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To: "Dr. Baruch Fischhoff - Chair, National Academy of Sciences Study on Social & Behavioral Science and Improving Intelligence for National Security"

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

**Subject: Independent re-checks of "threat industry" (Mueller) analysis; Scientific methods to calibrate vivid imaginations. The case of President Obama's Afghanistan speech**

Dear Dr. Fischhoff and Colleagues:

The recent published scientific criticisms of the data/analysis of the "threat industry" (Mueller's term) should be fully and objectively evaluated in the National Academy of Sciences Report.

### **Three Current Books**

I am aware of three current books by social scientists. Two are by John Mueller (a meticulous scholar), Atomic Obsessions: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al-Qaeda (Oxford UP, 2009) and Overblown: How the Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats and Why We Believe Them (NY: Free Press 2006, 2009 paperback) and [outside my field], by Matthew B. Robinson and Renee G. Scherlen, Lies, Damned Lies, and Drug War Statistics: A Critical Analysis of Claims Made by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2007). Robinson and Scherlen believe, *inter alia*, that official government statistics - reported to the President by the DNI system(?) - exaggerated government success and covered-up failures.<1>

The DNI system's capacity (or anybody's) to calibrate the imagination re national security threats - Mueller's concern - merits an independent chapter in your Report:

### **The Scientific Calibration of Vivid Imaginations?**

- The National Academy of Sciences and your committee can do a great service by engaging the question of vivid imagination and how, specifically, to calibrate the imagination when thinking about questions of threat? This question will be as timely as President Obama's speech, next week, concerning "threats" in Afghanistan and the rationally-justified national costs and priorities they imply.

[And the question is fundamental to our understanding/revisionist understanding of the history of the past fifty years, because it was the calibration of domino-theory imaginings - for which no persuasive rational/scientific method was available - that drove the dynamics of the Cold War for much of its early and mid-history, possibly on both sides.]

The neuropsychology of the brain is, sensibly for survival, hard-wired to attend to, and respond with quick emotional arousal to, danger. If the nearby rustle of leaves is a real tiger, then the instinctive response is functional. If it is a geographically remote and possible future attack - arising from someone's emotions and current purposes/fantasies in remote Afghanistan - that become vividly present, and alive, via the imagination and/or a chain of imaginings - then the calibration of the imagination and the chains of rational analysis possibly linked to it - are a state-of-the-art national security question. As alive as next Tuesday's Presidential address.<2>

Best wishes for the Thanksgiving holiday,  
Lloyd Etheredge

<1> More money can be perpetually justified in the threat industry/agencies when a current system is either a.) not working; or b.) showing progress, at current funding levels. The "we are having some successes, but this is a tough, adaptive opponent" portrayal blends both arguments.

<2> This calibration problem requires an extended discussion and analysis. The simplest scientific solution - applying methods from the analysis of physical systems - is "ignore the imagination, run the numbers" rationality. But political threats that live in public psychodramas, with shared subjectivities, may be a different phenomenon.

I had a run at this problem in a Cold War paper re the psychology of arms races, "On Being More Rational Than the Rationality Assumption" (on my Website). But this is only one strategic idea re a correlated problem. [At one level, technocratic rationality and rational-actor assumptions only give you MAD (mutual assured destruction) security solutions. But if there is a political art to be mastered too, you may get additional logics and methods to apply - e.g., Reagan and Gorbachev.]

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