because intelligence is not supposed to be contaminated by or to meddle in the state’s own foreign policy, analysts often know little more about this than does the informed newspaper reader. (Christopher Andrew notes that French intelligence before World War I often learned about their country’s secret policies through decoding their adversaries’ telegrams.)⁴⁵ But often other states’ behavior is at least in part a response to the state’s acts. When these acts are secret, analysts will not know of them and so cannot take them into account; even when they are open, unwritten norms often inhibit analysts from giving them prominence. For example, one reason for the Shah’s lack of confidence in his ability to control the situation in 1978 was that he believed that the

44. Ibid., pp. 964–965.

45. Andrew and Dilks, *The Missing Dimension*, pp. 36–37.

U.S. was not fully supporting him and indeed might be aiding the opposition. But it would not have been easy for intelligence to analyze how the Shah saw the U.S. or what U.S. officials were doing that might be contributing to his fears. Thus regulations and habits that are designed to keep intelligence and policy separate may badly skew the resulting analysis.

Conclusion

Sun Tzu's words of 2,500 years ago have been much quoted: "Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril." They are probably right, but both more worrisome and more accurate a description is his accompanying comment: "If ignorant both of your enemy and of yourself, you are certain in every battle to be in peril."⁴⁶ We should not expect too much of intelligence, especially because understanding the behavior of one's own country is so important and so difficult. We probably can do a much better job of determining whether a nuclear strike is on the way—a crucial question, to be sure—than we can of determining what others' foreign policies are likely to be and what will influence them. If the historical record is a guide to the future (and there is little reason to expect otherwise), errors will be common. Indeed, it is hard to find cases in which two states, even if allies,⁴⁷ perceived each other accurately. The debates over the origins of World War I remind us that even after the fact, we usually argue about the causes of states' behavior and the alternative paths they would have followed if others had acted differently. Lack of information, cognitive biases, commitments to established policies, and domestic interests make the task of intelligence even harder. The implications for decision-making are not reassuring: intelligence is likely to be deficient, and policies that will succeed only if the images of others that underlie them are completely accurate are likely to yield disaster. May's closing sentence is fully justified: "If just one exhortation were to be pulled from this body of experience, it would be, to borrow Oliver Cromwell's words to the Scottish Kirk: 'I beseech you in the bowels of Christ think it possible you may be mistaken.'"⁴⁸

46. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel Griffith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 84.

47. See the fascinating study by Richard Neustadt, *Alliance Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970).

48. May, *Knowing One's Enemies*, p. 542.