November 5, 2005

To: Interested Colleagues

Re: Testing Two Predictions from Political Psychology

Your students might be interested to test predictions, drawn from political psychology research, in two current cases of American foreign and domestic policy:

Optional Wars
    In the 1970s and 1980s I researched two books to test psychological theories of optional wars, decision making, and errors. The second book, Can Governments Learn? American Foreign Policy and Central American Revolutions, was based on three American return engagements with similar decision cycles in the 1950s (Guatemala), 1960 (Cuba), and the Contras (Reagan). It proposed a new theory of American optional wars, and predicted the psychology of the architects, including a prediction of the types of ambitions and fears, misperception, bureaucratic behavior, and ethics to which they are prone.
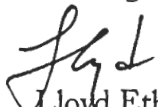   The theory (excerpts enclosed) may apply to the US war in Iraq, especially if the perceptions of Lawrence Wilkerson, Secretary of State Powell's chief of staff, are accurate. (I enclose a copy of a recent article from the Financial Times; there are further interviews and background documents on the pbs.org Website.)
    By contrast with Realist/rational choice or simple misperception theories, this political psychology model of optional wars is closer to the classic Greek theory of *hubris*.[1]

Will the Bush Administration Unravel?
    I enclose an early prediction, based on the work of James D. Barber, using the "passive-positive" example of Warren Harding to forecast George W. Bush's baseline behavior and his vulnerabilities (e.g., to manipulation by trusted appointees). The piece was written in June 2001 (before 9/11). If the Harding analogy is apt, it suggests that Vice President Cheney played a large role in the initiative to extend a war from Afghanistan to Iraq and presenting this case to the President.

Best regards,

Lloyd Etheredge, Policy Sciences Center
(lloyd.etheredge@yale.edu)

---

[1] The study of learning/nonlearning in US foreign policy may become a new field. An independent taskforce of the Council on Foreign Relations, co-chaired by Samuel Berger and Brent Scowcroft, has just published a report on non-learning across six US interventions since 1993. (In the Wake of War: Improving U. S. Post-Conflict Capabilities. NY: Council on Foreign Relations, 2005). I agree with many of their observations, although my explanations are more psychological.

Cheney 'cabal' hijacked foreign policy

>By Edward Alden in Financial Times
>>

Vice-President Dick Cheney and a handful of others hijacked the government's foreign policy apparatus, deciding in secret to carry out policies that had left the US weaker and more isolated in the world, the top aide to former secretary of state Colin Powell claimed yesterday.

In a scathing attack on the record of President George W. Bush, Lawrence Wilkerson, a retired colonel who was chief of staff to Mr Powell until last January, said: "What I saw was a cabal between the vice-president of the United States, Richard Cheney, and the secretary of defence, Donald Rumsfeld, on critical issues that made decisions that the bureaucracy did not know were being made. Now it is paying the consequences of making those decisions in secret but far more telling to me is, America is paying the consequences."

Mr Wilkerson said such secret decision-making was responsible for mistakes such as the long refusal to engage with North Korea or to back European efforts on Iran. It also resulted in bitter battles in the administration among those excluded from the decisions.

"If you're not prepared to stop the feuding elements in the bureaucracy as they carry out your decisions, you are courting disaster. And I would say that we have courted disaster in Iraq, in North Korea, in Iran."

The comments, made at the New America Foundation, a Washington think-tank, were the harshest attack on the administration by a former senior official since criticisms by Richard Clarke, former White House terrorism czar, and Paul O'Neill, former Treasury secretary, early last year.

Mr Wilkerson said his decision to go public had led to a personal falling out with Mr Powell, whom he served for 16 years at the Pentagon and the State Department.

"He's not happy with my speaking out because, and I admire this in him, he is the world's most loyal soldier."

Among his other charges:

* The detainee abuse at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere was "a concrete example" of the decision-making problem, with the president and other top officials in effect giving the green light to soldiers to abuse detainees. "You don't have this kind of pervasive attitude out there unless you've condoned it."

* Condoleezza Rice, the former national security adviser and now secretary of state, was "part of the problem". Instead of ensuring that Mr Bush received the best possible advice, "she would side with the president to build her intimacy with the president".

* The military, particularly the army and marine corps, is overstretched and demoralised. Officers, Mr Wilkerson claimed, "start voting with their feet, as they did in Vietnam . . . and all of a sudden your military begins to unravel".

Mr Wilkerson said former president George H.W. Bush - "one of the finest presidents we have ever had" - understood how to make foreign policy work. In contrast, he said, his son was "not versed in international relations and not too much interested in them either".

"There's a vast difference between the way George H.W. Bush dealt with major challenges, some of the greatest challenges at the end of the 20th century, and effected positive results in my view, and the way we conduct diplomacy today."

>

Let me now proceed, formally, to integrate the argument. Like the shape of iron filings on a sheet of paper which reveals the shape and power of a magnet beneath, the strong imagination system we have surveyed produces the form, and repetition of three vectors of blocked learning: ① characteristic policies; ② characteristic self-blocking behavior within the American executive branch's policy process; and ③ a characteristic syndrome of errors of judgment and perception.

Vector 1: The Form of Policy

The American government since World War II has not been empire-minded to the same degree as many other regimes in history; there are important distinctions and discriminations to be made. Nevertheless, I think we best understand American foreign policy toward leftist revolutionary challenges to governments within its (self-designated) sphere of identification and influence as expressing, in the main, the impulses and motives I have just described.

The principal American policy, in fact, is not intervention but "business as usual" inattention; any lower-status country, without power, which has not yet become a "trouble spot" is taken for granted. The depth of analysis and search in the American decision process is limited, and only when another major power which *genuinely* threatens America is involved (e.g., the Missile Crisis) is there motivation for extensive, consequential thought.

When a leftist revolutionary process begins, a standard American policy sequence (see the discussion of the 1980s in the next chapter, Table 7.2) unfolds, accompanied by agitated debate (with overdramatization) and producing an increasingly activist policy designed to restore a sense of control with respect to this growing, public challenge. Events thousands of miles distant suddenly arouse "hysteria" in American policymakers, overconfidence in their power to manage events, and a feeling of necessity to do so.[69]

I have outlined the core elements of this policy structure in Table 6.2, elements reflecting the presence of this top-down drama: overconfidence, fear, defective ethics, slightly drunken and emotion-charged talk, depersonalized and scornful hostility (regardless of the merits of the revolution), deteriorated humor, and feverish activism.

Table 6.2. Hardball Politics: A Repeated System of American Foreign Policy

Main Characteristic: Inattention to lower status nations between crises.

Reaction engaged via revolutionary challenge from below

I. *Ambition and Overconfidence*
  1. Escalating violence employed to preserve a dramatic role (above) of unchallenged domination and control. "Light at the end of the tunnel" faith, albeit without externally validating evidence and without a rational plan for an end game.

II. *Fear and Suspicion*
  1. "Domino theory" national security threats are overdramatized.

III. *Defective Ethics*
  1. Ideals poorly integrated and abandoned readily. Absence of principled restraint.
  2. Depersonalization leads to "technocratic" rationality. Deaths and injuries to foreigners, especially of low status, enter rational calculations as "nothing to lose."

IV. *Emotionally Organized Thought*
  1. Discussions, especially if public, will appear slightly drunken, that is, confident yet decoupled from reality, use emotion-laden symbols consistent with an imagined role of rightful American dominance, and possess only a modest ability to afford clear analysis of local realities.

V. *"Cold," Scornful Aggression*
  1. Policies are designed to prevent America's "visible" (i.e., dramatically consequential) defeat — or the "visible" success of an illegitimate challenger. Rational, "coercive diplomacy" designed simply to negotiate specific changes or limits in behavior is not used.

VI. *Deteriorated Humor*
  1. Absence of modesty and good humor.

VII. *Hyperactivity*
  1. Activism, particularly increasing to the point of obsession as earlier policies prove ineffective and challenges grow.

Table 6.3. Hardball Politics: Self-Blocking Characteristics of the American Policy Process

I. *Ambition and Overconfidence*
  1. Decided world views.
  2. Too hasty preference for like-minded advisers.
  3. Majority confident of successful use of force.

II. *Fear and Suspicion*
  1. Strong fear of being excluded from access to power leads to inhibition and self-censorship, especially by subordinates.
  2. Fear of expressing "soft" views.
  3. Strong fear of press exposure.

III. *Emotionally Organized Thought*
  1. Tendency, in a top-down system, to ignore subordinates and take them for granted in planning.

IV. *Defective Ethics*
  1. Dissembling and strategic maneuvers within the policy process.
  2. Limited sense of personal responsibility for outcomes.

V. *"Cold" Aggression*
  1. Strong rejection of the "disloyal" (e.g., Bowles).
  2. Scorn of weakness (liberal idealists "lack balls").

VI. *Hyperactivity*
  1. Accompanied by exaggerated sense of the import and importance of one's work.

Vector 2: Behavior Within the Policy Process

If we recognize the national security world to be, as I have suggested, a subculture with a highly charged sensibility of power drama, I believe we can understand more clearly a common cause of the self-blocking behavior reviewed in chapter 4.[70]

Primarily, one finds highly ambitious men, decided in the rightness of their views (to the point of overconfidence) and preferring like-minded advisers. The deepest fear of the highly ambitious is to be excluded from the inner circle at the top, and they dissemble, engage in self-censorship, and mute their emotional force of their communication upwards. Individuals have strong fear of appearing weak or tender-minded in such circles and engage in self censorship of any reservations that might appear to reflect these traits, leading policy discussions to further bias toward the hardball sensibility

Table 6.4. Hardball Politics: Characteristic American Tendencies to Errors of Judgment and Perception

I. *Ambition and Overconfidence*
  1. Substantial overconfidence in success, even without evidence or a rational plan (a mystical "light at the end of the tunnel" faith).
  2. Overconfident faith in mass public support for American-defined purposes in the target country. Overconfident faith in eventual public vindication through success at home.
  3. Substantial underestimation (and scorn for the ability and learning rates of) lower status opponents.

II. *Fear and Suspicion of Opponents**
  1. Strong fear of ambitions of other rival nations (e.g., Castro, Soviets) and of America's domino vulnerabilities, worldwide, if weakness is displayed.
  2. Strong fear of vulnerability to Republicans and other aggressive domestic opponents if there is "failure" through perceived weakness.

III. *Defective Ethics*
  1. Uncritical belief in the coincidence of American policy and moral virtue.
  2. Compassion (and, to an extent, reality) disappears in a "nothing to lose from trying" obsession for success.
  3. Strategic dissembling and press manipulation to out-maneuver genuine democratic accountability.

IV. *Symbolic Involvements*
  1. Use of ambiguous phraseologies and characterizations with modest power to clarify issues and forces in local reality.
  2. Tendency to overdramatize and to capture one's own imagination. In policymaking, this leads to the self-absorbed belief that American viewpoints effectively define reality.
  3. Direct experience of sinister, malevolent forces.

V. *Hyperactivity*
  1. Unrealistic faith that a plethora of activist programs, begun "when the hour is late," will restore control.

*Note that fear is a function of the insecure self, overconfidence a function of the grandiose self. Hence the two will not, a priori, be thoughtfully integrated (as in the months before the Cuban missile crisis when the anxious search for missiles coincided with confidence they would never be introduced).

Vector 3: Characteristic Tendencies to Faulty Perceptions and Judgments

Finally, if we reconsider the pattern of misjudgments and misperceptions I have suggested (chapter 2), these, as well, may be seen to be expressions of the imagination system I described in the previous section: that is, to be assessments made likely as an effect of the underlying presence of a "hardball" dramatic sensibility for thinking about America's position in the world and the nature of power in international relations. I suggest the following proposition: *At each point where the policy process stopped at what was, in retrospect, a misjudgment or misperception, it did so because the stopping point was a node of the hardball dramatic sensibility.*

June 27, 2001

Will the Bush Administration Unravel?
by
Lloyd S. Etheredge[1]

A knowledge of history can draw lessons, forecast behavior in the White House and, perhaps, avoid mistakes of the past. In the 1960s, for example, the political scientist James D. Barber described a type of driven, control-oriented, "active-negative" President who became rigid and self-destructive when publicly challenged. One of Barber's historical examples was President Woodrow Wilson and his failed battle for the League of Nations: shortly after the book appeared Richard Nixon, with a similar character, waged and lost a self-destructive war against his enemies in Watergate.

A contrasting character type, the "active positive" Presidents with fewer personal demons, enjoyed political life. When they fought political battles, they seemed to achieve better outcomes. President Clinton, for example, was an "active-positive": as the historical evidence predicted, he was impeached and survived - a more successful outcome than achieved by Richard Nixon, despite Richard Nixon's well-deserved reputation for hardball political acumen.

For the current Administration there is another forecast: George W. Bush belongs to a different category of Presidents. He likes people and spends a great deal of time being social. He masters briefs, but he does not do much homework. Beyond a few issues that he cares about, he has no drive to dominate the domestic political process, or the Executive branch, or the world. He thinks that people should work together. He wants people to like him. Among Presidents he is positive, but toward the passive end of the scale.

These character traits match President Warren G. Harding. The comparison raises a warning about unexpected trouble.

If history does repeat itself, the country is at serious risk for emerging scandals involving mal-administration, bribery, and conflicts of interest of public officials. And of losing control beyond the water's edge, as the camaraderie of summits and the President's sincere beliefs that people should be decent, respect one another, compromise, and work together, remain unconnected to the hard daily work of shaping the world's political forces.

Today, we see Warren Harding through the lense of scandals. But in the early 1920s he was well-regarded. He won the Presidency with a landslide of 60.3%. He was candid and self-deprecating about his limitations. Like George W. Bush, he reassuringly appointed distinguished people who were more competent than himself to several key Cabinet positions - Andrew Mellon at Treasury, Charles Evans Hughes at State, Herbert Hoover as Secretary of Commerce.

Harding, like George W. Bush, was essentially social. He had a few good ideas, but not many. He wanted people to like him; he had an optimism that appealed to his times; his deepest political philosophy was that people should get along. Once he enunciated these views, he thought that he had a foreign policy - and though he had been (as Senator) a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, few of the specifics of the world beyond the water's edge seemed worth remembering, past this basic point. At home, against the background of World War I, people felt assured by his idea of "return to normalcy" and his Republican slogans like "less government in business and more business in government."

Harding was betrayed by friends ("they're the ones who keep me walking the floors at night," he said, as the cheering began to stop.) Too many of his appointees accepted public office to pursue their own agendas, rather than the President's (who had none.) The new era of peace, prosperity, and economic boosterism of the Roaring 20s contributed to a University.

naive trust – and not simply by the President, but among wheeler-dealer lobbyists who had raised money to put Harding in the White House and who apparently did not believe that they would get into trouble by doing and accepting favors. It was only in the 3rd year of the Administration, before Harding's death in August 1923, that the possibility of serious problems (e.g., the Teapot Dome oil leases, involving Interior Secretary Bernard Fall; and many further problems involving Attorney General Harry Daugherty) became known to the public, and several years later before their full extent came to light.

Under Harding's inattention and misplaced trust the administration of the federal government suffered from neglect. But the President also was a role model. His percentage of the popular vote was the highest in American history until the Presidential election of 1920; in 1923 he was eulogized as "a perfect American." He established a tone for the country in the Harding Era of the early 1920s. If we find, in the first years of the 21st century, that effective and visionary leadership is missing in many American institutions, or that there is an alarming rise in the number of people in hospitals, or auto repair shops, who think that politeness and being a good person is a substitute for high standards and doing their job, we may be seeing, once again, wider effects of Presidential character.

In a comparison of Warren Harding with George W. Bush, there are differences in President Bush's favor. Harding was later revealed as a womanizer who drank heavily with his cronies, even as President during Prohibition. President Bush has overcome his earlier drinking, developed executive abilities, has a stronger moral character, and has used a capable Vice President and White House staff to fill-in for his weaknesses and manage early, important initiatives.

The dangerous choices will be in the months ahead, and there will be sharp questions for the Senate, which must confirm the nominees: Who will come to Washington to fill the many remaining posts in the Administration, and why will they come?