

Book Reviews

Red Team: How to Succeed by Thinking like the Enemy



By Micah Zenko

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Reviewed by Wing Commander Mal Craghill

Biography: Wing Commander Mal Craghill completed a Master's degree in Applied Security Strategy at the University of Exeter in 2014 as the RAF's first Henderson Fellow. He is a fast-jet navigator serving in the UK's Ministry of Defence.

Introduction

In highly competitive commercial environments poorly conceived strategies, weak security measures or inadequately resourced campaigns can result in financial and reputational damage. In a national security context the results could – and have been – disastrous in terms of lives lost, unforeseen consequences and shattered reputations. Yet in most cases, according to Micah Zenko, the chances of achieving more favourable outcomes could be improved through the use of 3 core practices: simulations, vulnerability probes and alternative analyses. Those aware of the dangers inherent in marking one's own homework can draft in a 'red team' of skilled facilitators who use these practices to encourage critical thinking, group think mitigation, cultural empathy and self-awareness to improve understanding of the motivations, intentions and capabilities of an organisation or actor.

To illustrate his theory, Zenko immersed himself in the world of red teaming, attending military courses at the US Army's University of Foreign Military and Cultural Studies (UFMCS, known as 'Red Team University') and commercial courses at the Fuld Gilad Herring Academy of Competitive Intelligence in Boston, USA. He also draws heavily on hundreds of interviews and case studies to bring his work to life, as well as relevant books, journals and military

doctrine. Zenko is currently a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in America, having previously held positions at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, the Brookings Institution, Congressional Research Service and the US State Department. He is widely published in the fields of national and international security and conflict prevention.

Late in the book Zenko states that "An adept red team will inform decision-makers by challenging conventional wisdom, identifying blind spots, revealing vulnerabilities, presenting alternative futures, and considering worst-case scenarios" (p.226). Many military readers will self-identify with that statement, pointing to numerous training courses and exercises (academic and practical) and their operational experience to show how they fit the mould of the critical thinker. The success of Zenko's book is in convincing the reader that is not the case, and that without significant investment – particularly in 'thinking about thinking', or learning how to think – most people in hierarchical organisations will be shaped more by their institution than vice versa.

The book is logically structured, beginning with the origins of red teaming in the Vatican's 'devils advocacy' approach to testing applications for sainthood, then working through best practices, red teaming in modern military, intelligence community and homeland security contexts, and private sector red teaming before summarising and suggesting the role that artificial intelligence might play in the discipline in future. Zenko uses contemporary examples throughout to show the benefits of red teaming as well as where its absence, or wilful ignorance of its results, has led to disastrous consequences. One theme is obvious throughout the book, directly related to the number one best practice: the boss must buy in. Where this is not the case, it tends to be due to cognitive biases (such as mirror imaging and confirmation bias) or organisational biases (of which institutional capture and adoption of hierarchical preferences are key to the military); without that high-level support, the red team's work is likely to be nugatory.

Several of Zenko's case studies are worth highlighting, for differing reasons. In one he explains how a lack of independent review and critical thought in the Israeli intelligence community ahead of the 1973 Yom Kippur War left Israel dangerously exposed. Learning from this experience, the Israeli Defence Force subsequently established a dedicated red team – the Mahleket Bakara – to prevent similar failures. The intelligence profession is highlighted as a narrow, deep specialisation where biases such as the 'tyranny of expertise' and 'coordination problems' (the 'blanding' effect of consensus) are particularly common. This point seems to have been recognised by the Obama administration in its use of three separate red teams to verify Osama bin Laden's likely presence in a compound in Pakistan ahead of the mission to capture him which resulted in his death. This example also shows how the use of simulations or table top exercises were useful in identifying, and planning responses to, 'what if?' situations such as the loss of a helicopter, which actually occurred.

Perhaps the most invidious example Zenko cites is the use of penetration testing and vulnerability probes by the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) during the 1990s to test airport and airline security. Despite repeatedly exposing the sort of shortcomings which

would lead to the catastrophe of 9/11, the FAA red team's findings were consistently ignored by the airlines and FAA leadership; failings which remain evident around the world today, as evidenced by the recent Brussels airport bombing. Zenko's exploration of red teaming in the private sector is no less revealing, highlighting how cost-benefit analysis and commercial secrecy combine to leave a feeling that the customer's best interests are frequently not a central consideration for big business.

Red Team is aimed at a wide audience, and some readers might feel that the 'how to' of military red teaming is somewhat overlooked. Zenko covers for this by liberally signposting other resources to which the reader can turn, including the Red Team University's Applied Critical Thinking Handbook and the UK Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre's own Red Teaming Guide (Second Edition). For those seeking detail on some of the other concepts explored by Zenko (such as biases, thinking about thinking and unconventional approaches), the works of Daniel Kahneman, Malcolm Gladwell, Matthew Syed and Nassim Nicholas Taleb should provide excellent further reading.

Micah Zenko proves the wide applicability of his fascinating and convincing work time and again throughout Red Team. Seasoned practitioners will find it a valuable source of material, particularly on avoiding the identified pitfalls, and budding red teamers will find a wealth of resources to get them started. But the key target audience will be those in a position of high leadership and responsibility who can influence how (or even if) red team concepts are employed in their areas of responsibility. The real challenge – especially in a military environment where ego can often block alternative perspectives – will be overcoming those senior leaders' biases and opening their eyes to the possibilities of red teaming.

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