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Tit for Tat, Patty Cake, and Hide and Seek: The Psychology of Spy Games

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Abstract. This article explores the psychology of tit-for-tat reactions in the context of espionage and counterespionage.

Journalistic accounts have described United States Government (USG) tit-for-tat reactions in the wake of its public acknowledgement of one of its counterintelligence assets having committed espionage for the Soviet Union and Russia. According to the accounts, the USG is retaliating against Russia--the Soviet Union being no longer available to be the brunt of USG wrath--by ordering 4-5 Russian diplomats to leave the US to be followed by the ouster of an additional 45-50 diplomats. All of these diplomats purportedly are Russian intelligence assets under soft diplomatic cover.

One can make a strong case that the USG reactions are not supportive of its own interests. First, the Russian government already has announced a tit-for-tat counter that would order a similar number of USG representatives to leave Russia. Second--given the assumptions that (a) the USG has a smaller number of its representatives as intelligence assets in Russia than Russia has in the US and that (b) both the USG and Russia have close to full knowledge of whom of each others diplomats are intelligence assets--the tit-for-tat counter may result in a much more significant removal of USG assets than Russian assets. Third, to maintain similar numbers of expelled government representatives, the Russians also may order military attaches, law enforcement and aid officials, and other individuals doing the work of the USG out of Russia. Thus, USG interests can become damaged beyond matters of pure intelligence. Fourth, USG insistence that its initiation of a tit-for tat reaction is necessary to show independence and strength in the international arena is obviated by its similarity with a Cold War psychology that constrained USG responses to tough-looking acts that often weakened USG interests. Fifth, the tit-for-tat approach looks like a strong response but actually facilitates a rationalization of an absence of any significant response against those who might be considered most responsible for USG counterintelligence assets going bad and staying bad for more than 15 years--viz., certain other USG counterintelligence and intelligence officials.

Of course, the USG tit-for-tat reaction is nothing of the kind. Given the USG counterintelligence asset who (allegedly) volunteered to betray his country and the Russians who accepted his largesse, a tit-for-tat reaction would involve better increasing the probability that Russians would volunteer to engage in treason and that such volunteering would be accepted by the USG. In fact, some journalistic accounts suggest that better USG nurturing of Russian treason led to the very uncovering of the USG counterintelligence asset who went bad.

Now it must be said that even if a tit-for tat reaction was chosen by the USG, the functional benefits of that reaction are by no means clear. For example, Sheldon (1999) has shown that the punitive feature of tit-for-tat is especially important in eliciting enhanced cooperation among opponents. On the other hand, Van Lange & Visser (1999) have shown that opponents with certain value orientations--e.g., competitive--may continue to exhibit low levels of cooperation with a tit-for-tat partner. Although they also assert that tit-for-tat may decrease interdependence with a competitive opponent, this option may just not be germane in a globalized world. Carment (1974) has suggested that certain opponents may be

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less likely to even employ tit-for-tat induced cooperative responding, while Lomborg (1996) has posited that an unforced cooperation approach can engender higher levels of cooperation than the tit-for-tat approach. Moreover, Betz (1995) has shown that the well-known GRIT (graduated and reciprocated initiatives in tension reduction) approach (Lindskold, 1978) plus tit-for-tat offers no advantages to GRIT alone in best resolving the Prisoner's Dilemma game. Yet Kuhlman & Marshello (1975) have shown more support for the benefits of tit-for-tat. And finally, much of the tit-for-tat research employs a prisoner's dilemma and game perspective that may not accurately characterize intelligence activities and power politics.

It would seem that the reaction chosen by the USG may be best indicative of the wrong game at the wrong time. However, in the smoke and mirrors environment of the counterintelligence world, merely laying out a persuasive case to support this perspective probably will have little effect on future USG behavior. (See Betz, B. (1995). Comparison of GRIT versus GRIT/Tit-For-Tat. *Psychological Reports*, 76, 322; Carment, D.W. (1974). Indian and Canadian choice behaviour in a maximizing difference game and in a game of chicken. *International Journal of Psychology*, 9, 213-221; Kuhlman, D.M., & Marshello, A.F. (1975). Individual differences in game motivation as moderators of preprogrammed strategy effects in prisoner's dilemma. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 32, 922-931; Lindskold, S. (1978). Trust development, the GRIT proposal, and the effects of conciliatory acts on conflict and cooperation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 85, 772-793; Lomborg, B. (1996). Nucleus and shield: The evolution of social structure in the iterated prisoner's dilemma. *American Sociological Research*, 61, 278-307; Risen, J. & Perlez, J. (March 22, 2001). Russian diplomats ordered expelled in a countermove. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Sheldon, K.M. (1999). Learning the lessons of tit-for-tat: Even competitors can get the message. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77, 1245-1253; Tyler, P.E. (March 24, 2001). Russia expels 4 Americans and vows 'other measures.' *The New York Times*, p. A4; Van Lange, P.A.M., & Visser, K. (1999). Locomotion in social dilemmas: How people adapt to cooperative, tit-for-tat, and non-cooperative partners. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77, 762-773.) (Keywords: Counterintelligence, Espionage, Tit-For-Tat.)