

April 8, 2004

FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE AND FOREIGN POLICY

Adlai E. Stevenson (as submitted and before editing by the New York Times for publication)

Much of the debate over foreign policy misadventures of the Bush Administration focuses on the intelligence community and misconceives the role and function of foreign intelligence. The tragedy unfolding in Iraq is not the fault of intelligence. The Director of Central Intelligence acknowledged that Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction would only be a "threat" if it was attacked - and if it had such weapons. A rudimentary familiarity with Iraq and its region was enough to foretell the consequences of invasion. The 9/11 tragedy might have been prevented if the Administration had heeded the intelligence, but intelligence can do little to prevent terrorism. It does little to address the causes of terrorism.

In 1979, a year long Congressional study of terrorism predicted "spectacular acts of disruption and destruction" in the U.S. and led to my introduction of the Comprehensive Anti Terrorism Act. The study was commenced because the Likud had come to power in Israel and was proclaiming its intention to occupy "Judea and Samaria." Religious claims of Zionists and secular claims of Palestinians were irreconcilable. Palestinians would resist the Israeli occupation and, lacking Apache gunships, would use less sophisticated weapons and delivery systems, including their bodies, against civilian and military targets. As long as the U.S. subsidized Israel's defiance of its policies, Americans would be vulnerable. That study required no foreign intelligence. Terrorism is not of recent invention.

Foreign intelligence is prone to support foreign policy. Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz exaggerated only slightly when he observed that intelligence is a "lie". Intelligence collection priorities are determined by policy makers, the "consumers". Sometimes the products of foreign intelligence are tailored to fit preconceptions of policy makers; otherwise they may be ignored. Foreign intelligence is often flawed. The variables are innumerable. The agencies of the intelligence community have conflicting and overlapping missions, lack true "central" responsibility and are overwhelmed by masses of information, much of it technical, which requires "production" and assessment often without the necessary regional specialists and linguists. When I was leading the Senate investigation of the intelligence failure in Iran in the late '70's, I learned from the capable Director of Central Intelligence, Stansford Taylor, that the CIA had no farsi speaking analysts and, in the field, I learned clandestinely, that the operating directives of its Station Chiefs in Iran and elsewhere focused on the Soviet Union's activities, the preoccupation of the consumers. The CIA relied on Savak, the Shah's agency, and Mossad, the Israeli agency, for intelligence on Iran, but these agencies supported the foreign policies and interests of their governments. The Bush Administration relied on faulty Mossad intelligence in Iraq. Or was it faulty? It may have achieved its purpose: drawing the U.S. into the quicksands of this post World War I European construct of feuding tribes, sects, ethnicities and foreign interests carved from the carcass of the Ottoman Empire.

The foreign policy failures of the Bush Administration, and I touch only on the mideast, don't reflect failures of foreign intelligence. They reflect failures of a cerebral sort of intelligence acquired from experience in the real world away from Washington, its arm chair polemicists, lobbies and ivory towers. Policy has been driven by ideologues and amateurs lacking military experience and often with substantial support in a Congress little noted for the real world experience of its Members. Lobbies are not diffident either nowadays, even lobbies representing foreign governments.

In addition to formulating foreign policy, officials lacking relevant experience are responsible for its execution, including L. Paul Bremer, the Administration's Proconsul in Iraq. With experience in Iraq, he might have known better than to precipitously dismantle the Iraqi military and bureaucracy. Some observers speculate that the Administration's unintelligence is too egregious to be plausible as an explanation for its failures, but why would neoconservative policy makers, including the President and Vice President, implicate themselves in such self-defeating tragedies as the occupation of Iraq? Many have concluded that intelligence of the cerebral sort is unwelcome in this White House.

The flip side of cerebral intelligence is ignorance which is easily acquired, often politically convenient and sometimes required by our government. U.S. administrations have fostered ignorance of Palestine. Contact by U.S. officials with representatives of the Palestine Liberation Organization was never encouraged, to say the least. As a Senator, I could ignore such injunctions and with unofficial encouragement from within the government seek intelligence from on the ground. As an Illinois State Treasurer, accompanied by my wife, I trailed the Israeli Army into the West Bank and Golan Heights of Syria in 1967. Our photographs record evidence of what in another time and place would be called ethnic cleansing. Visits to Palestinian refugee camps and schools, to Palestinians, including Yasser Arafat, made ignorance difficult, the intelligence gained politically inconvenient. As long as the U.S. financed Israel and its growing, unlawful occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, it would be vulnerable to terrorism. Politically inconvenient predictions and prescriptions, including measures to strengthen intelligence which offended civil libertarians, went unheeded. Today the U.S. is widely perceived to be waging war against Islam in Iraq and by proxy in Palestine while occupying Islamic states in the Gulf and Central Asia.

Politically motivated terrorists may be fanatics, but not fools. Gavrilo Princip, the Serb nationalist who assassinated the Austro-Hungarian Arch Duke in 1914 did not expect to bring down the Empire. He and his conspirators expected a reaction. The Empire obliged, triggering World War I and its demise. Nineteen men armed with box cutters did not expect to bring America down. Only the U.S. government can do that. It expected a reaction and has not been disappointed. The Bush Administration attacked Al Qaeda's enemy, the secular Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein. Its occupation of a desert quasi-state crippled and demoralized by sanctions has stretched the American military thin. The federal budget has plunged from surplus to deficit at the fastest rate in history. A vast Teutonic sounding bureaucracy has been established; civil liberties undermined. The dollar has sunk against other currencies as a measure of confidence in the American economy and polity. Innocents are dying and spreading jihad. The U.S. is increasingly isolated. In Spain, Argentina, Germany, South Korea and provinces in Pakistan candidates win public office by distancing themselves from the Bush Administration. The U.S. increases its dependence on oil from the Mideast while destabilizing it. It took the Bush Administration little more than three years to discredit its pretensions to Empire and pax Americana, leaving the U.S. increasingly alone and vulnerable, even dependent on foreign central banks led by Japan and China to keep its debt-ridden economy afloat. Its "progress" in Iraq is owing to no failure of foreign intelligence.

To be sure, the intelligence community can be strengthened. Several studies have recommended reforms which would eliminate redundancies and conflicts in the community while centralizing responsibility. But reform does not change the nature and function of intelligence. Monies could be transferred from a bloated intelligence community to the forlorn State Department for more effective political representation and reporting throughout the world.

There is no substitute for pragmatic, cerebral intelligence obtained through an understanding of history and experience in the real world - and the courage to act on it. Condoleeza Rice, Vice President Cheney and their fellow neo conservatives inhabit a fantasy world of great and competing powers, Christian Zionists seeking the second coming, militarists without military experience and a vast military, industrial, energy complex seeking money, power and oil. Their failures are not of foreign intelligence but of their own intelligence.

The ably led Iraq Study Commission would do the American people a service by explaining that 9/11 is a prelude to more terror and national decline unless intelligence is restored to the formulation and execution of American foreign policy.