Intelligence Analysis in Red and Blue

The years since 11 September 2001 (9/11) have witnessed an important increase in the conscientiousness of intelligence analysis in the United States Intelligence Community (IC). In every agency, managers of analysis and the analysts themselves are applying to their trade a rigor that is unprecedented in scope and seriousness. Assumptions are being examined, cognitive traps avoided, and flaws in logic exposed. The analysis of competing hypotheses and devil’s advocacy arguments are the order of the day. Well-thumbed copies of Richards Heuer’s “bible” sit on hundreds of desks. Each source’s credibility is questioned without mercy. Without question, the quality of analysis in the IC has improved.

A PREDISPOSITION

But is there mindset bias so pervasive in intelligence analysis that it has gone unrecognized, even in this rigorous environment? Is a bias crippling effective communication between intelligence and policy, accounting for the many reported frictions of recent years? I believe there is, leading me to state this proposition, based on four decades’ service in U.S. intelligence:

Intelligence analysts’ selection and understanding of information, and their expression of judgments, are profoundly affected by their worldview. This is a mindset bias functionally akin to others that are well known in the profession.

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The key word here is worldview. What does it mean in this context? It is a person’s underlying set of beliefs, assumptions, experiences—even wisdom—about how the world works. In the context of intelligence analysis, worldview encompasses ideas about the place of the United States in the world, the causes of economic development (or the lack of it), and the nature of freedom. It extends to basic ideas about diplomacy, military power, religion, academia, the press, and civil liberties.

Trying to identify and categorize such ideas might be thought a vast, rarefied, and pointless scholastic exercise, leading to no useful insights about how intelligence analysis is done. In fact, however, a rubric is at hand which everyone is familiar—at least in its crude journalistic form. But this rubric is not at all crude. Instead, it is a key to understanding a great deal about modern American society: it is the division of American public opinion into two camps—the Red and the Blue.

TV Graphics Reflect the Division

An artifact of the color scheme in the television graphics that illustrated the results of the 2000 presidential election, Red and Blue have come to signify something much deeper and nuanced than electoral party preferences. A bifurcation of American culture itself is reflected in the Red-Blue dichotomy. These cultural differences certainly did not originate with the 2000 election; they have been brewing at least since the 1960s. The depth of this cultural division largely accounts for the widely lamented inequity of much contemporary American political and social discourse. The choice between Red and Blue is not one of mere preference, as between vanilla or chocolate ice cream. Rather, it is a matter of what someone holds to be true about how the world works—that is, a matter of personal worldview.

Unsurprisingly, the Red and Blue worldviews affect intelligence analysis. A few qualifications are in order. First, the eight topics being used to sustain this assertion are not exhaustive, but rather representative; they capture many of the worldview differences that are relevant in intelligence. Second, every characterization could be amplified, qualified, or otherwise amended; again, they are meant to capture general truths, not to account for every possible variation. Third, not everyone of a Blue or Red mindset will necessarily be in step with the ascribed outlook on every one of these issues. Still, the mindset characterizations must be admitted to have a significant degree of validity.

Also, the Blue and Red mindsets are not simply polar opposites or negations of each other. They are two different and incompatible understandings of how the world works, not a series of binary disagreements. Incompatible views on a given topic cannot both be true.
(Of course, in logic both views might be false.) So an analyst’s worldview has a fundamental impact on the accuracy of his or her analysis.

**U.S. EXCEPTIONALISM**

A U.S. intelligence analyst usually addresses events, trends, or issues that bear on national security interests. This activity presupposes a certain idea of what U.S. national security interests are, and by extension, on what the actual or proper role and status of the United States in the international system might then be. The Blue analyst takes a view he sees as basically impartial: the United States is in all essential respects a country like any other, differing only in certain attributes such as population, wealth, or form of government. The United States thus is, or at least ought to be, subject to all the same status limitations and constraints on behavior as any other country. Indeed, the Blue analyst commonly takes this view a step further, believing that American economic and military power have precipitated U.S. behaviors in the international sphere that can be characterized only as overbearing or even abusive. For this reason, the Blue analyst tends to accept the idea that the United States ought to be subject to special scrutiny and perhaps constraints, whether externally or internally imposed.

In contrast, the Red analyst concludes from history that the United States is a uniquely important force for good in the world. The American economic and political model inspires and induces prosperity and freedom in other countries to a highly significant degree. Therefore, the United States has a responsibility to exercise world leadership, encouraging liberty and opposing despotism. In turn, the U.S. government should put U.S. national interests ahead of foreign opinion or competing preferences.

How might this worldview difference manifest itself in intelligence analysis? The Blue analyst might be less perceptive of opportunities for policymakers to advance U.S. interests, or be quick to highlight certain foreign complaints about U.S. actions. The Red analyst, by contrast, may be less alert to the alienation of allies, or fail to identify opportunities for coalition-building.

**ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

Intelligence analysts often must account for a country’s current economic state, or assess the prospective effects of some new government’s economic policy. The Blue and Red worldviews immediately come into play. The Blue analyst takes the view that governments are uniquely able to perceive broad economic needs and exercise productive economic policies. Governments therefore should naturally make or guide major investment decisions, favor selected economic sectors for development, or set the terms of international...
trade. Major private corporations, in contrast, by nature pursue their particular narrow interests, often at the expense of developing countries. International trade is largely a zero-sum activity; if one party gains, the other necessarily has lost correspondingly. Economic growth, the Blue analyst believes, occurs unevenly and creates wide disparities in wealth and income, leading to discontent and social instability.

The Red analyst sees most government involvement in economic development as a net negative. Governments should generally not do economic planning at all. Instead, they should concentrate on ensuring the soundness of the currency, building a legal and social structure that protects private property rights and the sanctity of contracts, and perhaps promoting certain infrastructure projects. The Red analyst will look approvingly at free trade policies, while shaking his head at protectionism. He finds that disparities in wealth or income within or between countries are natural and doubts they necessarily lead to resentment and conflict, much less that governments should engage in redistribution.

How might these worldview differences affect intelligence analysis? The Blue analyst will often not think to attribute slow economic growth in a country to adverse government policy, or will issue overoptimistic estimates of future growth in a country where interventionism is the rule. The Red analyst may be surprised in the opposite way: some countries with interventionist economic policies experience very high growth indeed.

DIPLOMACY

A great deal of intelligence analysis consists of monitoring and analyzing diplomatic activity, whether between target countries, or between some foreign country and the United States. Moreover, a primary customer for this analysis is the diplomatic service in the U.S. State Department. Thus, how an intelligence analyst conceives of diplomacy in the abstract matters a great deal.

The Blue analyst believes that the essence of international relations is peaceful, uncoerced bilateral or multilateral negotiation and other diplomatic interaction. Rare is the international issue that cannot be resolved through earnest negotiation, in this view. The resort to coercive measures, up to and including military force, particularly by the United States, is attributed primarily to a lack of good will, managerial competence, and honorable intent.

In contrast, the Red analyst sees diplomacy as one of several instruments of national power, in most cases meaningful only in the context of power relationships, whether economic or military. Negotiation should be entered into only warily, usually when the U.S. side holds ample high cards. Negotiation, in the Red view, is certainly not an objective of foreign policy.
policy, but is rather a tool that under favorable circumstances can be used to achieve outcomes that are beneficial to U.S. national interests.

What could be the effects on the intelligence each analyst might produce? The Blue analyst is more likely to overlook opportunities available to policymakers that lie outside the diplomatic sphere. He may also tend to see in foreign adversaries a mirror image of his own devotion to honest negotiation, missing instances of foreign duplicity. The Red analyst, in turn, may underestimate the resourcefulness of American diplomacy, failing to recognize that U.S. diplomats often do exercise pressure or even coercion to achieve results favorable to U.S. interests.

**U.S. ARMED FORCES**

The percentage of intelligence analysts with active-duty military experience is much smaller than it was several decades ago. At the same time, the armed forces have a distinctive, and massive, need for intelligence support. An analyst's ability and readiness to effectively provide this support is affected by his or her understanding of—and attitude toward—the nation's armed forces.

The Blue analyst usually does not have military experience, and in fact often views the armed forces as a remote, necessary evil. He or she may voice the opinion that the military is too influential in the Intelligence Community, and in national security affairs generally. The Blue analyst tends to believe that military officers lack intellectual depth and breadth of knowledge, that they are simplistic in their analyses and support inappropriately aggressive U.S. actions in the international sphere. These opinions occur somewhat less frequently in the military intelligence agencies, but they are far from rare, especially among the civilian cadre.

An intelligence analyst of the Red worldview will more often have served on active duty, but such veterans are still a minority. The Red analyst usually thinks of the U.S. military officer corps as a national treasure, a resource of the highest value, and finds most officers to be well-educated, with an outlook that is tempered by real-world experience and marked by the exercise of authority.

These alternative views of the U.S. armed forces play out in intelligence analysis. The Blue analyst tends to view intelligence reporting and assessments of military origin as less reliable than the rest, and considers uniformed intelligence analysts to be second-rate. Blue-shaded analysis may shy away from threat assessments that imply policy decisions in favor of military action. Meanwhile, analysts of a more Red persuasion often are less attuned than they ought to be to the nonmilitary levers of power available to the policymaker.
TERRORISM

Red and Blue analysts tend to have markedly different views of the nature and threat of modern terrorism. The Blue analyst may be ready to concede the occasional role of military special operations forces in counterterrorism, but more often thinks of the problem in terms related to law enforcement. Terrorists are viewed as criminals, best dealt with through police methods and judicial punishments. To the Blue analyst, terrorism itself is an extreme yet comprehensible reaction of oppressed, deprived, or alienated people against injustice or foreign occupation.

The Red analyst sees terrorism as a strategic threat to national security. In this age of U.S. dominance in weapons technology and conventional warfare, the Red analyst views terrorism and insurgency—augmented by skillful information operations via the Internet and international press—as the asymmetric weapon of choice in a long-term effort to gain strategic advantage. Although individual terrorist actions may be organizationally diffuse, the Red analyst sees them as a coherent phenomenon that elevates the threat to the strategic, even existential, level.

Blue and Red analysts are thus inevitably going to produce differently framed intelligence assessments related to terrorism: Is terrorism a law enforcement problem or a national security issue? Is it incidental or strategically critical? Is it diffused or is it coherent, even orchestrated?

ISLAM

An analyst's view of terrorism is naturally intertwined with his or her view of modern-day Islam. The Blue analyst holds that the great majority of Muslims worldwide are peaceful and pose no threat to the U.S. or the West. This opinion holds that the Islamic world can rightly claim victimization. The Blue analyst maintains that Islamic terrorist groups constitute a microscopic proportion of all Muslims, and allows that, while some terrorist leaders may indeed be religious fanatics, most are cynically manipulating Islamic themes for political purposes.

By contrast, the Red analyst sees in the current era all the signs of a civilizational uprising of the Islamic world against the West, quite unwarranted by any Western policies or actions. Islam is seen as a stultifying and often violent political-religious system. Red analysts point to the virtual absence of antiterrorist outcry in the Islamic world as evidence that Muslims generally accept, condone, or even support terrorism. The political manifestations of Islam are thus seen as comparable to Nazism and Communism as a national security threat.

The effects on analysis of the Red-Blue divide in regard to Islam are relatively minor, but not because of any consensus among analysts. Most analysis of events and trends in the Islamic world avoid addressing the
nature of Islam itself. Shia and Sunni tags certainly are placed without hesitation, but deeper issues tend to be avoided. Blue analysts set little store by religious issues, and generally confine their attentions to the secular political or military aspects of the topic at hand. Red analysts also avoid addressing the nature of Islam, but they do so out of a professional ethic that frowns on statements critical of a religion.

RELIGION

To take this exposition a step deeper, consider the Red-Blue divide on the subject of religion in general. The Blue analyst approaches issues from a secular point of view, considering religions to be widespread delusions, without valid substance beyond their capacity to motivate poorly educated people in one direction or another, or to segment them into factions. The Blue analyst sees religions as usually harmless, but at times as the basis for injustice, persecution, discrimination, and conflict. In this view, peace, justice, and social stability are fostered by secular government, with religious identity and observance marginalized.

Not that the subject is grist for casual conversation in the agency cafeteria, but the Red analyst generally takes the view that the God of the Judeo-Christian Bible is active in current world affairs, though in ways that are usually not immediately apparent. Because religious beliefs exercise a profound influence on this analyst’s worldview, he or she does not hesitate to try to identify religious influences on the policies and actions of the leaders and peoples being studied.

The analyst’s view of religion affects his or her intelligence work. The Blue analyst will tend to miss, minimize, or misunderstand the nature and force of religious motivations in situations where they are in play. One might suppose that the Red analyst would tend to overestimate the effect of religious motivations, or see them where they are in fact absent, but as discussed, the Red analyst—an intelligence professional—is inhibited by his training and experience from addressing religious issues. Separation of church and state is not solely a phenomenon of the domestic political scene.

THE PRESS

Intelligence analysts absorb a great deal of their information on world events and trends from the public press. Despite the IC’s emphasis on the importance of current intelligence, there is no classified substitute for a morning newspaper. Not surprisingly, however, the Blue and Red analysts read the press through different lenses.

The Blue-minded analyst will say that the top tier of the U.S. and international press usually does a good job of identifying issues for news
coverage, and of framing them to provide a balanced understanding of events and controversies. Mindful of the limitations imposed by deadlines and access to news sources, the Blue analyst is generally content that the information reported is reasonably accurate and that editorial and reportorial analysis is usually worthy of consideration. While suffering some discomfort when purported intelligence sources and methods are published, the analyst takes the longer view that there is a healthy adversarial relationship between the press and government. The Blue analyst’s trusted sources of news and opinion include the New York Times, the Washington Post, The Economist, National Public Radio, CNN, the major U.S. television networks and the BBC, and think tanks such as the Brookings Institution and the Council on Foreign Relations.

The Red analyst approaches what he would call the mainstream press in much the same way that he would China’s People’s Daily: a necessary input to understanding, but not a medium to be trusted at face value. The Red analyst sees the mainstream press as selecting and framing stories with a view to promoting a leftist political agenda; facts and quotations are selected with this agenda consciously or unconsciously in mind. The press, in this view, will always give critics and adversaries of the United States the benefit of the doubt, if not indeed supporting them outright, while discrediting or damaging U.S. national security efforts whenever possible. The Red analyst may read the New York Times, but more trusted sources of news and opinion include the Weekly Standard, National Review, the Washington Times, Fox News, Townhall.com, and Rush Limbaugh. Favored think tanks would include the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation.

A SITUATIONAL FLUCTUATION

This point-counterpoint treatment could be applied to other topics: the United Nations, warfare, multilateralism vs. unilateralsm, freedom and the spreading of democracy, environmental issues, views of academia, civil liberties issues, to name just a few. The Red-Blue bifurcation in worldviews held by intelligence analysts can be traced through each of these venues, but the point need not be labored.

Is there a Red-Blue divide on the nature and purpose of intelligence itself? In recent years, as the genesis of the Iraq war has been endlessly debated, an identifiable Red-Blue division has become apparent, a division that goes beyond the pros and cons of the Iraq intervention itself. Blue analysts have come to think of intelligence as akin to courtroom evidence: if hard information and well-supported assessments provide solid factual grounds for an assertive U.S. policy initiative, then the initiative may go forward. If information is sparse and assessments are therefore ambiguous, not to say

THE IMF

If the Red analyst is correct, then the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is an issue worthy of the closest scrutiny. The IMF is a key player in world financial affairs and has been an object of increasing criticism by developing countries. The IMF is often viewed as a tool for enforcing austerity measures and structural reforms on debtor nations, particularly in Latin America and Africa. Critics argue that the IMF’s policies have contributed to poverty and economic inequality, while supporters maintain that it is necessary for ensuring economic stability. The issue of reform is at the heart of the debate, with proponents pushing for changes to the IMF’s governance structure and lending criteria, while opponents seek to maintain the status quo. The future of the IMF is uncertain, with many calling for significant reforms to address its perceived shortcomings.

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counter-indicative, then an assertive policy initiative is unwarranted and even illegitimate.

Red analysts, in contrast, have taken a more limited view of the role of intelligence. They see it as an important input to policymaking, but only one input. The President, as the top national security decisionmaker, is one empowered and expected to make policy decisions that go beyond any chain of evidence that intelligence might offer. Indeed, the President may choose to act with little or no intelligence evidence at all.

The suspicion is that the Red-Blue divide is situational, however, and depends greatly on which Party occupies the White House. In the present era, Red analysts suggest executive autonomy, while their Blue counterparts play the lawyer. To at least some degree, the opposite seemed to be true during the Clinton administration, and after the Iraq experience, is likely to be true even when a Democrat is next elected President. Yet again, the point is that the worldview of the analyst contributes significantly to the nature and direction of the intelligence analysis.

THE IMPLICATIONS

If the Red-Blue mindset divide is indeed a fact, what does it mean? Is it desirable, or even possible, for intelligence schools and managers of analysis to try to eradicate worldview bias?

Intelligence professionals agree that cognitive bias must be recognized, guarded against, avoided, or offset as far as possible. This goal is both worthwhile and uncontroversial. But worldview bias is different from Heuer's gallery of cognitive biases. The instructor or manager with a Blue worldview bias considers that view to be a close approximation of Truth, the only factually-supported, logically sound, intellectually satisfying set of ideas of how the world works. His Red counterpart is just as sure that his worldview is a good approximation of the truth. I will not take the postmodernist dodge and pronounce them both deluded: one of them might indeed be right. Nor is it to be assumed that real truth can be approximated by splitting the difference between Red and Blue.

Perhaps balance is the solution: where Red-Blue dividing lines emerge on an issue, employ competing analyses and perhaps present them to the intelligence customer. Sensible as a general concept, this solution entails practical problems. Analyst teams or product review panels could easily degenerate into tawny, politicized gladiator pits. Assessments could easily become self-contradictory and incoherent, the objects of even greater partisan derision in Congress than seen at present.

And is there even an approximate balance among the population of analysts to begin with? Consider a typical intelligence analyst: 30-something years old.
A PARTIAL SOLUTION

A decisive solution to the evident problem of worldview bias in intelligence analysis will probably have to await the resolution of the political-cultural bifurcation of American society of which it is a part. In the meantime, at least two avenues could be pursued to mitigate the problem.

First, intelligence schools and managers of analysis should acknowledge that worldview bias exists. They should be frank, open, and wise in

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RESEARCH

As noted, the research within a neuroscience must be undertaken. these worldview- based analyses also require a robust, new, and fully developed

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