

gsin

## **Intelligence Failures, Surprise Attacks and Terrorism: A Comparative Case Study Analysis**

**Abigail Lucirose Birch**

*Within the scope of “traditional” intelligence failure and strategic surprise scholarship, adversaries were anticipated to be state actors that launched surprise conventional attacks during a security crisis. More recently, attacks have been witnessed in peacetime by state and non-state actors alike who operated in more sophisticated ways, leading analysts to wonder if intelligence failure and strategic surprise theories can adequately analyse contemporary cases of surprise ( )-1 (t)5(or)4n9 (o)-56(y)-3 -4 (e)-4 (v)9ks.4 ( )-9ks.4 ( )To2-1 (a)-2rr [ , )*

definition of the term *intelligence failure*

## **Handel's theory of strategic surprise attacks**

### **Estimating risk**



mind of their adversary, they may become demoralised. Handel believed that ethnocentric biases explained most strategic surprises.<sup>21</sup>

### **Bureaucratic explanations**

Finally, Handel drew attention to bureaucratic explanations that justify the inability to anticipate a surprise attack. He analysed these explanations under the headings of coordination, groupthink and excessive secrecy.

The quality of intelligence can be distorted when parochial views arise. Typically, agencies that







tendency to base analysis on pre-existing beliefs is described by Handel as one of the causes of intelligence failure. Given the volume of intelligence about Japan's capabilities that were intercepted in 1941, there were usually several plausible alternative hypotheses, so it's not surprising that intelligence was selected that matched American preconceptions about Japan.<sup>37</sup> Pearl Harbor's official report concluded that if the IC had a keener awareness of the intelligence's significance, someone would have been able to conclude that an attack at Pearl Harbor was highly probable.<sup>38</sup>

Another reason why the Americans didn't anticipate a direct attack on the US was because, if put in a similar position, the US

been reversed. More diversity in their intelligence assessments may have given them a wider choice of interpretations, contributing to a wider spectrum of intelligence hypotheses.

Not only was coordination a problem between the Navy and the Army, but also between Washington and Hawaii. Hawaiian services had different sets of signals before them, drawing conclusions that differed from those of Washington.<sup>44</sup> Communication and coordination were at the root of this confusion in earlier alerts as Washington had a much clearer picture of intelligence than Pearl Harbor did.<sup>45</sup> No one person or agency ever had at one point all of the signals that existed, “[t]he signals lay scattered in a number of different agencies; some decoded; and some not”.<sup>46</sup> However, when adequately coordinated from all sources, post-mortem reports reveal that the intelligence indicated that there was a probability of a war within days.

Although not explicitly mentioned in the official Pearl Harbor report, groupthink is a phenomenon, which likely prevailed within the IC in the months preceding the Japanese attack.<sup>47</sup> Despite the interception of MAGIC, US Navy and Army officers based in Hawaii did not take warnings from Washington about a potential attack seriously. The officers simply believed that the Japanese would not risk attacking the US. The main problem was that nobody challenged this idea because they were thinking the same, and instead rationalised why an attack was unlikely to happen rather than consider that it might.

The operation of MAGIC was kept secret as the US wanted to ensure that Japan did not learn of their intelligence discoveries.<sup>48</sup> Since MAGIC was so closely guarded, it meant that there was no opportunity to examine the messages over a substantial period of time. According to the official report, both Kimmel and Short argued “that they were wrongfully deprived in  
pel(i)(g)-5 (e)-3 npe  
otr13 (e-2 d(.))TJ -0.0043 Tc 6.96 0 0 6.961-16-16335.62 Tm (98)Tj 0 Tc 10.8 0 0 10.8126.57.08330.568 Tm



Al-Qaeda was “dispatched by an organisation based in one of the poorest, most remote, and

was used tactically and operationally in order to achieve effects that were to magnify into a larger grand strategy. These D&D tactics were used by Al-Qaeda as direct preparation for the attacks. For example, Khalid Shiek Muhammad admitted that he “taught [the hijackers] Western skills, such as ordering at fast-food restaurants”<sup>59</sup> and how to wear Western clothes, amongst other things.

### **Cognitive Rigidity**

The evidence shows that many key members of the IC were “insensitive, skeptical and downright hostile”<sup>60</sup> to warnings regarding terrorism, Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda. The explanation for this attitude was likely because of their preconceptions about Al-Qaeda’s objectives. As previously stated, analysts were almost certain that the attack was planned overseas. Similar to the case at Pearl Harbor, analysts in 2001 were less likely to accept new information, which may have indicated an attack within US borders. Instead, they conformed to intelligence which indicated that the threat from Al-Qaeda continued to be overseas. The IC’s misconceptions about where the threat was helps explain why security at airports and on domestic flights in 2001 was not improved.

Handel's assumption that ethnocentric biases are inevitable. It's worth noting that the probability of embracing ethnocentric biases is far higher when aririUas (r)1sgas ug,rocas a aic wicu5 (s)-8 ( )-311 .(

one was looking for a foreign threat to domestic targets”.<sup>69</sup> If foreign intelligence agencies had coordinated with domestic agencies, they may have been able to discover that there was a void to be filled. Both examples demonstrate what happens when there is a lack of coordination between

the 9/11 commission read: “Hijackers studied publicly available materials on the aviation security system and used items that had less metal content than a handgun and were most likely permissible”.





pre-existing literature should be refined. Traditional literature relates to interstate conflict where two or more states compete against each other. In an asymmetric security environment, however, new literature must consider surprise attacks from non-state actors. Future research, similar to Daniel Morris,<sup>77</sup> may draw the conclusions from this paper to help develop a new model for predicting terror attacks. The future researcher should concentrate on transferring the parallels between traditional literature on intelligence failure and comprehensive attacks (cognitive deficiencies in both intelligence analysts and bureaucratic issues) into their model, while ensuring they take into consideration the particular nature of terror attacks.

---

<sup>77</sup> Daniel Morris, "Surprise and Terrorism: A Conceptual Framework", *Journal of Strategic Studies* 32:1 (2009), 1-29.

GSIN 1 (Sep. 2020), Carl Moudabber, The Infiltration of the Lebanese Scene by Salafi-Jihadi Groups: Local Security Threats and Wider Perceptions.

GSIN 2 (Dec. 2020), Fidel Abowei, The Military and Soft Power: Assessing the case of Nigeria's Security Engagement in West Africa from the Perception of Ghanaian and Liberian Political and Academic Elites.

GSIN 3 (Mar. 2021), Abigail Lucirose Birch, Intelligence Failures, Surprise Attacks and Terrorism: A Comparative Case Study Analysis

The *Global Security and Intelligence Note* . ck4a(f)u Td ( )Tj 0.01Tc 9uaitlG Liln0 02d [(A 60)4 (Li)5 pub (es)1 (.)Tc 19h