

11-1-2002

From the Pentagon: Public Statements on Intelligence

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Recommended Citation

Editor (2002) "From the Pentagon: Public Statements on Intelligence," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 13 : Iss. 12 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol13/iss12/1>

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International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: From the Pentagon: Public Statements on Intelligence

Author: Editor

Volume: 13

Issue: 12

Date: 2002-11-01

Keywords: Defense, Intelligence

Abstract. This article provides commentary on public statements concerning intelligence by senior officials within the Department of Defense.

“People who are pursuing a certain hypothesis will see certain facts that others won’t, and not see other facts that others will.” Comment: In the abstract one would hope the intelligence analyst would see all the facts, and then generate hypotheses from the facts. Yet, research on social cognition suggests that there are hypotheses including hypotheses on what constitutes facts that are extant and antecede the perception of any relevant facts. Thus, the desire of having an unbiased analyst is an unattainable one. Moreover, the notion of seeing facts dependent on a hypothesis smacks of the politicizing of intelligence analysis, a cardinal sin of professional intelligence analysis.

“The lens through which you’re looking for facts affects what you look for.” Comment: This statement certainly is compatible with the above findings on social cognition. In some ways, one can change lenses by intentionally starting with certain overt assumptions and not others. However, in other ways bearing on implicit and unconscious cognitive, emotional, and motivational heuristics, one cannot exchange one lens for another.

“But as adherents of different views on the Iraqi threat use intelligence findings to argue their case, it should not permit you to create facts or deny facts.” Comment: There is an unfortunate suggestion that one has a view and then looks for facts to support it. According to some philosophies of science, facts are not created but found or passively perceived. According to other philosophies, facts are created regardless of whether you are permitted to create facts through adherence to a specific view. Yet, the creating of facts also might suggest a lack of integrity. According to yet other scientific philosophies, facts merely best resonate with various narratives concerning one’s life, intentions, or the lives and intentions of others.

“The correct process is one that surfaces as many facts as possible.” Comment: One might well argue with this opinion. As the number of facts increases, the probability of a correct conclusion does not necessarily increase. Some facts may be irrelevant or misleading, even as they become ever more impelling or salient.

Senior officials may be consciously challenging cherished beliefs and assumptions that they believe prevent intelligence analysts from focusing on certain information. Comment. Unfortunately, challenging the cherished beliefs and assumptions of others often enough means not challenging and even reifying one’s own cherished beliefs and assumptions.

The above quotes come within the context of some senior Defense policymakers positing that intelligence analysis is informed speculation, whether the analysis is accomplished by analysts or policymakers. Comment: One might posit that all perception is but informed speculation. This does not support an equivalence of consequence or quality among analysts and policymakers, because informed speculation can still vary in quality and accuracy. (See Hassin, R. R., Bargh, J. A., & Uleman, J. S. (2002).

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Spontaneous causal inferences. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 38, 515-522; Kuehnen, U., & Oyserman, D. (2002). Thinking about the self influences thinking in general: Cognitive consequences of salient self-concept. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 38, 492-499; Schmitt, E., & Shanker, T. (October 24, 2002). Pentagon sets up intelligence unit. *The New York Times*, A1; A14.) (Keywords: Defense, Intelligence.)