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PRESENCE OF MIND

Risks and Riddles

The Soviet Union was a puzzle. Al Qaeda is a mystery. Why we need to know the difference

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Explicit grammar
teaching/learning = puzzle
Negotiating meaning =
mystery (but we need
a better term - ?)
jazz? magic?

U.S. intelligence approached the Soviet military (a 1965 parade in Moscow) as a puzzle—the sum of its weapons and units.

THERE'S A REASON millions of people try to solve crossword puzzles each day. Amid the well-ordered combat between a puzzler's mind and the blank boxes waiting to be filled, there is satisfaction along with frustration. Even when you can't find the right answer, you know it exists. Puzzles can be solved; they have *answers*.

But a mystery offers no such comfort. It poses a question that has no definitive answer because the answer is contingent; it depends on a future interaction of many factors, known and unknown. A mystery

cannot be answered; it can only be framed, by identifying the critical factors and applying some sense of how they have interacted in the past and might interact in the future. A mystery is an attempt to define ambiguities.

Puzzles may be more satisfying, but the world increasingly offers us mysteries. Treating them as puzzles is like trying to solve the unsolvable—an impossible challenge. But ap-

proaching them as mysteries may make us more comfortable with the uncertainties of our age.

During the cold war, much of the job of U.S. intelligence was puzzle-solving—seeking answers to questions that had answers, even if we didn't know them. How many missiles did the Soviet Union have? Where were they located? How far could they travel? How accurate were they? It made sense to approach the military strength of the Soviet Union as a puzzle—the sum of its units and weapons, and their quality.

But the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of terrorism changed all that. Those events upended U.S. intelligence, to the point that its major challenge now is to frame mysteries, as I learned as vice chair- man of the National Intelligence Council, managing the process for producing National Intelligence Estimates.

To analysts in the Pentagon, for instance, terrorists present the ultimate asymmetric threat. But the nature of the threat is a mystery, not a puzzle. Terrorists shape

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themselves to our vulnerabilities, to the seams in our defenses; the threat they pose depends on us. The 9/11 hijackers, for instance, did not come to their plan of attack because they were aviation buffs. They came to it because they had identified gaps in our aviation defenses.

Whether Saddam Hussein's Iraq had nuclear or chemical weapons seemed a quintessential puzzle, and U.S. intelligence treated it that way. And got it wrong. But suppose the issue of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction had been treated not as a puzzle but as a mystery. That might have turned the exercise away from technical details and toward Saddam's thinking. It might have raised the question: Could Saddam be more afraid of his local enemies than he is of the United States? Could that lead him to boast that he had weapons he really didn't have?

PUZZLE-SOLVING is frustrated by a lack of information. Given Washington's need to find out how many warheads Moscow's missiles carried, the United States spent billions of dollars on satellites and other data-collection systems. But puzzles are relatively stable. If a critical piece is missing one day, it usually remains valuable the next.

By contrast, mysteries often grow out of too much information. Until the 9/11 hijackers' actually boarded their airplanes, their plan was a mystery, the clues to which were buried in too much "noise"—too many threat scenarios. So warnings from FBI agents in Minneapolis and Phoenix went unexplored. The hijackers were able to hide in plain sight. After the attacks, they became a puzzle: it was easy to pick up their trail.

Solving puzzles is useful for detection. But framing mysteries is necessary for prevention.

That's one reason the FBI embarked on a change of mission after 9/11, from almost pure law enforcement to intelligence—from solving puzzles to framing mysteries. That change in mission requires an enor-

mous change in organizational culture. For the puzzles of law enforcement, the measures of effectiveness are pretty clear—you can count the suspects collared and bad guys convicted. Terrorists, however, may commit but one crime, and by the time they do, it is too late. That scarcity of "collars" is a main reason why, rhetoric aside, counterterrorism was not a marquee FBI mission before 9/11.

For the mysteries of intelligence, measures of effectiveness are elusive. The goal of prevention is . . . nothing—an absence of attacks. But if no major terrorist attack occurs, does that represent the effectiveness of prevention, simple good luck or the fact that the threat was overstated in the first place?

That's one uncertainty we'll have to learn to live with. There are others that framing mysteries can help us understand.

NO MATTER HOW MUCH patients may seek the clarity of a puzzle, healthcare, too, is largely a mystery. The medicine, like that of counter- of illness and depends on