

Policy Watch: Woes of worst case analysis

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As has been much discussed in the news recently, a National Intelligence Estimate (which President George W. Bush has partly declassified) has concluded that the American presence in Iraq has served not to diminish or even contain Islamic radicalism, but to increase it instead.

Those responsible for sending American forces to Iraq certainly did not intend for this to happen. Indeed, they thought that American intervention in Iraq would go a long way toward defeating Islamic radicalism. What went wrong?

Many things, undoubtedly. But one factor that stands out is the application of what is known as "worst case analysis" by the Bush administration and its supporters to Iraq. Worst case analysis is a type of thinking that basically advises: "When in doubt, assume the worst." Thus, worst case analysis usually assumes that all one's opponents are allied to one another. In the case of Iraq, then, worst case analysts in the Bush administration assumed that Saddam Hussein was allied to al-Qaida. Some even saw a grander alliance among Saddam, al-Qaida, and Iran. Those who argued otherwise were dismissed as naïve or overly optimistic.

Yet in the case of Iraq (as well as others), it was the worst case analysts who proved to be naïve and overly optimistic. Since they assumed that Saddam, al-Qaida, and even Iran were allied to each other, they expected that the defeat of Saddam would weaken the larger alliance that they believed he was a part of.

But these three were not allied to each other. While there may have been some tactical cooperation between any two of them against the United States at various times, they were all basically opposed to each other. Thus, the American overthrow of Saddam did not serve to weaken the other two, but to strengthen them since it not only got rid one of their opponents, but also allowed both to exploit the (highly predictable) Muslim opposition that arose to the American occupation of Iraq.

Worst case analysts are certainly correct in understanding that America faces serious opponents -- ones who, like Saddam or the "Dear Leader" in Pyongyang -- and are not going to become our friends if only we would just sit down and talk with them as some "best case" analysts argue. The worst case analysts in the Bush administration, though, insisted on completely defeating Saddam, without thinking through how the downfall of Saddam would strengthen Iran and al-Qaida or how their insistence on bringing this about would alienate so many of our allies.

Unless and until we reach the elusive "end of history" when all the world becomes democratic that Francis Fukuyama forecast back in 1989 as communism was collapsing, America is going to face anti-democratic opponents either in the form of hostile dictatorships or revolutionary movements that want to set up hostile dictatorships. It is doubtful whether the United States can defeat them all. It is impossible for us to defeat them all at once. So the problem of how to eliminate any one of our opponents strengthens our existing enemies or creates new ones who will be with us indefinitely.

On the other hand, the fact that our opponents also oppose one another holds out the possibility that America can take advantage of disputes between them, just like Nixon and Kissinger did in the early 1970s after Sino-Soviet rivalry had become so intense that Moscow and Beijing came to fear each other more than they did the United States. The United States,

of course, cannot count on being able to divert our opponents' attention from us to each other. But it can at least recognize and seize upon opportunities to do so -- something that worst case analysts who assume our opponents are all allied to one another are very poor at doing.

Ironically, the United States could create just such an opportunity in Iraq if it announced that it was going to withdraw. Contrary to Bush's dire warnings of how the terrorists would then attack the United States, the most likely consequence of such an announcement would be an exacerbation of the conflict between Arab Sunnis and Arab Shias there. Under such circumstances, groups on one or both sides now demanding we leave might suddenly find that this would not be in their interests after all.

As the National Intelligence Estimate has shown, our opponents have become quite adept at exploiting our vulnerabilities. We need to learn how to exploit theirs -- one of which is that there is serious hostility among them. But to do this, we must overcome the limitations that worst case analysis puts on our own policymaking.

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