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

From: Lloyd Etheredge <lloyd.etheredge@policyscience.net>

Subject: The Social Science of Post-Mortems; Colin Powell's Surprise; How a National Academy Report Might be Dangerously Wrong

Dear Dr. Fischhoff and Colleagues:

Your Report may be the most important project that has ever been undertaken by the National Academy in the social and behavioral sciences. So much of what has gone disastrously wrong (at home and abroad) is within your purview - from 9/11 to WMD and other mistakes in Iraq, to eight+ years and yet another revised ("this time, light at the end of tunnel") war plan in Afghanistan last spring, and yet another revision underway; the unanticipated national and global financial crises, with academic models catastrophically disconnected from reality and the new asymmetries of brainpower and money in the financial world (challenges also within Admiral Blair's responsibility); the new political opportunities for a rapid-learning international health system, still under-identified and under-analyzed. Etc. <1> And so much of our future, and perhaps the world's.

The Social Science of Post-Mortems

- I hope that you will take a rigorous and systematic look at all of the recent cases of failure and error, and existing post-mortems and hypotheses, including whether the right questions were asked and whether the analyses were done by post-mortem experts who could systematically, like a medical exam, apply integrated complexity (Tetlock) and check all of the possible causal pathways at individual, small-group, organizational, and systemic levels, the types of inter-penetrating problems and how they were conceived and/or misconceived, etc.

- We should, by now, have become better at the social science

methodology of post-mortems.

For example, consider the case of Colin Powell at the UN, giving WMD testimony: It might be many problems, including a problem of photo interpretation - or something very different:

Photo Interpretation: Colin Powell at the UN

The interpretation of aerial and satellite photographs has been a responsibility of the intelligence community since at least the U-2 spy planes and the invention of spy satellites. That Colin Powell and his briefers were wrong - **and** confident - was surprising, especially since his WMD speech at the UN was a high profile assignment with full allocation of our government expertise.

Powell records that he spent many hours, and a final full day, personally reviewing the detailed evidence to be sure that he, the CIA, and America, had it right. He was an experienced man: a former National Security Adviser, a former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, a Secretary of State with his own, independent intelligence staff. At the UN Powell told the world: "My colleagues, every statement I make today is backed up by sources, solid sources. These are not assertions. What we're giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence." Powell also said, for example, that an aerial photograph of truck was *"a sure sign that the bunkers are storing chemical weapons . . . a signature item. It's a decontamination vehicle in case something goes wrong."*

Where did the US breakdowns occur? Were the analysts inexperienced or poorly trained? Do US databases have an insufficient N of examples to recognize the differences between apparently similar items? Was Powell given only a consensus interpretation that removed information about other possible interpretations? Was he lied to? Did he know the uncertainties? Did he lie because the President told him to? Were there computer programs that independently corroborated the interpretations?

Why a National Academy Report Might be Dangerously Wrong

Colin Powell's own post-mortem hypothesis (e.g., to Congress and to Barbara Walters in November 2005): *"There was some people in the intelligence community who knew at that time that some of these sources were not good and shouldn't be relied upon, and they didn't speak up. That devastated me."* <1>

If the "didn't speak up" problem was fear - or, perhaps more precisely, inhibitions within vivid hierarchical psychodramas - a National Academy of Sciences Report might be dangerously wrong - i.e., if you focus, for the future of the country and the world, on improvements of databases and cognitive analysis without solving, or thoughtfully compensating for, the real problem.

- Powell, for example, told Congress that the solution was a new, very strong DNI to assure that "what one person knew, everyone else knew." It was a General's solution - imposing another and more accountable/responsible level atop the dysfunctional system - but it did not deal directly with an alleged "they didn't speak up" problem.

From Powell to Perrow - or Beyond?

- Powell's (conceptually simple and common sense) solution has been tried before. And you probably will find that it has emerged from many official post-mortems of many cases. Sometimes, it works - but only sometimes. Charles Perrow's Normal Accidents (1999) identifies the perennials - accountability and better top-down management, better training for better employees, more money, etc. - and opens windows, that your Report might wish to review, on the contrast between common sense ideas/official post-mortems and the thoughtful architecture of complex systems. <3>

Lloyd Etheredge

<1> We also could add the partly invisible human costs of the government's limited effectiveness in the War on Drugs.

<2> I have not researched this case. However, Jonathan Schwarz, "The U.N. Deception: What Colin Powell Knew Five Years Ago, and What He Told the World." Mother Jones, February 5, 2008 suggests that Powell knew his own diagnosis was incomplete.

<3> Reisman's Folded Lies (1979) is another social science approach to breakdowns and reforms.

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