

2006. For the first three years of the war, then, the public strong skepticism or disapproval was ignored by the workings of government.

Facing growing public unrest and political paralysis within the government, President Bush felt compelled to empanel a “fresh look” after a Republican congressman from Virginia, Frank Wolf, proposed such a review after visiting Iraq in late 2005. The White House was initially opposed, but Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice prevailed and Congress quickly appropriated the money. Former congressman Lee Hamilton and former secretary of state James Baker headed the panel, the Iraq Study Group (ISG).

It is relatively rare when a foreign-policy issue that is current, unresolved, and extremely controversial would receive its most formal review and recommendations from a non-governmental body. Apart from the co-chairs, the ISG was comprised of members with little foreign-policy experience; its forty or so experts are well-versed but were drawn from the foreign policy establishment; and its work was done in secret.³ It withheld its policy recommendations until after the 2006 midterm elections, and the administration immediately undermined its conclusions—essentially declaring it would not heed such advice—although in practice it gradually adopted some of its views. Altogether, then, the ISG is hardly a model for exploring options.

That it was freighted with responsibilities difficult to deliver on is less a comment on ISG’s competence than the deeper ailments of the system that produced the Iraq catastrophe and allowed it to fester for years. Now in charge in Congress, the Democrats have not won many points in its oversight functions, either, fidgeting over withdrawal deadlines and the level of coercive language they can use, and failing to convince enough Republicans to come along. Meanwhile, the enormous human toll in Iraq—one-half in “absolute poverty,” high child malnourishment, 70 percent without clean water, and so on—goes practically unnoticed.⁴ So the failure of accountability persists in both branches.

Four Guideposts

The “what went wrong?” question is not merely a matter of competence in foreign policy implementation, but indicative of more fundamental issues. At least four are visible: grand strategy, democratic principles, consultation with allies, adversaries, and international organizations, and matching resources to goals.

Strategy. The “preventive war” strategy bracing the Iraq invasion was partially a departure from previous U.S. strategy, which had relied mainly on deterrence of the use of nuclear weapons in particular, and diplomacy.⁵ But a broader strategy was also at work in the invasion and other actions in the region—the attempt to transform the authoritarian political structures besetting several Arab states (and Iran) in one swiftly delivered blow and subsequent efforts at “coercive democratization.”⁶ This broad goal, articulated in the 2002 National Security Strategy, was borne of the shock of the 9/11 attacks and a pre-existing desire by many in the Bush administration for a much more assertive military posture in the region and around the world.⁷

But the strategy was hardly debated in foreign policy circles or Congress, much less among the broader public, before it was imbedded as the national strategy.⁸ Despite the abject failure in Iraq—to find WMDs, or to transform the region to democracy and free markets, and at an enormous cost—it remains official doctrine, and little discussed. While presidential doctrines may be the Washington equivalent of New Year’s resolutions, the nation—led by political leaders, intellectuals, and civil society—needs to take this more seriously.

Democracy. The Bush administration has formed and conducted much of its foreign policy in secret, an anathema to democratic principles, and has avoided congressional involvement, even though the Constitution grants significant power to Congress in global affairs. On both counts, this behavior is stoutly anti-democratic.

Matters of secrecy are not merely anti-democratic in a formal sense; the practice has powerful consequences. As the Commission created to explore government secrecy in the mid-1990s put it, “secrecy has the potential to undermine well-informed judgment by limiting the opportunity for input, review, and criticism, thus allowing individuals and groups to avoid the type of scrutiny that might challenge long-accepted beliefs and ways of thinking.”⁹

That the Bush White House is resolutely closed to scrutiny is well established.¹⁰ Its secrecy about the reasons for going to war with Iraq, particularly the virtually nonexistent intelligence regarding WMDs, is now widely accepted as a colossal blunder. Secrecy is sometimes necessary, as all acknowledge, but the attempts at balance begun in the post-Cold War era have been set back drastically. And despite the foreign-policy blunders, the current president’s penchant for secrecy has not subsided, and Congress is not challenging that, either.

John Tirman is executive director of the MIT Center for International Studies, and a principal research scientist. He is coeditor and coauthor of *Multilateralism Under Challenge? Power, International Order, and Structural Change* (U.N. University Press, 2006.)

The role of Congress is always in play during foreign policy debates. “War nourishes the presidency,” Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., once noted, and presidential powers in foreign policy tend to be cumulative, rather than episodic. Scholars generally agree that Congress and the president equally share foreign policy power, though the lack of precision in the delegation of authority is an “invitation to struggle.”¹¹ And struggle there has been since 9/11, confrontations over funding for the Iraq war in particular, which reflects the main authority Congress clearly possesses—the power of the purse.

Here, the current Congress—in contrast to the rubber stampers of 2003–2006—has made minor inroads, at least forcing a debate about timing of withdrawal, but the spending is approved and indeed the record-sized military budget overall is sailing through Congress with few visible objections. In past episodes in Southeast Asia and Central America, funding cutoffs or restrictions were the preferred method to exercise congressional authority, and were sometimes circumvented illegally.¹²

Even the relatively mild efforts at oversight, however, have been met by the administration with charges that oversight “emboldens the enemy.”¹³ This tendentious language undermines cooperation and intensifies the struggle between the two branches, hindering effective dialogue, action, and accountability.

Consultation. The lack of consultation is not limited to Congress. The war in Iraq, in contrast to the war in Afghanistan, has been conducted without heed to multilateral institutions, including international law,¹⁴ or with longstanding allies, apart from the U.K. Rice’s advice to Bush to “punish France, ignore Germany and forgive Russia” for their opposition to the Iraq war is emblematic of that attitude. Collective security decision making is bound to be more cumbersome and cautious than the decision making of individual states, but that can be an advantage in situations that are not urgent.

Likewise, addressing foreign policy crises through multilateral institutions like the UN or NATO provide other benefits: legitimacy (and legality) of action, cost and burden sharing, better intelligence, and international (and cross cultural) dialogue, to name the most obvious.¹⁵ U.S. presidents in recent years have generated misleading expectations about the UN in particular by focusing on the supposed constraints of international institutions. In trade and other fields, however, multilateralism is welcome, because American interests are served and indeed preeminent. At least prospectively, the benefits of multilateralism should accrue both to economics and security.

Regional diplomacy is also a matter of consultation, and has been conducted sporadically and bilaterally until this spring, when very brief meetings of regional stakeholders in the Persian Gulf were convened. (A pivotal recommendation of the ISG, regional diplomacy remains meager and fraught with additional and divisive issues, such as Iran’s nuclear program.¹⁶) This lack of consultation and negotiation is chronically problematic for U.S. foreign affairs.

Resources. As is widely noted, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, among other foreign-policy priorities, are not supported by sufficient levels of resources. The wars, for example, have been financed by deficit spending, in effect, and are often presented as supplemental budgets, which are less transparent and subject to review than annual requests. Underfunding may be another problem: the near-universal conclusion that too few U.S. troops have been involved in Iraq from the beginning is in part a resource issue.

Prominent among the other areas of foreign policy implementation where resources did not match objectives is President Bush’s

HIV/AIDS initiative. Congress appropriated more money for prevention and treatment than is being spent. A number of critics also point to the homeland security effort, a lynchpin of the global war on terror, as clearly demonstrating a lack of adequate funds to realize its stated intentions.

The Bush administration is not the first presidency to set goals it could not achieve with the resources it was willing to mobilize. In combination with its strategic ambition, resistance to congressional involvement, opacity, and unilateralism, however, the failure to match resources to objectives is all the more disabling.

Examining the Process

While the policies themselves deserve more exploration by scholars, journalists, and policy professionals, as well as by Congress, the *process* of policy making and implementation should not be ignored. As a general rule, the right has favored more executive power and the left more congressional input. What are the relative merits and drawbacks of these two preferences? Can new mechanisms of accountability—paying for wars with a special tax, for example—proceed without excessively boxing in presidential authority? How can transparency in intelligence analysis and budgeting be facilitated? Can we have a national discussion about the U.S. role in the world—for example, our relationship to multilateral institutions—that is encouraged by political leaders?

Grappling in a sustained, sophisticated, and non-partisan way with the foreign-policy process is long overdue. Iraq in particular demonstrates how badly broken the process is, a canary in the coal mine for U.S. globalism in the years to come.

article footnotes

1 Some well-known treatments: Roger Hilsman, *The Politics of Policy Making in Defense and Foreign Affairs* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971); Graham Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little Brown, 1971); Morton H. Halperin and Priscilla Clapp, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1974); Lincoln Bloomfield, *The Foreign Policy Process: A Modern Primer* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1982); Stanley Heginbotham, “Dateline Washington: The Rules of the Games,” *Foreign Policy* 53 (Winter 1983).

2 Scott Keeter, “Trends in Public Opinion about the War in Iraq, 2003–2007,” Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (March 15, 2007). On-line: <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/431/trends-in-public-opinion-about-the-war-in-iraq-2003-2007>.

3 Robin Wright, “Iraq Group a Study In Secrecy, Centrist Outside Participants Describe Process,” *Washington Post* (November 26, 2006): A21.

4 Oxfam and the NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq, “Rising to the humanitarian challenge in Iraq,” (July 30, 2007), on-line: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/18_07_07_oxfam_iraq.pdf.

5 Dan Reiter, *Preventive War and Its Alternatives: The Lessons of History* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, 2006), on-line: www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?PubID=651.

6 Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Transformational Leadership and U.S. Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2006.

7 Robert Kagan and William Kristol, eds., *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy* (New York: Encounter Books, 2000).

8 Jacques Hymans, “The Bush Preventive War Doctrine and Its (Mild) Critics: Seeking the Roots of America’s Threat Consensus” *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, PA, Aug. 27, 2003*.

9 Report of the Commission on Protecting and Reducing Government Secrecy (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office: 1997), pp. 7–8.

10 “Secrecy In The Bush Administration,” U.S. House Of Representatives Committee On Government Reform — Minority Staff, Special Investigations Division (September 14, 2004); on line: <http://oversight.house.gov/documents/20050317180908-35215.pdf>.

11 Ralph G. Carter and James M. Scott, “Taking the Lead: Congressional Foreign Policy Entrepreneurs in U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Politics & Policy* 32:1 (March 2004); Robert Zoellick, “Congress and the making of US foreign policy,” *Survival* 41:4 (December 1999); Barry M. Blechman, “The Congressional Role in U.S. Military Policy,” *Political Science Quarterly* 106:1 (1991).

12 The Congressional Research Service has produced several excellent accounts of this history and the current activity, e.g., J.K. Elsea et al, “Congressional Authority to Limit U.S. Military Operations in Iraq,” (July 11, 2007), which also cites others; on-line: www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL33837.pdf.

13 Kate Phillips, “Clinton Fires Back at Pentagon,” *The Caucus: New York Times* on line blog (July 20, 2007), <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/07/20/clinton-fires-back-at-the-pentagon/>.

14 This view of U.S. neglect of international law is also held by the UK attorney general. See <http://www.globalpolicy.org/security/issues/iraq/attack/lawindex.htm>.

15 John Ruggie, ed., *Multilateralism Matters* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), is the standard work on this topic.

16 See my treatment of this, “Diplomacy and the Iraq War,” *Strategic Insights*, VI:2 (March 2007). <http://www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/si/2007/Mar/tirmanMar07.asp>.



MIT CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

September 2007

Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

Is the Foreign Policy Process Working?

John Tirman

MIT Center for International Studies

PSB 07-08-0686



Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Building E38-200
292 Main Street
Cambridge, MA 02139

MIT CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES





MIT CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

September 2007
07-13

Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that define U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Michelle Nhuch (NHUCH@MIT.EDU, 617.253.1965)

Center for International Studies

Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Building E38-200
292 Main Street
Cambridge, MA 02139

T: 617.253.8093
F: 617.253.9330
cis-info@mit.edu

web.mit.edu/cis/
web.mit.edu/cis/acw.html

Is the Foreign Policy Process Working?

John Tirman

MIT Center for International Studies

For decades, political analysts have dissected the mechanisms in the U.S. government and other institutions to describe how foreign policy is made.¹ The matter seems to rise with international crises, and those are upon us again: the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the confrontation with Iran, HIV/AIDS, and the pressures of climate change, among other issues, underscore the point. With the U.S. government split between parties, fractiousness is in full view.

With troubles for the U.S. global position mounting, it is easy to say that the foreign-policy process is not working well. But what are the sources of trouble, and how readily can they be fixed?

This is not the first, doubtful moment for the wheels of the foreign policy mechanism. At the time of the Vietnam War, the criticism from the public was more deafening than today's, and it took Congress until 1971 to explore, via the Fulbright hearings, the course of the war. That same year, Daniel Ellsberg leaked the Pentagon Papers, seeming to verify the malady of a dysfunctional apparatus. Later that decade, hearings conducted by Sen. Frank Church uncovered covert operations, revealing broad illegality. The Iran-*contra* affair, the nuclear-weapons and "star wars" buildup of the late 1970s and 1980s, and other controversial episodes earned broad scrutiny, typically spurred by public or media activism followed by congressional probes.

We have, in short, been down this road before. The question is what can better be done to make the process work more satisfactorily.

The Current Morass

What is unusual today is that the Iraq war became unpopular rather quickly, with little leadership from the Democrats or strong oppositional voices in the news media or civil society. From support above 70 percent in March 2003, for example, by February 2005 the public was evenly split on the decision to invade Iraq, and support has dwindled since.² This has had an impact on accountability: the public's quick disapproval virtually demanded new answers, but Congress, under Republicans until this year, exercised little oversight, and Democrats were unwilling to challenge Bush until the midterm election season in