

Date: Sat, 26 Sep 2009 12:15:25 -0400

To: "Dr. Baruch Fischhoff - Chair, National Academy of Sciences panel on Improving Intelligence Analysis" <baruch@cmu.edu>

From: Lloyd Etheredge <lloyd.etheredge@yale.edu>

**Subject: 1. *Hubris*, the Cheney syndrome, the Rory Stewart problem**

Dear Dr. Fischhoff:

My early research, several decades ago, engaged some of the problems that you are addressing. It included an NSF grant to study problems of government learning/non-learning and a book - expanding upon the Allison tradition of single cases - to study decision making across three return engagements with similar problems (Central American anti-Communist interventions, with CIA estimates and planning) across three decades.

I only recently became aware of your panel's work. I feel a bit awkward to send you a series of email messages and a stack of ideas, but in light of the national importance and urgency of your task, I wanted to get these ideas to you while you were planning your agenda.

The earlier research evaluated major competing theories of misperception and faulty decision making (e.g., including Jervis's cognitive-tradition ideas, Janis, etc.). I found that a modern version of *hubris* theory worked best: it explained three related - and repeating - syndromes of policy, of misperceptions, and of induced distortions in the policy process. It was a systemic property, but also powerfully shaped and sustained by intense, fast-track personalities drawn disproportionately to the national security drama.

The Cheney Syndrome. I am enclosing a memo that I circulated among political psychologists in 2006. A recent snapshot of the phenomena is the Cheney Syndrome: intense, serious, power-oriented, highly rational (although in an oddly wired way), a combination of extraordinary self-confidence in managing a global drama directed by the US and a vivid sense of danger and stark vulnerability [i.e., this is part of the underlying clinical picture, captured by Ron Suskind as a rational stance in The One Percent Doctrine; it expressed itself as a geopolitical

domino theory in earlier years), secrecy, torture, etc.

In your (cognitive) traditions, an acceptable way to discuss the problem might be as a characteristic beginner's bias, with over-confidence, perhaps followed by a learning curve. After the earlier three cases that I studied, I think that we have been encountering a series of confirming examples - i.e., *hubris* is a good scientific theory. A beginner-to-expert arc keeps repeating across the three Central American cases, Vietnam, Iraq, and now Afghanistan where - eight years into this war - the US is losing and there is yet another ("this time we're getting it right") bold, integrated plan. . . . Even if you use a cognitive vocabulary tho', I'll stick with my Lasswell-tradition clinical sensibility - this is a dramatic overlay [perhaps especially of a superpower] that is very difficult to change by evidence.

There's a reference copy of the book, [Can Governments Learn?](#), online at [www.policyscience.ws](http://www.policyscience.ws).

- Re your panel's work, challenges to intelligence analysis & a conceptual experiment: Assuming that you could never convince Dick Cheney, you also might want to take a quick look at the recent Congressional testimony and writing of Rory Stewart re current Afghanistan policy. How - if a CIA analyst instinctively agreed with Rory Stewart - could he/she present a rational/scientific, compelling case to Admiral Blair? [Several recent pieces are on his Harvard-KSG Website.]

I hope that all National Academy members with interests in these issues will be able to review a draft of your Report. It is important to get this right.

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