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The misuses of intelligence

Last week, we had a couple of object lessons in how to use -- or misuse -- foreign intelligence.

The first emerges from reports by U.S. military authorities in Iraq that weapons have been used there against American forces which seem very likely to have come from Iran. To many of us, these reports seem unremarkable. There is every reason to believe the mullah regime in Iran wishes us ill, and the border between Iraq and Iran, much of it highly mountainous, is surely porous. Yet from many critics of the administration emanate cries that these reports are not to be given credence -- but are just a ploy to justify military action against Iran.

To be sure, it appears our military has been ordered to take action against Iranian agents in Iraq and have done so. One wonders why such orders weren't given long ago. And there is certainly a case to be made -- I would make it myself -- against a land war in Iran. But why should the reports be treated with suspicion?

The mullah regime has made war against the United States since 1979. It committed an act of war against us by imprisoning our diplomats for 444 days. It sponsored Hezbollah, whose suicide bomber killed 241 Marines in Lebanon in 1983. It was behind the attack on the U.S. barracks in Khobar Towers in 1996. It calls the United States the Great Satan, and its current president has called for eradicating the United States and Israel. The New York Times laments that America is "bullying" Iran. Actually, the mullah regime has been bullying the United States for 28 years.

So why the suspicion? The answer seems to be that because intelligence erred in its judgment that Saddam Hussein's regime had weapons of mass destruction it could be erring here, too: All intelligence that could be used to justify military action is inherently dubious.

But the conclusion of our intelligence community -- and that of every other nation with serious intelligence capacity -- that Saddam had WMD was eminently justifiable. Saddam had possessed and used WMD in the past; he had resisted and evaded WMD inspections; and, as we have learned from Charles Duelfer, he retained the capacity to produce WMD in the future.

We found in 1991 that his nuclear program was further along than our intelligence agencies thought. No responsible American leader could have given Saddam the presumption of innocence and assumed he had no WMD until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. George W. Bush didn't. Neither did Bill Clinton.

The critics seem to assume we can somehow obtain 100 percent accurate intelligence. But that is not possible in the real world. Intelligence tries to get information regimes make great effort to conceal -- evil regimes, in the case of Saddam and the mullahs. Our leaders must make decisions based on incomplete and highly imperfect information. That information can remain imperfect for a long time. We still don't know what Saddam did with the WMD he once had and never accounted for.

The second object lesson was the Defense Department inspector general's report accusing former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith of "inappropriate" behavior in presenting a briefing critical of intelligence community consensus. The IG conceded that Mr. Feith's briefing was legal and authorized by his superiors, and did not criticize them for authorizing it. But it was somehow "inappropriate" for Mr. Feith to question the conclusion that there was no significant cooperation between Saddam's regime and al Qaeda.

What Mr. Feith did was to point to the intelligence community's own evidence of such cooperation and to question the assumption of analysts that there could be no cooperation between Sunnis and Shi'ites. As we now know, such cooperation is very common. If your job is to protect the United States, you cannot assume it can't happen. Britain and France paid a high price for assuming Adolf Hitler's Germany and Josef Stalin's Soviet Union would never cooperate.

Again we encounter the idea that intelligence agencies' conclusions should be regarded as Holy Writ, not to be questioned or analyzed critically by high government officials -- that an intelligence product can be 100 percent accurate, and that every intelligence community conclusion must be treated as if it is.

The Bush critics' position is that we must believe without reservation or criticism any intelligence that can be used to argue against military action and that we should never believe any intelligence, however plausible, that can be used to argue for it. That's not very intelligent.

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