Ask the right question

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At the heart of many a large and ambitious empire sits one man who is not the ruler, though the ruler often listens to him; and who runs no department, though his faithful followers are found all through government. He is rarely seen in public, publishes very little, avoids journalists, sits silently through meetings, and yet steers the country. For more than four decades, America's version of this inscrutable figure was Andrew Marshall.

He looked the part, small and benign, with a bald dome of a head, wire-rimmed glasses and a bureaucrat's bland suit. He also inhabited the part, hidden behind thick buzzer-locked doors in the innermost A ring of the Pentagon in an office buttressed with papers and books on every branch of knowledge. There from 1973 he ran the Office of Net Assessment (ONA), a tiny independent think-tank whose remit was to compare the capabilities of the United States and its enemies in weaponry, troop training, efficiency, spending, deployment, planning, decision-making, readiness and any other point of variance. These painstaking assessments, highly classified, sparingly distributed and compiled at a rate of only six a decade, gave America as much detail about its adversaries as could be had. Then it could plan how to counter them.

ONA, as he set it up and ran it (originally at Henry Kissinger's request and in the NSC, but the Department of Defence was a much neater fit) was not a problem-solving place for times of crisis. Like him, it took the long view. Ten years ahead was his preferred span, with many longer backward reflections, influenced by his lifelong love of Toynbee's "A Study of History", to see how states amassed power and how, often foolishly, they lost it. He was no futurist, a word he disliked, since the non-rationality of humans, especially in war, made prediction impossible; if people wanted their fortune told, they should visit a gypsy. And his office was not there to give answers, offer bland-bunkum analysis or follow Pentagon fads, but to ask the right questions and provide true information. After that, there was only so much stupidity one man could prevent.

For years all defence strategy centred on the Soviet Union, and there his chief questions were: could it afford its military machine? And was the government as ruthlessly monolithic as American officials supposed? His assessments, contrary to the CIA's, answered no to both. (His estimate for the percentage of Soviet GDP going to military spending was almost triple the spooks', for whom he had little time.) Once these facts were known, it made sense to deploy "competitive strategies", borrowed from the business strategy he had studied at RAND in the mid-1960s, and make the weaker competitor overspend until it was driven out of the market. Hence the B2 Stealth bomber programme, to force the USSR to modernise its air defences, and Ronald Reagan's strategic defence initiative ("Star Wars"), to strain to the utmost Soviet investment in its missile shield. These had the desired effect even when merely talked about; they hardly needed deploying.

All this gave him a hawkish reputation, and certainly he had consorted with hawks at RAND, where from 1949 he spent two decades considering the nuclear threat. Never having fought in a war himself, since a heart murmur had kept him out of military service, he was shaken when, witnessing a nuclear test in the Nevada desert, he saw his bones through the palms of his hands. An arms race was not just about weapons, but about psychology: *let us show you what we could do to you*. The Pentagon did not fully appreciate that. He did, because he spent hours each day reading anthropology, economics and behavioural studies as well as war books, and instructed his recruits, whom he commissioned to write ONA's studies, to do the same. To his trainees he was Yoda (the bald, benign Jedi Master of "Star Wars", whom he had never heard of) and they were his Jedi Knights or alumni of "St Andy's Prep", sitting at his feet and, more usefully, lobbying fiercely for him when cutpurse or unpersuaded presidents tried to close ONA down. Thanks to these acolytes, as they moved on to think-tanks or government jobs, he kept his methods running through eight administrations.

Prominent among them was his seven-page memo, "Some Thoughts on Military Revolutions" of 1993. These were ideas he had chewed on since the 1980s, on how advances in technology, coupled with operational changes, might radically alter

warfare and sharpen America's edge. As a free element in the Pentagon, disliking the grandiose talk of big platforms and one-or-two-theatre wars and the numbing inter-service rivalry, he relished a type of combat that would be nimbler and quicker, with sensor-fitted precision weapons, robotic devices and IT co-ordination between forces. This new thinking, the Revolution in Military Affairs, was adopted in 2001 by the Bush administration, only to be sideswiped by 9/11; but his points remained, and permeated.

The terrorist attacks did not surprise him; America had been wide open. What did surprise him—apart from the speed with which the USSR fell apart—was the Pentagon's new fixation on fighting terror, jumping from crisis to crisis. His mind was still set on the long view and the next great-power rival, and from the mid-1990s, too early for everyone else, he turned his gaze on China. Its sheer size implied that it must begin to compete for hegemony. As he had done with the Soviet Union, he watched its mindset and bureaucracy as well as its weapons, and ran war games encouraging officials to contemplate a sudden Chinese attack in the Pacific. Others thought that unlikely, but his question was: what if it did?

Appropriately for one so hidden, he revealed almost nothing about his private life: his love of French food and sports, a first marriage that had lasted longer than his time in the Pentagon, and a flat in Alexandria even more piled with good reading than his office in the A ring. Among all those books and papers, however, there was no laptop or iPad; e-mails were read to him, and he never went on the internet. For him the world of strategic threats was tactile and physical, a matter of geography and the clash of forces. Cyberwarfare, of which he knew nothing, he left to the equally unknown master who, he hoped, would follow him.

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