

NATIONAL MISPERCEPTION AND THE CAUSES OF WAR

I. HOW COMMON IS MISPERCEPTION? HOW DANGEROUS? IS IT ALWAYS DANGEROUS WHEN IT APPEARS?

Sometimes misperceptions prevent war. For example, if states are insecure but don't know it they may refrain from wars they might start if they knew the truth. However, it's more often true that misperceptions raise the risk of war, e.g.:

- Exaggerating or underestimating others' hostility can cause war.
- False optimism or false pessimism can cause war.

II. THREE PARADIGMS OF NATIONAL MISPERCEPTION: PSYCHOLOGY, OPACITY, COZENOLOGY

III. HYPOTHESES FROM PSYCHOLOGY (from Jervis 1968, Jervis 1976 (assigned) and from "Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations," International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences)

- A. "Attribution error." States tend to attribute their own aggressive behavior to their situation, while attributing others' aggressive behavior to their innate disposition. States therefore see their own nasty conduct as excused by necessity while others' nasty conduct is unprovoked and unjustified.
- B. A related syndrome: states tend to ascribe others' good behavior to their own efforts to make the other behave well, and to blame others' bad conduct on the other's innate disposition. (Jervis 1968, hypo #11.) Result: States tend to underestimate their own role in causing others' hostility; hence they exaggerate the immutability of that hostility.
- C. Belief perseverance. States are slow to absorb new realities that clash with their elite's existing beliefs. (Jervis 1968, hypos #1, #2.)
- D. States tend to exaggerate the shared character of information, hence to exaggerate the effectiveness of communication. Hence they are unaware of their own and others' misperceptions. (Jervis 1968, hypos #5, #6, #12.)
- E. States tend to infer too much from isolated or unique events, and to mis-apply domestic analogies to international politics.
- F. States tend to exaggerate the centralized, disciplined, coordinated character of others' behavior. (Jervis 1968, hypo #9.)

Question: can you think of competing non-psychological explanations for any of these misperceptions (e.g., misperceptions B or C?)

- G. Hypotheses from in-group-out-group theory. Humans have a strong propensity to organize themselves into cohesive and mutually hostile groups. They exaggerate the similarities they share with ingroup members and favor the ingroup; they exaggerate differences with outgroup members and disfavor the outgroup. They create false narratives that exaggerate the virtues of their ingroup and the shortcomings of the outgroup. Nationalist and religious loyalties may illustrate; also loyalties to colleges, sports teams, etc.

IV. HYPOTHESES FROM ORGANIZATION THEORY #1: MILITARIES OR OTHER GOVT. BUREAUCRACIES AND PRIVATE ORGANIZATIONS AS THE SOURCES OF ELITE AND PUBLIC MISPERCEPTION

- A. "Militarism."
  - 1. Two militarism theories:
    - a. "Militaries live by war so they cause war." Joseph Schumpeter, Richard Cobden, Alexis de Tocqueville, and others. Historical facts give this version little support.
    - b. "Militaries infuse civilian society with organizationally self-serving ideas that lead civilians to start wars. Militaries do this to preserve/protect their organizational

- interests." The professional military and associated agencies and industries as causes of misperception. See Jack Snyder, Myths of Empire.
- i. Germany before 1914 and Japan in the 1930s and 1940s are prime examples. Also Turkey, Serbia, and Russia before 1914. Perhaps Pakistan and North Korea today. Some worry about China someday.
  - ii. This theory clearly does **not** cover many, even most, militaries. Can it still be useful?
2. What organizations want: size and wealth, conservation of "essence," autonomy, minimal uncertainty.
  3. Why **some** militaries are willful and powerful actors--why they want to shape national perceptions, and why they can.
    - a. Arguments about why professional militaries are willful:
      - Militaries demand a lot from society--lots of money, plus draftees' time--and must constantly justify these demands.
      - Militaries have natural political opponents, such as peace groups and pacific religious organizations, who have qualms about the military's task and must be countered.
      - Military officers have only one potential employer, the military establishment, hence they are especially concerned about its welfare.
    - b. Arguments about why professional militaries have persuasive power:
      - A monopoly of information and expertise.
      - A monolithic internal character, a hierarchic internal structure, and high esprit de corps.
      - A large workforce.
      - Great prestige.
 See S.E. Finer, Man on Horseback, for more discussion of this.
  3. What perceptions do militaries **sometimes** purvey? The web of military misperceptions. (Debating this: Samuel Huntington and Richard Betts vs. Bernard Brodie, Martin Kitchen.)
    - a. "Others are hostile"--others' hostility is exaggerated. See for example the German and Russian militaries before 1914, the Soviet cold war military, today's Chinese military.
    - b. "Bandwagoning is common, threats make others more compliant." Cf. Wilhelmine (pre-1914) Germany's Admiral Tirpitz's risk theory, and Wilhelmine Germany's General Bernhardt.
    - c. "Conquest is Easy." Cf. European armies, 1914; European air forces, 1930s; the Soviet Strategic Rocket Forces, 1950-1980s.
 

Two arguments are made:

      - a. "Conquest is easy."
      - b. "Offensive military force postures and doctrines are better than defensive postures and doctrines."
    - d. "Striking first pays off." Cf. Russian army, 1914; Japanese military, 1941, Soviet cold war military.
    - e. "Windows are common and large." Cf. German and Austrian armies, 1914; British Navy 1898--"the French are rising, let's attack them while we can!"; French and Prussian armies, 1867; U.S. Generals Power and Twining, 1950s.
    - f. "Empires are valuable, resources are cumulative." Cf. U.S. Admiral A.T. Mahan; Prussian army, 1871.
    - g. "War is cheap, healthy, beneficial." Cf. European militaries, 1914; U.S. Gen. Daniel Graham 1979.
    - h. Optimism in wartime--cf. Japanese military in WWII--but not peacetime.
    - i. "Escalation is the answer" in wartime. Cf. German military 1917; US military in Korea, Vietnam.
  4. What states are prone to "militarism?" Big states; isolated states; insecure states; states whose militaries form a separate society.

5. How could the militarism hypothesis be tested? What predictions does it make? Does history seem to confirm or infirm them?

The U.S. military has been markedly more dovish than U.S. civilian policymakers since at least 1980. General Colin Powell and Admiral Crowe have been markedly more dovish than Paul Wolfowitz or Richard Perle. Does this discredit this theory?

- B. Other domestic organizations: the foreign policy bureaucracy; foreign lobbies (the China Lobby, the Eggestaens); businesses (United Fruit Company in 1954, Gov. Dinwiddie in 1756); etc.

V. HYPOTHESES FROM ORGANIZATION THEORY #2: NATIONAL MYTHMAKING

States, ethnic groups, and other entities (businesses, universities, sports teams) manufacture self-glorifying, self-whitewashing and other-maligning myths and infuse these into their members.

- A. Nationalism and nationalist mythmaking in education--"value infusion" and what might be called the "non-guilt complex"--ideas from Philip Selznick, Carleton Hayes. "Elites seek to persuade publics to support the regime, pay taxes and join the army by purveying myths that glorify state national institutions."

1. Three types of myth **about the past**:

- a. Self-glorifying myths--"we're brilliant, ingenious, chosen by god. We invented all the world's better mousetraps!" The Soviet government claimed that Soviets invented the lightbulb, airplane, and railroad. Hindu nationalists claim civilization started with the Hindus; Turks say the same thing; etc.
- b. Self-whitewashing myths--"we've started no wars, committed no crimes!" E.g., Germans in 1920s ("we didn't start WWI--Britain did!"); Turkish denial of Turkey's 1895 and 1915 murder of Armenians; Soviet denial of responsibility for Cuban Missile Crisis (they called it "The Caribbean Crisis"); Croatian denial of Croat mass murders during WWII; Arab and Israeli mutual myths of innocence; American forgetting of King Philip's War 1675-1677--few remember this horror; Bin Laden's narrative of recent history, which omits all crimes of Muslim societies against both Muslims and non-Muslims.
- c. Other-maligning myths--"our neighbors are culturally inferior/aggressive/dangerous." Israelis and Arabs both blame the other for a conflict caused by the West. Osama Bin Laden's al Qaeda propaganda paints non-Muslims as rapaciously vicious and aggressive, far beyond what the historical record supports.
- d. Myths cause conflict by convincing the two sides that they have large historical grievances that justify large claims; that the other side has malign intent; and that the other side views them with contempt.

In extreme cases myths foster victim ideologies that give the myth-believers a sense of release from the duty to obey normal ethics. Groups that wallow in victim ideologies can believe that "We are the victims and so are always right! Don't ask us to respect others' rights--that would be blaming the victim!" Many groups with this mindset have committed great crimes (e.g., the Germans 1939-1945, Croats in the 1990s, Serbs in 1990s, China today?).

2. Why are myths purveyed? They make citizens contribute to the nation--pay taxes, join the army, etc. They also bolster the political power of illegitimate elites.
3. Why are myths so often believed? Myths play to ingroup-outgroup reflexes. We are hard-wired to think in self-glorifying and other-denigrating terms, say ingroup-outgroup theorists.
4. A short history of mythmaking. Chauvinist mythmaking surged in Europe in the 19th century; peaked during 1870-1945; then diminished sharply after 1945. Why?

- B. Myths **about the present**: "Orwellian" myths, "social imperial" myths, and "diversionary war" myths--"our neighbors are out to get us, so you better back the government!"
- C. Do chauvinist myths cause war? Or are they just excuses for making war? How could we test the "chauvinist myths cause war" hypothesis?
- D. Can nationalist myths be cured? If so, how? (Start "Amnesia International"--an NGO dedicated to naming and shaming mythmakers?)

## VI. RELIGION AND WAR

- A. Scholarship on the causes of religious conflict is thin. Scholars have avoided touchy issues, such as "Are some religions more violent than others?" This is clearly a lacuna, especially since 9/11/01.
- B. Religious difference was a common cause of war before the 20th century but then faded as a cause of war until recent times. Now it's back! The current terror war stems from a violent Islamist backlash against the West.
- C. We understand the nexus between religion and war only poorly.
- D. Some preliminary hypotheses:
  1. Scriptural inerrancy--a belief that holy texts are the literal word of God, hence inerrant--makes compromise on religion-related matters impossible, as this would compromise God's will. And without compromise we see greater conflict as literalist fundamentalists insist on getting their way over others on religion-related issues.
  2. Scriptural inerrancy--a belief that holy texts are the literal word of God, hence inerrant--leaves little room for interpretation of scripture, hence little room for humanist religious philosophers to spin belligerent or xenophobic religious texts in benign directions or to decommission hateful scripture. This gives a more belligerent content to religious faith. The faith is frozen with its original, often harsh ethics. There is less room for later humanistic philosophers to put a humanizing gloss on the founding dogma. Examples might include Islam, and Christians who take the teachings of Leviticus, Deuteronomy and Joshua as literal truth. In such religions it is also easier for later reactionary philosophers to reject the humanizing spin of post-founding philosophers and revert to the harsh founding text. Examples include ibn Taymiyya, ibn Abdul Wahhab, Sayyid Qutb, and other Islamists who reject the humanizing gloss of post-Muhammed Islamic philosophers such as the Mutazilites.
 

This theory assumes that later philosophers in most religions tend to be more humanistic than their predecessors. Where this is untrue the theory will fail.
  3. Religious faiths born in conflict tend to have original religious texts that are xenophobic and/or call for violence. Violence ensues if those texts are still quoted. Possible illustrations include:
    - > Islam from Mohammed's time, or from ibn Taymiyya's--tainted by the violence in which Islam was born, and by the violence of the era in which ibn Taymiyya wrote.
    - > Perhaps the Old Testament/Tanakh, especially Numbers, Leviticus, Deuteronomy and Joshua. A counter-example is Mennonite Christianity, which was born in warfare and developed an embedded pacifism in response.

Corollary: secessionist or supersessionist religions tend to develop scriptures that are hostile to the religions from which they secede or which they attempt to supersede. Examples include: the anti-Jewish barbs in the New Testament;<sup>1</sup> and the anti-Jewish and anti-Christian barbs in the Koran.
  4. Millennialism--the belief that the end times are coming, salvation will follow--causes globacidal thinking ("let's bring about the

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Borg, The Heart of Christianity: 196, 215-16.

end of the world!") Every major faith contains millennialist sub-groups. Christianity has the premillennial dispensationalist churches, including 25 million followers of John Nelson Darby and Tim LaHaye in the U.S. But what causes millennialism? A doctrinal focus on the afterlife instead of this life? Or what? This suggests ...

5. Religious dogma that includes belief in an afterlife causes millenarianism. Many faiths include belief in afterlife but some--most notably Buddhists and Jews--downplay it.
6. A "diversionary war" theory: religious elites that are losing their legitimacy seek to legitimize themselves by demonizing outsiders to scare the flock into supporting them. This causes them to clash with these outsiders. A possible example is Christianity of the Middle Ages, which demonized Jews and Muslims as it fell into corruption.
7. Highly institutionalized religions with large cash flow need to keep cash coming in. Hence they arouse their flocks to contribute by demonizing outsiders, painting them as dark threats to the church. This arouses the flock against outsiders. Christianity in the Middle Ages may illustrate.
8. Lack of central religious authority (like the Islamic Caliphate or Catholic Papacy) leaves a faith open to hijacking by apostles of hate, like Osama Bin Laden, who know nothing of the religion but much about sowing hate and killing people. Some offer Islam since the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924 as an example. Is Protestantism since Luther a counter-example?
9. Debate weeds out extreme ideas. An absence of debate allows crazed ideas to thrive because they are unchallenged. Hence crazed religious ideas will thrive in societies that lack a context where religious ideas face debate and challenge.
  - a. Excessive religious tolerance in the wider society ("no religion can be questioned or challenged!") can allow extreme religious ideas go unchallenged and undebated, allowing hatred to fester and grow. Thus the murderous Buddhist cult Aum Shinrikyo flourished in Japan partly because it went unchallenged.
  - b. A lack of democracy can produce the stifling of free debate of any kind in society. This allows extreme religious ideas go unchallenged, hence to thrive. Thus hateful Wahhabism has flourished without challenge in authoritarian Saudi Arabia. Perhaps it would have moderated under greater challenge in a democratic Saudi Arabia.
10. Evangelizing by religions causes conflict between the evangelizing religion and target religious communities who see evangelism as aggression.
11. Religions that adopt victim narratives ("We are oppressed! We have always been oppressed! We are always right because we are always victims!") feel release from the duty to behave ethically and have a related sense of total entitlement. Hence they are more likely to commit mass murder. For example, Islamist thinking since 1900 has a strong victim narrative. Such thinking is also growing among U.S. Christian and Jewish conservative religious believers, who complain of being oppressed by an anti-religious secular American society--despite the flourishing of religion in the U.S.
12. Threatened religions become aggressive. Example: backlashing fundamentalist movements that feel threatened by secular culture. (See an MIT Ph.D. thesis by Dr. Heather Gregg on this idea.)
13. Status reversal: religious communities that once dominated but then fell to inferiority are prone to violence, as status reversal is a powerful general spur to human violence. For example, some people argue that Islamic extremism is a response to the decline of the Muslim world relative to the West since 1683.
14. Religious faiths that claim exclusivity--to be the only valid faith, the only path to heaven, the only way to God--are more

aggressive toward others as they hold other faiths in implicit contempt. Christianity is quite exclusivist.<sup>2</sup> Hinduism and Buddhism are less exclusivist--Hinduism probably because it is polytheist (see below), Buddhism because its followers do not worship God. Judaism is also less exclusivist, as it accepts that non-Jews can be righteous if they follow the seven Noahide laws, which forbid murder, theft, blasphemy and other misdeeds.<sup>3</sup> And mainstream Islam is less exclusivist, as it accepts that Jews and Christians that behave righteously "shall be rewarded by their Lord; they have nothing to fear or to regret."<sup>4</sup>

15. Monotheism causes conflict. Unlike polytheists, monotheists reject the notion of more than one legitimate God. Hence they are more inclined to reject the notion that more than one faith is legitimate.

Behind these hypotheses is the argument that religious hate ideologies are more dangerous than other hate ideologies because their adherents assume they with God's moral authority, to fulfil God's will. This provides followers with a **moral release** from normal ethics; and the promise of **large rewards** of God's approval, to include admission to paradise in the hereafter. Hence followers observe less restraint in conflicts with others while pursuing them with more energy. Hence a religious hate idea is dangerous to a special, extra degree. See Scott Appleby's work on this argument.

Consider also the opposite important proposition: "Religion is a cause of peace. Most of the world's great religions proscribe killing and emphasize the value of human life. This inhibits war."

A case to consider: Christian premillennial dispensationalism. Its worldview is found the Left Behind book series by Tim F. LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, which are runaway best sellers. The last book in the series is Glorious Appearing: The End of Days (Wheaton IL: Tyndale House, 2004). It describes a mass-murdering Jesus returned to earth, hurling the religiously incorrect of the world into an abyss of everlasting fire:

"Jesus merely raised one hand a few inches and a yawning chasm opened in the earth, stretching far and wide enough to swallow all of them. They tumbled in, howling and screeching, but their wailing was soon quashed and all was silent when the earth closed itself again."

At a mere word from Jesus other unfortunates saw "their own flesh dissolved, their eyes melted and their tongues disintegrated." The landscape was covered with "splayed and filleted bodies of men and women." Quotes from Nicholas D. Kristof, "Jesus and Jihad," New York Times, July 17, 2004.

How to address religions hatred? One idea: start "Religious Hate Watch," an NGO that names and shames those who use religious authority--God's authority or the authority of one's faith--to sow hatred and stir violence. Would this be effective? Another idea: persuade organized religions to create truth and reconciliation commissions that would record the wrongs committed by the religion in the past, offer an expression of contrition, and create institutions (religious rituals) to purvey and sustain memory of the wrong among the flock. Another idea, from Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins: abolish religion. Will this happen any time soon? Would it be a good thing?

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<sup>2</sup> To support the exclusivist view some Christians quote the gospels of Mark and John: "Those who do not believe will be condemned" (Jesus in Mark 16:16); and "I am the way; ... no one comes to the Father except by me" (Jesus in John 14:6).

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion, Its People, and Its History (New York: William Morrow, 2001): 127, 560-61, 591-92.

<sup>4</sup> God in The Koran: 2:62. Other statements from The Koran are more exclusivist.

VII. HYPOTHESES FROM ORGANIZATION THEORY #3: BARRIERS TO ANALYSIS--NON-SELF EVALUATION AND NON-STRATEGY

- A. "Non-self-evaluation" by states and societies: "The wish of the powerful to stifle criticism leads societies to punish those who evaluate dominant policies and ideas; hence evaluation is scarce and inferior." ("National Auto-lobotomization"? :)) Relevant works: Irving Janis, Groupthink; Aaron Wildavsky, "The Self-Evaluating Organization."
1. Non-evaluation in government bureaucracy: two explanations.
    - a. The "groupthink" hypothesis, offered by Irving Janis.
    - b. The "punishment of evaluators" hypothesis.
    - c. Examples of "punishment" hypothesis. Robert Fitzgerald was fired for exposing huge cost overruns on the C5A aircraft in the early 1970s. Billy Mitchell was fired for demonstrating the effectiveness of airpower at sea. The U.S. "China hands" were fired in the U.S. in the late 1940s and early 1950s for speaking truths about China's Chiang Kai Shek regime. Saddam Hussein murdered anyone who brought him bad news. In 1941 the Japanese government punished the analyst who warned superiors that the U.S. had ten times Japan's industrial power. J. Colin, who argued against unduly offensive military doctrines in France before 1914, was hounded out of the French army for his heresy.
    - d. Motives for punishing/expunging evaluators: the clash between requirements of sound policy formulation and sound policy implementation. Dissenters make policy implementation difficult, so they are purged in advance. This injures policy formulation.
  2. Non-evaluation in the press and academe. See, e.g., Robert Lynd, Knowledge for What? German scholars were "fleet professors" who evangelized for Germany's unwise naval buildup before 1914. Honest historians such as Hermann Kantorowicz and Eckert Kehr were hounded out of Germany after 1918 for telling the truth about World War I. Fritz Fischer was attacked in 1960s for truth-telling about World War I.
  3. What motivates press and scholarly non-evaluation? The press believes its job is to report, not to evaluate. The press also fears alienating the official sources on which it often depends for information; and it wants to please its audience so they will buy its product, so it tells them what they want to hear even if it ain't quite true. Scholars do little evaluation partly from fear of retaliation from those evaluated, but more often from disbelief that evaluation is their job. They often think they don't owe evaluation to society, and instead deem themselves free to ask irrelevant questions whose answers interest only themselves.
  4. Results: consider the many follies and folly-makers lionized by their peoples. Napoleon led France to ruin but is still fawned over by the French. General Eric von Ludendorff led Germany to ruin but was later honored by the Germans. The German Schlieffen plan of 1914 was a folly that was not assessed until 1956. Austro-Hungarian General Conrad von Hötzendorf was a World War I blunderer who was not criticized within Austria until decades after World War I.
  5. Solutions: pass whistle-blower protection laws? (It's been done.) Give job tenure to policy evaluators and whistle-blowers? (That's been done too. University professors are supposed to be policy evaluators, and have tenure, but many waste their freedom writing on questions of little importance.) Instill better ethics in those who are supposed to evaluate?
- B. "Non-strategy": "States tend to leave national grand strategy and basic foreign policy vague or fail to frame it at all." Results:  
-- Less learning. E.g., U.S. policy in Asia didn't learn and adjust following the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s.  
-- Less storing of knowledge. E.g., by 1965 the U.S. forgot what it

learned about Vietnam in 1954.

-- Explaining is more difficult. E.g., Britain failed to explain its policy to Germany before 1939, hence Hitler miscalculated.

- C. Control cults as causes of misperception. Bolshevism, extreme Islamism, North Korean communism, the Moonies, the Heaven's Gate cult, and other religious cults may illustrate. Control cults are groups that venerate or worship a person or entity of some sort; and that separate their followers from the outside world, propagandize them, and include in that propaganda paranoid and chauvinist messages. Control cult leaders are often coercive, even terroristic, toward members in enforcing isolation, stifling dissent and free thought. The cult comprises an entire social community and forms the only society enjoyed by its members.

Points about cults: (1) The ideas of members are controlled in order to maintain loyalty, discipline, and esprit de corps. (2) This control is established by (a) isolating members from the outside world--a task achieved by enforcing members' isolation and by providing members with a comprehensive internal community to replace their social ties with the external community; (b) propagandizing members heavily, (c) stifling dissent among members, usually by coercion, and (d) sometimes keeping members too busy to think, dissent, or organize. (3) The content of the propaganda aimed at members stresses paranoid and chauvinist messages: "We are threatened, we are victims, we are superior, we are saving the world from evil, others are evil." Sometimes included are claims that cult leaders are divine, or in touch with the divine.

VIII. THE "SPIRAL MODEL" VERSUS "DETERRENCE" (OR THE "DETERRENCE MODEL," OR THE "MUNICH MODEL"): CHOOSING BETWEEN HARD-LINE POLICIES AND APPEASEMENT, AND THE DANGERS THAT FOLLOW FROM WRONG CHOICES

- A. Defining the spiral model and the deterrence model. What are they?  
B. Explaining spirals:  
1. Can psychological dynamics explain spirals? (See IIIA, IIIB above).  
2. Can nationalist mythmaking explain spirals?  
C. What conditions determine whether carrots or sticks work better?  
1. Is the other an aggressor state or a status quo power? (And: does it see itself as the aggressor or not?)  
2. Are the other's claims legitimate or illegitimate? (And: does it see its claims as legitimate or not?)  
3. Is the other weak or strong?  
4. Will the concessions demanded by the other strengthen its ability to commit further aggression?

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