

Mass Media Coverage

Professor J. Scott Armstrong

Interview on BBC Radio, Manchester England, March 14, 2003

Why We Argue About the War on Terrorism: Bad Forecasts and How to Avoid Them

There is broad agreement on the objective in the war on terror: We would all like a safe world. The arguments and rancor over the invasion of Iraq arise because people around the world have made different predictions about what might happen, given various strategies. For example, will the war in Iraq reduce terrorism in the future, or will it increase it?

In general, people are using unaided judgment, to make these forecasts. Research on judgmental forecasting has shown that this is not a good way to make such predictions. For example:

- Those with high expertise in the area (e.g., people with Nobel Peace prizes) are no more accurate than those with little expertise (people who follow the situation in newspapers or on television);
- Beyond a minimal level, the collection of more information does not improve accuracy; and
- The strength of conviction (e.g., “I will quit my job!”) is unrelated to accuracy.

These findings, although well supported, are contrary to common beliefs, which is probably why people cling to the use of unaided judgment.

For the past 17 years, Scott Armstrong of the University of Pennsylvania has been involved with research on how to make forecasts for conflict situations. He and his colleague, Kesten Green of Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand, have done much to advance what we know about such methods. They take actual situations and disguise them (checking to be sure people do not recognize the situations). They then list some plausible outcomes (there are usually three or four) and ask people to forecast the decisions by the groups in conflict.

Surprisingly, unaided judgments by college students were no better than chance. But when they asked experts (clever people like those you see on TV), they were no more accurate than the students. Based on the research to date, then, discussions about what to do in situations such as in Iraq, are based on worthless forecasts!

But it is possible to make good forecasts. Armstrong and Green have been doing comparative research on *simulated interaction*. This involves role playing the interactions between the competing parties (e.g., between Saddam Hussein and George Bush). This provides a realistic way to examine the possible interactions. The forecasts are not perfect but, in their studies using undergraduate student role players, the error rate was halved compared to that of experts using unaided judgment. The researchers expect the forecasts would be even more accurate if experts were involved in the simulated interactions. The U.S. military has used simulated interactions in the past. Dr. Armstrong commented, “I have heard rumors that they are using them in the current situation involving Iraq. My guess is that Saddam Hussein did not do so.”

In addition, Kesten Green has found that the use of “structured analogies” to produce accurate forecasts. He asked a variety of experts to individually write descriptions of analogies and to rate their similarity to the current situation. For example they might think of Churchill just before WWII as an analogy for Iraq. The outcomes of the analogies are then used as the forecasts. Interestingly, when allowed to apply their judgment to the analogies, accuracy decreases.

The simulated interaction and structured analogies procedures allow us to make better forecasts. If we can make better forecasts, then we should be able to make better decisions and save lives. To aid this process, Green has summarized the procedures, along with the evidence, under “What's New” at <http://forecastingprinciples.com> While the benefits are expected to be greatest if all parties would use these procedures, improvements in conflict resolution are expected even if only one party uses them. Meanwhile, I certainly hope that the U.S. and Britain are using simulated interaction and structured analogies to assess different strategies. Smart forecasts may save smart bombs.