

IN THIS ISSUE

If a distinct theme emerges from this issue, it is probably the imperfection, and imperfectibility, of knowledge. This is, of course, hardly a new idea; it has been a stimulus to philosophical and historical inquiry for several thousand years. But it is an issue that has practical, significant, even urgent, implications in today's world outside the realm of the "Ivory Tower." The three articles in this issue each deal with different requirements for and methods of acquiring information needed for assessing trends in political violence. Each article also examines some of the problems inherent in acquiring and assessing such information.

Taking the bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon (1983), as a case study, Glenn Hastedt examines intelligence failure in the context of intelligence policy and process. He concludes that there were failures in intelligence tasking, collection, and processing. But he also points out that these were overshadowed by policy failures relating to the Marines' mission in Lebanon, and by failures to act on the information available.

Robert Mandel employs a comparative approach in examining the perspectives which inform the purpose, focus, and methodology applied to prediction of political instability in foreign countries. The subjects of this comparative assessment are the American intelligence and multinational business communities. His analysis suggests that while the two institutions face similar bureaucratic problems in utilizing political risk assessment, the business community encounters greater difficulties, owing to lack of resources, greater numbers of risk variables, bias introduced by vested interest in outcomes, and a lower tolerance for fundamental forecasting errors. He notes, however, that the potential consequences of predictive error for government are far more severe. Mandel concludes with some prescriptions which, he argues, would benefit both communities.

The purely academic quest is represented by Jeffrey Ross, who examines the conceptual and methodological problems involved in creating an 'events data base'. The subject in this case is political terrorism in Canada. He illuminates some of the particularly problematic issues, such as definition, lack of rigorous analysis, inadequate data, and doubtful reliability of information sources. By way of conclusion Ross points to the need for a reliable data base on political terrorism in Canada, while highlighting the difficulties of creating it.

The opinions expressed in the articles, reviews and other contributions are those of the authors alone, and do not necessarily represent those of the Centre for Conflict Studies or of the University of New Brunswick.

What emerges from all of this is a cautionary tale — an implicit warning that as our capacity to acquire information grows, so too do the opportunities for error. For the analyst in academe, business, or the intelligence community, there is virtue in humility in recognizing the limits of our knowledge and more than a grain of sage advice in the words of Oliver Cromwell: “think it possible you may be mistaken.”

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David Charters
Executive Editor

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