

In Defense of Striped Pants

Morton Abramowitz & Leslie H. Gelb

FROM THE day after the United States toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein, it has run into one problem after another in Iraq. We failed to establish security. We steadily lost support from Arab Sunnis and Shi'a. We entered the war with limited international support and have even less today. However encouraging the January elections, Iraq is a work in progress, and it is straining our resources, roiling our military and complicating our diplomacy. How long public support will last is uncertain. So who is responsible for our current predicament, and what can we learn from a serious answer to that highly charged question?

Politics requires scapegoats, whether they bear guilt or not. And the media seem less interested in discovering who is responsible than in providing a megaphone for the accusations. But the questions need to be asked. We cannot begin to fix the policymaking process until we see who broke it—and even then, the damage may be beyond repair.

Cheered on by conservative think tanks and journals, the administration has focused on the sins of that easiest of tar-

gets, the career professionals. That requires bloodletting, and it has gushed at the top levels of the CIA. The State Department was expected to be next, but Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice thus far has selected very able foreign service officers for a number of top positions. It is, of course, unclear how she will want to use their advice—or whether she will be able to do so. The Pentagon had already experienced significant bloodletting in the ranks of the career military through Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's highly personal and unorthodox choices for top jobs.

The administration, and even more its vocal outside supporters, assert that Iraq, as well as democracy promotion and other important policies, have not gotten traction because career professionals are incompetent, unable to see the merit of these policies, unwilling to carry them out, or insufficiently aggressive in explaining their wisdom to a skeptical world. They blame the CIA for faulty information, and military leaders for not insisting on more troops. Some conservative critics even blame the State Department and the CIA for the occupation of Iraq, when it could have been avoided, they say, by just installing Ahmed Chalabi and withdrawing U.S. troops quickly thereafter. (Are George Bush, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld such pussy cats for State *and* the CIA?) Many career professionals were

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indeed skeptical of the Iraq enterprise as conceived, publicly explained and carried out. These views were hardened by the persistent internal warfare between the Pentagon and other agencies, where battles were frequently denied publicly while Mr. Rumsfeld was mostly winning them.

Conservative critics also generally believe that the top bureaucratic ranks are essentially inhabited by cautious officials overly wed to international institutions and fearful of wholesale change or the pursuit of a foreign policy mission with big, politically difficult objectives. They also see many career officials as Democrats, disloyal or at least unsympathetic to the Bush Administration, who will often try to undermine policy by leaking secret information that casts doubt on the effectiveness of administration policies. They point to the CIA's allowing the publication before the November election of a book by a relatively senior official that was highly critical of the administration's Iraq and counter-terrorism policies. Indeed, some of the usually quasi-public statements of several CIA officials were surprising in their direct criticism of the Bush Administration, particularly in comments denying Iraq's ties to international terrorism. Unidentified officials in all agencies were also frequently quoted in the press, questioning what the U.S. government was publicly saying about Iraq.

A more detached view that partially supports this perspective comes from the 9/11 Commission (and more recently the CIA's inspector general). The commission found the federal bureaucracy under at least two administrations to have been mostly out of touch with the threat posed to the United States by Islamic jihadism. But the commission did not focus on the road to Iraq, the administration's role, or the interplay between political leaders and career professionals.

The opposite perspective—one shared by many Democrats, editorialists, academics and senior officials—regards

these charges as little more than scapegoating of the bureaucracy by the administration and its supporters—a way to hide its own massive mistakes in Iraq. Vice President Cheney's visits to the CIA notwithstanding, the bureaucrats' defenders charge the administration with failure to seriously consult the bureaucracy, and with pushing aside uniformed officers in the Pentagon who were upset with the planning for war. As a matter of historical fact, this group does have a big truth on its side: The administration did little to encourage any serious internal debate or real consideration of alternate policy approaches.

Some holding this view consider the Iraq War a historic policy mistake based on profound ignorance and the arrogance of administration "ideologues." They also believe that the administration has been mendacious in shaping the limited public debate, and that the mainline agencies are being punished while the principal authors of Iraq policy and their cheerleaders are allowed to remain in office—another expression of the administration's inability to admit the slightest error. And they assert that the Bush foreign policy has been run without diplomacy, almost purposefully, in order to avoid the kind of compromises that presumably might have avoided armed conflict in Iraq.

When the debris of charges and counter-charges is set aside, two broad conclusions remain. First, even had the bureaucratic professionals had their full say on Iraq policy, it is far from clear that President Bush would have changed his basic decision and policy to remove Saddam Hussein from power by force of arms. It seems the odds are that he would have resorted to arms in any event. Second, even with war as a given, a strong case can be made that the president's Iraq policy would have been strengthened had he listened to the career professionals on three critical issues: better mobilizing international support by giving the UN

inspections some additional time; better managing the postwar occupation; and the need for far more troops to establish and maintain security.

It is too soon to measure the ultimate impact of our Iraq effort. But with the war still underway and with other major problems between political masters and career professionals, it is none too soon to re-examine, and hopefully fix, the policy-making process.

TENSION BETWEEN presidential administrations and their foreign affairs, intelligence and career military bureaucracies is hardly a new phenomenon. Since the centralization of national security decision-making in the White House in the 1960s, most presidents and their national security advisors—Democratic and Republican—have been distrustful of the bureaucracies. They have often viewed them as disloyal competitors and as resistant to change. And often, the political masters have excluded them from high-level considerations of critical issues, relegating them to producing unneeded papers or busying them with planning trips and motorcades.

This now built-in tension becomes acute when there is a major foreign policy discontinuity or a radical change in course or style. We saw it in the Reagan Administration and in the first George W. Bush Administration in spades. From the very start of the current administration, internal tensions grew over what was immediately seen as an unnecessarily unilateralist and arrogant White House style. That seemed immediately “proven” when Mr. Bush publicly told South Korean President Kim Dae Jung that his policy toward North Korea was totally wrong (a view and an act held to be destructive by many career officials). Simmering feelings then exploded from many quarters over Iraq. Most professionals adjusted, but some found ways of going to war with the administration and its policy. Very few

left, particularly those in the senior ranks.

But the administration does have legitimate gripes about the capabilities of two key agencies, the State Department and the CIA. (The serious limitations in the Defense Department are of a different character.) The State Department is not now, to put it charitably, at its zenith. Its policymaking capabilities and functions have declined, it has reduced its interest in field reporting, and its implementation of policy sometimes has been taken over by Defense or the CIA. State also has not exhibited much imagination. Nor has it honed its political skills. For example, State put its highly regarded study of postwar Iraq under the aegis of a very capable midlevel foreign service officer whose name was not known far beyond his own office. This valuable study was shunted aside, possibly by the senior officials surrounding Colin Powell in the officer’s own building.

Nevertheless, the State Department remains a great source of talent, information and analytical skills. Its international experience is unrivaled and can be applied on numerous issues. It has a wealth of important and often unique associations, and it is filled with people dedicated to pursuing our national interests. And for all its complaining about political masters, it does try hard to satisfy them. State is almost Zelig-like in its capacity to adjust to political leadership, whatever the personal views of its professionals. Many administrations fail to take advantage of this trait and prefer to talk about the disloyalty of the State Department. But most political appointees to Foggy Bottom will tell you, correctly, that the department responds to anyone who takes the institution seriously. Taking the place seriously will not stop all the leaks—that’s life. But it will reduce them.

The CIA’s reputation, never very high, has significantly declined despite a huge infusion of resources. But its recent roguish behavior is not typical. Indeed, quite

the opposite. When the U.S. government embarks on a major effort, its employees, including the CIA, usually salute. Top officials want very much to please their big bosses, and they usually find ways to match the intelligence to the policy proclivities. And when things go wrong, their political masters inevitably turn against the agency. None of this should obscure the general capability of CIA analysts and their dedication to preserving the integrity of the intelligence process.

The CIA's analytical product faces some serious hurdles. First, its importance is inflated in the public eye, even as its reports go mostly unread by top policymakers. And second, if there are intelligence errors on big issues, it casts a pall over the whole intelligence analysis effort. The agency's failure on Iraq's WMD, and its lack of understanding of the potemkin and dysfunctional nature of the Saddam regime, have had a serious impact on American credibility as well as attitudes toward the agency.

It is not the CIA's analytical directorate but the operations directorate—the field-agent effort and the one so important to dealing with terrorism—that has been getting most of the flak, and the one whose career senior leaders have been summarily fired by Mr. Goss. They have been variously accused of delinquencies ranging from gross incompetence to extreme caution—no “risk-takers there.” That may be one reason the Defense Department is taking over many of the CIA's activities. This part of the CIA has had trying times, from the Church Committee in the 1970s to their involvement in the Iran-Contra affair to their difficulties in the early Clinton years. They have gone up and down in manpower. In the last few years they have been the beneficiaries of a significant infusion of resources, but if the recent firings are any indication, the enhancements have not yet paid off.

It is difficult for the outsider to draw

any conclusion about the effectiveness of the CIA's clandestine efforts. Congressional oversight cannot be given much credence. The agency claims that only its failures become public, that there are many unheralded and unknown achievements, particularly in preventing terrorist incidents. One thing is clear: Greater risk-taking and reorganization of the whole intelligence community does not necessarily produce more intelligence on extremely difficult targets like North Korea. The challenges in acquiring such information are enormous. The Clandestine Service is not likely to be “transformed” by simply changing the organization's wiring diagram and the top people.

THE FIXES to these “problems” within the professional bureaucracy and between it and the political masters have mainly taken three forms. First, there are times when the political masters have grown so exasperated or so eager to place blame elsewhere that they have fired senior career people. On many occasions, these firings are justified, as with some of the recent moves in the upper reaches of the CIA. But it is hard for senior professionals to swallow righteous firings when those whose mistakes are seen as even more egregious, like several high-level Pentagon officials, retain their positions and are praised for performance. While bloodletting is needed at times to get rid of particular problems, it does not solve systemic ones.

A second tried-and-true formula has been to reorganize the bureaucracy, redirect supporting lines, and move boxes for whole agencies from one place to another. Most times these reorganizations are a waste of time and money. Moving bureaucrats does not necessarily change the culture or the performance. And wherever they are moved, Congress is almost always unmoved. Organizational changes that occur within administrations

are often negated by unchanged and parochial congressional relationships—as demonstrated by the utter disregard with which Congress has treated the reforms to its own operations that were recommended by the 9/11 Commission. It is argued that the recent attempts to improve counter-terrorism efforts have proven successful. But a serious evaluation will take several more years.

Third, the final fix resorted to by political masters has been to rail against or ignore the bureaucracy. That is the approach discussed in this article. It has proven very costly to the nation. As we have noted, it is clear in retrospect that U.S. policy in Iraq could have benefited at almost every turn from the advice and information of the professional bureaucracy. From the president on down, political appointees must realize that, yes, bureaucracy is sluggish and out of touch, resistant to change, lacking in imagination, and often wrong, but career professionals can save them from disastrous mistakes. By virtue of having worked seriously on these problems, countries and cultures for years, no one is better than they are at spotting obstacles and landmines. No policy can be successful that fails to anticipate these hurdles. Political masters ignore this expertise at their peril.

EVERY ADMINISTRATION must be zealous in the pursuit of important national security goals. Political appointees, however, must not confuse an absence of candor with loyalty in their career subordinates. Career professionals are being most loyal when they are being candid with their bosses about situations and when they press for a serious examination of policy. They have a sense of American national interests that tries to transcend an individual administration and should be fully and fairly examined before administrations change course.

This will not stop all leaking to the press. But the kind of draconian measures

that would be needed to prevent all significant leaks would be bad for the policy-making process and, it could well be argued, worse for the democratic process. Sometimes the people know what's going on or what the choices are only because of these leaks. Ditto for Congress.

Thus, probably the most effective way to address the bureaucracy's weaknesses and take advantage of its strengths is not bloodletting, or reorganization, or ignoring and condemning the bureaucrats. It is having a sensible attitude at the top, starting with presidents and secretaries. Beneath them, the key to making the system work is to have appointees at the assistant secretary level who are responsive to the policy imperatives of the political leadership and willing to engage and draw on the skills of their career experts. The assistant secretary jobs are where the proverbial rubber meets the road.

At this time, the country has a particular need for preserving candor in the departments and a variety of viewpoints from different agencies, particularly in the intelligence world. The War on Terror has given the U.S. government enormous power to do what it thinks is necessary to protect this country. Today, everything done in the name of that effort seems to be acceptable to, even demanded by, the public. The mechanisms for self-examination or self-correction either do not work or are diminishing. Congress provides little serious oversight. The media, particularly on television, are disadvantaged by the secrecy of subject matter and often by their lack of interest. In this post-9/11 environment, the permanent bureaucracy is the last line of defense in possibly subjecting critical policy considerations to the most informed scrutiny. If the administration does not want to consult them seriously, they must themselves persist in trying to make their views known to their leaders in constructive ways that go beyond anonymous leaks to the *Washington Post*. □

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