# Intelligence Failures and the Limits of Logic

RALPH PETERS

One of our prime cultural biases is the assumption that all things are knowable, and that we have only to get the numbers right to predict the sum of anything. We live in a century of mathematics, and the splendor of science has been enriched to depths beyond our common capability to understand. Hardly a century ago, Tennyson coaxed Romantic over-achievers "To follow knowledge like a sinking star, Beyond the utmost bound of human thought."[1] But, already, our "knowledge" of the universe, assisted by the computer's ability to speed through calculations that far outstrip the power of pencil or chalk, has, literally, out-reached the grasp of Newtonian thought. We know so much that we cannot fully know all that we know.

Then how can it not be frustrating, to a civilization that grapples with the physics of a black hole, to be constantly surprised by the misbehavior of less-credentialed cultures just a comfortable jet flight from home? In a universe where all is tacitly assumed to be knowable—and we still retain that 19th-century conceit, though we dress it in more somber colors—it seems obvious that *someone* must have failed when we choke on our morning coffee at the totally unexpected news reports just in from the Third World.

The Shah of Shahs falls off the pedestal we paid good money to erect for him, and our recent allies, the Iranian people, start calling us all sorts of imaginative names. An increasingly robust Mexican economy receives a bonus infusion of petrodollars only to develop, without warning, the financial equivalent of AIDS in less than a decade. We spend our best available minds to construct painstakingly detailed assessments of what clever moves the Soviets will make next, only to have the Empire of Evil

# Report Documentation Page

*Form Approved*
*OMB No. 0704-0188*



| 1. REPORT DATE | 2. REPORT TYPE | 3. DATES COVERED |
|---|---|---|
| **1987** | | **00-00-1987 to 00-00-1987** |

| 4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE | 5a. CONTRACT NUMBER |
|---|---|
| **Intelligence Failures and the Limits of Logic** | 5b. GRANT NUMBER |
| | 5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER |
| 6. AUTHOR(S) | 5d. PROJECT NUMBER |
| | 5e. TASK NUMBER |
| | 5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER |
| 7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)<br>**U.S. Army War College,ATTN: Parameters ,122 Forbes Avenue ,Carlisle,PA,17013-5238** | 8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER |
| 9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) | 10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) |
| | 11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S) |

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
**Approved for public release; distribution unlimited**

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT

15. SUBJECT TERMS

| 16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF: | | | 17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT | 18. NUMBER OF PAGES | 19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. REPORT | b. ABSTRACT | c. THIS PAGE | | | |
| **unclassified** | **unclassified** | **unclassified** | **Same as Report (SAR)** | **8** | |

(Empire of Mediocrity?) embarrass us by doing something colossally stupid or clumsy rather than breathtakingly insidious. As of this writing, we are scrambling to calculate future events ranging from the internal evolution of Haiti to the counter-SDI structure of Soviet strategic forces. And, despite our very best, most conscientious efforts, we are bound to get a great deal of it wrong—added to which high drama will likely unfold in exactly that area of the world we are momentarily ignoring.

And the press, and the opposition, and the citizen who just read a three-month-old news magazine in his dentist's waiting room, will cry, "Intelligence failure!"

As a ten-year veteran of the discipline of intelligence analysis, I have some bad news for the already choleric taxpayer: a broad range of "intelligence failures" remains inevitable. But, on a considerably less dramatic level, there is some hope—we *could* do a bit better than we have done in the recent past.

We must, however, take a hard look at the intellectual architecture currently popular within the best neighborhoods of the intelligence community (where the pilgrim encounters an abundance of prefabricated constructions with impressive facades, multiple stories, and not a few condominiums). An honest appraisal is apt to conclude with the judgment that we have built for display, and not to last. Certainly, there are problems with the sewage.

Our most obnoxious assumption—and one that has been painfully disproven over and over again—is that the dynamics of human social and political behavior are thoroughly quantifiable. Masquerading as true contemporary scholarship, this approach to analysis is really just high-tech numerology. Numbers *are* genuinely useful to the discriminating analyst, in such forms as production statistics, demographic projections, strategic transport capacities, and even public opinion polls. But numbers lose a great deal of their magical power when they must deal with human emotions (otherwise mathematicians would get all the girls). Numbers are the purest form of logical expression. But much of human nature is decidedly illogical—emotionally, rather than analytically, driven. Much of human behavior remains practically "incalculable" even in retrospect. Our common history is punctuated with frightful excesses that can only be understood on an intuitive, emotional level, and each new generation is

---

Captain Ralph Peters is the Chief, All Source Production Section (G2), III Corps, Fort Hood, Texas. Captain Peters enlisted in the Army as a private in 1976 and was commissioned through OCS in 1980. He has served as an enlisted intelligence analyst with the 8th Infantry Division (Mechanized); as S2, 1-46 Infantry; as Chief of the Intelligence Production Section, 1st Armored Division; and as Chief of Current Intelligence, III Corps. Captain Peters has published extensively in military journals.

---

fated to shake its collective head at the past, muttering, "How could they have done that?"

The hapless intelligence analyst, on the other hand, does not have to wait for the passing of the generations to cry "How could they have done that?" He has only to wait for the next embarrassment of his solemn predictions. Thus in this one respect, at least, intelligence professionals seem to be ahead of their time.

A wonderful paradigm for the limits of logic in analyzing human behavior can be drawn by briefly considering the enduring appeal of doctrinaire Communism. First of all, the one major philosophical-political system that is most obviously—if often only textually—tied to logical determinism is Marxism-Leninism. Yet this system has had mostly a rawly romantic appeal to men. While Capitalism bluntly prefers facts to ideas, Communism deals shamelessly in dreams. Communism, in its various mutations, continues to dumbfound rational Westerners with its ability to capture new adherents even though it has nowhere produced the promised results.

The witchery is that Communism never runs out of promises. Often dreadful in its reality, Communism has nonetheless produced the first enduring secular *vision* of Utopia. Capitalism deals stubbornly, and often irritably, in the problems of today; Communism simply promises that those problems will go away if only the faithful believe. Millennial in its essence, Communism is well suited to fill the vacuum left by religion in the secular age—especially in suddenly disrupted traditionalist societies. Our Western statesmen, in all of their intellectual grandeur, have rarely grasped the simple fact that Capitalism has no mechanism to appeal to the truly hopeless. Communism recognizes and exploits the fact that most men would rather die for a beautiful lie than for an ugly truth. Addressing the wasting poor of the Third World, Capitalism raises the prospect of minimum-wage jobs for the next generation. Communism shamelessly promises salvation, power, and revenge.

Yet, ultimately, even Communism with its rhetorical totems is only a catalyst for latent emotional powers—the human heritage of rage that cannot be quantified. Communism is the flag of convenience for the spiritually dispossessed. To espouse Communism is to admit that one has not only run out of practical ideas, but that one has chosen a sort of secular martyrdom. And the speeches that drone on for hours in Havana, Kim il-Sung's parables of himself, and the nervous visions of Daniel Ortega really bear more similarity to primitive religious litanies than to efficient tools of government.

In the short novel *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad offers a stunning image of a 19th-century gunboat attempting to shell a primitive

continent.[2] It is, among other things, an image of the futility of attempting to impose techno-civilization on the wildness at the heart of mankind. We analysts pecking away at our second-rate computers, attempting to quantify the future of a world much of which is merely chaos artificially structured to ease postal delivery, often resemble that puffing little gunboat in both our hubris and our accomplishment.

Less than a generation ago, we spoke blithely of "winning the hearts and minds" of the populations of developing countries. Today, the best analysts have retreated to merely trying to understand the minds—even though political, social, and economic behavior may actually arise more from the "heart," from the anti-rational possibilities lurking within those foreign, foreign figures who so often seem to make monkeys of us all.

We study hard. We read the best texts, listen dutifully to the acknowledged experts, and strive honestly to grasp the future's single possible course in our estimates. We seek right thought and correct action. But, in our intellectual (often merely educational) pride, we limit ourselves needlessly, willfully closing our eyes to the facts that do not fit our predetermined interpretation of the world. We do not really analyze foreign peoples. Instead, we simply revisit our own educations. For every intelligence analyst who seeks to probe that "heart of darkness" that is the future, there seem to be a thousand who are content to remember what they once were told, to spruce up classroom formulae with contemporary dates and names.

But no people can be truly known (if, indeed, a people can be known at all) merely through the analysis of their gross national product, physical environment, political, military, and overt social establishments, and other relatively quantifiable aspects, since charts, graphs, and tables can neither encompass nor tether human desires. All of the above is indispensable, and yet it is nothing more than the requisite background information.

We take the easy way out (although even this demands a formidable amount of work), characterizing the foreign citizen in terms of what he earns, eats, wears, and how he votes (with either ballot or gun). We consider his religious, tribal, and family loyalties. We gather statistics on his prisons, press, and fleets. We count his Mercedes in one column and his oxcarts in another. We know the type and amount of fertilizer he uses, and the type and amount he should use. But we shy at reaching into the man himself.

Certainly the partially quantifiable inability of a man to feed his family or treat their diseases highlights obvious vulnerabilities in the sociopolitical system that arches over his worried life. But if you want to know what excites a man to action, and just how volatile that action may ultimately be, you must try, while being prepared to fail over and over again, to identify that for which he *yearns*.

Our vocabulary has grown cold. We fear the effect of words that might infect our scholarly prose with the cancer of emotion. We sincerely believe (since we have been repeatedly assured) that any book on Latin America that bears the imprint of an established university press has more to teach us about those dumbfoundingly foreign people south of the Rio Grande than does the fiction of Gabriel García Márquez. We read the professors. Castro reads García Márquez.

Overall, it is the misfortune of the analyst that the mobs and strong men who intermittently convulse the Third World rarely bother to study the rules that American and European academics prescribe for them. Their ingratitude toward our efforts at corralling their destinies within our theories is so boundless that they occasionally just do what they *feel*. It is the stuff of quickening headlines and governmental dismay.

As analysts, we know the theories of economic assistance and the infrastructure problems related to chronic underdevelopment. We have thoroughly described the problems and even constructed marvelous abstract models to solve them. And we are by no means dummies. Yet, we fail resoundingly. At the risk of some well-intentioned wooliness, I think it might be otherwise. We have to open our minds, which an inbred educational system has closed at least to the degree of Albanian society.

The price of bauxite on the world market is a factor critical to the well-being of the Jamaican economy. But knowing that price and its impact on state debt really does not help us understand the inner workings and dreams of the average Jamaican down in the parishes. Nonetheless, a Caribbean analyst will shut himself up behind economic indices when he must project the long-term prospects for continued democracy in Jamaica. I would urge him to make just a little time in his schedule to listen to recent Jamaican music, for an incandescent artist such as the late Bob Marley can make the aching and slow fury of the young unemployed Jamaican more vivid and knowable than an entire book on bauxite.

*Courtesy Island Records, Adrian Boot*

**Bob Marley was awarded Jamaica's Order of Merit for his contributions to the nation's culture. His lyrics tell us more about his countrymen than any economic indicator can.**

It is genuinely hard to understand why academic disciplines such as political science and international relations are so anxious to distance themselves from popular art forms. After all, one of the keynotes of successful art is that it encapsulates or translates vivid commonalities. Art permits a *visceral understanding*, without which the study of foreign peoples must remain incomplete.

An example of the political maturity and insight available in contemporary art forms is the relationship of V. S. Naipaul's novel *Guerrillas* to the Grenada rescue operation.[3] Writing in the decade before our intervention, Naipaul essentially modeled the internal political scenario that would later emerge in Grenada (although Grenada was not his subject) and "solved" the model with US military helicopters. When I encountered the book shortly after its publication, I dismissed it as one of Naipaul's lesser works—too much artifice. Mr. Naipaul, I have learned my lesson.

We are too proud. While we should not—dare not—dispense with scholarly rigor, we must develop corollary approaches to sampling the lifeblood of other peoples. At the very least, we must recognize that there is possible value in alternative methodologies—including the willingness to trust mature intuition even unsupported by statistics. The trick, if there is one, is to master the art of empathizing without being co-opted into the other's system of beliefs.

Good analysis is, then, largely a matter of what the poet Keats called "negative capability," the ability to assimilate dualities without creating conflict within oneself that hopelessly muddles everything.[4] This is very, very hard. But it is worth the effort. In any case, it offers more hope of a partial remedy to our "intelligence failure" disease than does the current practice of examining the slums and villages of the Third World from university offices—or from international chain hotels in the capital city, where we fear the water and the waiter's touch.

We are marginally better at analyzing the Soviets than at figuring out the Third World, if only because Soviet studies occupy so much of our effort. But we repeatedly do needlessly badly when we negotiate with them just because we do not really see them as human beings. This is especially pronounced in the area of military intelligence, where we tend to regard the "Russian" as a characterless thing that drives a tank. And yet the Russian character is so culturally rich that the world of music and literature continues to shimmer with its enduring contributions. This dehumanizing of the Russian (or Soviet in general), based largely upon our own naivety, fears, and a bit of intellectual sloth, is not only costly at the negotiating table and in our insomnia-remedy intelligence estimates, it is both dangerous and debasing to ourselves.

It is dangerous because it prevents us from understanding these people who are, tragically but frankly, our collective opponents for the

*"In war, it is easier to defeat the opponent you understand than it is to fight an enigma."*

present. And, in war, it is easier to defeat the opponent you essentially understand than it is to fight an enigma. Further, our inability to grasp the Soviet military hierarchy as a structure of living individuals with personal differences in talents, visions, and experience renders our intelligence evaluations disarmingly superficial and stupidly dehumanized ("The impact of 30 percent attrition on the second operational echelon equates to . . . " and so on). As an intelligence analyst, I can presently tell the decisionmaker precisely how many tanks an enemy formation has, but very little about that formation's commander. As a soldier, I would settle for a very approximate figure on tank strength if I could know the essence of the enemy commander as a man.

Our approach is debasing to us because it lulls our humanity to sleep. We, as a people, were at our moral worst during the Chernobyl disaster, gloating with unabashed *schadenfreude* at an event that visited far more harm on average Soviet men, women, and children than it inflicted on their stable, if somewhat embarrassed, government. Our loss of perspective appears grotesque. While the Soviet government is implacably the enemy of the United States, the individual working man in Kiev has full claim on my sympathy until he picks up a gun.

But will taking a more ecumenical approach to the background research for estimative intelligence solve the problems described above? Will watching a succession of Indian popular films enable us to accurately predict the future of the subcontinent?

Of course not. But most human progress comes in increments, and a trifle more open-mindedness may bring marginal—but meaningful—improvement in our intelligence capability. The blindingly obvious recognition that eccentric human decisionmaking may at least partially determine the course of human events would certainly help. And we could definitely profit by stepping back from our pretension that there is but one predestined and fully knowable future. The future, except to the spiritually boorish, is incomparably rich in alternatives. The best analysts I am privileged to know rarely stand up and state categorically that such and such will definitely happen just so (although there is a time for this, too). Rather, they "wargame" various options, some of which *must* be highly imaginative if we are to receive good value for our efforts. Even this process can degenerate into a form of playing it safe—deluging the decisionmaker with a list of every possible option, thereby abdicating all real responsibility. But at

its best, this earnest pursuit of tomorrow's deepest secrets can become an intellectual endeavor worthy of our nation.

And we will always get some of it wrong. By this statement, I do not mean to convey defeatism—on the contrary, this essential realization can be positively liberating to the analyst struggling to mature in a suffocatingly closed system. We *will* always get some of it wrong. So let us do our best to get as much of it right as possible, recognizing that much remains unpredictable, except by lucky guess, in a world where a single bullet still has the power to alter the course of nations.

On the positive side, intelligence analysis that perseveres in an endeavor to *understand* rather than merely explain (or make requirements go away) may reveal previously unimagined opportunities to shape the future advantageously to ourselves. After all, the future—logically—must be at least as malleable as the past, and a skillful historian can make of the past nearly anything he wishes. The fundamental purpose of today's intelligence effort is to achieve future advantage—winning the future.

I wish I could offer upbeat hopes for immediate progress. Unfortunately, current trends are more worrisome than they are encouraging. The intelligence community seems determined to find a formula for everything. Partly because so many of the nation's best minds are going to the private sector rather than into the government's various intelligence services, there is a nervous trend toward reducing intelligence analysis to a matter of quantifiables even more so than it is now. Yet, the qualities that are most lacking in our efforts refuse to be quantified. Perhaps, one day, Artificial Intelligence will master empathy, imagination, and mature intuition. But it is unlikely to occur this fiscal year.

Our desperate need is to achieve balance, recognizing that a properly integrated intelligence effort requires minds and talents both practical and imaginative—some technically oriented, at least a few eccentrically visionary. The penalty, if we continue to reduce intelligence more and more to a logic that is increasingly limited to expression in integers, is that we will experience not fewer but more intelligence "failures." I believe the United States intelligence community has, at least for the present, reached the limits of logic. Rather than continuing to examine bodies of men in numbing detail, we need now to explore their souls.

**NOTES**

1. Alfred Tennyson, "Ulysses," in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Longman, Green, 1969), p. 564.
2. Joseph Conrad, "Heart of Darkness," in *Great Modern Short Stories*, ed. Bennett Cerf (Random House, 1942), p. 18.
3. V. S. Naipaul, *Guerrillas* (New York: Knopf, 1975).
4. John Keats, the English Romantic poet, coined the term "negative capability," defining it as the capability "of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (A. F. Scott, *Current Literary Terms* [New York: St. Martin's, 1965], p. 192).