

1 The Model and Us Frivolous Ones

A simple experiment: Some options.

At this moment insiders are plotting how to control our brains. As former White House press secretary Scott McClellan put it, their tools are “spin, stonewalling, hedging, evasion, denial, noncommunication, and deceit by omission.” This book offers techniques for defending ourselves from such machinations.

If the real world were as tidy as mathematics, I wouldn’t have to write this book. In my daytime job, two plus three is always five, everyone agrees on the basic assumptions, and we draw conclusions with a chain of reasons that obey rules as strict as those that govern a game of baseball.

But outside this ivory tower, the world is a madhouse. Practicing mathematics has made me hypersensitive to the way decisions are made in the real world, where there are no accepted basic assumptions as starting points, and no restrictions on how to draw conclusions from them. It is a Wild West of the mind.

In the world of mathematics we speak to the intellect. Each step is explicit and can be checked. Not so in human affairs, where rhetoric is aimed at the gut, and it is usually impossible to check whether it is right or wrong.

Gut reasoning, imprecision, and lack of checkable facts would be of little importance if we lived under a dictator. But we live

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in a democracy, and, like it or not, we are the ultimate check in a delicate system of checks and balances.

There are many of us, but we are a frivolous bunch. We are no match for those who make a fulltime career of governing or running a corporation day in and day out. We must make our modest contributions in our spare time. No wonder we are vulnerable.

I say vulnerable because we are easily convinced by the flimsiest evidence. This tendency was critical to our survival when the challenges we faced required quick decisions: flee or fight. In our present world, where the challenges are complex, such a response is our undoing. Review the disasters of the twentieth century and you will see that our wisdom has not kept up with the new options that magnify our powers to do good or to inflict harm. Technical progress has made parts of your brain and mine obsolete. We all, both high and low, ought to be far more humble than we are.

For every issue of the day, whether local or national, we form an opinion, a belief, an attitude, a perception, call it what you will. When a pollster phones us, we feel important and are happy to reveal where we stand even though we may not have spent more than a few minutes studying the issue.

To illustrate this tendency, let's start with a simple optical illusion. I pick it because it's not one of the controversies that keep us on a high emotional red alert.

I had thought of using an example that we already share, such as our attitudes during the buildup to the Iraq invasion. Take mine, for instance. At first I felt it was a dumb idea, because wars in general have horrible, unpredictable consequences, even for the victor.

Then I was reminded that Saddam committed terrible crimes, so thought the invasion was a good idea. Next, hearing that the international inspectors had found no sign of weapons of mass destruction, I changed my mind again.

But then the big shots at the top of government warned me that Saddam could unleash a mushroom cloud in a mere forty-five

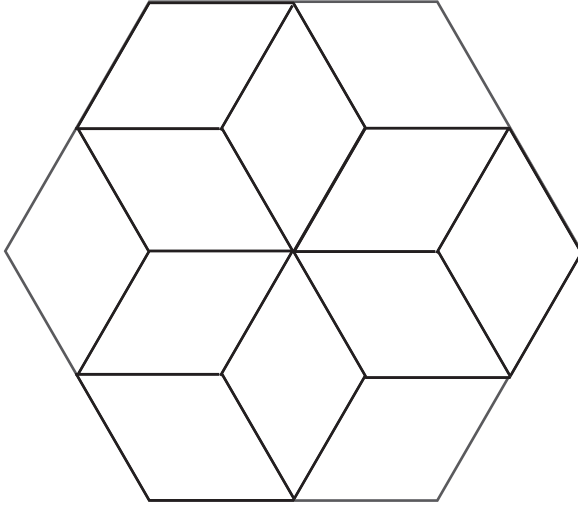
minutes. Who was I to condemn a whole city to mass extermination? Surely the big shots knew something that I did not for they have access to at least forty billion dollars worth of intelligence per year, (that's over a hundred million dollars a day) collected by the CIA, the National Security Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency, National Reconnaissance Agency, National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, Homeland Office of Intelligence Analysis, State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Army Intelligence and Security Command, Office of Naval Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence Agency, and on and on. And the president even had the service of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board to help him analyze the analysis. Who was I to suspect that they were feeding me hokum?

On the basis of that scary image of a mushroom cloud rising high into the sky, I probably would have voted to invade, though that vote, within my mind, was close, like 51 to 49. Because I had never been to Iraq, knew not a single Iraqi, never studied the history of Iraq, I was easily pulled one way and then the other while going about my daily chores on my bicycle in the flat little town of Davis, California.

My point is not whether it was wise or foolish to invade. Rather it is that I could look at the information leading up the invasion in many different ways, but at any moment I simply had to have a viewpoint, a perspective, as though I were sitting in the Senate and was obliged to vote.

Instead of Iraq, I will now use a cool, fresh, non-controversial example, just a picture. I know it's much simpler than the events about which we are constantly forming opinions. Even so, it illustrates a critical idea, which I will refer to often throughout the coming chapters.





A SIMPLE EXPERIMENT

What do you see? Three cubes, with the top cube to the left? Three cubes, with the top cube to the right? A six-pointed star in a hexagon? Or is it just thirty identical line segments? Or do you see it as twelve parallelograms filling up a hexagon?

It seems impossible to stare at the picture and not give it some form. Inevitably, we interpret it. We cannot resist giving it meaning. That's how we deal with events in the real world. We don't just notice them. We fit them into our view of life. The process is so automatic that we are not aware of it. Even if we are aware we do it, it is hard to stop ourselves and, so to speak, stay on the sidelines.

Scientists call this habit of forming a perception "modeling." Physicists model the world. For instance, they say that any two objects attract each other with a force that shrinks the further apart they are. Modeling the universe with a few such assumptions, physicists deduce that planets move in elliptical orbits. They

work within their models, not with the world itself. So do we. A model replaces a complex reality with something easier to deal with. It may be wrong. It may oversimplify. But at least it's in our heads and we can work with it.

Here is an example from my own experience to show how we do this.

While taking a walk I noticed a school bus parked on the street opposite an elementary school. On its side was the name of a school district in a nearby town. "Oh," I said to myself, "it brought pupils on a visit here. Or maybe it's a local bus bought used and the old district's name hasn't been painted over." I couldn't just look at the bus as simply a big, yellow object with wheels. I felt compelled to give it a meaning. Both of my guesses were wrong. The driver explained that he had dropped high school students off at the university and then had driven about until he could find a parking place. My compulsion to model led me to the wrong conclusion, but this was of no consequence. My next example, however, has substantial implications.

SOME OPTIONS

Theology might be described as the making of a model for the whole universe, as the following actual incident illustrates. A certain mathematics department consisted mainly of devout professors, but there was an atheist in their midst, which upset them. A Jesuit priest was dispatched to cure him of his atheism. After much fruitless argument, the priest gave up and asked the atheist, "How do you know that there is no God?" The atheist replied, "There are some things you must take on faith."

That ended the discussion. Both priest and atheist had created their own models of the universe, both beyond proof or disproof. Each looked at the ultimate equivocal illusion, the universe itself, and saw radically different patterns. The Jesuit saw a guiding hand; the atheist did not. There was no halfway point of compromise

What is the basis of the conflict between the West and the Islamic world? A president of the United States said it is because they hate our freedoms. Osama bin Laden said that is not the

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reason; rather, it is because of United States policy and actions in the Middle East: “If it were from hatred of your freedoms we would have attacked Sweden.” Both models cannot be right.

Deciding how to model our relation to the Muslim world is far more important than interpreting the optical illusion or the parked bus. But each of us has a model, and those models shape how we think about the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, how we vote, and, ultimately, how our nation acts in the world. No matter how firmly held, our personal models of what is driving events in the Middle East are not generally grounded on direct knowledge of place, people, or events. Most of us haven’t lived in the Middle East and we don’t speak Arabic or Farsi. We probably know little of the history of the region. We have no idea when those straight-line borders separating the countries were established or who drew them. Our models are necessarily based on second- and third-hand accounts, amounting to little more than hearsay. I wonder how many of us could identify Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran on a map that shows only borders, or just tell their order from west to east. How many could identify Mohammed Mossadegh?

That the bedrock of international affairs is not reality, but a model, is also illustrated by an example from a century ago. In this case we know which model turned out to be correct. That is one advantage of looking back, in contrast to paying attention only to the present.

Consider the two views of the pre-World War I armaments race, dominated by the construction of ever larger battleships by Germany and Great Britain. Pacifists, about to assemble for the Hague Peace Conference of 1907, saw that race as a threat to security. But Theodore Roosevelt, then president, saw the same race in an opposing light. In a letter of September, 1906, he wrote, “In the Hague, my chief trouble will come from the fantastic visionaries who are crazy to do the impossible. Just at present the United States Navy is an infinitely more potent factor for peace than all the peace societies.”

Each year that passed with armaments increasing and without war breaking out confirmed his perception and weakened the pacifists’ case. But the outbreak of World War I less than eight

years after he wrote that letter can be seen as validating the fears of the ‘fantastic visionaries.’

Real life can even be shaped by a perception of a perception of a perception, “perception raised to the third power.” As President Johnson wrote about the Vietnam War in his memoirs: “I thought that Hanoi would probably view a new cessation in bombing as a sign of weakness.” That short sentence describes three efforts to model, for it is a perception about a view about an attitude. He was modeling how Hanoi would model his modeling of the halt in bombing. Reality was buried under layers of hypotheses.

The world that shapes our actions is not the one “out there,” but is the one that gradually forms inside our own skulls. I am fascinated by the unpredictably diverse ways different people, facing the same fact, can interpret it in opposite ways. If optical illusions thrive on the peculiarities of retina and optic nerve, how many errors of judgment spring from imperfections of that far more complex instrument, the brain.

The hand is quicker than the eye, and the world subtler than the mind. No wonder the chains of cause and effect in human affairs can be interpreted so many ways

At a magic show, where we know we are being misled, we are on guard. But outside the theater, in the wide world, no one warns us about the “magicians” who are trying to shape our models of the world. When we stop to think how weak are the foundations that support most of our views, we will realize how vulnerable we are and why it’s so easy to play us for “suckers.”

In the following chapters I will analyze why we are such push-overs, the techniques insiders use to manipulate us, and how we can protect ourselves.

