

“Constructing Cassandra” – New book exposes the roots of fifty years of intelligence failures at the CIA

Constructing Cassandra is an inquiry just published by Stanford University Press into the intelligence failures at the CIA that resulted in four critical strategic surprises experienced by the US over a fifty-year period which still play out today: the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, the Iranian revolution of 1978, the collapse of the USSR in 1991, and the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

According to co-author Milo Jones, a Visiting Professor of strategy at IE business school in Spain, “While there has been no shortage of studies to understand how they happened, however, none of the explanations have been able to provide a unified understanding of the phenomenon. Without that understanding, failures will happen again. There is no easy cure for failure, but let’s start with a sound and complete diagnosis.”

Constructing Cassandra looks at the CIA as an organization over time and proposes a unified, coherent and rigorous theory of strategic surprise that flows from the Agency’s group identity and culture. As a consequence, the book can present a novel model of surprise that focuses on the internal make-up the CIA, an organization specifically created to provide not flawless predictions of the future but sound strategic warning.. It suggests that by examining the key features of the CIA’s make-up, we can arrive at a holistic, unified understanding of the intelligence failures that have occurred since the Agency’s formation. Crucially, Constructing Cassandra is also the first systematic look at Cassandras – people inside and outside the agency who offered strategic warning, but were ignored.

Philippe Silberzahn, who co-authored the book with Milo and is a strategy professor at the EMLYON Business School, adds that Constructing Cassandra captures the zeitgeist of the Intelligence Community. “In the light of the Boston Marathon bombing, and the current NSA Prism scandal, this book offers the first deep exploration of the ultimate sources of intelligence failure at the CIA, and points to ways to prevent future strategic surprises. For over four decades the Intelligence industry has suffered from an obsessive focus on hard technical data or ‘Big Data’, which this book proves to be a key enabler of catastrophic intelligence failures at the CIA.”

To make their case, the authors reviewed hundreds of declassified documents, a wide range of secondary sources, and conducted in-depth analyses of the four cases of strategic surprises above.

By providing a novel, unified theory of strategic surprise that links terrorist attacks to more conventional failures, Constructing Cassandra is the first deep and systematic exploration of the ultimate sources of the CIA’s intelligence failures, its identity and culture. As such, it is an important contribution to the crucial ongoing intelligence research work on how to prevent future strategic surprises whether they be terrorist attacks, revolutions, or the collapse of friendly regimes.

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