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Communication and Intelligence: Allies or Enemies?

HAMILTON BEAN

James S. Major: *Communicating with Intelligence: Writing and Briefing in the Intelligence and National Security Communities*

The Scarecrow Press, Lanham, MD, 2008, 420 p., \$45.00.

Jan Goldman writes, in the introduction to *Communicating with Intelligence*, that effective communication is “the raison d’être of the intelligence community.” But James Major observes that no textbooks exist for teaching would-be intelligence communicators the skills needed to increase the effectiveness of their written products and verbal briefings. Major’s book—aimed primarily at students and faculty in the fields of intelligence, national security, and homeland security—is intended to fill this gap. Major states: “Writing and briefing are fundamental to the intelligence profession. The ability to communicate clearly, concisely, and coherently is basic to all

intelligence disciplines, even the most technical.” More than forty years in the intelligence field (in both military and civilian capacities) has provided Major with a deep understanding of the interconnections between communication and intelligence, resulting in a book useful to both practitioners and scholars.

“SWEEPING” STRATEGY

Communicating with Intelligence is the first in Scarecrow Press’s series of volumes on professional intelligence education. The book is divided into two parts: Part 1: “Writing with Intelligence,” and Part 2: “Briefing with Intelligence.” In Part 1, Major

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asserts that effective intelligence reflects the “basic principles” of writing: clarity, conciseness, correctness, appropriateness, completeness, and coherence. He instructs would-be intelligence communicators to “read” for the sake of writing. For Major, learning the conventions of effective intelligence writing and briefing is aided by critically assessing others’ work. He urges readers to evaluate finished intelligence in terms of its purpose, sources, judgments, evidence, and assumptions. Ideally, such critical assessment will improve one’s own intelligence writing—a process that involves prewriting, drafting, revising, and review. His “four sweeps” strategy, used at the end of this process, is valuable for any professional writer. “Sweep 1” assesses a text for “clarity” i.e., a tight focus, clear bottom-line message, and effective organization. “Sweep 2” relates to the “persuasiveness” of a text, i.e., its analytical rigor, outlook, implications, and judgments. “Sweep 3” focuses on “packaging,” i.e., the form, format, flow, and consistency of a text and its supporting material. Finally, “Sweep 4” assesses “writing,” i.e., a text’s style, transitions, sentence and paragraph structure, and word choice.

Part 2 extends related considerations to the task of intelligence briefing. Here, Major explains that the “ABCs” of effective briefing include being “accurate,” “brief,” and “clear.”

He also guides readers through the process of organizing, writing, rehearsing, and fine-tuning a presentation. In addition to his practical strategies and useful advice, students and practitioners of intelligence will benefit from the extensive individual and group exercises included at the end of many of the book’s chapters.

BOTH ALLY AND ENEMY

Major’s volume mostly reflects his own “basic principles.” Topics and anecdotes are occasionally introduced that are not elaborated or explicitly connected to prior themes. But my critique of *Communication with Intelligence* centers on its depiction of communication. Major defines “communication/communications” as both noun and adjective. He states: “*Communication* refers to the process or act of communicating. . . . *Communications* are the means of sending messages. . . .” Major thus conceptualizes communication as a process of transmitting messages from intelligence analysts to policymakers. This “transmission” or “conduit” model of communication is widespread, intuitive, and based on the following assumptions: (1) communication involves the direct transfer of thoughts and feelings between people; (2) these thoughts and feelings can be encoded into words; and (3) recipients extract and decode thoughts and feelings from the words.¹ In this way,

communication “success” can be measured (at least theoretically) in terms of the correspondence between a message recipient’s understanding and a sender’s intended meaning. Major illustrates these assumptions when he argues that “meanings sent are not always the same ones received,” “meaning is in the mind,” and that “communication is imperfect.” From this perspective, communication is both the ally and enemy of intelligence.

For example, the conceptualization of communication as a conduit underlies the impulse to standardize the use of words of estimative probability (or “WEPS”) across the national security arena in ways that lead to their consistent interpretation by officials and policymakers.² Advocates of standardized WEPS emphasize the many barriers to accurate transmission, including variations in word meaning (“meaning is in the mind”), “noise” in the channel, information overload, and inadequate feedback. But a conduit model of communication risks deemphasizing the role that audiences play in categorizing messages via preexisting historical, cultural, and political frameworks, and evaluating those messages in terms of source credibility, intention, and trustworthiness.³ The conduit model of communication is not “wrong”; however, intelligence stakeholders may find situations where other conceptualizations of communication prove more useful.

Specifically, communication theorist Robert Craig argues that “communication” can be conceptualized in a variety of ways to suit pragmatic goals and objectives. The field of Communication maintains no established, consistent set of theoretical assumptions. Indeed, Craig’s “metamodel” of communication delineates seven “traditions” of communication theorizing: rhetorical, semiotic, phenomenological, cybernetic, sociopsychological, sociocultural, and critical. Each of these traditions retains distinct (and often incompatible) ontological, epistemological, axiological, and praxiological assumptions and commitments. Communication has thus been described alternately as an “eclectic” and/or “fragmented” field.⁴ Borrowing Craig’s analogy, it is as if geologists were to argue the existence of “seven theories of the Earth”—each one viable for addressing certain scientific problems.

THE RHETORICAL TRADITION

In his concern for “effectiveness,” James Major’s treatment of communication aligns mainly with the “cybernetic” and “sociopsychological” traditions of communication theorizing. His treatment is reasonable, given the assumptions about communication from which he draws. Yet, the indeterminacy surrounding the nature of “communication” opens

up possibilities for productively reconceptualizing the relationship between communication and intelligence. One way of doing so draws from the rhetorical tradition in order to illuminate how different assumptions about communication can lead to different concerns vis-à-vis the writing and briefing of intelligence. A rhetorical perspective on intelligence might begin, for example, by noting that etymologically, the word “intelligence” is compounded from the Latin *inter*—meaning “between”—and *legere*—meaning “choose,” “pick out,” or “read.” By hailing audiences to “choose between” interpretations of ambiguous phenomena, intelligence is a deeply strategic practice.

Within organizational contexts, the study of rhetoric is typically concerned with the actual or potential effects of intentionally produced messages, the use of symbols, inductive reasoning, formal and public speeches and documents, and the forces of identification and persuasion.⁵ These concerns influence the management of uncertainty surrounding physical, electronic, and human sources of “evidence” within processes of *multiple advocacy* and *devil’s advocacy*. According to Michael Handel, multiple advocacy involves “the deliberate establishment of several independent agencies in order to foster increased competition and greater analytical variety, thereby affording policymakers access to a

wider spectrum of views.⁶ By contrast, devil’s advocacy entails encouraging “an individual to freely express unpopular, dissenting opinions, which allows decisionmakers to consider alternative views while protecting those who present them.”⁷ Handel argued that multiple advocacy “makes sense,” but can exacerbate—rather than reduce—ambiguity. Moreover, the process of multiple advocacy can be easily corrupted by parochial and bureaucratic interests as officials and policymakers attempt to assert their preferred interpretations in order to reach their objectives.⁸ Handel was even more skeptical of devil’s advocacy, noting that “a true advocate of opposing views on an important issue would not be employed in an intelligence organization in the first place, unless he were to conceal his actual opinions in order to survive.”⁹

Interpersonal Dynamics

These institutional dynamics complicate the straightforward transmission of meaning from analysts to policymakers in written or spoken form. Moreover, these institutional dynamics intersect with interpersonal dynamics among analysts, officials, and policymakers that shape how intelligence is written, briefed, interpreted, and used. For example, Loch K. Johnson notes that policymakers are more likely to consider intelligence assessments generated

under the supervision of preferred analysts or officials. As one former intelligence official stated: "...our real product was National Intelligence Officers—not paper but people, experts, in a position to attend meetings and offer judgments."¹⁰ Interpersonal dynamics influence the meaning of intelligence by allowing officials and policymakers to shape each other's interpretations. For example, journalist James Risen reports that one of former Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) George Tenet's top lieutenants stated: "George Tenet was too close to the president.... [As CIA Director] You shouldn't be the president's friend."¹¹ Such friendships potentially render carefully chosen WEPs more-or-less irrelevant as meanings generated in conversations among analysts, officials, and policymakers replace them. In a now infamous example of this dynamic, reporter Bob Woodward disclosed that Tenet told President George W. Bush in 2002 that the existence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) was a "slam dunk" when the underlying intelligence supporting that claim was spurious at best.

Ambiguity surrounding physical, electronic, and human sources of evidence concerning an adversary's capabilities and intentions, the institutional norms and imperatives shaping analysis, the genre characteristics of written intelligence products, the probabilistic nature of analytical judgments, and

interpersonal dynamics among analysts, officials, and policymakers constitute intelligence as a rhetorical practice.

BENEFITS OF THE RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Would-be intelligence communicators may benefit from a perspective on communication that elaborates the influence of institutional and interpersonal pressures within this environment. In other words, as former intelligence official Mark Lowenthal argues, "the role of intelligence is to reduce uncertainty."¹² A rhetorical perspective would maintain that "reducing uncertainty" often relates more to dynamics among rhetors, audiences, messages, and contexts than to a given intelligence assessment's fidelity to an underlying material reality. (That intelligence is a rhetorical practice does not mean it is not useful, however.) A benefit of a rhetorical perspective is that it directs attention not only to the technical aspects of writing and briefing intelligence, but also to the situated, human context in which these activities occur. As the cultural critic Kenneth Burke stated years ago:

Inssofar as the individual is involved in conflict with other individuals or groups, the study of this same individual would fall under the head of Rhetoric. . . . The Rhetoric must lead us through the Scramble, the

Wrangle of the Market Place, the flurries and flare-ups of the Human Barnyard, the Give and Take, the wavering line of pressure and counterpressure, the Logomachy, the onus of ownership, the War of Nerves, the War.¹³

A rhetorical perspective thus suggests that the problem of how to represent the ambiguous, partial, selective, and contingent nature of intelligence within an institutional environment saturated with ideological and strategic interests will continue to endure, notwithstanding James Major's valuable contribution in *Communicating with Intelligence*.

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