

Slide 2: Theory of Surprise: Part 2, by James J. Wirtz

Slide 3: The Failure of Surprise

Much is written about intelligence failure, but little is written about the failure of surprise. Scholars have focused on successful surprise at the operational level of war, not on the effect of surprise in achieving overall victory. Surprise attacks often produce spectacular results temporarily or locally, but surprise rarely wins wars. Successful operational surprise may even hasten defeat by mobilizing the victim (e.g., the American response to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor) or by expending scarce assets without achieving a decisive victory (e.g., the fate of the Nazi offensive through the Ardennes forest in the winter of 1944). Even when surprise produces positive strategic consequences, the price can be extraordinarily high. The shock of the Tet attacks or the Egyptian surprise attack at the outset of the 1973 Yom Kippur war can be said to have produced victory in the very important sense that they altered the political balance between the combatants, but from the North Vietnamese or Egyptian perspective, events on the battlefield did not unfold according to plan. In that sense, the shock of surprise itself, not the temporary suspension of war's dialectic, helped to deliver victory. But this political shock effect is rare and in the previously mentioned cases it was an unanticipated, albeit not unwelcome, positive effect produced by a failed military attack. Because they can alter the political balance in a conflict, the consequences of surprise are often unanticipated and unintended by the side launching the initiative. If surprise is an *immediate force multiplier*, then over time it can act as a *resistance multiplier*.¹ The side that achieves surprise may reach the culminating point of attack, thereby achieving some fantastic local victory, without ever reaching the culminating point of victory, thereby hastening its defeat in war.

Slide 4:

Surprise attacks often fail disastrously because the side undertaking the initiative miscalculates in several ways. Those contemplating surprise might correctly estimate that surprise is needed to achieve their military objectives, only to find that a successful surprise attack undermines the political or moral basis of their campaign. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was a military tour de force, a feat of professional skill that will be remembered for a thousand years. But the successful surprise attack was a political disaster for Japan because it eliminated the basis of its grand strategy in the Pacific: a "casualty averse" American public that would negotiate rather than fight over relatively unknown and unwanted territory. The Japanese failed to understand that the military force multiplier they needed to

succeed – surprise – would destroy the political basis of their quest for empire. Those launching an attack often fail to understand that surprise can maximize the impact of a specific blow, but that even the most successful surprise attack needs to be integrated into an overall strategy to win the war. Surprise can worsen the weaker side's position once the dialectic of war is reestablished because it can elicit a heightened response from the stronger victim. Successful surprise can make it impossible for the attacker to reach the culminating point of victory in war because it causes the more powerful victim to engage fully in battle.

Failures also occur because of a mismatch between the weaker side's objectives and the degree, duration or scope of the paralysis induced in the stronger opponent. The attacker might achieve surprise, but not across a large enough front or for a sufficient enough time, allowing the opponent to muster its superior forces to crush the attack. Indeed, when the effects of surprise begin to dissipate, the weaker side risks being caught overextended without the combat power needed to manage even a decent fighting withdrawal. This is what happened to the Nazi counterattack through the Ardennes forest. Nazi forces achieved surprise and punched through the allied line, but the allies had sufficient forces to absorb the attack and launch their own counterattack against the exposed Nazi flanks and lines of communication. If surprise is not linked to some sort of knockout blow or an overall strategy to win the conflict, it often worsens the weaker party's position and accelerates its loss of the war.²

Slide 5:

The failure of surprise is related to Handel's risk paradox in the sense that it vindicates the stronger side's judgment that a possible operation is extraordinarily risky or simply irrational. It made no sense for the Japanese to attack Pearl Harbor because they lacked the resources to defeat the United States; the sneak attack on 7 December simply guaranteed that superior American resources would be brought to bear against them. Even aided by the element of surprise, operations that appear hare brained ex ante can actually turn out to be hare brained. The analysts who predicted in SNIE 85-3-62 that the Soviets would not place missiles in Cuba because it would be too dangerous stated in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis that their analysis was at least partially vindicated by events. In other words, the Soviets should not have placed missiles in Cuba because the gambit risked superpower war for what were at best marginal benefits. CIA analysts were not alone in this judgment. When Secretary of State Dean Rusk called on Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin to inform him that the United States had detected missiles in Cuba, he surprised the Soviet official with the news (Dobrynin had not been privy to the decisions made in Moscow). Rusk stated informally that it was incomprehensible

to him how leaders in Moscow could make such a gross error of judgment about what was acceptable to the United States.³ Years later, he noted that Dobrynin was so shaken by the news that he aged ten years right before his eyes.⁴

Surprise fails because it leads the weaker side in the conflict to reach for goals that are truly beyond their grasp or to forget that when the effects of surprise dissipate, the dialectic of war returns with a vengeance. Indeed, the ultimate paradox of surprise is that it often amounts to a “Lose-Lose” proposition: it creates a disastrous initial loss for the victim and a painful loss of the war for the attacker. The outcome of the war actually confirms both sides estimate of the pre-war balance of power as the stronger power defeats the weaker side in the conflict. The theory of surprise thus offers an important caveat to Geoffrey Blainey’s argument that war is more likely as states near parity.⁵ Even though the leaders of the weaker side in a conflict might recognize the disparity in power between them and their opponent, the prospect of surprise can prompt them to believe that they can nullify that disparity and achieve their objectives.

Slide 6: The Future of Surprise

In the aftermath of 11 September 2001, the idea that the United States, its allies, military forces or interests are likely targets of surprise attacks or initiatives would not stir much controversy. But this prediction is not based solely on recent events. Instead, the theory of surprise suggests that America’s opponents must somehow circumvent its diplomatic, economic or military might to achieve goals that Washington opposes. The United States’ relative strength creates incentives for its opponents to launch surprise initiatives or asymmetric attacks to achieve their objectives before America and its allies can bring their full power to bear. Americans’ relative strength also creates an attritional mindset that blinds them to the possibility that enemies will use surprise to attempt to achieve objectives that in war would be beyond their reach.

Evidence exists to support the idea that the problem of surprise is especially acute for the United States. Thomas Christensen, for example, notes that the American academic and policy debate about the potential threat created by the emergence of China as a peer competitor (i.e., a state capable of challenging the United States in a battle of attrition), ignores a more likely road to war. Chinese leaders’ perceptions of their own weakness have led them to a search for methods to distract, deter, or bloody the United States.⁶ What is particularly chilling is that the thinking emerging in China is eerily similar to Japanese strategy on the eve of Pearl Harbor: a casualty-averse America will seek a negotiated settlement following some military setback. The fact that many American observers fail to realize that China might gamble on surprise rather than work for decades to match U.S. military

capabilities also is disturbing. Additionally, Al-Qaida's recent success in the skies over New York and Washington demonstrates that terrorists, fanatics or syndicates might find the element of surprise attractive because it affords them a way to attack an infinitely more powerful United States. As the information and communication revolution continues to empower individuals, the U.S. intelligence community now has to worry that non-state actors will attempt to capitalize on surprise to achieve their objectives. The stage is set for surprise to occur.

Slide 7:

Michael Handel was a pessimist when it came to the future of surprise, agreeing with his colleague Richard Betts that intelligence failures are inevitable.⁷ Handel came to this conclusion in his early writings, and the advent of advanced data processing and reconnaissance capabilities did little to alter his judgment. Indeed, what is especially vexing to Handel, Betts and a host of other scholars is that victims of surprise often had a chance to avert disaster, but cognitive, bureaucratic or political constraints or pathologies prevented them from capitalizing on these opportunities. Accurate signals of impending attack generally can be discovered in the intelligence pipeline after surprise occurs. Some people even manage to recognize these signals. Intelligence "dissenters" – individuals who swim against the analytical or policy tide – often issue accurate warnings before disaster strikes only to be ignored by fellow intelligence analysts or policymakers. Prior to the Tet offensive, for instance, civilian analysts in Saigon developed an accurate estimate of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong intentions, only to have their analysis dismissed as far fetched by analysts at the headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency.⁸ Occasionally intelligence analysts might even get things right: U.S. intelligence analysts surprised the Japanese Navy at Midway. But the American miracle at Midway was made possible by the American disaster at Pearl Harbor. According to Handel:

Arrogance and a sense of invincibility blinded the Japanese, who did not consider their opponent worthy of much attention. On the other hand, the Americans, who had been humbled early in the war and who lacked both confidence and ships, knew that learning as much as possible about their enemy was imperative. There is no stronger incentive to encourage the appreciation of intelligence than fear and weakness (whether actual or perceived); conversely, victory and power reduce one's

motivation to learn about the enemy, thus bringing about the conditions that may eventually cause defeat.⁹

What changed in the months following Pearl Harbor was that the Japanese had adopted the attritional mindset characteristic of the strong while U.S. analysts and officers recognized that they needed force multipliers to overcome their disadvantage in numbers, equipment, morale and experience.

Slide 8:

The American experience at Midway thus offers some insights into possible ways of avoiding future surprise that American policymakers and analysts might use to great benefit. The outcome of the Battle of Midway raises an important question: why did the same analysts and intelligence organizations fail so badly in their task prior to Pearl Harbor yet succeed so well in its aftermath? Was it war alone that concentrated their minds? In the past, most observers have identified cognitive, bureaucratic or political problems as a source of intelligence failure. But the pathologies and bureaucratic and cognitive limits to analysis often identified as the source of intelligence failure might simply be consequences of a more fundamental causal force. The theory of surprise suggests that it is the initial cognitive framework created by the relative power position of the parties in conflict that sets the stage for surprise to occur. In other words, if strong parties began to view conflict from the weaker party's perspective, while weak actors kept war's dialectic in mind, then surprise would become less likely. Christensen's analysis of the potential Chinese threat ends on a similar note: Chinese officers and officials should be encouraged to visit Pearl Harbor to take note of the fact that it is a mistake to count on a lack of American resolve in war.¹⁰ One might also think about modifying the tour to include the surrender deck of the battleship *Missouri* to suggest that once the effect of surprise fades, the dialectic of war returns.

Clearly, reversing the cognitive predisposition that accompanies one's position in a conflict is no small or simple matter. Midway suggests that it might be possible to alter this fundamental bias quickly, although it is not apparent if this change in mindset can be accomplished quickly enough or completely before disaster strikes. The theory of surprise suggests, however, that at least a "theoretical" path to reducing the likelihood that surprise will be attempted or succeed is available.

Slide 9: Conclusion

Handel began his 1977 article in *International Studies Quarterly* with the observation that the theory of surprise would be better at explaining, rather than

preventing, disaster. He turned to Hegel's famous passage to capture this shortcoming: "The owl of Minerva begins its flight when dusk is falling . . . man can perceive the conception of actuality . . . only when the actuality has already been fully unfolded and has indeed become cut and dried."¹¹ One can only add the observation that things in fact did become pretty cut and dried on the morning of 11 September when the old bird returned home to roost. Millions of people in real time experienced surprise, which was accompanied by an inability on the part of nearly all concerned to interfere with the airplane hijackers. War, for a moment, became a matter of administration, a phenomenon in which it was possible for a few people to destroy the World Trade Center with the aid of a box cutter in just two hours. The very brilliance of such an audacious surprise attack showed that the assumption that people, groups or states would not dare do such a thing was flawed, if not down right stupid. Usama bin Ladin, after all, had established a track record of attacking American interests and targets and made no effort to hide the fact that he intended to attack Americans in the future.¹² The fact that we could have seen the attack coming simply adds insult to injury. Handel would of course suggest that this sort of thing is inevitable, that this is what it means to be a victim of surprise.

It is too much to expect that surprise can be prevented in the future. But the theory of surprise can identify when it is likely to occur, who is likely to find the element of surprise attractive as a basis of policy or strategy and who is likely to be its victim. It also explains why the beginning of the end for al-Qaida came when the first New Yorker noticed an aircraft heading toward the World Trade Center. The trick now lies in making operational use of the theory of surprise.

¹ Surprise can make war go away, but it rarely can prevent it from returning.

² Stalin offered a similar judgment about the effectiveness of surprise, which provided him with an excuse for the denigration of the disaster of June 1941. For Stalin, surprise was a transient influence in war, not a permanently operating factor that could determine the outcome of a conflict. I would like to thank Dick Betts for offering this observation.

³“State Department Cable on Secretary of State Dean Rusk Meeting with Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin to Give Kennedy’s Letter to Premier Khrushchev, Announcing Discovery of Missiles in Cuba,” contained in Laurence Chang and Peter Kornbluh (eds.), *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962* (New York, The New Press, 1982), pp. 146-147.

⁴ James Blight’s interview with Dean Rusk, 18 May 1987, in James G. Blight and David Welch, *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), p. 185.

⁵ Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1988).

⁶ Thomas J. Christensen, “Posing Problems without Catching Up: China’s Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy,” *International Security* Vol. 23, No. 4 (Spring 2001), pp. 5-40.

⁷ Handel, “The Yom Kippur War,” pp. 461-462; and Richard Betts, “Analysis, War and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures are Inevitable,” *World Politics* Vol. 31 (October 1977).

⁸ Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive*, pp. 172-177.

⁹ Michael Handel, “Intelligence and Military Operations,” in Michael Handel (ed.), *Intelligence and Military Operations* (London: Frank Cass, 1990), p. 39.

¹⁰ Christensen, “Posing Problems,” p. 36.

¹¹ Handel, “The Yom Kippur War and the Inevitability of Surprise,” p. 462.

¹² Kenneth Katzman, “Terrorism: Near Eastern Groups and State Sponsors” (CRS Report to Congress, 10 September 2001), pp. 9-13.