

#### The Trouble with Best Practices

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## **Opening Questions**



- What are current best practices in intelligence analysis?
- Can we learn lessons from other disciplines?
- What best practices from non-intelligence domains have utility?
- What best practices do not apply to intelligence?
- How do you evaluate analytic quality in intelligence?
- Are there unique aspects that prevent the use of best practices?

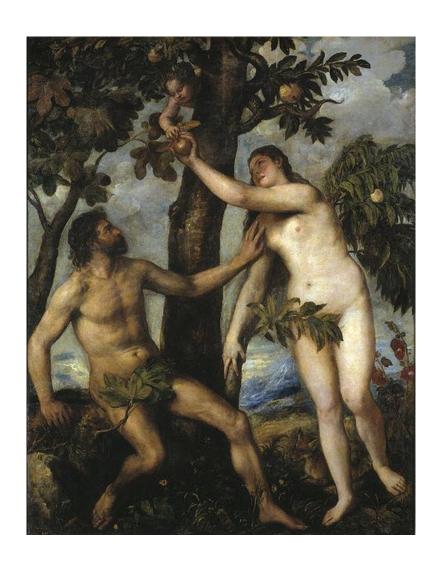
## **Opening Conjectures**



- The limited use of analytic best practices cannot be explained by reference to insufficient time or training (although these are legitimate culprits)
- We should consider as well those issues that condition analysts against the use of best practices. These include the problems of:
  - Definition
  - Perception
  - Application
  - Knowing

# In the Beginning...





#### The Problem of Definition



- Analysis as a reductionist process constitutes a fraction of what we do; the bulk of our efforts are oriented toward holistic methodologies
- Most techniques encourage the fragmentation of knowledge; this runs counter to our instinctive preference for building a narrative by reducing the amount of information we have to deal with
- Reductionist approaches only work if we share a common understanding of the constituent elements we are dealing with (or end up with)
- If we can't agree on these elements, we have a problem of knowing

### The Problem of Perception



- Analysis is not a unitary activity; it consists of multiple cognitive processes, most of which are founded on *perception*
- Perception is our basic unit of knowledge; even ignorance is a product of perception (which supposes some knowledge)
- How we perceive a problem determines our willingness to use analytic best practices (i.e. if we think we "get" the problem, we wont analyse it properly)
- The more complex the problem, the likelier we are to use "tried and trusted" methods of analysis
- This has the effect of reducing operational uncertainty but foregoing analytical rigour

### The Problem of Perception



- Best practices do not alleviate the perception of risk analytical, organisational, operational or otherwise
- Analysts must still contend with:
  - The fallacy of misplaced concreteness
  - The curse of logical positivism
  - The problem of verificationism

### The Problem of Application



- Best practices do not make the business of intelligence any easier, which is why they are readily avoided
  - Most techniques are intended to shape decisions (difficult, not the analyst's job) rather than answer questions (easy, anyone can do this)
  - They create more work, typically by exposing bias or ignorance. Our default biological setting is to avoid this outcome
  - They generate more information, which is the last thing we want; more information does not necessarily reduce analytic uncertainty
  - They are context specific; what works in one case may not in another
  - They are only as good as the people who use them







The philosopher Fred Dretske offers the following problem:

"Unknown to Sarah, her neighbor, a person she sees every day, is a spy. When she sees him, therefore, she sees him without awareness of either the fact that he is a spy or the fact that she sees a spy."





- The problem of definitions:
  - The Middle East
  - The Wider Middle East
  - The Arab World
  - The Arabian Gulf
  - West Asia

 Given the differences in meaning, how do we build analytical understanding?



- If we are to employ reductionist approaches to analysis, are we agreed on the elements that make up the whole?
- Do we agree on the properties, characteristics and behaviors of:
  - The sources we monitor?
  - The information we collect?
  - The issues we address?
  - The targets we develop?
- Best practices can help us surface our knowledge and test its validity or relevance. However, the problem of *knowing* typically remains unresolved

## The Fix (?)



#### Definition

- Overhaul the vocabulary of analysis (easier said than done)
- Beware the fixing of definitions ("X" is never "Y" for long)

#### Perception

- Educate the 19th century out of the analyst
- Operate counterintuitively (i.e. do the opposite of what comes naturally)
- Enhance perceptual discomfort

### The Fix (?)



#### Application

- Shift perspectives: uncertainty is good; information overload is valuable
- Work harder to work smarter
- If all else fails, increase the analyst's stake in the decision (yes, but...)

#### Knowledge

- Borrow from philosophy (e.g. Aristotle's Ways of Knowing)
- Borrow from the library sciences (e.g. thesauri, taxonomic and ontological systems, Ranganathan's facets)

#### In Praise of Best Practices



$$H(X) = \mathbb{E}_X[I(x)] = -\sum_{x \in \mathbb{X}} p(x) \log p(x).$$

#### Thank You



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