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Reporting for Spin

Carl Levin's latest report ignores the facts on the ground to this day.

By Benjamin Zycher

The Committee believes that [Intelligence Community] analysts should expect difficult and repeated questions regarding threat information. ...The Committee found that this process — the policymakers probing questions — actually improved the [CIA's] products. ...While analysts cannot dismiss a threat because at first glance it seems unreasonable or it cannot be corroborated by other credible reporting, policymakers have the ultimate responsibility for making decisions on this same fragmentary, inconclusive reporting.

Thus spake the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence — unanimously — in July 2004 in its report on the U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq.

That was then; the politics of the Iraq blame game are now. And so at the behest of Senator Carl Levin, a highly visible member of the committee that issued the statement above, the Defense Department Inspector General now has issued a third (!) report on the efforts of the DoD policy office (headed by Douglas J. Feith) to interpret and critique CIA intelligence on possible links between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda.

The IG found, for the third time, that the activities of the policy office were legal and authorized, and that the officials in that office did not mislead Congress. So what's the problem? Well, the IG asserted also that it was "inappropriate" for the policy office to disseminate "alternative intelligence assessments inconsistent" with the "consensus of the intelligence community" (that is, the CIA).

Put aside the fact that interpretations and critiques of CIA analyses by the policy office are not "alternative intelligence assessments" as those terms are understood broadly in Washington, in that no one views the policy office as an intelligence agency. Consider instead the breathtaking circularity of the IG argument: It is "inappropriate" for policymakers to criticize the "consensus" of the intelligence community (again, the CIA) because such criticism is inconsistent with the consensus of the intelligence community!

Well, now. Let us review a small sample of past consensus thinking at the CIA. There was the Eisenhower-Kennedy "missile gap" that proved illusory. There were the legions of Cuban patriots who were predicted to rise up against Castro at the outset of the Bay of Pigs invasion; they did not, and the invasion disintegrated into a fiasco. The fall of the shah of Iran came as an utter surprise; and

just who is that guy Ruhollah Khomeini, anyway? There was the Vitaly Yurchenko episode, in which the KGB colonel “defected” to the CIA in Rome, delivered baskets of disinformation swallowed whole by the CIA consensus, and then redefected to Moscow by climbing out of a restaurant restroom window in Washington. The CIA consensus offered no warning whatever of the Iraqi invasion of Iran. There were the preposterous CIA estimates of Soviet-bloc GDP, which at one point had east German living standards higher than those of west Germany; perhaps the CIA reached its consensus without having had occasion to look at a photo of the Berlin Wall. The CIA failed to predict the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The consensus offered no inkling of the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam. The advanced state of Saddam’s nuclear program came as a shock. And there were Saddam’s stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction, the existence of which was a “slam dunk.”

Despite this record, it now is the official position of the DoD IG that it is inappropriate for policy officials — the secretary of Defense, the secretary of State, the assistant to the president for national security — to question the consensus of the intelligence community. Is it inappropriate as well for the president himself to do so? By the way, the critical focus of Feith’s policy office was the CIA stance that secular Baathists and al Qaeda Islamic extremists never would cooperate, an assumption utterly disproved by the fact that we now are fighting a combined Baathist-al Qaeda enemy in Iraq. Was it inappropriate for the policy office to be right? On the contrary: Praise is in order.

What’s going on here? It is obvious that some senators simply will not be deterred from finding any grounds, however flimsy, to argue that their votes in favor of the overthrow of Saddam Hussein were influenced by manipulation of intelligence, notwithstanding the fact that the central justification for the war was not cooperation between Saddam and al Qaeda, but was instead the issue of WMDs and the failure of Saddam to adhere to various U.N. Security Council inspection requirements.

Forget death and taxes. The real certainty of life is the daily Beltway descent into ever-deeper depths of absurdity, the latest manifestation of which is Senator Levin’s characterization of the IG report as a “devastating condemnation” of intelligence manipulation “by high ranking officials” of DoD. Oh please. Levin is blatantly manipulating the words of the IG report so as to accuse others of manipulation. He should be ashamed of himself.

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