

(U) Operation Cassandra

(b) (3) - P.L. 86-36

(U) Introduction

(U) What follows is a conceptual piece on intelligence and prioritization, intended to redirect the current discussion somewhat. OPERATION CASSANDRA does not exist, nor should it; it should not be confused with any existing entity bearing this name. Hopefully, though, everyone will appreciate the applicability and humor in this allusion to Greek mythology.

(U) Intelligence Value

(U) Two processes are frequently confused when prioritization and the allocation of resources are discussed in the context of intelligence: the assessment of the value of information on hand, and the assessment of the potential value of information not yet available. Somewhat different criteria apply to each. In either case, the ultimate question remains: "where should the resources available be applied?" The answer should be based upon a cost-benefit analysis.

(U) Recently, there has been much discussion about how to prioritize projects and individual reports. Over the past twenty-five years, prioritization systems have evolved from thirteen Key Intelligence Questions (KIQ) into something much more complex. The new National SIGINT Requirements Process (NSRP) preserves the logic of the outgoing National SIGINT Requirements List (NSRL), but adds more complexity in its effort to bandage over the old system's inflexibility.

(U) Unfortunately, the "real people" left to apply these systems seem increasingly divorced from the driving factors for determining intelligence value:

- the reflection of change to the status quo

- the potential impact of that change

- the rapidity of change

(U) Different scales could be used for each factor, but I propose they should be viewed within the context of the "CASSANDRA CUBE," each forming one dimension. Please take special note of the label given to the lowest category of Dimension 1: Change.

(U) Dimension 1: Change

A. presages or otherwise signals major change to the status quo

B. clarifies a major misunderstanding on our part of the status quo

C. fills in a major gap in our understanding of the status quo

D. presages or otherwise signals minor change to the status quo

E. clarifies a minor misunderstanding on our part of the status quo

F. fills in a minor gap in our understanding of the status quo

G. JUNK

(U) Dimension 2: Impact

1. directly upon our interests

2. directly upon our rival's interests

3. directly upon our ally's interests

4. directly upon neutral party interests

(U) Dimension 3: Time

- a. indicates or otherwise applies to a specific deadline before which intervention is needed (with the time needed for that action factored in)
- b. signals fairly rapid change
- c. indicates or otherwise applies to a specific deadline before which preparation is needed
- d. relatively timeless

(U) Category "b" (rapid change) is the true determinant for Dimension 3: Time. Levels "a" and "c" are in fact subsets of "b," chosen for their utility.

(U) Priority would be measured by the combination of the three respective scales, from A1a (major change, directly affecting our interests, with a short suspense for intervention) toward G4d (Junk, affecting no one close, and with no time sensitivity); determining that something "falls off of the chart" is still a prioritization decision. Thus, it might be simpler to envision the relationships with the cube stood up on its corner to form a double pyramid, with the highest priority A1a at the top peak, a large middle grey area, and the lowest priorities at the negative extreme G4d. This is not a 100 percent solution, as there will always be rough parity between categories somewhat close in scale, for example, between B1b (major misunderstanding, directly affecting us, and rapidly changing) and A2b (major change, directly affecting one of our rivals, again rapidly). Moreover, in a rather perverse inverse relationship, intelligence pointing to the most momentous change can have the greatest "shelf-life," which unfortunately means it often gets relegated to the back burner.

~~(S//SI)~~ The criteria above, as universal, apply equally to the U.S. or Algerian intelligence communities, transnational corporation market analysts, crime syndicates, or even a backpacker on a mountain trail; "our" is thus defined as you wish, with the given shift in perspective. [redacted] Russian

[redacted] or terrorism" are important, but anything categorized in this fashion is a specific application, not a driving factor. An illustration of the need for a clear split between driving factor and application is the fact that even the superficially simple classification of a country like France would shift from ally to rival as the discussion shifted from global democratization to global trade. It is incumbent upon the given analyst to know (or find out with appropriate research) what the status quo is and judge the information accordingly. Not all information about [redacted] is of equal value; not all of it even qualifies as intelligence.

~~(S//SI)~~ Applying these criteria to a historical example, [redacted] clearly presaged major change to the status quo with a direct impact upon a U.S. ally's interests, and an argument could be made that it even impacted U.S. interests directly. The news of [redacted] could be viewed the same way, establishing the trend. The news of [redacted] (without further detail) would have changed nothing of our understanding, and thereby would have bordered on "junk."

(U) Potential Intelligence Value

(U) As suggested above, the "Cassandra Cube" criteria apply to the assessment of "information on hand" as "potential intelligence," and the relative cost-benefit merits for allocating further resources against it to produce a piece of "finished intelligence."

(U) *The same criteria* hold for "information potentially acquired," but, with the difficulty of assessing what you do not have, the application is messier. A mitigating factor is that time as a separate element is essentially irrelevant, being built into the idea of change, unless the target is defined to be a scheduled event like a conference. This "cube" is relatively small, almost flattening to a square, with the two dimensions defined by "changeable versus more stable" and "major versus

minor impact;" further gradations could be added taking your cue from the "Cassandra Cube".

(U) Once the specific target stabilizes and the potential impact of any change becomes minimal (e.g., the immediate follow-up to the event passes), cost-benefit analysis should put it to bed. This then, in the less obvious cases, leaves the analyst to balance

- more static targets, sometimes with a huge potential impact should something ever happen; against

- targets subject to frequent or precipitous change, most often with only minor potential impact upon our interests.

(U) The analyst needs to have a firm grip on societal pathologies and fault lines, and an appreciation for potential dynamics: who and what are the vectors of change?

~~(S//SI)~~ As Tocqueville described it about 200 years ago, it is when constraints are loosened and things are finally improving that explosive tensions are at their height; reforming governments have much more to fear in this respect than dictators. To take an example from recent history, the "give me everything on..." vacuum cleaner approach against the former Soviet Union was inefficient, demanding greater intelligence resources than needed and drawing them away from what could have been more beneficial. At the same time, greater intelligence resources rather than fewer should have been devoted to the immediate aftermath of its dissolution; for the intelligence community, the peace dividend at the end of the Cold War was a mirage.

~~(S//SI)~~ As we pursue new targets with equal fervor, has our mentality changed? Do we know the fault lines in China or Latin America and are we ready for the new upheaval, or will we wake up only after things implode the way they did in the Balkans or the .com market?

(U//FOUO) [redacted] has been a linguist and reporter in the [redacted] since [redacted] 1975. A senior linguist under the Agency technical track program, he is certified in two languages.

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