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Commentary on “Conditions for Success and Failures of Denial and Deception: Democratic Regimes”

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Abstract. This article provides commentary on an essay written by Mr. Walt Jajko. Mr. Jajko’s essay was itself a commentary on an article published in the book, *Strategic Denial and Deception, the Twenty First Century Challenge*, that was edited by Roy Godson and James J. Wirtz and published by Transaction Publishers (2002).

Mr. Jajko was formerly assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Intelligence Oversight and director, Special Advisory Staff, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy within the United States Government (USG).

Commentary.

Government Type. The very title fragment, “Conditions for Denial and Deception Success and Failure in Democratic Regimes,” implies that there are structural, functional, and process differences between and among governmental types that impact on the consequences of denial and deception programs. An implicit hypothesis accompanying the above premise is that there are unique psychological effects on political authorities (as denial and deception initiators, targets, and observers) from various governmental types that have consequences for denial and deception success and failure. These effects may most commonly be associated with (1) the very perception of threat against one’s government regime from within and external to that regime; (2) thresholds of perceived threat bearing on the need for action; (3) accepted modes of acting against threat, including the acceptability of engaging in denial and deception; (4) expected consequences for political authorities contingent on denial and deception success and failure; and (5) accepted life styles of political authorities and their representatives including the prioritization of official, unofficial, and personal goals bearing on how time is acceptably fragmented among these goals.

A broader variant of the premise of psychological differences between and among governmental types encompasses the constructs of national and ethnic character. Do such constructs, as well as those constrained to government type-induced psychological differences, bear some sort of ontological validity? If not, are beliefs in such constructs associated with some sort of instrumental effectiveness or even evolutionary adaptiveness? Unfortunately, common epistemological approaches to knowledge, reason, logic, faith, authority, and empiricism are accompanied by many epistemological vulnerabilities and may not yield the certainty on which a prolegomenon or primer on denial and deception might be founded.

(One further issue as to the salience and import of government type for denial and deception may be the non-psychological but equally significant hypothesis that the structure, function, and process of government might only allow certain denial and deception initiatives to rise to the top for approval, implementation, and evaluation, regardless of any concurrent and epiphenomenal psychological consequences elicited by government type.)

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Characteristics of Deception Officers. Mr. Jajko's commentary focuses on an assertion of another author that deception officers may be more successful if they share a "single cohesive social class." Mr. Jajko asserts that there are more important characteristics associated with successful deception, viz., flexible and imaginative minds intuiting options that conventional minds could not even conceive and the understanding of how the enemy thinks.

As a point of departure, both Mr. Jajko and the author whom he critiques share a birds of a feather perspective but differ in the nature of birds and feathers.

For example, a "single cohesive social class" has much to recommend it. One might posit that, for a deception planning team, class identity attenuates disruptive behavioral differences, nurtures a sense of unity of purpose and being on a team, and precludes demonization and ostracization of individuals who present minority opinions. Moreover, class and class identity may be directly or indirectly correlated with the very opportunities and experiences that are, in turn, correlated or even cause deception success.

On the downside, class identity may preclude or minimize the testing of limits and the capability of going and the motivation to go beyond the mundane. In fact, if class identity is associated with degrees of access to material and other psychological and social benefits as perceived by all in a populace represented or controlled by a government, constraints on options that risk one's high standing or mobility upward from a low standing as to possession of such benefits may ineluctably impede deception success.

In contrast to class hypotheses, advocacy for flexibility, imagination, and intuiting of the uncommon elicit significant face validity. Without seeking to be merely contrarian, however, one might find less than what first meets the eye in such advocacy.

For example, cognitive flexibility and the like are at times conceived as primary symptoms of serious psychiatric disorder even constituting variants of psychosis. It is the very flexibility and uncommonness that land the bearer of such characteristics in a stigmatized and otherwise problematic position.

Even without approaching psychiatric status, one might still bear the brunt of stigmatization in the groupwork of deception planning. This is because each individual within the group might well exhibit flexibility and uncommonness in different ways. Some individuals would be closer in flexibility and uncommonness to each other than other individuals. Majority and minority positions even on flexibility and uncommonness would be experienced. The groupthink of groupwork would then work to stigmatize the fruits of minority flexibility and uncommonness, much as majority inflexibility and commonness in the larger world would stigmatize flexibility and uncommonness in general.

As to the positive value and desirability of understanding how the enemy thinks, one might counter with several points.

First, one is limited to attempting to predict how the enemy behaves, because thinking is a privileged, internal phenomenon that one might futilely infer about others in that these others may often enough not even have conscious access to what they, indeed, think. Or even if one somehow acquires access to enemy thought, such thought may not be linked with relevant enemy behavior.

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Second, the selection characteristic (for deception planners) of understanding how the enemy thinks is less a characteristic than a consequence of characteristics. The usual suspects for such characteristics include empathy and intuition. These characteristics are themselves characterized by multiple definitions and measurement procedures and often enough are conflated with the consequence of predicting behavior so as to form a circular sequence of causal attribution, e.g., possessing empathy because the behavior one predicted occurred and predicting because of possessing the putative characteristic of empathy.

Third, one might state that an enemy behavior will occur and it does, indeed, occur. However, the appearance of the enemy behavior may not have been predicted at all but merely coincidental. (Incidentally, this line of reasoning is similar to that of Sigmund Freud's counter to the premise of dreams predicting the future in *The Interpretation of Dreams* wherein a certain percentage of what is dreamt should be expected to occur based on relevant behavioral base rates.

Thus, as with assertions concerning government types, those assertions addressing deception planners, characteristics are still open to rigorous debate.

Deception and Values. Perhaps most importantly for the study of denial and deception is Mr. Jajko's analysis of values linked to each activity, especially deception. His analysis focuses on two classes of values. The first embraces deception as often highly effective but morally and ethically suspect. The moral and ethical taint may be deontological in nature, based on some intrinsic badness of deception and human intention to engage in it. Such a taint should logically preclude any deception practice or only allow it in exceptional cases. The moral and ethical taint also may be related to a variant of postmodern and relativist critique through which most if not all threats are as equally valid or benign as those from which we seek to protect, thus precluding the need to effect deception. Or the taint may arise through the belief that deception is only for the weak and, thus, one can only engage in deception if one is weak or believes one is weak, a belief that constrains the maintenance of political power among the strong and those who believe themselves to be strong. As a praxis-based counter to all examples of taint and to the whole class of values maligning deception, one should note that the same people who decry political deception in matters affecting the collective good and even the life and death of the collective engage in the individual politics of deception in matters affecting their own personal and social lives.

The second class of values encompasses perceptions that deception is not effective or is unknowable as to its effectiveness. Rationales for this class include the vast number of variables contributing to the multi-determination of most behavior and the seeming impossibility of validly assessing all possible contributing variables that might contribute or have contributed to behavior. Here the bureaucratic psychology of deception planners may come into play. Desired enemy behavior that occurs is associated with implemented deception plans, while undesirable enemy behavior that occurs would have been worse without deception planning or has nothing to do with the deception plan.

Again, rigorous debate remains to inform on the appropriate value of denial and deception. Following Nietzsche, to claim that there is no Universal Truth does not mean that there are no truths or that all truths are equivalent.

Terror Management and Deception. Mr. Jajko makes a number of astute observations in describing the problematics of deception as a tool of USG foreign policy. There are, indeed, few if any career pathways for deception planners. The few planners attempting such a pathway often are looked at as culturally

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and even psychologically deviant. Deception activities do seem to require enormous intricacy as to staffing and coordination. The long-term nature of strategic deception may well be fatally incompatible with how political and military officers are rewarded and punished through promotions, awards, or the lack thereof. It may well be easier to kill than to deceive, and killing or deterring/containing through the threat of killing (the last, paradoxically, a valuable opportunity and permeable venue for deception planning) has always been a sine qua non of strategic power and politics. There is a conceptual fuzziness to the nature of counterintelligence and its linkage to deception-related constituents. Lip service to deception in official security- and intelligence-related documents do far surpass praxis.

Yet a final observation concerning deception that is not made by Mr. Jajko may even be more important than an analysis of deception and values. It may turn out that the very language we use to describe our world may have no correspondence to the nature of the world. Instead there are competing narratives about the world that relate to instrumental value and adaptiveness, not deception itself. As described earlier in this article, the notion of competing narratives is not necessarily an argument for cognitive relativism, because there may well be Truth, Good, and Right for each individual, not necessarily all individuals. In fact, people may choose to believe as a means of avoiding the existential terror of openly perceiving the world as potentially unknowable or unpredictable or meaningless. By this perspective, belief in the viability of deception for political power may be the biggest deception of all. This should by no means dissuade from believing in the value of denial and deception. It might, however, attenuate internecine battles concerning the value of deception in the abstract or in managing the threat and opportunity of political power through denial and deception for the security of what one believes to be True, Good, and Right. (See Heinrich, C.U., & Borkeau, P. (1998). Deception and deception detection: The role of cross-modal inconsistency. *Journal of Personality*, 66, 687-712; Jajko, W. (2002). Conditions making for success and failures of denial and deception: Democratic Regimes. In R. Godson & J.J. Wirtz. (Eds.). *Strategic denial and deception, the Twenty First Century Challenge*. Transaction Publishers; Metcalfe, J. (1998). Cognitive optimism: Self-deception or memory-based processing heuristics? *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 2, 100-110; Ratner, N. K., & Olver, R.R. (1998). Reading a tale of deception, learning a theory of mind? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 13, 219-239; Tuckett, A. (1998). "Bending the truth:" professionals, narratives about lying and deception in nursing practice. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 35, 292-302.) (Keywords: Deception, Denial, Jajko.)