

Nov 04, 2016 by [Ernest James Wilson III](#)

Educating the Idea Makers ^[1]

The U.S. foreign policy machine has been churning out a lot of bad ideas lately. To what do we owe this increased supply of bad ideas? Is it mainly the fault of the current foreign policy team? The permanent foreign policy apparatchiks? Where do all these bad ideas come from?

The short answer is, "all of the above." Bad ideas are not just the fault of the Bush officials that control the White House, State Department and Defense, although to them goes the lion share of responsibility for providing and enacting really bad ideas about foreign policy.

The Iraq morass is hardly the first -- let's not forget the mess of Vietnam. Nor is the future guaranteed to be free of bad ideas -- ahead of us lie tough policy choices about Iran and North Korea.

First of all let's admit that many of these bad ideas come from outmoded or misplaced ideologies, deep-seated belief systems that decision-makers bring with them to the office on their very first day.

But some of the bad ideas and poor analysis occurs because the people now in senior decision-making and analytic positions have been educated and trained for a world that no longer exists. Trained and educated to operate in a relatively stable bipolar world where the U.S. confronted one big enemy -- the Soviet bloc -- they are genuinely flummoxed by today's new conditions: multiple and dangerous non-state actors, asymmetrical warfare, the rise to power of states in the global south, and the like. For fifty years the foreign affairs community -- State, Defense, intelligence -- has trained its people to be savvy about a bi-polar world centered on the U.S.-U.S.S.R. rivalry. The institutions of foreign policy and national security recruited the right people and gave them the right training and rewarded them when they were successful in a world which has now faded away. In that world some cognitive styles and skills were rightfully given priority over others -- emphasizing rational choice approaches to problem solving, using mathematics and sequential analysis, concentrating on Europe. Far less attention was given to other cognitive styles, whether systems thinking, gestalt frameworks that encourage analysts to seek out and recognize emergent principles, plus scenario thinking or intuitive approaches to better help "connect the dots."

That has to change. National security analysis and action desperately needs a new bundle of cognitive styles more consonant with the current realities of economic and cultural globalization and distributed political power. The dots won't get connected using the old cognitive styles.

Fortunately, the State Department, Defense and the intel agencies seem to be wrestling with these issues, at institutions like the Foreign Service Institute, the National Defense University and the Kent School. Unfortunately, figuring out what cognitive styles and competencies to teach and how to teach them has proven a very slow-moving exercise in a fast-changing

global environment that doesn't reward moving slow. One of the biggest challenges is to mix together people with different cognitive styles into one smoothly functioning team that shares information and meshes together as a team. It's also a major challenge to find and nurture leaders able to get the best out of their mixed teams, and who can synthesize and integrate diverse findings to produce better analysis, better ideas and better action.

Bad ideas won't go away just because foreign affairs professionals get better education and training. But it's a start.
