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Lt. Col. Michael C. Bailey, Europe commander

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Harry Eley, Europe Business Operations

Terry M. Wegner, Pacific Business Operations

EDITORIAL

Terry Leonard, Editor
leonard.terry@stripes.comRobert H. Reid, Senior Managing Editor
reid.robert@stripes.comTina Croley, Managing Editor for Content
croley.tina@stripes.comSean Moores, Managing Editor for Presentation
moores.sean@stripes.comJoe Gromelski, Managing Editor for Digital
gromelski.joe@stripes.com

BUREAU STAFF

Europe/Mideast

Erik Slavin, Europe & Mideast Bureau Chief
slavin.erik@stripes.com
+49(0)631.3615.9350; DSN (314)583.9350

Pacific

Aaron Kidd, Pacific Bureau Chief
kidd.aaron@stripes.com
+81.42.552.2511 ext. 88380; DSN (315)227.7380

Washington

Joseph Cacchioli, Washington Bureau Chief
cacchioli.joseph@stripes.com
(+1)(202)761.0908; DSN (312)763.0908
Brian Bowers, Assistant Managing Editor, News
bowers.brian@stripes.com
Amanda Trypanis, Design Desk Supervisor
trypanis.amanda@stripes.com

CIRCULATION

Mideast

Robert Reismann, reismann.robert@stripes.com
+49(0)631.3615.9150; DSN (314)583.9150

Europe

Van Rowell, rowell.van@stripes.com
+49(0)631.3615.9111; DSN (314)583.9111

Pacific

Mari Matsumoto, customerhelp@stripes.com
+81-3 6385.3171; DSN (315)229.3171

CONTACT US

Washington

tel: (+1)202.761.0900; DSN (312)763.0900;
529 14th Street NW, Suite 350, Washington, DC
20045-1301

Reader letters

letters@stripes.com

Additional contacts

stripes.com/contactus

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IQ test is a useful tool – and lightning rod

BY STUART RITCHIE

Special to The Washington Post

Most scientists feel a certain nervousness when the topic they research appears in the news. Overstatement is par for the course, misunderstanding a near-inevitability. But what could be more cringe-worthy than the president of the United States engaging in a macho contest with his secretary of state over the area you research? I am, of course, talking about IQ testing. After Rex Tillerson allegedly called him a “moron,” Donald Trump this week suggested that he and Tillerson “compare IQ tests.” Naturally, Trump could “tell you who is going to win.” This isn’t the first time that the president has spoken — and tweeted — about his apparently sky-high IQ.

It’s hard to deny the grim entertainment value of the latest Trump spat. But the idea that an IQ score is just a bragging aid for egotistical politicians threatens to trivialize a genuine field of research. It doesn’t help, of course, that IQ tests hardly have a good reputation to begin with. Steeped in controversy, by far the most common reaction whenever the topic arises is the oh-so-droll refrain: “IQ tests only tell you how good you are at doing IQ tests!”

In fact, IQ tests tell us much more than that, as a mountain of evidence from the fields of psychology, sociology, neuroscience, genetics and epidemiology attests. For instance, we know that people who do better at IQ tests tend to do better at school, in work and in terms of their physical and mental health. On average, they even live longer — and that doesn’t seem purely due to education or social class. Studies continually appear in top neuroscience journals linking MRI measures (such as the overall volume of the brain) to IQ scores, and some

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of the first IQ-related genetic variants are now being uncovered.

Yet controversy around IQ tests and scoring remains. Some of it is due to the fear of immutability, or the worry that a low IQ score is set in stone, dooming a person to a life of failure and embarrassment. But this is misplaced. First, IQ is only one of a whole constellation of reasons, including hard work and sheer chance, why people get to where they end up in life. And as the writer Scott Alexander has recently noted, the findings discussed above are all averages and tendencies and trends at the group level; they absolutely don’t apply to every individual person who gets a particular score on the test.

Second, nobody would argue that IQ is strictly biologically determined. The environment still has a crucial influence. Indeed, scientists don’t all share the fatalistic view of many IQ critics; rather, a great deal of IQ research is focused on how we might boost people’s abilities. For example, we know that factors like iodine deficiency are linked to lower IQ scores (a brilliant charity, the Iodine Global Network, is dedicated to doing something about this) and growing evidence appears to show positive effects of education on IQ. Research continues on whether improved physical fitness, among other influences, might help older adults stave off the decline of their mental abilities as they age.

Another reason psychologists wince at self-satisfied crowing about IQ is that the tests can — in the right hands, and despite the immoral ways they have often been used in the past — serve a useful social purpose. After all, they were first invented to identify children in need of extra educational attention, and they can still serve that purpose. A terrific study from last year also illustrated how IQ tests can level the social playing field, finding that the use of objective cognitive tests — as opposed to referrals from parents and teachers, who aren’t always reliable at spotting talent in certain groups — improves representation of poor and minority children in gifted education programs. (The study is “Universal screening increases the representation of low-income and minority students in gifted education” by David Carda and Laura Giuliano.)

Treating IQ as a frivolous, point-scoring game makes it easier to write off perfectly serious research and ignore the useful information we can get from cognitive tests. It contributes to the mistaken notion that, with IQ tests, psychologists are trying to sum up the worth of a person, rather than develop useful tools to understand the mind and identify different levels of ability. Most importantly, it fails to recognize what many scientists in this field already do: that the mere possession of a high IQ score isn’t what matters.

We don’t admire history’s great scientists, mathematicians, composers and artists because they were intelligent per se; we do so because they used their intelligence to produce something worthwhile in the world. Those who would bandy around their high IQ as if it in itself entitled them to respect should take note.

Stuart Ritchie is a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Psychology at the University of Edinburgh.

‘Stealth privatization’ increases risk of torture

BY ROBERT WEINER AND BEN LASKY

Special to Stars and Stripes

The idea of privatizing the war in Afghanistan with contractors was floated by notorious ex-Blackwater CEO Erik Prince, but the military immediately rejected the suggestion. However, as American Legion President Charles Schmidt said in August, “stealth privatization” has been and remains underway. President Donald Trump has been in a middle ground on this issue.

The president’s proposed federal budget would have led to the privatization of the Department of Veterans Affairs. The Choice Program was created during the VA scandal, allowing veterans who live 40 or more miles away from a health care facility or have to wait at least 30 days for an appointment, to seek private medical treatment. The recently passed Veterans Affairs Choice and Quality Employment Act extended the program until its funding runs out.

While the Choice Program could become permanent, unemployment benefits for disabled veterans would be slashed by \$40.8 billion over 10 years at the same time under the administration’s budget. That’s why Schmidt called the proposal “stealth privatization.”

Matthew Cary, founding president of Veterans and Military Families for Progress and board member of the Salute America’s Heroes Coalition, is concerned about privatization. In an interview Oct. 4, he told us, “The move toward privatization is going against the current practice that works so well for the country. Why do we need to be tampering with that?”

Cary says there are lots of reasons not to privatize fighting wars, most importantly that defending our country is a matter of “service, not profits.” Another is to protect against torture.

It was private CIA contractors who committed torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq that destroyed the U.S. reputation for morality in the Middle East and much of the international community. The administration should leave the war in Afghanistan in the hands of the military, who unlike contractors, adhere to the Army Field Manual.

The Army Field Manual follows the Geneva Conventions and states, “All captured or detained personnel shall be treated humanely at all times and in accordance with DOD Directive 3115.09 ... and no person in the custody or under the control of the DOD, regardless of nationality or physical location, shall be subject to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment as defined in US law, including the Detainee Treatment Act of 2005.” Private contractors of the CIA are not under these restrictions.

Trump said during the 2016 campaign when discussing his views on torture, that, “I don’t think it’s tough enough,” and that he prefers “much worse.” This is a campaign pledge that a private military would implement.

While the military has refused to do CIA contractor-style torture, they have given it a wink and nod. When Gen. Geoffrey Miller moved from Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, to Abu Ghraib, he reportedly vowed to “Gitmoize” Abu Ghraib by moving torture strategies over. Simply allowing the

CIA to do it through private contractors is no better. In fact, it’s worse, because there is no oversight. According to Open Society Foundations, established by investor and philanthropist George Soros, the U.S. has been farming out torture to 54 countries since 9/11.

A 2008 bill would have stopped the CIA from bypassing the Army Field Manual, but after the bill passed both chambers of Congress, it was vetoed by President George W. Bush. So that legislation does not exist and CIA torture remains an option.

Torture brings contempt and revenge. According to a report by the Director of National Intelligence, through 2016, 29 percent of Gitmo detainees have “re-engaged in terrorism” — but only 7 percent of those released under former President Barack Obama did so after his “no torture” order was issued at the beginning of his administration.

While appearing on MSNBC in January, retired four-star Gen. Barry McCaffrey, called Trump’s words on torture “against international law. It puts our military at risk. This is a really shaky position.”

The U.S. often holds itself as an example for the rest of the world. We speak up when human rights abuses take place. It is time to get back to being an example on how we treat prisoners of war. The proposal to privatize war-making was rightly nipped in the bud. But there is not yet a nail in the coffin of privatization or private contractor torture.

Robert Weiner is a former White House spokesman in the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush administrations and former spokesman for the House Government Operations Committee. Ben Lasky is a senior policy analyst at Solutions for Change.