Research Agenda

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My work stands at the intersection of history, decision making, and policy. Through four books and numerous articles I have asked how leaders make decisions about their enemies and how this in turn affects international conflict. The overarching aim is to develop a history of judgment in foreign affairs. My hope is that this work will not only advance our understanding of particular historical periods but will also provide some guidance to contemporary decision makers. Below I describe each book: its origins, thesis, and relevance.

What Hitler Knew

My first book, *What Hitler Knew: The Battle for Information in Nazi Foreign Policy* (Oxford University Press, 2003), asked how Hitler made decisions. Specifically, I examined how the climate of fear within the German foreign ministry affected information flows to Hitler and how this shaped foreign policy outcomes. I wanted to know what it was like for Hitler's advisors, especially the non-Nazi diplomats, to serve such a violent regime. As I came to discover, intimidation, surveillance, violence, and fear affected their control of information, causing them to manipulate it or to withhold it altogether. Information was the only weapon the diplomats possessed, and they used it to safeguard their positions – and sometimes their lives.

Drawing on materials from four German archives, the British Public Records Office, and the former Soviet Union, I traced the paper trail from diplomats and spies to advisors and statesmen, tracking how the Nazi regime's violence led officials to exert excessive, sometimes obsessive, control over information. I demonstrated that Hitler's power to make informed decisions was limited by the frenetic system that he himself had created.

What Hitler Knew was the outgrowth of my doctoral dissertation at Oxford and postdoctoral research at Harvard. In that book I scrutinized many of the key foreign policy events of the pre-war Nazi era. For example, I asked why Hitler remilitarized the Rhineland in 1936, when the German military was still weak. French troops could have easily expelled German

forces from the demilitarized zone, and that defeat could have meant the end of Hitler's young regime. Why then did Hitler take such a reckless risk?

The scholarship at the time maintained that Hitler possessed a remarkable sense of his enemies – an intuitive feel for his opponents' timidity. I doubted it could be that simple. In the archives I found clues to a more complex explanation. Records previously held in East Germany had been transferred to Berlin Lichterfelde in the 1990s. There I came upon the official and personal papers of Hitler's first Foreign Minister, Constantin Freiherr von Neurath. I quickly discovered that Neurath possessed top secret intelligence from a reliable Foreign Ministry colleague that neither the French General Staff nor the French President was willing to fight over a German remilitarization. But the story became far more interesting when I realized that Neurath likely never shared this information with the Führer. Instead, he urged Hitler onward, insisting that France would not fight. Unlike all of Hitler's other advisors, including the War Minister, Neurath alone consistently pressed for remilitarization, despite Hitler's own misgivings. The reason, I surmised, was because Neurath understood his tenuous position as a non-Nazi serving the Third Reich. He grasped that Hitler favoured bold risk-takers. In order to protect his position, and possibly even his life, Neurath advocated risky policies while exerting excessive control over the information flow to Hitler. This chapter of my book first appeared as the lead article in the *Journal of Contemporary History*.

In subsequent chapters I showed how risk-taking and extraordinary information control became the norm for Hitler's diplomats. To understand the reasons why they took such risks in manipulating or withholding information from Hitler, I combed the records for clues to their experiences during the regime's first purge: the so-called "Night of the Long Knives" in 1934. Since no one would have been so foolish as to have written down his thoughts about the purge, I turned to records of the foreign diplomats in Berlin at the time. Sure enough, their papers contained notes on the fates of their German counterparts. Some German officials were shot across their desks, while others went into hiding or fled the country. Still others, heirs to the noble tradition of elites serving in the diplomatic corps, now seemed utterly shaken by the violence that barraged their ministry. From these independent accounts of foreign officials, I was

able to tell the story of what happened to the diplomats during the purge and postulate its long-term effects.

Following sections on the decision to align with Poland and the decision to covertly arm the Ethiopians against Italy, the book culminated in a two-chapter exploration of the information flow surrounding the Nazi-Soviet Pact. While I found multiple examples of Foreign Ministry officials attempting to withhold or manipulate information in order to prevent that agreement, I also uncovered a startling event that might have inadvertently contributed to the formation of the infamous pact. As had previously been known, in the months just prior to the war, British and German representatives met in secret to discuss a possible separate peace. To my surprise, I discovered that the records of those secret talks were cabled to the German Embassy in Moscow. That Embassy had been thoroughly penetrated by Soviet spies, as I learned from a cache of NKVD (forerunner to the KGB) files on the German Ambassador, Count von der Schulenburg. Those files had been held in the Soviet Union for decades until just after the Soviet Union's collapse, when the German state purchased them from Russia and housed them in the Bundesarchiv Koblenz. The documents showed how extensively the Soviets had spied on the Germans and had gained access to many cables arriving at their Moscow Embassy. Unfortunately, because certain Soviet archives were, and still are, closed, I could not obtain the "smoking gun" to prove that Stalin had seen the notes on those meetings between the British and the Germans. However, since his spies saw and heard so much of what passed through that Embassy, it seemed entirely possible that Stalin learned of those secret talks on the eve of World War II and suspected that he was about to be sold out. That is, in fact, what the talks described: a separate deal between Britain and Nazi Germany – the final act of Chamberlain's appeasement policy.

At this late hour, August 1939, it is unlikely that Chamberlain actually intended to sign a separate peace. Instead, he probably only hoped to lure Germany into negotiations in order to prevent or forestall the war. Stalin, however, would not have known that. He would instead have assumed the worst. By tracing the flow of cable traffic, signatures on cables, and other clues, I was able to show that just one day after Ambassador Schulenburg read the minutes of those secret conversations, Stalin's ambassador to Berlin informed the Germans that the Soviets were

ready to resolve all outstanding differences. In other words, I found evidence strongly suggesting that Stalin signed the infamous agreement not solely out of a ruthless drive to control Eastern Europe, but also out of fear that Britain was preparing to sign its own separate peace with Hitler, leaving Russia to fend for itself.

In the book's conclusion I made a single prediction: I proposed that in other authoritarian regimes where a climate of fear pervaded the daily life of a leader's advisors, information control might assume an equally frenzied nature. As the United States was then preparing for an invasion of Iraq in 2003, I wrote that we might find a similarly chaotic decision-making process under Saddam Hussein's regime. Thousands of captured documents would later bear this out.

While *What Hitler Knew* explored the impact of a climate of fear on decision making, beneath the convoluted twists and turns of information flows lay a deeper question. What I really wanted to understand was judgment. Why did Hitler create such a chaotic system in which he would not receive the information he wanted? More broadly, why do individuals and governments sometimes reach such poor decisions? Unlike political scientists, I wanted to approach this question from a historian's perspective: by combing sources for clues without seeking to craft a grand theory. Following my time at Harvard, I joined the State Department's Policy Planning Staff thanks to a fellowship from the Council on Foreign Relations. I began just days prior to the attacks on September 11, 2001 and quickly found ample material to occupy my obsession with judgment in foreign affairs.

Breeding Bin Ladens

My second book, *Breeding Bin Ladens: America, Islam, and the Future of Europe* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), tackled a more contemporary issue of judgment. This book asked how and why the United States and Europe were alienating the moderate Muslim populations they most wanted to attract. I began investigating this question in 2001 because I suspected that Europe, with its vast Muslim populations, could be fertile ground for Islamic extremists. I also recognized that the overwhelming majority of Europe's Muslims wanted no truck with terror. I therefore wanted to know which policies would best attract those Muslims in

the middle – the ones who might otherwise be lured into supporting extremism. I found that American and European officials simply misperceived these potential enemies, who were also potential allies. I realized that I needed to understand moderate Muslims better.

Much of the literature at the time was infused with a "Chicken Little" alarmism. Authors decried the Islamicization of Europe, speaking of "Eurabia" and "Londonistan," and prophesied the end of Europe's Christian culture. At root lay a monolithic view of Europe's Muslims: all dangerously steeped in anti-Americanism and bent on creating a Caliphate in Europe. I assumed it would not be difficult to debunk such shallow claims. And while in fact the alarmist view proved untenable, the opposite contention, that most Muslims were content in a multicultural Europe, was also not quite right. What I found was a surprising degree of ambivalence: ambivalence toward America, toward Europe, and toward Islam's place in the European Union. The appropriate description was not anti-Americanism, then, but ambivalent-Americanism, or "ambi-Americanism" for short. And while I did not expect a unified view to emerge from within Europe's dramatically diverse Muslim populations, I did in fact discover a remarkable consistency among Europe's younger Muslims, particularly those under forty. This generation was becoming more religious and identified more with Islam than its parents or grandparents had been.

Surveys in the early 2000s repeatedly showed that America was deeply unpopular among Europe's Muslims. President Bush's war in Iraq was a major factor, though far from the only cause of this disenchantment. Traveling to mosques and Islamic community centers across the continent over the course of several years and interviewing a diverse range of Muslims, both immigrant and European-born, I tried to get at the heart of ambi-Americanism and ambi-Europeanism. Repeatedly I encountered a deep unease with perceived mainstream European and American values. This unease manifested itself across a range of daily activities. Each chapter of the book therefore focused on a different aspect of younger European Muslims' behaviors: how they worship, how they vote, what they purchase, where they live, what they wear, and what they believe. To avoid "orientalism" – which in this case would have meant to rob Muslims of their agency, deprive them of their own voice, and depict them as monolithic – I tried always to present a diverse range of attitudes and behaviors, letting younger Muslims speak

for themselves (and verifying with them that I had accurately conveyed their views). I then compared my subjects' stories with the larger survey data and noted that the former did not always mesh with the latter. I believe this was because my interviews often occurred over time, sometimes over several years, and this allowed for more nuanced attitudes to emerge, in contrast to the snapshots that polls can capture.

This ostensible contradiction between what younger Muslims told pollsters and what they told me was best articulated by Malik, a twenty-nine-year-old Moroccan living in Germany, who vehemently railed against America for several minutes before I interrupted to ask if he had ever visited America. "Ahhh, I dream of going to America one day," Malik said wistfully. Our conversation revealed that Malik saw no inconsistency in this position. He could despise many of America's policies and social customs – its sexualisation of women, its economic inequality, and its immorality as shown on television – while at the same time admiring its technology, its dynamism, and its innovations. Malik insisted that he could hate American foreign policy while still wearing Reebok or Nike shoes. Yet increasingly Europe's Muslims were turning to Islamically-oriented products as alternatives to the most pervasive American consumer goods. In one chapter entitled "Clash of the Barbies," I explored the rise of these goods and services. Whether it was to manage their money at the Islamic Bank of Britain; or choosing to drink only MeccaCola instead of Coke; or giving their daughters Razanne, a Muslim Barbie-like doll, Europe's Muslims were seeking alternatives to the perceived mainstream values that made them ambivalent about their place in European society.

To ground my analysis in a historical perspective, I posited in a concluding chapter that contemporary Islamophobia bore some similarity to American anti-Catholic sentiment in the late 19th century. I suggested that Europe's Muslims would both change and be changed by mainstream European society, and that in the process greater integration could result, just as it had happened for American Catholics. Hoping that my study could hold value for policymakers, in an epilogue I offered concrete policy prescriptions that might ease the integration process. One of these ideas received an award from Germany's Körber Foundation at a ceremony in Berlin.

During the more than five years that I worked on *Breeding Bin Ladens*, the war in Iraq continually cast its shadow. That war intensified my interest in understanding why governments

often devote significant time, resources, and brain power to studying a problem, and then pursue solutions that make matters even worse than before they began. The subject of my next book seemed clear.

Blunder

I next wanted to take a broader historical look at judgment in foreign affairs. Specifically, I wanted to know whether certain mindsets recur in the prelude and conduct of disparate wars, and whether these patterns could be better understood or even changed. In *Blunder: Why Smart People Make Bad Decisions* (Bloomsbury, 2008), I offered a historian's critique of judgment. Ranging across periods from ancient Greece to present-day Iraq, I illustrated the most prevalent forms of faulty thinking (or "cognition traps") that undermine a stable peace. Using diaries of statesmen, diplomatic cables, and some interviews to expose how decision makers were thinking at the time, *Blunder* argued that the rigid mindsets I identify are essential components to ill-fated foreign affairs.

Each chapter in *Blunder* identified a different cognition trap and provided both historical and contemporary examples of how that rigid mindset led decision makers astray. Though many cognition traps exist, I focused on the seven most prevalent and destructive ones. In order to assist policymakers and others, I assigned each cognition trap a label that I hoped would be memorable. Some of these include *Exposure Anxiety*, the fear of being seen as weak or flawed; *Causation Confusion* (*Causefusion* for short), the confusion over the causes of complex events; and *Infomania,* an obsessive relationship to information. While *Blunder* offered a typology of judgment, it did not merely categorize the mindsets that sabotage success. It also considered those people in comparable circumstances who did not fall prey to cognition traps and asked why. Naturally, no one can account for all of the factors that foster good judgment, but throughout the many stories in this book several common themes emerged. Those who overcame or avoided cognition traps tended to demonstrate mental flexibility, the willingness to question the majority view, the rejection of reductionism, and the development of empathy and imagination.

In the penultimate chapter I turned my attention to Iraq. Thanks to the work of journalists and others, by 2007 a considerable amount of information had become available on the Bush administration's actions preceding and during the war. After reviewing this literature, it struck

me that each of the seven cognition traps I had identified in *Blunder* had combined to undermine America's success in Iraq.

One of my aims with *Blunder* had been to tackle the challenge of writing about foreign policy for a popular audience. I feel strongly that the historical profession benefits when we can bring our work to a wider readership. Though endorsed by scholars such as the American Historical Association's President Emeritus, James Sheehan, *Blunder* also attracted reviews in mainstream publications, such as *Newsweek* and *O, The Oprah Magazine*. *Blunder* has now been translated into six languages (including Chinese, Korean, and Turkish) and was made into an audio book.

Although I felt that *Blunder* had advanced our understanding of judgment in foreign affairs, I realized that the book had focused so heavily on poor decisions that it left much more to be said about good decisions. I knew that my next book had to address at least one aspect of this puzzle.

A Sense of the Enemy

My fourth book, *A Sense of the Enemy: The High-Stakes History of Reading Your Rival's Mind* (Oxford University Press, 2014) asked the opposite question to the one I posed in *Blunder*. Instead of tracing the roots of failure in decision making, I examined the causes of success. More specifically, I wanted to know how certain historical figures managed to read their enemies correctly. I used the term "strategic empathy" to mean the ability to discern an enemy's underlying drivers and constraints. When leaders read their enemies well, was it just luck, or did they have a method? In other words, I wanted to know what produces strategic empathy.

I did not begin this project expecting to craft a grand theory about enemy assessments. Instead, I simply sought to extract lessons from an array of successful leaders and possibly make those lessons accessible to contemporary analysts. To my surprise, however, a common theme emerged. I found that leaders understood their enemies best not by studying a pattern of past behavior, but by scrutinizing behavior during what I call "pattern breaks." Pattern breaks are those moments when normal routines are upended and standard operating procedures are completely overturned. Pattern breaking moments could be any dramatic events: a nuclear disaster, a massacre, or even a peaceful revolution. How leaders acted at these moments revealed more about their underlying drivers than did their longstanding pattern of past behavior.

Most of the book's chapters spotlighted a particular leader, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Gustav Stresemann, Franklin Roosevelt, or Le Duan, and examined a pivotal incident during which he gained insight into his opponent's deeper motivations. Each leader figured out what the other side really wanted and was therefore able to adapt his policy accordingly. In contrast, two other chapters ranged across periods, focusing on several leaders and their flawed assessments. In chapter eight I used the term "the continuity heuristic" to describe the opposite of the pattern-break heuristic. I discussed how both Sir Eyre Crowe and George F. Kennan ascribed continuity to a putative German and Russian national character respectively. Their analysis did not allow for the possibility that a change in circumstances could meaningfully alter behaviour. Rather, they saw their enemies as possessing an essentially fixed nature. Scrutinizing behaviour during pattern breaks, I argued, is more likely to produce sound assessments and wise policies.

Chapter nine brought the subject of my study to the present. It addressed a serious shortcoming with today's reliance on big data as a means of prediction. I pointed out that while large-scale quantitative analyses of patterns can undeniably yield insights into group behaviors, they often fail us when the focus is on an individual. To understand what motivates any particular individual, we may find more useful clues hidden not in patterns but in pattern breaks. Finally, in a lengthy afterword, I challenged some of the assumptions of current social science scholarship on individual behaviour. I noted that while the cognitive sciences have brought many advances, we too often accept their findings uncritically, forgetting that these fields typically construct experiments absent the full array of real-world conditions. The aim of this chapter was to place my own work within the context of scholarship on decision making in order to show how historical studies can make meaningful contributions to these questions.

Because *A Sense of the Enemy* has implications for contemporary strategy and policy, the Smith Richardson Foundation decided to host a discussion of the book with foreign policy experts in Washington, D.C. On September 15, 2016, leading analysts from the intelligence community, the Defense Department, think tanks and universities met at the Willard Hotel's Grand Suite to consider ways in which nations can better understand their adversaries. I provided the keynote address, outlining the book's thesis. The group then delved deeply into the challenges and benefits of the book's concept of pattern-break analysis, exchanging ideas on how American officials could better understand their foreign enemies. My hope is that as more people learn about pattern-break analysis, we will strengthen our strategic empathy and reduce the severity of future conflicts.

Grad School Essentials

In the winter of 2014, a long-time Ph.D. student in Berkeley's history department came to see me. He had been working on his dissertation for nearly a decade, and his advisor was beginning to lose faith that he would ever finish. I spent several hours with him that day, forcing him to craft a crisp, coherent thesis question and thesis statement. We then did the same for each of his chapters. Within roughly three hours we had reshaped his dissertation's basic structure,

making the point of his project much clearer. I then spent a considerable amount of time over the ensuing year reading each of his chapters and helping him to focus them on answering his underlying question. He, his advisor, and I were all delighted (as well as relieved) when he earned his doctorate in 2015. I had been working with students in similar ways for many years, but I realized it was time to put my methods down in print.

With my fifth book I wanted to help graduate students improve their academic performance. After reviewing the existing literature, I saw the need for a concise, practical guide to academic work. Each chapter of *Grad School Essentials: A Crash Course in Scholarly Skills* (University of California Press, 2016) therefore addresses one of six key skills: how to read, critique, write, speak, act, and conduct research at a higher level. I am hopeful that graduate students, along with advanced undergraduates, will benefit from this effort.