UNSPoken AssUmpTions

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In his introduction to Volume 6, Issue 2, the chair of TNSR’s editorial board, Francis J. Gavin, reflects on the unspoken assumptions during and after the attacks of 9/11. He asks what ideas today might similarly be so widely shared that no one is saying them aloud.

In April 1968, historian of modern Europe James Joll delivered an inaugural lecture at the London School of Economics entitled “1914: The Unspoken Assumptions.” He presented his reflections several months after the English language translation of German historian Fritz Fischer’s controversial book, *German Aims During the First World War*, appeared. Joll had contributed an introduction to the English edition, after having written a review essay on the German language edition.1

Joll’s essay confronted the challenge of surfacing unspoken assumptions — or what is left unsaid when people make consequential decisions.2 When assessing any critical choice — either in the past or present — we analyze the process and debates over policies by looking at written documents and commentary made in public. But many times, the core assumptions and worldviews shaping decisions are not explicitly laid out.

When political leaders are faced with the necessity of taking decisions the outcome of which they cannot foresee, in crises which they do not wholly understand, they fall back on their own instinctive reactions, traditions and modes of behaviour. Each of them has certain beliefs, rules or objectives which are taken for granted; and one of the limitations of documentary evidence is that few people bother to write down, especially in moments of crisis, things which they take for granted. Yet if we are to understand their motives, we must somehow try to find out what, as we say, ‘goes without saying.’4

How do we uncover these unspoken assumptions? Historians regularly examine the mentalities of individuals, institutions, communities, and states that shape how decisions are made. This demands making sense of the intellectual, social, and cultural dynamics within which the decision-maker operates. Joll persuasively argued that it was impossible to understand how decisions were made in European capitals during the summer of 1914 without recognizing the pervasive influence of a “doctrine of a perpetual struggle for survival and of a permanent potential war of all against all” that emerged from a witch’s brew of social Darwinism and popularized, if misunderstood, Nietzschean thought. According to Joll, there was a shared feeling in July 1914 that war was inevitable, which, in turn, produced almost a sense of relief when it finally came. Uncovering these underlying and unspoken assumptions help make sense of actions that, from only reading the diplomatic documents, are hard to fully comprehend.

If we are to understand the conflicting beliefs which lie behind the actions of statesmen and the reactions of their followers, we must look at a number of ideas, attitudes and assumptions which are not always to be found in the archives … . It is as important for the historian of international relations to understand these changes in what Hegel calls the spirit of the age as it is for him to understand changes in the structure of the economy or developments in military technology.5

What unspoken assumptions inform our contemporary world? When we think historically, we understand that, in our own times, as in the past, our actions are often influenced by shared understandings that we don’t make explicit, common viewpoints so obvious “they needn’t be said.” These shape both how we see and act in the world. Almost by definition, however, it is hard to be aware of our own unspoken assumptions, even as they invisibly frame the decision-environment in which

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it is to wonder how we might best use history to understand and navigate our complicated current moment. We often use history to excavate explicit arguments about why a state or a leader or a people committed some act or pursued a policy which, decades later, seems inexplicable. While important, history’s true power may be to remind us that people once understood their world much differently and carried far different, often hidden, shared assumptions, and that our own beliefs and shared assumptions, often unexplored and unchallenged, may lead to similar catastrophes that will one day puzzle our grandchildren.

Surfacing and challenging assumptions doesn’t simply help you avoid disaster; it may open up unexpected opportunities. The Johnson administration, at the same time it unwisely escalated its war in Vietnam, cooperated with the Soviet Union to negotiate the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the most consequential and successful arms control treaty in history. It did this while working together with its bitter foe to eliminate smallpox, a plague that once killed 2 million people a year worldwide. Neither of these policies would have been imaginable only a decade earlier, when policymakers were gripped by a rigid Cold War mentality. At almost the same time that the Bush administration launched its disastrous war in Iraq, it also unveiled PEPFAR to help reduce the suffering caused by AIDS in Africa, an effort that is estimated to have saved 25 million lives.

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Which leads me to our current time: What are the unspoken assumptions, held both in the United States and in other capitals, about international relations — beliefs so widely shared that they need not be spoken? And what mistakes — or extraordinary opportunities — could our unspoken assumptions lead us to, and might those mistakes be avoided if those assumptions were revealed and scrutinized?

One of the most important ambitions of the Texas National Security Review is to publish excellent scholarship that surfaces and interrogates our assumptions — spoken and unspoken — about national security and international affairs. You can see excellent examples of this in this issue. Megan Lamberth and Paul Scharre mine the long history of arms control to lay out principles that should guide the military uses of artificial intelligence. Paul Avey employs one of my favorite forms — the thoughtful, long-form review essay — to explore new thinking on how nuclear weapons affect world politics while overturning long-held (and indeed, often unspoken) beliefs about the so-called nuclear revolution. Rosella Cappella Zielinski and Samuel Gerstle tackle a subject that is often seen as dry but, historically, is of first-order importance: defense financing. Variations in defense funding is arguably what made Great Britain a great power in the 18th century and a superpower in the 19th. It is also an area where unspoken assumptions have shaped key decisions. Recall how obsessed the post-World War II generation was with paying off the massive national debt created by the conflict as quickly as possible. And Rose Gottemoeller reminds us that wartime is not a time to stop speaking to our adversaries, but in fact, a time to focus on diplomacy, especially when it involves the existential issue of nuclear weapons. Finland’s and Sweden’s application to join NATO, unthinkable two years ago, is analyzed by Katherine Kjellström Elgin and Alexander Lanoszka, highlighting how rapidly assumptions, both spoken and unspoken, can be transformed overnight.

It would be asking too much to identify all the things we believe to be true, to say out loud “the things that go without saying” that could lead us to trouble, or to figure out which assumptions we hold that are preventing us from realizing great opportunities. Scholars are not soothsayers. History, however, does remind us that our predecessors often got themselves in the most trouble, and limited their opportunities, when they were motivated by ideas so widely shared that they needn’t be said aloud.

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