

Heads in the Sand

By Jim Lobe | May 29, 2007

Two major studies by the U.S. intelligence community—distributed to senior officials in every relevant agency two months before the U.S. invasion of Iraq—warned of many of the problems that have turned the occupation there into the worst foreign policy crisis since at least the Vietnam War.

The studies, both by the National Intelligence Council (NIC), redacted versions of which were released last week by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, warned that a U.S. invasion and subsequent occupation would likely benefit al-Qaida and boost political Islam throughout the region. The NIC also predicted that “domestic groups [in Iraq] would engage in violent conflict with each other unless an occupying force prevented them from doing so.”

In addition, the NIC anticipated the emergence of an insurgency consisting of ex-Baathists who “could forge an alliance with existing terrorist organizations or act independently to wage guerrilla warfare against the new government or Coalition forces.”

“Sadly, the administration’s refusal to heed these dire warnings—and worse, to plan for them—has led to tragic consequences for which our nation is paying a terrible price,” said the committee’s chairman, Sen. Jay Rockefeller (D-WV), as he released the two studies, which were incorporated into a 226-page report.

The report, which will likely bolster charges by Democrats and other critics that top officials in the George W. Bush administration were so determined to go to war with Iraq that they deliberately ignored or distorted the best assessments of the government’s intelligence professionals, was adopted by the committee on a 10-5 vote earlier in May. The majority included two of the committee’s seven Republican members.

The two studies—one on post-war challenges in Iraq, the other on regional consequences of regime change there—were undertaken at the initiative of the State Department’s Office of Policy Planning, then headed by one of former Secretary of State Colin Powell’s top aides, Richard Haass, who resigned several months after the March 2003 invasion to become president of the influential Council on Foreign Relations.

The State Department, like the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), was seen at the time by neoconservatives and other hawks who dominated the Pentagon and Vice

President Dick Cheney’s office as a stronghold of so-called realists who were skeptical about the wisdom of going to war in Iraq.

Former senior officials at both State and the CIA subsequently complained that their assessments and advice were largely ignored in the run-up to the war, due to the dominant influence on the White House of both Cheney and then-Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld, whose optimistic predictions about post-war Iraq and its impact on the region contrasted sharply, as the two new documents make clear, with the intelligence community’s classified analyses.

In fact, the two studies, which were sent to top officials in Cheney and Rumsfeld’s offices, according to a distribution list that was included in the report, were predicated on relatively optimistic assumptions—namely, that a post-invasion Iraq would retain its territorial integrity and that a U.S.-backed government would be established with a gradual devolution to full Iraqi self-governance within five years, accompanied by a U.S. withdrawal over the same period.

The study on post-war challenges inside Iraq cast serious doubt on the hawks’ insistence that a democratic government could quickly take root in Iraq, particularly under the leadership of the exiled opposition.

“The building of an Iraqi democracy,” it said, “would be a long, difficult, and probably turbulent process, with potential backsliding into Iraq’s tradition of authoritarianism.” It warned that external opposition lacked “the popular, political, or military capabilities to play a leading role after Saddam’s departure without significant and prolonged external economic, political, and military support.”

Moreover, if a “strong and central authority” were not established after Saddam’s ouster, “many Iraqis would begin looking toward more traditional regional, tribal, or religious authorities for support and guidance,” according to the study. It suggested that Iraq’s regular army, “once purged of the security and intelligence officers embedded

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within it could be used for security and law enforcement until police or a local gendarme force is established.”

In one of the most controversial acts of the U.S. occupation, the Iraqi army was officially dissolved shortly after the invasion on orders of the Pentagon.

The same study also stressed that post-war Iraq would lead not only to sectarian violence and score-settling, but regime change could also permit “political Islam” to “take root in post-war Iraq, particularly if economic recovery were slow and foreign troops remained in the country for a long period.”

Even more threatening, al-Qaida “probably would try to exploit any post-war transition in Iraq by replicating the tactics it has used in Afghanistan during the past year to mount hit-and-run operations against U.S. personnel.”

“If Baghdad were unable to exert control over the Iraqi countryside, al-Qaida or other terrorist groups could operate from remote areas,” it predicted, noting as well that sectarian conflict within Iraq would also encourage “terrorist groups to take advantage of a volatile security environment to launch terrorist attacks.”

At the regional level, al-Qaida and similar groups could also benefit. Al-Qaida, for example, “would try to take advantage of U.S. attention on post-war Iraq to reestablish its presence in Afghanistan,” while “a U.S.-led war against and occupation of Iraq would boost political Islam and increase popular sympathy for some terrorist objectives, at least in the short term,” resulting in an increase in funding for terrorist groups “as a result of Muslim outrage over U.S. action.”

“Increased popular Islamist sentiment would bolster both extremist groups and, in some countries, Islamic political parties that seek to gain power peacefully,” the study noted, anticipating subsequent major electoral advances

by Islamist parties in Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt, and the Palestinian Territories.

The study also cast doubt on hawks’ claims that a convincing U.S. victory in Iraq would persuade other regional states to abandon their weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs. On the contrary, a U.S. invasion would prompt some states “to accelerate programs already in train with the hope of developing deterrent capabilities before the programs could be destroyed preemptively.”

While some elements in the Iranian government could try to aggressively counter the U.S. presence in Iraq by using Kurdish and Shiite leaders to sow dissent, according to the report, “The more that Iranian leaders—reformists and hardliners alike—perceived that Washington’s aims in Iraq did not challenge Tehran’s interests or threaten Iran directly, the better the chance they would cooperate in the post-war period—or at least not actively undermine U.S. goals.”

At the same time, “The longer U.S. forces remain in Iraq, Tehran would become increasingly convinced that the United States was bent on encircling Iran and that Iran could become a target of U.S. military operations.”

Syria, the study concluded, would likely maintain its cooperation with Washington against al-Qaida but also enhance its cooperation with Iran to “influence events in Iraq and maintain pressure on Israel from Lebanon as a reminder to Washington that it retained options if Syria perceived no movement on its regional objectives, especially the return of the Golan.”

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