Analysis and Foreign Policy Choice

DAVIS B. BOBROW
University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota

The relationships between political analysis and foreign policy choice whatever their other problems have not lacked for discussion in recent years. That is not surprising in a period when the connection between knowledge and action has been under normative re-examination, when the technology of political analysis has changed drastically, when U.S. foreign policy in both program and process terms has disappointed and angered many, when the internal inadequacies of American society have again been recognized, and when federal and foundation funding for internationally focused social science research and training have shrunk.¹

In spite of all the discussion, one is highly optimistic to contend that even modest signs of progress are visible. At the current rate of change, we might as well wait for the secular trend of a new generation of officials and analysts with better undergraduate and graduate social science training. That option is unsatisfactory on two counts. First, the costs of delay are high. Second, there is no particularly convincing reason to believe that if analysts continue what they are doing, the impact of their students will be particularly more beneficial than the impact of the students produced by the burgeoning international relations and area studies programs of the late 1940s and 1950s.

Accordingly, in this paper I will put forward, first, a selective set of observations about our past experience and current situation and, second, some suggestions for new strategies and tactics in the future. The first section suggests some lessons for us. These are of a political and technical sort as contrasted with the more discussed problems of communication and morality. The imbalance stems from my concern not to repeat what has been said well and also from a conviction that it is arid to focus

on communication and morality without specifying a political and technical context. One communicates and acts morally in a context not a vacuum. Indeed, “communication problems” often mask more substantial phenomena; they are more the frosting than the cake. Without knowing the particulars of the political and technical situation one wishes to influence, few normative positions have clear action implications or help very much in evaluating the actions of others. In the second part of the paper, I draw on the experience of disciplines other than political science, particularly economics, the physical sciences, and manpower related parts of psychology, to suggest some new directions for international relations analysts. I do not know if these are sufficient to change the substance of foreign policy directly or to change the process from which it results. The experience of others suggests that the odds are much more favorable if we draw on the relatively successful strategies and tactics of other disciplines than if we simply do more of what we have been doing. The innovations suggested can be pursued, though not completed, with the current state of the art. None requires agreement or disagreement with particular foreign policies or foreign policy organizations. However, the immediate benefits of the proposed innovations will be restricted to those elements of society with atypically high intellectual skills, organizational cohesion, and access to power centers.

I. Lessons

The “lessons” stated below have been selected according to the emphasis noted earlier and for particular relevance to the use of newer methods of international relations analysis. The problems posed by the latter criterion are, of course, not unique to political science. They characterize the class of intellectual influence situations where the work of external analysts challenges the professional competence of operating officials. As the title of the paper suggests, we are concerned with lessons pertinent to impact not to contact. That is, we want to understand better why foreign policy has or has not changed as a result of our efforts, not why operating officials do or do not seek our company or increase their financial support. Indeed, the implication of the suggested lessons will interfere with some forms of contact.

1. The impact of sellers depends on the presence of a number of competitive buyers. Analysts, and particularly external analysts, are sellers while operating officials are buyers in this analogy. Their relationship is not necessarily monetary. We either have not understood this principle or have not had the opportunities provided by a market with at least several buyers. Accordingly, we have not had the advantage of competition among buyers. Our buyer has been primarily the executive branch with little exchange with Congress. Within the executive branch, the Department of Defense has been the dominant buyer and other agencies have made only minor and sporadic purchases. In such a market, the only incentive to the buyer to do what he does not otherwise want to do, or to alter his habitual practices, is that of reason. Such an incentive is inadequate in the private sector, and we have no convincing reason to assume that it is more powerful in the public sector. A dominant buyer need not worry that his competitors will use the seller’s product against him or that he will be punished for not using the best product, in this case analysis, available for purchase. This line of argu-