

How “Wisdom” Differs from Intelligence and Knowledge in the Context of National Intelligence Systems

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It is customary at this point to spend considerable time defining key terms like wisdom, intelligence and knowledge. I will come back to that after cutting to the bone of the topic at hand.

Wisdom has a longer time horizon than either intelligence or knowledge. It spans a greater scope of concern, and reflects a set of values infused into knowledge that include compassion as a core component. It requires a deep understanding of human nature, because it is only called upon during crises of human affairs. All the rest is details, which can distract from these cardinal truths.

With respect to issues of international security, this difference is exemplified by cases like Afghanistan (1979-89), Guatemala (1954) and Iran (1953-79). In each case focus on short-term, narrowly defined and mainly American national interests resulted in significant tactical victories. The long-term cost has been generating intense hatred of America among hundreds of millions of people worldwide. That hatred has diffuse military and economic consequences that are difficult to measure, but by any measure are profound.

Of course there are excuses for this sacrifice of long-term, general welfare for short-term, narrow goals. But such excuses should not obscure the great price to thoughtful intelligence professionals, who undoubtedly do care about the future of their countries and their children.

“Intelligence, knowledge and wisdom” are domains along a spectrum of information quality. “Usefulness” is one attribute that distinguishes them, but there are others. At the low end is the kind of raw data and noise that the NSA scoops up every day by the gigabit. At the high end are strategic concepts like “containment” of George Kennan as opposed to the view ascribed to Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, that ‘World War III is inevitable, let’s get it over with and nuke ‘em now.’

The daily work of most intelligence professionals lies between such extremes. They must distill timely, actionable meaning from the noise and allegedly “all source” data they are deluged with. In theory, the President’s Daily Brief and its British and Israeli counterparts should be the wisest documents produced on a regular basis. But advisors cannot be too much wiser than their political customers lest they be fired or disregarded. Carmen Medina and Steven Ward have contrary views on the significance of this problem (1, 2) but they both write from experience. I agree with Medina that we need to rethink paradigms, but side with Ward on how much policy makers need substantive and even ethical help from those who bring them options to consider.

What have others said about those key terms? In Studies in Intelligence (3), CIA historian Michael Warner reviews about a dozen definitions of official intelligence beginning with Walter Laqueur’s dismal conclusion that “... all attempts to develop ambitious theories of intelligence have failed.” Warner concludes this review with his best offering, that official “**Intelligence is secret, state activity to understand or influence foreign entities.**” This has the virtues of clarity and brevity, which I have concluded are signs of that elusive quality called ‘wisdom’ which I seek. And most would agree that it catches the essence of official intelligence processes.

Psychologists have been debating the meaning, measurement and origins of “intelligence” for about a hundred years without achieving consensus either. Individual intelligence and official intelligence are obviously not exactly the same thing, but there are remarkable parallels between the two phenomena. The most interesting to me is the importance of deception, and of the ability to detect deception in complex social circumstances that greatly affect the real meaning and significance of things.

The dominant view in psychology today is that “intelligence” includes a general ability, partly innate and symbolized by “g,” overlaid by a number of more specific mental skills like spatial visualization, math and linguistic elements that vary greatly within and somewhat among groups of people. Aptitude tests try to get at “g” while achievement tests better measure acquired knowledge, skills, and specific types of intelligence. Collecting data about the world is one skill, being able to “connect the dots” and discern the real significance of complex things is another (4).

Business schools teach courses on “strategic intelligence” which is sometimes defined as useful knowledge about the capabilities and intentions of competitors. This could hardly be more parallel to official concepts of intelligence and its mission. Some of the professors were probably “intelligence professionals” before they became mere teachers! The take-home lesson here is that “knowledge” undoubtedly implies something between raw intelligence and wisdom, something to do with “usefulness.” A parallel from the official intelligence world is the cry for “actionable” intelligence rather than all the other noise, in order to be relevant to policy makers (5, 6).

Aristotle pondered these questions long ago (7) and came up with some distinctions. To him, “intelligence” was an innate human capacity to acquire knowledge. Knowledge, however, was an acquired grasp of reality “the way it is” not just the way we might wish it to be. And “wisdom” was an intellectual virtue, an acquired habit of reflection that perfects raw intelligence into something more useful and far more broadly based. Finally, both the Greeks and the ancient Hebrews had a healthy fear of hubris, which is an occupational hazard of both high political leaders and very bright people. Hubris is extremely corrosive to intelligence.

Now anyone who watches national leaders must recognize that “wisdom,” like beauty, is often in the eye of the beholder. Politics provides many examples of the endless clash of opinions regarding what would be wise for the nation or the world. Often those clashing views are not fully reconcilable due to fundamental differences of underlying values or assumptions about the “real” world. Aristotle had a tool for that problem. He asked, “Has this idea been tested by dialectic?”

That process means rejecting all assumptions, or at least allowing all assumptions to be challenged in fierce dialogues by experts who are devoted to the truth (not to any old multicultural, postmodern, deconstructed or politicized truth, but to THE truth, whatever that is). The ancient quote: “the truth shall set you free” graces the entrance to the CIA, but no consensus has emerged there regarding what THE truth is yet (so far as I know). Vigorous dialogues are rumored to occur, but barriers to public participation guarantee that they can not possibly be truly “all source” or free from political biases. I wrote about such biases last year (8), so will spare you a dissection here. But the most appropriate parallel is to the Catholic Church, which clings to decision-making power by experts whose vetting process systematically excludes all women and virtually all men who will not claim to be perfectly celibate. The resulting group certainly shares many qualities, and virtues, but ability to deal with (or even to hear) “all sources” of information is not one of them. Their dedication to service and to institution is extreme, very much like yours, but their elite, exclusive selection process inadvertently blinds them to some things that they really need to know.

Pappas and Simon (9) offer this solution: “The remedy, however, requires US intelligence agencies to overcome ingrained resistance to our overtures of cooperation (with private research establishments). Large segments of the public, news media, academic and scientific communities have a highly developed suspicion of the motives of the Intelligence Community. Despite improvements driven by the events of September 11th, serious efforts must be made by all parties concerned to overcome these suspicions in pursuit of a common defense.” Amen.

Genuine openness and access to ‘all sources’ of information is critical to that holistic, God-like view that enables ‘the wise’ to transcend some limitations. But remember, broad scope is just one quality that distinguishes “wisdom” from less refined forms of intelligence. The others were: longer time horizon, deep knowledge of human nature, and values infused, especially compassion.

How could we enhance these qualities in the task-driven, politically riven, compartmented, high-stakes pressure cooker of daily life among spies and those who analyze their products? The long time horizon is daunting considering the notoriously short time horizons of your customers, and “compassion” is not notoriously connected to “intelligence.” I do hope our other speakers have practical answers to these dilemmas. And what about the great problems our governments must confront today? It is far too easy to criticize the difficult work of others from the ivory tower. How could the world of professional intelligence actually become wiser in the foreseeable future?

Well to start we could acknowledge that while America certainly is not the “Great Satan” of this earth, we are rapidly becoming the Big Bully in the eyes of hundreds of millions of people not all of whom are ignorant or deranged. Turning our back on 60 years of work on international legal institutions is alienating many former allies (10) much less our enemies, and pretending that they are just being envious or vain does not help (11). We need them, and they need us. Data on hemorrhaging world opinion can be found at the Pew Research Center www.people-press.org

One of the main differences between the image of the Big Bully and the image of a noble policeman willing to risk his life to preserve the public safety is a visible concern for concepts of law and due process. Intelligence likes to get things done – Wisdom wants the right things done properly. A refined understanding of human nature helps here, and is another of those qualities (like usefulness and compassion) that distinguish wisdom from mere knowledge.

This is one reason the global war on terrorism dare not become a crusade against Islam. The world will accept us tracking down people who attack innocents (in fact, it will applaud); it will not support a global clash of civilizations (12). This is one reason helping former enemies to reform their societies is more than important -- it is critical to long-term success. In Russia, “the rule of law still struggles to find its way through secrecy, criminality and corruption.”(13) We won in Afghanistan, but left the seeds of chaos to ripen and grow. We dominated Latin America, and harvest generations of hatred. It is not enough to defeat our adversaries – they must be reformed in genuinely positive ways for victory to be complete. Hardest of all, we must reform ourselves.

America and its allies won the long Cold War of containment, so much better than the nuclear option promoted by Gen. LeMay. But we could lose the shorter but equally vital challenge of post-war constructive transformation if we economize on that endeavor, just like we could lose Afghanistan again if we neglect nation building there. We could lose the whole third world if we tried really hard. Intelligence might say: Why not, they’re not worth much, and they are easier to dominate when weak. Some very bright people always do say that. Wisdom says, BIG mistake. Their strongest will certainly come to your door dirty, diseased, angry and with nothing left to lose.

Loose nukes and Soviet smallpox on an open market in failing Third World economies with corrupt, ineffectual governments looking for scapegoats to distract their repressed publics: these are just the beginning of nightmares down that road that some would love to follow. It is a vanity of the last century that the affluent can long ignore the suffering of the poor, so long as our weapons are exceptional and our soldiers highly motivated. Wisdom says that we must deal with these things too, and recognize that the chaos of destruction and decay is seldom made better by strictly military options. You must have some constructive options also, and you dare not be seen by your neighbors as the arrogant, greedy, unilateral Bully on the block. If so, they will unite against you, sooner or later, and when they do, you're doomed.

Far better to work together on the challenge of human survival than to destroy each other in a "clash of civilizations" over who gets to write the rules and talk a lot. This is the overarching, deepest failure of the existing paradigm. It does not notice a grave danger to the global civilization because it is so preoccupied with smaller conflicts (14). Nations compete for control of important, but relatively trivial resources, while the whole human experiment is put at risk by factors that very few study because they are constantly tasked to deal with lesser things. These problems were described in "The Global 2000 Report to the President" (then Jimmy Carter, 15) and in "Global Trends 2015" produced by the CIA in December 2000 (16). But their meaning keeps getting lost in the din of current events, bureaucratic shuffling, lobbying by selfish interests, and yak yak yak from the politicians and their tenders.

You cannot 'gather' intelligence. And gathering wisdom is a Sisyphean task. It is more productive to try to grow them slowly. You can gather tin cans, or data or baseball cards, and you can sort them in thousands of ways, but you can NOT "collect" real intelligence, only data and misconceptions. REAL intelligence has to be cultivated, and it involves refined abilities to throw out noise and to integrate meaning at least as much as to gather all the information that you can.

Add some "useful" factors and you get practical knowledge, but the real prize is wisdom. REAL wisdom has to be cultivated also, assiduously, with conscious intent and lots of hard work. It involves refinements I have tried to outline here. With wisdom you may achieve your desires without destroying your army or laying other nations to waste. Sun Tzu said (17):

"Generally, in war the best policy is to take a state intact; to ruin it is inferior to this. To capture the enemy's army is better than to destroy it; to take intact a battalion, a company or a five-man squad is better than to destroy them. For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill." 3:1-3.

"If not in the interests of the state, do not act. If you cannot succeed, do not use troops. If you are not in danger, do not fight. A sovereign cannot raise an army because he is enraged, nor can a general fight because he is resentful. For while an angered man may again be happy, and a resentful man again be pleased, a state that has perished cannot be restored, nor can the dead be brought back to life. Therefore the enlightened ruler is prudent and the good general is warned against rash action. Thus the state is kept secure and the army preserved." 12:17-19.

There is a reason Sun Tzu is still published and read millennia after most of the generals and emperors who hired them have been forgotten. Sun Tzu was wise; the others were merely intelligent. We should all aspire to that virtue during these difficult times for responsible nations.

Notes and References

- 1) Medina, Carmen A. “What To Do When Traditional Models Fail,” and Ward, Steven R. “Evolution Beats Revolution in Analysis” counterpoint papers in Studies in Intelligence, Vol. 46, No. 3, Summer 2002. <http://www.cia.gov/csi/studies/vol46no3/article03.html> (Ward’s is article04)
- 3) Warner, Michael. “Wanted: A Definition of ‘Intelligence,’” in Studies in Intelligence, Vol. 46, No. 3, Summer 2002. <http://www.cia.gov/csi/studies/vol46no3/article02.html>
- 4) Krizan, Lisa. “Intelligence Essentials for Everyone,” Occasional Paper Number Six, from the Joint Military Intelligence College, Washington D.C., June 1999. Pages 55-59 are particularly relevant, beginning with cognitive attributes but then moving to the less explored but very relevant personality variables.
- 5) Davis, Jack. “A Policymaker’s Perspective on Intelligence Analysis,” in Studies in Intelligence, Vol. 38, No. 5, 1995. <http://www.cia.gov/csi/studies/95unclass/Davis.html>
- 6) Jack Davis beats the “actionable” horse to death in A Compendium of Analytic Tradecraft Notes, February, 1997 from the DI at CIA. He also cites a method (on pg. 42) remarkably similar to Aristotle’s. And his main point is axiomatic: policymakers can’t waste their time on you if you don’t meet their needs.
- 7) Aristotle, philosopher 384-322 b.c.e., also said: “The more you know, the more you know you don’t know.” This is another antidote to hubris, the great destroyer of growing minds, and occasionally of nations.
- 8) Andregg, Michael. “The Primary Value of Restoring a Healthy Relationship Between Intelligence Agencies and the Academic World is a Revolution in Intelligence Affairs.” Unpublished paper presented at the ISA conference in Chicago, March 25, 2002. Available from the author.
- 9) Pappas, Aris A. and Simon Jr., James M. “Daunting Challenges, Hard Decisions: The Intelligence Community 2001 – 2015,” in Studies in Intelligence, Vol. 46, No. 1, page 11, Spring 2002.
- 10) Hattori, Eiji. “U.S. Needs the Humility to Learn From Others,” in The Asahi Shimbun, Nov. 30 – Dec. 1, 2002, pg. 23. Hattori was a senior information officer at UNESCO for many years, now a professor at Reitaku University in Chiba-ken, Japan. His opinion here is widely shared throughout Asia today.
- 11) The Pew Research Center recently conducted a huge international poll, including > 38,000 respondents from 44 countries regarding attitudes toward America. It should sober any serious citizen of our country, from the highest policy makers to the smallest tourist or businessman. Data at: www.people-press.org
- 12) Friedman, Thomas. “Threatening a War of Civilizations” in the Star Tribune, March 17, 2002, page A-25. Originally published in the New York Times, March 10, 2002, section 4, pg. 19 as “A Foul Wind.”
- 13) Meyers, Steven Lee. “A Russian Crime Drama Deepens with Arrests” in the New York Times, Nov. 22, 2002 page A-8, a story on the assassination of legislator Galina V. Starovoitova in 1998.
- 14) Andregg, Michael M. On the Causes of War, Ground Zero Minnesota, 1999 (second edition). www.gzmn.org
- 15) The Global 2000 Report to the President, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980, edited by James G. Speth, then chair of the US Council on Environmental Quality, now dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies.
- 16) Global Trends 2015: A Dialogue About the Future with Nongovernment Experts, December 2000, CIA. <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/globaltrends2015/>
- 17) Sun Tzu, The Art of War, as translated by Samuel B. Griffith in the Oxford U. Press edition of 1963.

NB: Considerable help with this paper was received from Gary Atkinson and David Clemenson of philosophy at the University of St. Thomas, and by XXXXXXXX XXXXXXXX, former analyst in the Directorate of Intelligence at the CIA. I alone am responsible for its errors of every kind. Michael Andregg, University of St. Thomas, February 28, 2003.