

Metaphors for Thinking About Analysis

Metaphors are often used to describe the intelligence analysis process. Thomas Hughes, a former director of the Department of State Bureau of Intelligence and Research, wrote that intelligence analysts were either butchers or bakers. Butchers tend to cut up and dissect intelligence to determine what is happening. Bakers tend to blend analysis together to get the bigger picture. Analysts assume both roles at different times. In the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, the phrase “connect the dots” became prevalent as a means of describing an analytic intelligence failure. It is an inapt metaphor. Connecting the dots depends on all of the dots being present to draw the right picture. (The dots also come numbered sequentially, which helps considerably.) As a senior intelligence analyst pointed out, the intelligence community was accused of not connecting the dots in the run-up to September 11 but was accused of connecting too many dots regarding the alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. Two more useful descriptions are mosaics or pearls. Intelligence analysis is similar to assembling a mosaic, but one in which the desired final picture may not be clear. Not all of the mosaic pieces may be available. Further complicating matters, in the course of assembling the mosaic, new pieces appear and some old ones change size, shape, and color. The pearl metaphor refers to

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