

The Analysis of Intelligence

By

William R. Polk

The Guardian newspaper published a dispatch from its correspondent in Washington on October 9 (substantially confirmed yesterday in *The New York Times*) that evoked chilling memories of two disasters. The first, during the Second World War, was the British attack against the German army at Arnhem. Probably everyone will have seen the account in the film *A Bridge Too Far*. The second, not glorified or mourned by the cinema, was the abortive American-sponsored attack on Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. What linked these two memories of a now-distant past with Washington today?

In the Arnhem operation, the British paratroop commander was warned by his chief intelligence officer that the German army was strong in that area and that the paratroopers would be slaughtered. When the general was briefing the king of Holland on the operation he used the unfortunate phrase, “we will lay down a carpet to Arnhem...” In what was too loud a whisper, the young intelligence officer mumbled, “...of bodies.” He was told to shut up. The operation would go ahead. It had all been decided. What we now know are two crucial things: first, the reason it had all been decided was politics – General Montgomery was determined that American troops not “steal the show” in Europe. The second was more subtle and fundamental. It was that to get a correct assessment of a situation is usually the key to success. If the assessment is compromised by desire, fear or stupidity, disaster is likely to follow. At Arnhem it did.

It also did in the Bay of Pigs. What happened is now well known. During the Eisenhower administration, the Central Intelligence Agency was instructed to prepare an invasion of Cuba. The main military force was to be made up of Cuban exiles then living in Florida. The CIA was to train, arm and organize them in bases in Central America. The operation had to be secret: it was illegal and it would have no chance of success if Fidel Castro was given advance notice.¹ Secrecy determined the shape of the operation. The then director of Central Intelligence, Alan Dulles, decided to “cut out” the part of his agency charged with evaluating “raw” information and making cool judgments of capacity, the Office of National Estimates. That decision proved fatal.

Dulles’s decision almost guaranteed a repeat of the Arnhem tragedy. Why was this true?

It was true because, like horses, when men “get the bit in their teeth,” they become so confident of what they are doing that they are wont to lose their sense of balance and capacity. The British generals at Arnhem and the CIA officers training for

¹ Preparations were far advanced when the newly-elected President Kennedy was briefed on it by the outgoing President Eisenhower. Kennedy found himself in a dilemma: if he stopped the operation, he would be accused of being “soft on Communism.” He sought advice. All those around him except for the former Governor of Connecticut and then Under Secretary of State Chester Bowles said, “go ahead.” He waffled, saying, “go ahead but without us.”

the Bay of Pigs were dead certain that they could do the job. They were brave men and true. They dismissed fears and built up hopes: German panzers could not be nearby Arnhem and the Cuban people would rise against Castro the minute their brothers-in-arms hit the beach at the Bay of Pigs. Contrary views were wimpish, defeatist, unpatriotic. Or, as from hindsight we would say, reality was inconvenient and not, they convinced themselves, very important.

Why are these bits of history important now?

They are important precisely because the Bush administration appears intent on repeating history. What the dispatches in *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* warn us is that, in their determination to invade Iraq, the senior officials of the Defense Department and the White House are silencing or “cutting out” all the officials of the American government whose job it is (and whose experience and training enables them) to evaluate reports, facts, opportunities and dangers. The reporter for *The Guardian* found that “Officials in the CIA, FBI and Energy Department are being put under intense pressure to produce reports which back the administration’s line...some are complying, some are resisting and some are choosing to remain silent.”

The reporter then quoted the CIA’s former head of counter-intelligence, Vincent Cannistraro, as saying “Basically, cooked information is working its way into high-level pronouncements and there’s a lot of unhappiness about it in intelligence, especially among analysts at the CIA.”

So let us look briefly at the three issues involved in the formulation of an intelligent line of action: the first is the gathering of information; the second is evaluating that information; and the third is constructing a policy. These are quite different functions. Confusing them often result in failure and occasionally in calamity. Look first at collection of information.

The collection of information can never be perfect, but in the last half century it has become amazingly proficient. The old techniques of eavesdropping or reading the other fellow’s mail are still used but have been sharpened by technology and greatly expanded in scope. I remember in the 1960s learning that the National Security Agency (NASA) boasted 16 acres of computers – I had never thought of computers numbered by acres! – to break codes and discriminate among telephone calls. Every single telephone call in the Soviet Union and many other countries was intercepted and evaluated. Added to this was, of course, aerial and subsequently satellite photography, telemetry and other forms of interception. President Eisenhower is said to have been convinced of its precision when he was shown a picture taken from 11 miles up in the air of his golf ball on a green near Washington. Much progress has been made since so that, today, the problem is not getting information but not getting overwhelmed by it. Again the computer helps. It enables vast masses of raw information to be winnowed for the bits that are regarded as important. I understand that NASA now has computer power that dwarfs the 16 acres that so astonished me in 1962 when I was “cleared” for its “product.”

How can sense be made of the vast amount of information pouring into the government? That is a quite different task from gathering it. Indeed, the two tasks sometimes appear to be in conflict: those who gather information naturally tend to get involved both emotionally and intellectually and are in danger of missing the woods in their attempt to find the trees. To counter this tendency, intelligence organizations create separate compartments where dispassionate but well-informed officers can evaluate what is reported and attempt to put it into coherent “appreciations.” In effect, they are charged both with seeing the “wood” and cutting out the underbrush. In the CIA this Office of National Estimates was established by Professor William Langer of Harvard and later headed by Professor Sherman Kent of Yale.² Kent’s book *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy*³ became the bible for this field. In it, Kent made the critical point that evaluation of information had to be kept separate from, indeed protected from, those collecting information and those formulating policy. It was to be the crucial fulcrum on which the other two functions balanced.

Formulating policy, that is making decisions, is something we all do every day. We know it can be done in two ways, on the spur of the moment or prudently. Security analysts are somewhat more careful than most of us. They insist upon getting the most information they can before investing and then do so on the basis of their experience and knowledge. Governments ratchet up the stakes and sophistication a notch further. They usually make policy on the basis of the best evaluation possible of the most information obtainable. Sometimes, of course, they do not. When the British invaded Suez in 1956, Prime Minister Anthony Eden was acting emotionally and heedlessly; Britain paid a heavy price for what most of his advisers thought was wrong-headed.

We all can make mistakes, even with the best information we can obtain. But there is a third possibility and that is the one signaled by the stories in *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*: the information can be made to fit the policy. Consider first the Bay of Pigs.

The CIA officers who were working with the Cuban exiles wanted to believe that Castro was so unpopular that at the first opportunity the people of Cuba would rise up and overthrow him. If that were true, then even a token force, that is the one they were creating, would do the trick. So great efforts were made to convince Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy that this was true. To their credit, both presidents were skeptical and certainly neither attempted to manufacture evidence to support for that view.

Today, it appears that the wise policy of Eisenhower and Kennedy is not being followed. The most publicly discussed aspect of the policy that the Bush administration has announced is that we must attack Iraq since Saddam Husain has or will shortly get nuclear weapons with which he will threaten us. Great efforts are being made to substantiate this belief with “hard” intelligence.

² Langer was one of the board that evaluated my Ph.D. thesis at Harvard in 1958 and Kent I got to know while I was a member of the Policy Planning Council in the early 1960s.

³ Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949, 1966.

The latest such bit of intelligence information is that Iraq has been attempting to import hardened aluminum tubes “for gas centrifuges, which are used to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons.” It is a line of argument also put forth by British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Is it credible? Or, if credible, is it compelling? As *The Guardian* article points out, “US government experts on nuclear weapons and centrifuges” doubt that these devices are to be used for a nuclear program. In any case, they are apparently not yet in Iraq. David Albright, a physicist and former UN weapons inspector pointed out that the experts of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory dismiss such scare stories on nuclear weapons. While American atomic energy experts dismiss them, they lament that “the administration can say what it wants and we are expected to remain silent.”

But, take the worst case. Suppose Saddam Husain actually got the aluminum tubes and all the huge amount of other gear and materials required to build a nuclear bomb without our finding out about it and stopping him, what then: first, his people would have to put the pieces together. Doing that would be readily detectable since you cannot build a nuclear bomb in a garage; it would require a major production facility as we know from what it took us, the Russians, the Chinese, the Indians, the Pakistanis, the Israelis and the French to build bombs.

Second, the prototype bomb would have to be tested. One of the main reasons that Germany could not build a bomb during the Second World War, as McGeorge Bundy pointed out in his *Danger and Survival*, was that building and testing took vast open spaces. Israel was able to build its bombs because it had the help of South Africa and could use the South Indian Ocean. Iraq has no such place. But suppose it somehow managed to do so, what next?

Third, it would have to build another device and then “weaponize” it. That is, it would have to turn what would initially be a rather crude and cumbersome piece of equipment into something that could be moved and would work.

Each of these stages would require absolute secrecy, vast space, imported equipment and components, large numbers of people and great expertise. More important, they would require time. No one I have spoken to believes that Iraq could possibly accomplish such a task for years or, if thwarted along the many steps of the way, in the foreseeable future. Yet, we are told and, apparently, the Bush administration told the experts to affirm, that an attack against us could occur any day.

Turn now to the next charge that Iraq is closely involved with terrorism, a.k.a. Islamic fundamentalism.

As nearly as I can find in the public media and in talks with former senior officials, there is no evidence pointing in that direction. What we do know points in the opposite direction: Iraq is a secular state ruled by a regime that has been at war with a theocratic state and has opposed all forms of militant Islam throughout its career.

Moreover, Islamic militants have been strongly opposed to it. Not only did Iran fight a long and costly war in the attempt to “change the regime” in Iraq but even Usama bin Ladin offered (during the build-up to the first Gulf War) to create an international brigade to attack Saddam’s “Godless regime.” Like most dictatorships, including the old Soviet Union, Saddam’s regime is uncomfortable with those it does not control. Cooperation with terrorists would be unattractive.

Unattractive, that is, if it has other options. It would be instructive to read a U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) addressing the circumstances in which Iraq *would* cooperate with terrorists. My hunch is that the answer is simple: it would be tempted to do so if it believed that it was under a death threat and that doing so might deter an attack on it.

Difficult to believe? Remember that for half a century we worked on the assessment that only if we made a Soviet attack on us unbearably painful and costly would they not do it. They reciprocated. They did not judge us by the smile on our faces. They presumed that we did not attack them because attack would be ruinous to us. This was what we called deterrence.

The Soviet Union was then the “Evil Empire” and now Iraq is part of the “Axis of Evil.” The arguments that were then compelling to the Russians and us might be compelling to them. And, if we really move ahead to attack Iraq and obviously intend to kill (or to get others to kill) Saddam Husain, what does he have to lose? “Regime change” is a euphemism for his death warrant.

To go on with my hunch, I think that even then Saddam Husain, who is a canny survivor, would not entrust his chance of survival to a bunch of Islamic fundamentalist terrorists. Rather, I think, he would seek to use such means as he can more nearly control. What are they?

First, chemical and biological weapons. Iraq probably has quantities of them. Most countries do. We have them, Israel has them, Russia has them, and so on. They are cheap and simple to produce. And, of course, they are horrible. I remember being briefed on ours at Fort Meade in 1962. I was sick for a week just seeing pictures and listening to the army colonel who described them to me. But, in the cold world of strategy, horribleness is their primary virtue. A second virtue is that they can be moved around easily and secretly. Of course, they can be sent by missile or airplane, but they can also be loaded into containers on cargo ships or pre-positioned in warehouses. We would have to think Saddam Husain is a complete fool (or is totally unaware of our own writings on the strategy of deterrence) if he has not thought of these possibilities. Assuming that he has, in response to an attack he would do what we would have done had the Soviet Union attacked us, or vice-versa, pulled all the stops in an attempt to destroy the enemy. For Saddam, of course, the enemy is us.

Since he does not have missiles of any considerable range, we must assume, I think, that Saddam, listening for months to President Bush’s calls for his assassination and for the overthrow of his regime, has done what he can to provide himself with a

trump card. I am not alone in thinking that we must expect that if we begin to actually invade Iraq, he will announce that already positioned abroad are chemical and biological weapons in sufficient quantities to kill millions of people and that if we do not immediately withdraw he will use them.

Then what do we do? Even dropping a nuclear bomb on Baghdad would not offer us any protection. Of course, he might be bluffing, but who in his right mind would choose to call that bluff?

Second, right out of medieval Iraqi history comes the second possible line of defense, urban resistance. When the great Mongol general Hulagu Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan, attacked Baghdad in 1258, his soldiers quickly breached Baghdad's walls as we would presumably breach or overfly the country's outer defenses today. But in 1258 the people fought on, desperately, block by block, house by house, room by room. Hulagu had to kill virtually the entire population and utterly destroy the city before he could declare "victory."

Would the people of Baghdad fight today as they fought then? Of course we do not know. We do know, however, two things that may be significant: first, in times of terrible fear and despair, people often do. The people of Leningrad should certainly have given up when German armies encircled the city and 900,000 of them starved or froze; it was irrational for Churchill to continue the fight after Dunkirk when Britain had no army left; in island after island the Japanese fought almost to the last man. What people do in war is always unpredictable.

The second thing that we know is that nationalism is still the strongest impulse to human action. Even those Iraqis who hate Saddam Husain might fight for Iraq against a foreign invader. Those advocating war argue that they will not. But history, and even very recent history, is full of examples where nationalism has caused people to take up arms even in what, rationally, are either or both unattractive or doomed causes. We should not be surprised if the Iraqis do. If they do not, they and we will be lucky; if they do, we will be placed in the same position as Hulagu Khan's Mongol warriors. The casualties could well be appalling. We will then win a victory like that described by the Roman historian Tacitus when he wrote, "they create a desolation and call it peace."

While the intentions of people are far harder to evaluate than the equipment they have, they are subject to the process of reason. It is simplistic to jump to the conclusion that because someone has a weapon he will necessarily use it. If that were true, given the number of guns in America, there would be few of us alive today. It is usually the circumstance that is key. What the Office of National Estimates does, or at least used to do, when I read its work, was to put together a coherent picture in which capacity and intent were both evaluated. Without going into great detail, we can see what are the main issues they would have to evaluate. I believe they are first, capacity:

Iraq is a small country, about the size of Texas, with a population of c. 23 or so million people. Roughly a third of the country and a quarter of the people are now, de

facto, a separate state and not under the control of the Iraqi regime. Iraq was badly wounded in the Gulf War. Its army was mauled and has not been effectively rearmed; the equipment it has is now antiquated. Much of the infrastructure was destroyed. The population has been gravely weakened by malnutrition and sickness. Revenues have been severely limited because of the Boycott. It is surrounded by enemies of which most are more powerful than it. Iran would probably welcome an excuse to invade and take over the southern third, which is populated by an essentially Persian-oriented society and is very rich in petroleum; Turkey would welcome a chance to take over the northern, Kurdish, area both because it could then more effectively control its own Kurdish minority and because that area too is very rich in petroleum. And, most significant, Israel has made no secret of its desire to control Iraq; it has the strongest army in the Middle East and at least 400 nuclear bombs. Any move Saddam Husain could make would lead to massive and decisive retaliation. However evil he is, Saddam shows no signs of being suicidal. Left to himself, he will continue to be a ruthless, ugly dictator (a charter member of a club that has many members), but if he decides that we are on the point of actually moving to kill him, he will strike back in any way he possibly can.

I believe that if the Bush administration allowed the Office of National Estimates to make a detailed evaluation, it would point out, politely of course, that it is ludicrous to think of such a small, poor, weak and surrounded country, no matter who is running it or how terrible he is, as a serious threat to America. Unless, that is, we push ahead on the lines laid down by the President, namely the intent to kill him. Then, I believe the National Intelligence Estimate would warn that we can anticipate he will try to come up with as nasty a surprise as he can possibly manage. Why not? We certainly would have in similar circumstances.

Alas, it appears that the kind of sober view the Office of National Estimates might have given will not be called for: the policy has been set and disagreement is not welcome. Arnhem and the Bay of Pigs all over again. History, indeed, can be forced to repeat itself.

© William R. Polk, October 11, 2002

William R. Polk was a Member of the Policy Planning Council of the U.S. Department of State from 1961 to 1965. He then became Professor of History at the University of Chicago, Founding-Director of its Center for Middle Eastern Studies and President of the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs. He is the author of a number of books on international affairs (*Neighbors and Strangers*), the Middle East (*The United States and the Arab World*, *The Elusive Peace*, *The Arab World Today*, *Backdrop to Tragedy*, etc.) and American history (*Polk's Folly* and *The Birth of America*) as well as many articles. He has lectured at the Council on Foreign Relations, the Royal Institute of International Affairs and the Soviet Academy of Sciences and scores of universities, colleges and research institutes.