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An Amateur's Guide to Denial and Deception,
a Book Review by James J. Wirtz of Practice to
Deceive: Learning Curves of Military
Deception Planners by Barton Whaley

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An Amateur's Guide to Denial and Deception

JAMES J. WIRTZ

Barton Whaley: *Practice to Deceive: Learning Curves of Military Deception Planners* Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, Maryland, 2016, 280 p., \$39.95.

Until his death in 2013, Barton Whaley was the foremost Western expert on the art of denial and deception, an engaging iconoclast who understood the connection among magicians, card sharps, Operation FORTITUDE, and Greeks bearing gifts. When Whaley spoke, astute students would pay attention to every word. An attentive listener might be treated to a spontaneous explanation of deception theory, counter-deception theory, a compelling analysis of how denial and deception facilitated Nazi rearmament in the 1920s and '30s, or the unsettling observation that efforts at denial and deception work most of the time.

Whaley spent his scholarly life cataloging instances of denial and deception in what appeared to be a quest to uncover every successful stratagem to forewarn future policymakers and officers. He could not succeed in that task, but he managed to collect a series of compelling insights into the human mind and how people, bureaucracies, and politics itself can be manipulated, especially by those who understand the intricacies of denial and deception. Decades of empirical work enabled him to speak with authority about the use of stratagem in all sorts of endeavors.

James J. Wirtz is Dean of the School of International Graduate Studies and former Chairman of the Department of National Security Affairs at the United States Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California. A former Chairman and Program Chairman of the Intelligence Studies Section of the International Studies Association (ISA), he has also been President of the International Security and Arms Control Section of the American Political Science Association. A graduate of the University of Delaware, with a Ph.D. from Columbia University, New York City, he is the author and co-author of several books on intelligence and arms control. In March 2016, he was named a Distinguished Senior Scholar by the ISA's Intelligence Studies Section at its annual meeting in Atlanta, Georgia.

MAKING SCHEMES WORK

Practice to Deceive, published posthumously, is a classic Whaley study. Edited by Susan Stratton Aykroyd, this unfinished catalog of case studies, vignettes, notes and analysis explores various aspects of eighty-eight instances of denial and deception. Whaley uses the cases to explore why some people are drawn to deception planning, what makes them successful, how plans are implemented by military staffs and bureaucracies, and how reluctant commanders are sold on the use of stratagem. In the course of this survey, he offers a checklist of first principles that can be used to devise a scheme to deceive and the key factors that must be manipulated for a stratagem to have a strategic or operational impact in war. *Practice to Deceive* might best be thought of as an amateur's annotated guide to denial and deception.

Theoretically, Whaley is most interested in the psychology of denial and deception, meaning the psychology of the deceived and the deceiver. Successful deception planners share several common traits. They are intelligent and have a good sense of humor, while paradoxically remaining reserved in most social situations. Whaley notes that military deception often contains an element of humor; it can be thought of as a practical joke played on opponents to get them to act according to one's wishes. For instance, R.V. Jones, a keen student and practitioner of deception, once bet a colleague that

he could get a person to place his phone in a bucket of water. After repeatedly calling an Oxford professor on the phone in a way that simulated a problem that seemed to be partially resolved by minor movements of the device, he managed to get the gullible man to submerge the phone. Jones realized that the prank worked because the victim had come to rely on a single source (the voice at the other end of the line) for information about his situation. This fact was the key to manipulating the victim's behavior. Years later, when the Germans became alarmed about their U-boat losses in World War II, Jones convinced them that the British possessed an infrared device that made submarines easy to spot on the surface. The Germans painted their U-boats with a new type of paint that effectively cloaked their submarines' infrared signatures, never realizing that the British were employing a new type of radar to spot the U-boats. "Practical jokes and hoaxes work for the same reasons that military deception plans work," notes Whaley. "Both involve 'induced incongruities' where by presenting false evidence the deceiver lets the victim 'build up an incorrect but self consistent world picture', thus causing him to take actions that are incongruent with reality." Victims of deception thus share a common trait: they fall victim to the desire for a sense of certainty about an unfolding situation.

Whaley also addresses practical matters. He notes that experienced operations officers are most likely

to possess the necessary knowledge needed to not only manipulate the opponent, but to also manipulate their own organizations to get them to accept and implement deception schemes that can sometimes appear far-fetched *ex ante*. “The deception planners must not only know their Commander’s goal for each operation,” according to Whaley, “but they must be prepared to ‘sell’ their plan to that Commander or joint staff.” He observes that good deception planners do more than think “outside the box.” They often ignore rules, regulations and standard operating procedures in their daily lives and are especially adept at ignoring all sorts of conventions and moral boundaries when it comes to devising ways to induce desired behavior in opponents. Whaley also identifies the foremost mistake made by deception planners: taking actions that alter an opponent’s perceptions, not actions. In other words, deception planners need to act on command guidance about how the opponent should act in the future and not focus on changing how the opponent perceives the unfolding situation.

ASKING FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

When Whaley turns to the broadest strategic issues, however, his observations compel a contemplation of the implications of his judgments. For example, he notes that “the levels of guilefulness at any given point in time *between any two contemporary armed entities* (nations, insurgents, or

terrorists) are apt to be asymmetric.” Some might dismiss this judgment as a restatement of the obvious; after all, opponents rarely possess equal qualities and capabilities. Yet, this straightforward observation identifies a fundamental question that should be addressed by intelligence analysts when contemplating the behavior of a potential opponent: what is the opponent’s relative propensity to engage in denial and deception? While such a question can never be answered with certainty, a guess might be ventured that, although accurate estimates are possible, they are rarely undertaken or acknowledged in a bureaucratic setting.

Whaley also notes that “*when all other factors are equal*, the more deceptive player or team will always win.” This observation flies in the face of Carl von Clausewitz’s lack of enthusiasm for stratagem—leading to perhaps pondering if the Prussian philosopher’s experience during the Napoleonic wars was a bit too limited to generate a definitive judgment about the utility of denial and deception on the modern battlefield. Nevertheless, such a sweeping generalization also suggests that guile is a quality that should be recognized as a key force multiplier, regardless of the advantages one side might enjoy over less capable opponents.

BUREAUCRACY’S APPREHENSIONS

Whaley also hints at why bureaucracies are often resistant to undertaking denial and deception. The technique is

often practiced by oddballs and miscreants who just happen to be smarter than their fellow officers and other officials. They can often recognize and exploit incongruities in both their own and opposing organizations. These keen students of human nature understand that people tend to wear their emotions, innermost thoughts, and ambitions on their sleeves, and that bureaucracy is predictable and easily manipulated. They understand what motivates people in social and bureaucratic settings. Especially striking in the stories related by Whaley is the certainty expressed by deception planners that their schemes would work, and their occasional frustration that their opponents actually lacked the situational awareness (intelligence?) to be deceived. The best practitioners of stratagem not only recognize that the emperor has no clothes,

but as R.V. Jones demonstrated, they can be made to dance naked to the tune of their manipulators' choosing. Such people make uneasy those average commanders, run-of-the-mill bureaucrats, and others who, above all, love order. To the staid bureaucratic mind, the admonishment that stratagem can yield significant dividends seems to contain the seeds of subversion, a thought that can undermine good order and discipline. After all, those adept at duping the opponent might just turn their talents on those closer to home.

Practice to Deceive not only explains the general principles behind the magic of deception, it literally offers a "by the numbers" guide to employing stratagem in war. That Barton Whaley was not merely a historian or theoretician, but in private life a practicing magician, is thus no coincidence.