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National Security Strategy: Common Sense and Critical Thinking

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Common sense

“These are the times that try men’s souls.” The brief pamphlet titled *Common Sense*, written by Thomas Paine, was first published in 1776. It challenged the authority of the British government and the royal monarchy over the American colonies. Paine said of King George, “He may accomplish by craft and subtility [subtlety], in the long, what he cannot do by force and violence in the short one.”

Paine argued that, given the choice between reconciliation or independence, it was in America’s interest to be separated from Britain. He then stated, “In the following pages, I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain argument, and common sense.”

This brief pamphlet was pivotal in stiffening the resolve of the Colonists and their leaders to declare independence. It succeeded because it resulted in the American people understanding the issues and the arguments involved. It conflated the elements of strategy, critical thinking, and common sense which are the subjects of this article.

What is Common Sense?

Common sense is a way of thinking about the personal, social, and physical world. It is not a set of beliefs, it is a way of thinking. It is an array of insights gained over time, derived from successful or unsuccessful encounters with difficult situations. It is a tool that extracts meaning from a large volume of information, some of which is contradictory.

Cognition and language are innate and commonly possessed by everyone. Cognition is applied at a basic level in one's everyday life: "Don't touch a hot stove because the consequence is that you will burn your hand." To understand a typical event one relies on learned repetitions and predisposition. Occasionally, disruptions occur which cause one to shed predispositions, adjust behavior, and set a new course.

In the context of national security, when life is good, interest in political affairs is low – why bother, if there is no crisis? However, when confronted with threatening situations, people tend to explore the circumstances that affect them. Common sense suggests that people make better judgments when things are calm, which affords them a leisurely opportunity to analyze the facts at hand. We seek contemporary information hoping for normalcy so that we can rely on what is familiar. People must be convinced that there is a real crisis before they are motivated to modify their predispositions and behavior.

Thinking

We have a hard-wired ability that enables us to learn, to understand, and to solve problems. Our cognitive intelligence works best when it is tasked to identify a specific problem or class of problems. The prerequisite for problem solving is knowledge of our immediate world, and knowledge of the constituent parts of the problem to be solved. A disconnect occurs when national security policymakers ignore their personal problem-solving capability (common sense) and fail to use it to address national security problems.

The process requires understanding the constituent parts of the problem and assembling them into a structure of beliefs derived from favorable outcomes of past experiences. In the national security arena, other societies and people have different systems of beliefs than our own. To achieve a favorable result, the U.S. must understand and adapt its reasoning, in part, to the judgments and thought processes of others – the essence of a complementary strategy.

When knowledge is available, we must understand the relationship of the constituent parts of a problem, many of which are conflicting. When this is achieved, we "understand a problem." We classify data, large and small, and compress this into constituent parts of a problem. In effect, we create a scaffold or structure adapted to a situation.

Human intelligence works best when it is tasked to identify a specific problem or class of problems. Knowledge of the world and the constituent parts of a problem are needed before the task or problem solving can begin.

Common sense is most valuable when it is applied as the ultimate test of policies and decisions derived from strategy and critical thinking. For example, could a decision result in ludicrous consequences? If so, it would be important to take a final look at the process. A retrospective look at crisis decisions gone afoul suggests that penultimate decisions – actions about to be taken but rejected – could have resulted in disastrous consequences.

Common Sense Applied to National Security

The president and his national security advisors are policy makers and crisis decision makers. Although common sense, apart from intellect, is innate, the degree to which it is developed varies widely. Some American presidents were regarded as having average intelligence, but they succeeded partly because of their first-class common sense.

A national security policy maker or decision maker brings to the table a knowledge structure which is based on his or her pre-government experience. Government policy making and decision making are formed largely by the realities of on-the-job training. Policy makers must rely heavily on analogizing incomplete and contradictory information. The analogy process consists of perceiving similarities of past and present situations, and understanding that the characteristics that led to either successful or unsuccessful outcomes in past situations can be applied to the present situation.

National security situations occur when the response time is short; where decisions must be taken with a minimum amount of deliberation (at its extreme, four or five minutes to respond to a purported missile attack against the U.S.); when the situation is ambiguous; when the information is incomplete and conflicting; and when the consequences of the decision involve a high degree of material and/or political risk.

Thinking "outside the box" is important for critical thinking to flourish. Most elements of national security are well-understood and are "inside the box." However, their connectivity to other elements is frequently overlooked. Most components of national security issues are connected to several other issues. For example, little attention was paid to the element of "affordability" during times of economic prosperity. Resources were regarded as infinite. Now, there is a need to weigh the cost of warfighting in Afghanistan and the expenditures required to fight al Qaida in Yemen, Somalia, and Mauritania. The result of critical analysis could be re-prioritization and re-allocation of finite resources.

Confidence Men

The confidence man – the con artist – was the subject of the last books written by Herman Melville, Mark Twain, and Thomas Mann. Each of these books expressed a common dark view of the world where the con man could manipulate good people. A con man uses his target's gullibility. Gullibility is a manifestation of the failure to think critically about propositions. Of course, there is no free lunch, but we continue to hope that lunch could be free.

Gullibility and the absence of critical thinking operate in both our personal lives and in the arena of national security. W.C. Fields, the misanthropic film star of the 1930s and 40s, advised, "Never give a sucker an even break." Contemporary history demonstrates numerous examples of the absence of applied critical thinking.

Critical Thinking and National Security

Regarding the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, one argument is built on the major premise that “The Afghan Taliban are a threat to the U.S. homeland.” The minor premises that follow support the major premise: “The Afghan Taliban may join forces with the Pakistan Taliban, or the Pakistan Taliban may join forces with the Afghan Taliban.” A second minor premise: “The combined Af-Pak Taliban will destabilize the Afghan government.” A third minor premise: “The combined Af-Pak Taliban could result in Pakistan’s nuclear weapons being controlled by al Qaeda or the Taliban.” The conclusion: “To protect the U.S. homeland, the Afghan Taliban must be defeated; this would prevent Pakistan from being destabilized; an unstable Pakistan government might be unable to prevent its nuclear weapons from being controlled by al Qaeda or the Taliban.”

Critical analysis of an argument begins with the analysis of the minor premises – assumptions that may be only partially accurate or true. Recall that one of the minor premises for the U.S. invasion of Iraq was the belief of policymakers that Iraq was close to achieving nuclear weapons capability. The Afghan Taliban inclusion in the argument stated above is the nexus between the minor premises and the conclusion – an inference based on eight years of observing the Afghan Taliban. There can be several actionable conclusions, including: to suppress the Taliban rather than defeating them, and to prevent Af-Pak Taliban linkage.

Ideally, the minor premises are based on facts and evidence that, in turn, are based on gathering and analyzing relevant information. However, there is usually a factor of uncertainty. Minor premises are often based on assumptions. If an assumption is unwarranted, the actual causation for reaction will be different than what is presumed. The Afghan Taliban and their objectives may be different than those of the Pakistan Taliban. For example, the Afghan Taliban's objective is to force the U.S. "infidels" to leave Afghanistan, but the Pakistan Taliban's objective is not identical. Assumptions are often based on facts that are uncertain, resulting in a weak causal linkage between the minor premises and the conclusion.

An assumption may be fallacious, weak, or erroneous, because a general rule is applied to a unique situation: "the Afghans defeated the Russian invasion because the U.S. provided weaponry to the Afghans which enabled them to shoot down Russian helicopters." However, the Taliban did not exist during the Russian invasion. The *post hoc* complexity is that when something happens before, it suggests that it will happen again: the Afghans defeated the Russians and they are capable of defeating the U.S. Thus, the U.S. must substantially increase its military presence much more than the Russians did and prevent Iran from supplying weapons to the Afghan Taliban, or withdraw. *Post hoc* thinking is frequently misleading because the comparable situations are different.

The distinction between deductive reasoning and inductive reasoning is critical. Policy makers tend to use deductive reasoning because it tends to simplify a complex situation and introduces a

high degree of certainty. The premises are portrayed as being true and sufficient to support a conclusion. There are no missing pieces; it is a mathematically closed set. We are familiar with the navigation term “dead reckoning.” It is portrayed on navigation charts as “ded.”reckoning – deductive reasoning. The exact location expressed as latitude and longitude of New York is certain. To go to San Francisco from New York, what is needed is a compass setting of 175 degrees west using ded. reckoning.

Inductive reasoning is the better practice to be applied to national security situations. It may provide partial support for reaching a conclusion, but it is not sufficient to totally support a conclusion, which may be a probability, but never can be absolutely certain. Inductive reasoning tends to create temporary impasse and “dithering” which can be resolved by the application of critical thinking.

Strategy is both a discipline and a profession. However, at the highest level, the president and presidential advisors are probably not qualified strategists, and they are not ready for policy or crisis decision making in the national security arena when they take office. They are highly qualified politicians and political strategists, but this skill does not necessarily carry over into national security strategy. Thus, policy and decisions are usually made with a large component of domestic political considerations and consequences in mind.

Military training exercises frequently use a "Red Team" – troops that are assigned to portray the enemy. However, high-level policymakers and decision makers are not usually receptive to views that conflict with their own. They are the skunks at the picnic. Typically, policy making, decision making, and crisis management employ similar techniques. The national security “Red Team” relies on an array of semantics, logic, inductive reasoning, and collaboration among disparate units, and is employed in the private sector as well as the political.

The first cousin of critical thinking is synthesis, which is useful in several ways because it simplifies antagonistic arguments and counter-arguments. It is useful because in the political arena both sides, representing thesis and antithesis, must try to synthesize – grudgingly on both sides – a decision to be reached. The goal is to “get on with it.” This is the art of compromise, which is the bedrock of messy American democracy. Both sides adhere to their respective positions, but agree to give up elements of their principles to avoid impasse. Synthesis and compromise suggest a middle ground that is applicable and suitable for political situations. However, in the national security arena, the Taliban, al Qaeda, and other antagonists yet to emerge are neither democratic nor civil, and they have a different ethos than Americans. For them, outcome is effected only after a shootout results in the last man standing.

Examples of Non-Critical Thinking

The application of critical thinking and common sense could have avoided disastrous consequences in the following cases:

- The Wilsonian doctrine that shaped the post-WWI Versailles Treaty Conference: WWI was supposed to be the war that ended all wars.
- The U.S. stock market craze of the period 1925-29, when investors believed that they were rich because they assumed their highly leveraged investments in stock market shares would remain high indefinitely. The unforeseen consequence was the October 1929 Crash and subsequent Great Economic Depression.
- The rise of Adolf Hitler, who conned a generation of gullible Germans into believing that Jews were responsible for Germany's economic depression.
- Joseph Stalin, who conned American idealists and Western liberals into believing that totalitarianism in the cause of a perfect society – Communism – was acceptable.
- The rise of Benito Mussolini, who made Italy's trains run on time, but who led the country into a disastrous alliance with Nazi Germany.
- U.K. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, who in 1939 believed that appeasing Hitler would result in "peace in our time."
- Stalin's belief that a Friendship Pact with Hitler would prevent a Nazi German invasion of the USSR.
- The December 7, 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, premised on the belief that crippling the U.S. Pacific Fleet would result in the Japanese winning the war in the Pacific.
- USSR President Khrushchev's belief that the U.S. public and government would be indifferent to Russian nuclear-tipped missiles in Cuba in 1962.
- The policy and belief of the U.S. government that every American should own his or her own home, without due regard for whether a new homeowner could afford to pay a home mortgage.

The errors embedded in these examples are based on aspirations, unwarranted assumptions, fallacious premises, and failure to anticipate consequences. Whether the application of critical thinking to these examples could have prevented the commission of error is an open question, but it is worthy of speculation about critical thinking.

Even in instances of excellent and intellectually adroit leadership, governments can be wrong and entire societies can be wrecked with consequences. Societal groupthink can be avoided if there is an unrelenting desire to challenge prevailing premises and to seek non-confirming opinions, constructed through rigor and common sense, without assuming away the possibility of unintended consequences.

Glossary of Critical Thinking Terms

The words that are used in discussion, debate, and argumentation are sometimes misunderstood and frequently misused. This is a barrier to critical thinking. The following glossary of terms may be useful as they are applied to the examples of non-critical thinking in the section above.

Argument: a statement of a point of view and the evidence that supports it in a way that is intended to persuade others; a line of reasoning; assertion of claims or declarations accompanied by supporting data.

Aspiration: a hoped-for result that is subjective, rather than based on objective reality.

Assertion: a forceful statement of belief that may be used to intimidate non-believers.

Assumption: ideas that are taken for granted and assumed that others share the same assumptions; they are usually implied, rather than expressed. Unwarranted assumptions prevent thinking about useful questions and exploring the consequences that flow from assumptions. Assumptions are made when there is doubt, when it cannot be said with certainty that a fact is correct. There is a need to probe for the unstated assumption.

Attitude: a belief expressed indirectly. It is a filter that categorizes others and their arguments as being favorable or unfavorable; it can be a barrier to civil discussion.

Belief: a firmly held position that something is true or real; and that if your belief differs from mine, you and your belief are wrong.

Bias: a personal perspective based on one's life experience; the bias of others prevents them from reaching sound judgments and conclusions; "my bias is appropriate."

Cascade of error: if a fundamental premise is erroneous, this error becomes the foundation for subsequent errors.

Civility: recognition that people who have opposing views are not evil and that their arguments may have merit.

Connectivity: recognition that situations are usually complex and that the facts, principles, and concepts of one situation are connected to other issues and disciplines.

Error: persistence in one's opinions, rather than self-education when inconsistent facts are presented; opinions that are argued without being tested.

Evidence: reliable information that supports an opinion.

Experts: people who offer opinions that are useful, but may be frequently wrong.

Fact: an event that is amply documented and affirmed; when it is highly likely that an element is true and can be empirically tested; facts are frequently judgmental. Witnesses to the same events frequently give vastly different versions of the same event.

Gullibility: the failure to think critically about a proposition.

Ideology: personal convictions that are unmovable; the counter-convictions of others are offensive.

Incredibility: as practiced by con men, it is a repetition of a false fact, or withholding of a fact that is known to be true.

Judgment: the ability to make considered decisions that will result in favorable conclusions.

Logic: a set of rules used to determine whether an argument is sound or unsound; in its most rigorous form it is based on mathematical formulae.

Manipulation: as practiced by con men, it is based on dishonest reporting of facts that are either nonexistent or known to be false.

Opinion: statements of belief that are not universally true.

Premise: an assumption upon which reasoning proceeds to reach a conclusion.

Post Hoc: an error in logic – that something which occurred earlier in time will repeat itself.

Reasoning: the process of forming conclusions, judgments, or inferences from premises or facts.

- *Deductive Reasoning*: a process in which conclusions drawn from a set of premises contain no more information than the premises; based on assumed certainty.
- *Inductive Reasoning*: the truth of the conclusion is verifiable in terms of future experience; certainty is attainable only if all possible instances have been examined.

Selective perception: focus on what is pleasant and supports our opinion.

Simplification: making a situation simpler by focusing on its most important elements. It can also be a tool for inaccurately or dishonestly summarizing a complex situation. There are no shortcuts.

Thinking: a conscious, controlled activity that can be improved by training and intellectual exercise.

Truth: the accurate representation of objective reality.