

Policy Watch: In praise of pessimism

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Many of these columns have been critical of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Others have been critical of American President George W. Bush. Those who object to my criticism of Putin see me as a conservative, while those who dislike my criticism of Bush see me as a liberal.

But I am neither a conservative nor a liberal. Instead, I am a pessimist -- at least insofar as international relations are concerned.

I am not, however, a typical pessimist, or what I call a relative pessimist. I am so pessimistic that I am even pessimistic about pessimism. I am, then, an absolute pessimist.

A typical pessimist looking at the world from the perspective of his own country sees that it has enemies. Because the typical pessimist wants to be prepared for the worst, he assumes that his country's enemies are working together against it -- or that they will do so. To suggest that his country's enemies are not allied with each other or that they will be unable to remain so because their enmity for each other is so great appears hopelessly optimistic to him. Evidence that there are differences between them is dismissed either as unimportant or as deliberate deception.

But this is where the typical pessimist errs. An absolute pessimist does not just see that his own country has enemies. He insists on looking at the world from the perspective of other actors -- including his opponents. By doing this, the absolute pessimist can easily see that the leaders of authoritarian governments and movements are highly suspicious individuals who believe themselves to be surrounded by enemies. When they ally with others against the United States (if they can actually manage it), they do so suspecting that their "allies" will turn against them once their common objective is achieved -- or even beforehand. It is usually only a matter of time before one side in this sort of alliance "hits back first" before the other does so.

In some respects, President Bush is a typical pessimist. He believed (or at least, wanted voters to believe) that Saddam Hussein and al-Qaida were allied, even though they were in fact strongly opposed to each other. This viewpoint contributed to his insistence on seeing the invasion of Iraq as essential for the fight against al-Qaida even though this was untrue.

What I find more objectionable about President Bush, though, was not his brand of pessimism, but his overweening optimism that once U.S. forces toppled Saddam Hussein, Iraq would become a model democracy that would inspire a democratic transformation throughout the Middle East. For years to come, the U.S. experience in Iraq will be pointed to as a classic example of the errors that over-optimism can lead to.

President Putin also exhibits both pessimism and optimism, but in a different combination than Bush. Like a traditional pessimist, he sees his country as being surrounded by enemies. Like an absolute pessimist, he understands that Russia's many opponents have important differences with one another. This, of course, is sensible. But Putin's over-optimism comes in to play in assuming that the differences between his opponents are so great that Russia can behave thuggishly toward many of them (especially small former Soviet republics such as Estonia and Georgia) without serious risk that they will all gain a common interest in working with others (including the United States) to protect themselves against Russia -- as is increasingly

happening.

Indeed, despite the very serious differences that erupted between the United States and several of its most important West European allies regarding Iraq, the United States and the European Union are increasingly making common cause against Russia. It was not clever diplomacy on the part of the Bush administration that brought about this state of affairs, but thuggish diplomacy on the part of the Putin administration that has done so.

From the American perspective, of course, this is cause for optimism. But as an absolute pessimist, I must add a word of caution: The fact that America's Russian opponent (and that is what the Putin administration has increasingly become) is making mistakes that benefit the United States does not mean that the United States can afford to make mistakes that benefits it.

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