

policy

BRIEF

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Preventive Military Intervention: The Role of Intelligence

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SUMMARY:

The effectiveness of any first-strike military doctrine depends on reliable intelligence. The U.S. intelligence community's inability to produce accurate information on enemy threats renders such a doctrine feckless and reckless. Ironically, vigorous pursuit of preventive warfare promises to degrade U.S. intelligence further, magnifying the dangers of military interventions and increasing the nation's vulnerability to attack. Even if intelligence cannot support preventive war, efforts should still be made to improve the intelligence on which the nation relies. Policy makers can enhance the quality of intelligence assessment and increase the likelihood of sound foreign policy by following several broad principles outlined in this brief. This would be preferable to continuing the radical and counterproductive doctrine of preventive war.

In 2002, President George W. Bush introduced the doctrine of preventive war into the National Security Strategy of the United States for the first time. Preventive war must be based on the firm knowledge of a hostile opponent's capabilities and intentions. Yet the Bush administration has twice demonstrated convincingly that the elaborate intelligence services of the United States cannot be relied upon to deliver definitive and timely knowledge of opponents' capabilities. In the case of Saddam Hussein, U.S. intelligence could not even discern his near-term intentions.

As the United States enters a period of likely intelligence reform, it is tempting to believe that the intelligence community can rise to the challenge of the preventive war doctrine. Such an expectation cannot be fully met, however, because while the doctrine demands nothing short of clairvoyance, intelligence assessments will always be subject to incomplete information and flawed interpretations. These inherent limitations stem from a strong tendency on the part of analysts to emphasize warning over prediction, the susceptibility of analysis to deception by hostile states, as well as the common practice of political leaders to spin the intelligence product.

I would never advise Your Majesty to declare war forthwith, simply because it appeared that our opponent would begin hostilities in the near future. One can never anticipate the ways of divine providence securely enough for that.

—Chancellor Otto von Bismarck
to Kaiser Wilhelm I in 1875

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Each of these factors contributed to the recent failure to assess accurately the threat posed by Iraq to the United States. Analysts consistently featured worst-case scenarios, and did so prominently—giving greater credibility to supporting evidence and dismissing contrary indications. The front-loading of alarming timelines and subtle obfuscations of the uncertainty and fragility on which the projections were made misled intelligence consumers. Saddam Hussein's machinations fed the illusion of imminent danger. A close reading of pre-Iraq War statements by key Bush administration officials also shows a consistent pattern of exaggerating intelligence-community reporting about operational ties between Iraq and al-Qaida and about the prospects for an early nuclear weapons capability by Iraq.

If governments have a tendency to exaggerate present facts, the temptation to exaggerate future dangers is even greater. The rationale for preemptive war extends only from the present to the immediate future; preventive war can be justified by engaging the most imaginative speculations about an eventual future. Since the future has infinite possibilities, one cannot rule out the worst.

A Vicious Cycle

Ironically, while preventive war doctrine heightens the need for reliable intelligence, pursuit of the doctrine tends to degrade the intelligence community's capability to provide it. Under preventive war, the influence of those intelligence organizations that possess military or paramilitary capabilities will be expanded; the influence of those that specialize in nonviolent methods will be reduced. The gap between what intelligence is needed and what is provided will make matters worse, since pressure will increase on agencies to make actionable assessments, even in the absence of sufficient information. There will be a tendency to ignore or suppress efforts by intelligence professionals to hedge their estimates or accurately label the low confidence levels of their judgments. Bottom-line judgments of the intelligence community will be conveyed to the public and tailored for policy advocacy. This will increase the chances that public manifestations of classified intelligence judgments will bear low fidelity to the actual evidence.

In an atmosphere tolerant of preventive war, even more energy will be devoted by the intelligence community to detecting foreign military capabilities than to uncovering political intentions, since the former are more readily available from technical means and the latter are very difficult to discern with high confidence. There will be a greater incentive to focus on short-term intelligence rather than on underlying dynamics and long-term trends. Preventive war implies a resort to immediate, unilateral, and violent solutions rather than multifaceted efforts through multilateral fora to achieve more gradual change in fundamental economic and political trends. The ongoing trade-off between military intelligence most relevant to the "warfighter" and strategic intelligence most relevant to the political leadership will be further tipped in the direction of the former.

History is replete with instances of intelligence services exaggerating threats and concluding erroneously that neighboring states harbored aggressive intent when they were, in fact, only preparing to defend themselves from aggression. Preventive war doctrine will further orient intelligence toward providing early and definitive judgments of malevolent intent. Because the National Security Strategy (NSS) doctrine itself implies a lower tolerance for risk, the intelligence agencies will also accept less risk in their identification of danger. It is likely, therefore, that there will be more occasions when warning-focused intelligence finds threatening situations. The NSS doctrine will stimulate more occasions for putting troops on alert, forward-deploying ships and aircraft, and interdicting suspicious movements of ships and aircraft from hostile states. The preparations consistent with such doctrine will then result in a more provocative posture, which in turn may be interpreted by other parties as evidence of malevolent U.S. intent. A vicious cycle is the likely result.

Until the Bush administration incorporated preventive war into U.S. military doctrine, the primary consequence of exaggerated warnings from intelligence was unnecessary defense spending and missed opportunities to negotiate security arrangements. The cost was in the form of money and aggravated risk of war. We are now entering an era

in which the existing emphasis on warning may lead not only to undertaking unnecessary and expensive defense measures, but also to waging unnecessary and expensive wars against other countries. As a result, friends and allies may be alienated and the proliferation of unconventional weapons to hostile states may be exacerbated. U.S. occupation of Iraq is, of course, the case in point.

The Question of Reform

Reform can improve but not perfect the intelligence process. Since governments prefer false alarms to missed alarms, there will continue to be a bias toward warning over prediction. And the larger the intelligence gaps, the greater will be the tendency to assume the worst. For those states labeled as “rogues” by our political leadership, sinister motives will be assumed and it will be judged prudent not to regard the lack of solid evidence as exculpatory.

The quality of intelligence required for preventive war cannot be reliably attained. But this realization should not preclude efforts to improve the intelligence on which the nation continues to rely. Indeed, the better the intelligence, the more likely we will be to avoid attack and to minimize damage from any attacks that do occur. More successful intelligence along with more intelligent foreign policy would make the radical and counterproductive doctrine of preventive war even less attractive.

The traumatic circumstances leading to the 9/11 Commission Report and the unanimous, bipartisan nature of the report’s recommendations have increased prospects for significant statutory changes being made in the structure of the U.S. intelligence community. It would be wise also to incorporate lessons from the other significant U.S. intelligence failure of the new century—regarding Saddam Hussein’s Iraq—in any reform effort. The Senate Select Intelligence Committee Report has already provided an unusually comprehensive insiders’ perspective on the performance of the intelligence community in assessing Iraq’s unconventional weapons programs and alleged Iraq-al-Qaida connections. The Silberman-Robb Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction is due to report in early 2005 on the issue of proliferation intelligence. These results should be even more relevant to reforming the intelligence community’s assessment function. Although definitive and detailed recommendations are certainly premature, several broad principles of reform to enhance the quality of intelligence assessment can be safely asserted:

- *The positions of the Central Intelligence Agency chief and director of Central Intelligence must be separated.* While currently performed by the same individual, there is a conflict in interest between the two jobs. In practice, the job of coordinating all 15 intelligence agencies and representing their collective judgment to the president has been subordinated to the institutional or personal interests of the head of the CIA.
- *The organization responsible for producing intelligence community assessments, currently the National Intelligence Council, should be truly independent.* It should be headed by someone who is not responsible for running individual intelligence agencies or defending any particular policies, but is instead free of pressure from political, operational, and resource concerns.
- *The sources of human intelligence must be more rigorously evaluated. More information on the sources should be made available to those with the proper clearances.* If trustworthy reliability labeling cannot be achieved under the existing structure, as appeared to be the case with so much of the human intelligence relating to Iraqi biological and chemical weapons, then an evaluative mechanism needs to be established outside of the CIA’s Directorate of Operations.
- *The analytical integrity of individual intelligence community agencies must be maintained.* Each of the separate agencies and entities of the U.S. intelligence community has a unique institutional mission and perspective. Some are structured to collect

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information. Others perform all-source analysis, but are oriented to the specialized needs of a particular customer. Interagency discussions of complicated issues serve as a form of peer review when hypotheses are suggested to explain evidence. While consensus is sought when the intelligence community produces an estimate, conclusions dissenting from the majority view are permitted, if not always encouraged. The failure to take published dissents seriously on Iraqi WMD has had serious consequences. A more centralized and tightly controlled intelligence directorate might never have allowed the dissenting views to surface in the first place.

- *Congressional oversight needs to be revamped. Under the current arrangement, there appears to be little scrutiny of how the intelligence community sanitizes classified information for public consumption, or how it resolves dissenting opinions.* This situation encouraged the CIA's leadership to present information on Iraq to the public (and to members of Congress not on the intelligence committees), in a manner that distorted detailed analyses in highly classified documents and marginalized the views of the government's leading experts.

While improving U.S. intelligence collection and analysis is desirable and possible, the intelligence services cannot be expected to deliver the quality of information needed in preventive war. To initiate war without such certain knowledge of intentions and capabilities is a prescription for ignominy—and an invitation to join the multitudinous ranks of aggressors throughout history. If even Bismarck, as chancellor of the German Empire in the 19th century, could forswear preventive war because of the inherent limits of strategic intelligence, it is not asking too much for the president of the world's most powerful democracy in the 21st century to do the same.



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