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Trends. A Contrarian View: Admiral Jeremiah and the United States Intelligence Community

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A May 12th press release from the Central Intelligence Agency announced that the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI), George Tenet, had asked Admiral David Jeremiah, USN (Ret), former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to lead a team to assess the Intelligence Community's (IC) performance in collection and analysis concerning India's nuclear testing. In a June 2nd press statement, the DCI admitted that as to India's recent nuclear testing the IC "did not get it right. Period. We have a professional responsibility to stand up, acknowledge that, and learn from it....I accept all of Admiral Jeremiah's recommendations."

According to press accounts of Admiral Jeremiah's classified report, one significant recommendation involved the need to have a contrarian view--implying the need for fresh thinking, devil's advocate analyses, thinking outside the box, testing the envelope. This recommendation has much to commend it. However, its virtual omnipresence in reports assessing military, political, business, educational, and social service organizations after something goes wrong suggests the futility of implementation.

What too often happens is that the contrarian view falls victim to a number of organizational dynamics. It is disregarded by senior officials who believe that they got where they now sit through keeping their own counsel. Or it is discounted by those who find it but a noxious attempt to satisfy as opposed to satisfice task requirements. Sometimes it is embraced in a square-filling exercise that is guaranteed not to significantly affect decisionmaking. At still other times there is intense witting and unwitting cooption of the contrarian so that it becomes the preconceived view--e.g., even the devil along with the devil's advocate agrees with us.

A strong case can be made with theoretical, empirical, and experimental data from organizational psychology research that the contrarian view has the above predictable effects plus one. The contrarian too often becomes the Shakespearean fool--speaking the truth and suffering for it. (See Bearden, M.A. (June 3, 1998). Failure to detect Indian N-tests results of bad policy. Dawn, <http://dawn.com>; Central Intelligence Agency Public Affairs Staff press release on Indian nuclear testing. (May 12, 1998); Menon, N.C. (June 4, 1998). Panel raps CIA for failing to learn of India's N-tests. The Hindustan Times, <http://www.hindustantimes.com>; Press statement by the Director of Central Intelligence George J. Tenet on the release of the Jeremiah report. (June 2, 1998); Weiner, T. (June 3, 1998). C.I.A. inquiry asks for an overhaul. The New York Times, pp. A1; A8.) (Keywords: Central Intelligence Agency, CIA, Contrarian, Nuclear Testing, Organizational Psychology, United States.)