

Playing Games with Narratives

In an age of spin and propaganda, one trick is to falsify the chronological order of events to turn reactions into instigations and vice versa, like when George W. Bush says he went to war in Iraq in response to bad intelligence when his decision predated the manufacturing of that intel, writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

A recurring difficulty in public recriminations about past actions and debate about ongoing problems is the absence of a sense of sequence, of an accurate understanding of what happened when, and in particular of whether certain things happened *before* or *after* certain other things.

Many much-discussed events enter the recriminations and debates as individual points of controversy, detached from any time line or comprehensive narrative. They become like flashbacks in a creatively edited movie, in which the audience has to stay well engaged to keep track of what happened when. The film editor does not want to make the audience's task *too* hard, lest his product sink into incoherence.

Outside the movies and in the real world, there often are people with an ax to grind who try to get us to fit the flashbacks into a preferred story, which may be inaccurate. Even without ax-grinders, our minds try to fit the detached events into a story that is easily comprehensible, even though again it may be inaccurate.

Such insensitivity to sequence may be found, for example, in recriminations over the George W. Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq. The easily comprehensible story is that the decision was based on bum intelligence about unconventional weapons.

But the intelligence estimate that became the subject of nearly all the after-the-fact criticism wasn't written, in fact, work on it hadn't even begun, until after the administration had not only made the decision to go to war but had already moved into high gear its campaign to sell the war to the public. (There still was a congressional resolution to be voted on, but hardly any members of Congress bothered to look at the estimate.)

The political silliness over the lethal incident at Benghazi provides additional examples. The most glaring one came right at the outset, when Mitt Romney, seizing on the incident as a prop for his campaign, described as the Obama

administration's first "response" to the incident a statement that the U.S. embassy actually had issued before the incident.

Now we continue to hear endless professed outrage about what Susan Rice did or did not say, with her sayings thrown into public discussion alongside observations that have been made since then about what lay behind the attack on the U.S. facility. Lost again is any sense of sequence, and in this case any distinction between confusion and uncertainty in the early hours after the incident and understanding that has been acquired only later.

The Petraeus affair offers other recent examples, particularly in recriminations about how the FBI handled the case, how an able public servant has been lost because a private matter had become public, etc. Seemingly escaping notice is that the matter became public only when Petraeus himself announced his resignation and cited an extramarital affair as the reason. Neither the FBI nor anyone else had made anything public before that.

If the whole business were to have ended differently, it would have had to have been in one of two ways. One would be that nobody says anything publicly (with or without an FBI investigation), in which case the security implications of potential for blackmail would be very much an issue. The other possibility is that Petraeus discloses the affair but says he is not resigning.

We should give him enough credit for realizing that the image of an adulterer clinging to his job would have been inconsistent with both the values he propounded and his continued ability to lead his agency, and that the honorable thing for him to do was instead to resign.

Now there is the warfare in the Gaza Strip. I recalled the other day the sequence of events at the start of the current upsurge in violence. But the deficiency in temporal understanding is not just a matter of who started the newest round of fighting. Israeli demands that "the rockets must stop" before Israel ceases its lethal operations feed a general impression that the story is one of Hamas rockets first, and Israeli response afterward.

This overlooks that most of the rockets fired from the Strip since Israel's Operation Cast Lead four years ago have come in these last few days, after, and in response to, Israel's newest operation. So we have not only a demand for a one-sided cease-fire but also a bizarre rationale in which the stated reason for the operation is to prevent the very response that the operation itself engenders.

Gregory Johnsen, who has done extensive field research in Yemen, raises what may be something similar in U.S. policy. Johnsen argues persuasively that lethal

strikes from drone aircraft have enabled terrorist groups to win more recruits who are angered over the collateral damage from the strikes. He cites as evidence how the estimated strength of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has risen in correlation with the frequency of the drone strikes.

Despite this indication of counter-productivity, do not be surprised to hear others argue that the increasing strength of Yemeni terrorist groups is all the more reason we need to pound them with Hellfire missiles.

There is no known cure for sequence deficit disorder. We can perhaps ameliorate some of the consequences by demanding that anyone who starts making assertions about Y being a consequence of X should make explicit reference to chronologies or time lines to support the assertion.

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