TYRANNY OF CONSENSUS

Discourse and Dissent in American National Security Policy

JANNE E. NOLAN

Tyranny of Consensus

Discourse and Dissent in
American National Security Policy

Janne E. Nolan

Cover design by Abigail Grimshaw

Foreword

National security policymaking is a complex and difficult process. The president must make decisions based on the output of an immense bureaucracy that includes the National Security Council, the Department of State, the Department of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Central Intelligence Agency, as well as other federal agencies, offices, advisers, and officials. This network reaches into virtually every corner of the globe, and the amount of information it generates is staggering. And yet, despite this wealth of knowledge, it seems that sometimes our leadership is completely surprised by world events, even in regions where we have made large investments in terms diplomacy, intelligence, financial aid, and military involvement.

If making security policy is challenging, so too is performing the post mortem when it fails. Each significant breach in national security is followed by some form of investigation, in which those involved are asked what they knew, and when they knew it. The increasingly partisan nature of Congress, however, has rendered its inquiries ineffective in finding the true nature of the problem. In this environment, then, it is fortunate that Janne E. Nolan undertook this study of our national security policy-making process. The working group that she assembled for this project—consisting of senior practitioners and policy experts drawn from the Executive Branch, Congress, think tanks, and other institutions— provided her with careful and candid observations about how national security policy is made, and, unfortunately, how seldom it is revised. This book is the distillation of those discussions, containing thoughtful

suggestions on how the process can be improved, particularly how it responds to changes on the ground.

The Century Foundation has conducted many studies into the challenges of creating post–Cold War national security policy. Most recently, in 2011, we published *Afghanistan: Negotiating Peace,* a report by The Century Foundation International Task Force on Afghanistan in Its Regional and Multilateral Dimensions, led by Ambassadors Lakhdar Brahimi and Thomas R. Pickering, co-chairs. In 2004, we published *Defeating the Jihadists: A Blueprint for Action,* the report of team of experts led by Richard A. Clarke. In 2007, we published *Breaking the Nuclear Impasse: New Prospects for Security against Weapons Threats*, edited by Jeffrey Laurenti and Carl Robichaud, and in 2003 we published *Ultimate Security: Combating Weapons of Mass Destruction,* edited by Janne E. Nolan, Bernard I. Finel, and Brian D. Finlay and co-sponsored by Georgetown University.*

We have looked not only at the formulation of policy, but also at the impact of some of those policies on the domestic front. In 2002, we published Stephen J. Schulhofer's *The Enemy Within: Intelligence Gathering, Law Enforcement, and Civil Liberties in the Wake of September 11,* and in 2003, we released a volume of essays edited by Richard C. Leone and Greg Anrig, *The War on Our Freedoms: Civil Liberties in an Age of Terrorism,* underscoring the ways in which the governmental response to terrorist attacks appeared to be encroaching upon civil liberties without enhancing the nation's security.

The task of constructing and maintaining effective national security policy in a changing world is an ongoing challenge, requiring constant input and improvement. On behalf of the Trustees of The Century Foundation, I thank Janne E. Nolan for this contribution to our understanding.

—Janice Nittoli, *President*
The Century Foundation
June 2013

Contents

Acknowledgments

The analysis contained in this study is based on the extensive use of original and primary source material, including a series of guided discussions and interviews conducted with senior practitioners and policy experts who participated in the discussions and analyzed each of the case studies, as well as recently declassified intelligence and policy documents that were made available in summary form to many who were interviewed. A bipartisan and multidisciplinary working group consisting of senior experts and practitioners drawn from the Executive Branch, the Congress, think-tanks, and other scholarly institutions met over the course of nine sessions between 2004 and 2008 as part of a working group established by this author at Georgetown University. (A list of members is provided in the Appendix.) Much of the intelligence analysis, in particular, is derived from the extensive contributions made by Douglas McEachin, a brilliant intelligence veteran who worked tirelessly to secure and analyze declassified documents. Kristine Tockman, at the time a doctoral candidate in political science at Georgetown University, also provided invaluable analytic support throughout the project. It is fortunate and rare that many senior policy-makers and intelligence officials shared their experiences about these issues for this book. Their candor allowed for an exploration of sensitive fault lines of American governance that is not often possible in mainstream policy discourse. The discussions were conducted on a not-for-attribution basis but recorded and transcribed. Every effort was made to encourage fair and open inquiry while discouraging any partisan or other overt biases.

The meetings were convened under the auspices of the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy at Georgetown University and made possible by the generous support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The support and trust of successive officers at the MacArthur Foundation (including Kennette Benedict, Lukas Haynes, and Gary Samore) made it possible to pursue an inquiry that was uncharted and potentially controversial. As dean of the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, Robert Gallucci supported this work and offered the original idea for advancing this research, originally by suggesting that I teach a class at Georgetown about the dynamics of professional discourse and informed dissent in the formulation of national security decision-making. This graduate seminar provided a forum for generations of students who aspired to policy careers to grapple with the dilemmas of loyalty, patriotism, and the importance of a willingness to "speak truth to power" in public service. The students examined cases of individuals who had tried to change the course of American policy by offering important information and reasoned professional judgments that took issue with prevailing assumptions, emphasizing lessons about the complexity of decision-making and the special pressures and obligations that come with the privilege of service in government. Sir Thomas Moore (as depicted in *A Man for All Seasons*) still serves as the archetype of the self-sacrificing and loyal public servant who resists the seductions of power and ultimately surrenders to execution for trying to warn his king of the catastrophes that befall a society whose rulers allow expedience to compromise the rule of law.

I am indebted to several generous mentors who helped to guide this work over many years, especially Richard Leone and John Steinbruner, as well as Mort Abramowitz, Robert Steck, General Jasper Welch, and Casimir Yost. I am also very grateful to the dozens of talented students who contributed research and insights for the course about ethics and national security that I taught at Georgetown for many years (and the students who participated in the class when I taught it again a few years later at the University of Pittsburgh.) Many of these students now have successful careers in national security and stay in touch.

I interviewed dozens of people for this book. Some of them are listed as members of the study group but others preferred to remain entirely anonymous. I am grateful to all of these smart and distinguished individuals for taking the time to think through these difficult dilemmas with me and for sharing insights from their own professional experiences.

I had the rare opportunity to discuss some of the questions posed in this book at great length with the late Robert McNamara. This exchange, which went on for some years, began when he unexpectedly appeared in my office at the Brookings Institution to ask me to read a rough draft of his memoirs. McNamara was struggling at the time to translate his personal conflicts about his role in the Vietnam War into constructive lessons for future leaders. The memoirs he eventually published, *In Retrospect,* were the result. This book is controversial, particularly for veterans and families who lost relatives in this tragic and costly conflict. His legacy aside, he performed a rare public service by offering a detailed post mortem about a significant policy failure written by one of its principal architects. His account is invaluable for anyone interested in the inner workings and intricate political dynamics of American strategy and democracy.

Finally, I owe enormous and sincere thanks to the staff and officers of The Century Foundation, first for giving me the support to conduct this research a decade ago and then for their immense indulgence of the many interruptions that impeded its completion. Reflecting a remarkable sensitivity to the struggles of authors, the president of The Century Foundation, Richard Leone, stood by this project and offered me only encouragement, as did its vice president, Greg Anrig. Senior Fellow Jeff Laurenti read and thoughtfully commented on successive drafts. Ambassador Morton Abramowitz read and critiqued a final version and spent some hours with me discussing and critiquing its content. Cynthia Maertz issued routine dire warnings to me about my contractual obligations, somehow always buoying my spirits. The talented Jason Renker, who has rendered countless manuscripts into publishable form, kindly agreed to edit this one. Brian Finlay, once my assistant at TCF before going on to loftier endeavors, has always taken an interest in this work and encouraged me to finish. The kindness that the people at the Foundation have extended to me, including its new president, Janice Nittoli, is not the sort of thing one has any right to expect, nor certainly ever to take for granted. My only hope is that this book, despite its flaws, is worthy of them.

Introduction

A phenomenon noticeable throughout history regardless of place or period is the pursuit by governments of policies contrary to their own interests. Mankind, it seems, makes a poorer performance of government than of almost any other human activity. In this sphere, wisdom, which may be defined as the exercise of judgment acting on experience, common sense and available information, is less operative and more frustrated than it should be. Why do holders of high office so often act contrary to the way reason points and enlightened self-interest suggest?

—BARBARA TUCHMAN, *The March of Folly*

It is not obvious why the most highly advanced industrial country, commanding unparalleled access to vast sources of global intelligence and information, seems to so often miscalculate the realities and risks of its foreign interventions. The premises guiding American strategic planning all too frequently prove to be at odds with the actual nature of the challenges involved—the so-called facts on the ground. From the failure of U.S. efforts to defeat Vietnamese communist insurgents in Vietnam in the 1970s, to the expulsion of Americans from Iran after the toppling of the Pahlavi regime in 1979, to the unanticipated difficulties of establishing order in Iraq after declaring victory in 2003, and even so recent as the uprisings in the Arab world in 2010, the instances in which the United States failed to accurately identify the character of the threats it faced or clung to a flawed strategy despite mounting evidence of failure are far too

numerous to ascribe to a single administration, political party, or group of influential advisers.

Why does the United States repeatedly find itself bewildered by the complexities of countries and regions where it chooses to get involved? Put differently, why does American strategy time and again rely on an inadequate or inaccurate understanding of the nature of regional and global challenges, leaving leaders unprepared to understand, manage, or certainly prevent adverse developments when these arise—even in places where the United States previously had extensive diplomatic and military involvement? In light of current difficulties the United States faces in extricating from its recent interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in dealing (or not dealing) with the tumultuous and complicated events of the Arab Spring, one has to ask what can possibly account for so little apparent evolution.

The foreign policy field is crowded with brilliant books, documentaries, official commission reports, and observations from pundits about the failure of the United States to understand the nature of its adversaries. Yet most of this collective wisdom fails to provide a fully compelling reason for why this has remained an Achilles heel for American leadership for decades and persists today.

This book examines a dimension of the recurring pattern of misperception that is not widely discussed or understood, tracing the difficulties the United States faces in adapting to international realities to domestic factors, including the embedded assumptions, values, and institutional priorities that make up the American strategic consensus and which, all too often, seem to circumscribe the ability of American policy-makers to fully take account of and understand important developments around the world. The analysis examines the dynamics of policy formulation from the time a consensus strategy is determined based on established priorities, to instances when a previous consensus risks becoming so entrenched that it seems impervious to new information about the shifting threat environment. This is especially the case if the information does not comport with previously established expectations. The cases show the need for a delicate balance that must be struck in American decision-making between the ability to reach and maintain an actionable consensus and the ability to scrutinize and adapt policies in response to changing circumstances, including when this requires reexamination of core assumptions that leaders (and publics) may favor. When an impulse to protect a popular domestic consensus severely disrupts this balance, the kind of

discourse and information that policy-makers need to make informed decisions can get interrupted, making it very difficult for the disjunction between existing policy priorities and emerging facts on the ground to be reasonably debated or understood. Without access to informed discourse or a functioning "marketplace of ideas," policy-makers can find themselves unable or unwilling to seriously consider possible correctives even to obviously flawed strategies.

The instances in which leaders seem to favor adherence to a strategy whose utility has long been outstripped by events—or which was never based on a realistic assessment of challenges from the outset—are too frequent and have too many similarities to attribute to random complexity or the inherent inscrutability of potential adversaries. The cases presented in this book analyze how strategies that elicit the "buy-in" of senior officials sometimes collide with a need to acknowledge and understand new realities and adapt responses accordingly. However compelling the need for policy departures may seem not just in retrospect but in real time, the reluctance to "embrace the unknown," as one official described it, reflects a special requirement in American democracy to calibrate the demands for domestic consensus with considerations of international challenges—an inherent tension in the formulation of foreign policy in a democracy that has persisted over decades.

This book examines factors that can contribute to a failure to adapt to new threats by examining several cases of so-called "strategic surprise." On closer examination, the cases show that reliable information was available that could have helped policy-makers better understand emerging threats but that too often it was dismissed or ignored because it did not comport with commonly accepted assumptions. Although consensus is essential for setting national priorities, not all forms of consensus prove to be healthy or benign. In the cases examined here, important information coming in from otherwise credible professionals was excluded from the mainstream of policy discourse, in part because it was inconsistent with a prevailing mindset and perceived as unduly challenging to the current course.

The cases show that when intelligence warnings about security threats raise new and unfamiliar factors and imply a need for significant realignment of difficult policy decisions, the information—and the individuals presenting it—run a risk of being ignored and perhaps marginalized. In such instances, the flow of information can cease to function as a corrective to dislodge outmoded assumptions, leaving policies in place that

may be inadequate and bound to fail. Taken to its extreme, adherence to a course of action against all evidence of an impending disaster conjures an image of what historian Barbara Tuchman called "a march of folly." These moments are impossible to understand without parsing the internal circumstances—the pressures and perceived incentives on professionals and decision-makers—that would allow leaders to so misjudge events.

The analysis presented here strongly suggests that the United States would be better served by a national security culture that encourages more open professional discourse and a wider diversity of expertise to help with policy formulation. This recommendation should not be misconstrued as implying that dissenting from prevailing policy views is inherently a good idea, nor that discussions about policy can be allowed to flounder in a sea of indecision. Formal and informal boundaries on official discourse are very necessary and should be powerful. A system needs to be established that allows for critical dissent from the majority opinion while providing a path towards reconciling it. The ability to reach consensus is the linch-pin of cohesive and effective governance in American democracy whose divided powers make this particularly challenging.

Much as maintaining clear and actionable consensus is essential, so is ensuring that the actions taken (and not taken) support the mission of ensuring American national security with the most effective instruments based on the most current and accurate intelligence. It is understood that policy and professional discourse, the gathering and dissemination of intelligence, and routine reporting by public servants (who are trained as observers and stationed all over the world) up the chain of command function to enhance the ability of top decision-makers to incorporate new information efficiently and respond to changing circumstance as best they can. Beyond this obvious observation, however, there is still scarce understanding of the tensions that can arise between protecting an exist-ing domestic consensus and the need for the kind of discourse about unfolding events that can help ensure that policies stay on target.

This study investigates three distinct cases of American decision-mak-ing that led to strategic setbacks for American interests, explaining how certain systemic factors in domestic decision-making contributed to blind spots among policy-makers and posed negative results for American secu-rity. Each case tells a story of significant misfortune for the United States when Washington appears to have been taken off guard by game-chang-ing events overseas. The accepted version of events is then tested against a counter-narrative that reconstructs the intelligence picture available

to policy-makers at the time. Notwithstanding available and sometimes very good intelligence (which varies across cases), the warning that this information might have provided gets obscured in favor of an entrenched course of policy supported by a previous domestic consensus. Signs of impending and significant changes in conditions on the ground either never make it to the level of top policy-makers with the power to reorient priorities or they get sent back into the bureaucracy to be adjudicated at lower levels, typically with little to no discernible effect except to silence the discussion. When professionals working in the field chose to push back, insisting that the current course could not redress new challenges or prove adequate to a shifting threat environment, they typically did so at some peril—risking their professional credibility and, in some cases, their careers—even when later proven correct.

It is implicit in this analysis that the endorsement of a need for more open and informed professional discourse also is aimed at the current epidemic of disloyalty in Washington manifested in the practice of leaks. Only a fraction of those who leak sensitive information are inspired by good faith objectives, of course, and even in those instances the leak still constitutes an illegal act. There seem to be increasing numbers of public servants who are resorting to this instrument, certainly enough to be concerned. If even the most loyal insiders are tempted to break protocol, violate security, and sacrifice their careers by taking their objections public, there is clearly something wrong.

The willingness of public servants to resign over matters of principle, similarly, which may seem like a purely noble impulse, can also be a warning sign of serious dysfunction. Keeping a proverbial "letter in your pocket" that expresses the willingness to resign over matters of significant principle may help discourage a culture of excessive conformity or acquiescence to ill-informed policy choices; but when a dedicated and duly authorized professional feels a need to resign because his or her voice cannot legitimately be heard, it can represent a loss to all concerned—a point of systemic as well as personal failure. Their resignation does not merely indicate that a different option was chosen, it implies that they were not heard, that their voice was not considered important enough to be legitimately considered.

When this study began almost a decade ago, it was not expected that many of the issues explored here would become topics of media headlines or move to center stage of controversial debates about lapses of American intelligence or the failures of military intervention to advance enduring

interests. The September 11 terrorist attacks and the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq brought into stark relief the dangers of a Washington policy consensus that was demonstrably out of touch with the actual facts on the ground in several vital respects. Countless official and unofficial postmortems about these two events continue to emerge, raising important questions about how policy-makers can or should influence the priorities, content, and dissemination of vital information needed to inform sound policy decisions, including intelligence assessments. Many of these inquiries have helped to illuminate some of the complex tensions that can arise when information, particularly intelligence findings, casts doubts on a course of action favored by political leaders.

Notwithstanding these efforts, questions remain about how and why the United States was so unprepared for the ascendance of global al-Qaeda terrorist operations prior to September 11 or how intelligence findings disseminated early on during the George W. Bush administration could so dramatically misread the nature of the military threat from Iraq and the potential for Iraqi resistance to American intervention. It is just as puzzling that the plans and rationales for American intervention in Afghanistan since 2001 seem to have so consistently underestimated or misunderstood the challenges the United States would face. The decision in 2011 to begin withdrawing American troops despite persistent internal and regional instabilities represents another example of strategic setback that arose in part from a failure to understand facts on the ground. This study does not take up these current cases or answer these questions directly; rather, the historical cases raise similar concerns, provide many of the antecedents to current dilemmas, and point to a set of systemic factors in American policy-making that may help explain why glaring disconnects between domestic perceptions and international realities endure today.

Dozens of accounts by insiders, experts, and journalists published in recent years have pointed to a pervasive inclination of the George W. Bush administration to dismiss evidence and silence skeptics if they failed to support foreign policy priorities favored by top officials. The Bush administration dramatized what can happen to decision-making when the White House works to actively discredit experts who disagree with its views, or when slogans like "you're either with us or against us" influence what is considered acceptable professional discourse. When taken to the extreme, this subversive understanding led to an explicit shunning of hard data and professional opinion. Prior to the extensive revelations about certain Bush

officials' tendency to penalize its skeptics, it was much harder to explain what a "tyranny of consensus" was about, especially to those who had no direct experience with Washington. Following reports of an American vice president paying visits to Langley to criticize mid-level intelligence analysts for findings that failed to support his convictions, or about the determined pressures of senior officials that led to the inclusion of unsubstantiated intelligence in the president's 2003 State of the Union address, the complex issues examined here became somewhat easier to explain.

That said, the popular view that policy-makers ignored professional advice and dismissed intelligence findings only under the George W. Bush administration is both mistaken and highly misleading. Such impulses to conform to the desired result are deeply embedded in American governance and transcend successive presidencies and other differences among administrations. The instances in which the United States failed to heed its own professionals and accurately define the character of the threats it faced, or when it has adhered to a strategy long after it had proven less than successful, are far too numerous to ascribe to a single administration, political party, or group of influential advisers. It seems clear enough that the Obama administration differs markedly from its predecessor in its choice of decision-making style, but informed opinion suggests this may only be to a small extent. As Leslie Gelb, one of the most experienced and astute analysts of American foreign policy and governance, summarized it:

> "The Obama system doesn't close off debate, and participants aren't complaining about not being able to speak their piece. But I find it hard to believe—based on my own experience at such meetings—that the people at the table don't feel more constrained than usual by the direct involvement and control of Obama. While his words certainly invite disagreement and dissent, his command manner may discourage it. . . . And of course (Vice-President) Joe Biden is not to be forgotten in this mix. . . . He could well be the most knowledgeable participant on the most issues who attends these meetings. . . . He's probably the closest at the table to being a dissenter, and his colleagues admire him and his openness."[1]

While one can certainly hope for success and systemic evolution of policy-making under future administrations, the prospects remain in question or, at least, wide open for further study—especially as the dramatic forces of change currently underway in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan,

to say nothing of Iran, Egypt, and the rest of the Arab world, continue to unfold. Indeed, with the seemingly sporadic (if not entirely about-face) changes of the Arab Spring, the need for an effective and accurate process remains a prominent issue in the short-run as well as in the future. The realities of the modern landscape increasingly demand decisions not just made efficiently, but also chosen from the widest and best pool of options possible—not just those that seem to arbitrarily fit the consensus.

The three cases examined here represent a diverse range of what are commonly understood as failures—moments of stunning reversal for which policy-makers were ill prepared. Considered chronologically, the cases include the sudden demise of a valued ally in a country critical to U.S. vital interests (the overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979); the disintegration of Afghanistan into a violent, failed state in the aftermath of the decision of the United States to withdraw all engagement after extensive involvement in supporting a successful anti-Soviet insurgency (Afghanistan in 1991); and sophisticated terrorist operations launched by a transnational terrorist movement in a region not widely believed to be vulnerable to such threats (the al-Qaeda bombings of American embassies in East Africa in 1998).

In contrast to those who would argue that it was not possible to have known that the Phalavi regime was failing, that withdrawing from Afghanistan after a policy to covertly arm the *mujahideen* even after Soviet withdrawal while paying scant attention to efforts for peace and reconstruction risked contributing to conditions ripe for a nascent anti-Western jihadist movement, or that an international terrorist network could successfully threaten vital national security interests, including by mounting operations in East Africa, this study suggests that information was available that could have raised leaders' awareness of these risks, but it was overlooked, albeit to different degrees across the individual cases. In all three of the cases, taking action based on the intelligence and information available at the time would have required policy-makers to seriously amend or discard core assumptions embedded in the prevailing mindset—not something that they proved willing or able to do.

The Cold War-Era Consensus

There are three aspects of the dynamics of consensus that are observable across the case studies and that continually re-emerge as underlying themes. First is the basic observation that inherent tensions in a

democracy with a system of divided powers make consensus difficult to achieve and necessary to protect. Second is the persistence of blind spots that seem to be particularly associated with the American version of the doctrine of *realpolitik,* the dominant Cold-War era worldview through which U.S. national interests came to be defined and prioritized. The assumptions that long guided U.S. national security strategy posit an international system comprised of sovereign states whose power and significance is measured primarily according to relative military capabilities and the ability to project force. While helpful in simplifying and clarifying Cold War priorities, this framework has long relegated the consideration of internal political and socioeconomic dynamics of states and regions as largely irrelevant in the calculus of security interests. The need to learn about or understand domestic developments inside countries tends to be eclipsed by the exigencies of great power calculations. This remained true even after U.S. leaders realized that such a practice could leave the United States open to surprise when internal instabilities erupted into internationally significant events; and which, if examined more closely, might perhaps have been averted or certainly managed better. The third theme is the bureaucratic culture of Washington, which seems to incentivize personal ambition and cautious conformity over a culture of leadership and personal accountability, often undercutting the effectiveness of public servants to fulfill missions in ways that can protect long-term interests.

The structure of American governance makes it uniquely difficult to achieve a macro-level consensus about any kind of complex issues, not least in sensitive and protected areas of policy like national security. Once consensus is achieved for a particular strategy, altering its content or direction in response to new circumstances can prove even more daunting. Long-standing and systemic tensions in American democracy exist between the need for open discourse and the requirements of a disciplined decision process, both of which are essential to govern effectively. Garnering support for sustained international commitments, to approve budgets at the level needed to fund those commitments, or to mobilize sentiment in favor of committing American lives to support foreign interventions imposes high demands on leaders to frame issues in ways that the American public—and powerful elites—find compelling. For those who serve in government, in turn, particularly in areas associated with the country's security, the ability and willingness to adhere to and defend missions is part of an explicit contract and remains paramount. This leads to a sort of circular effect between the public and its leaders. The

public needs to trust its leaders to make the best decisions, even if they do not seem to be that way to the public, but the public lacks this trust because they have been lied to in the past from these very leaders. Logically, this circle can only be broken through the repeated long-term success of both policy and action.

Anomalies only arise when the imperative to defend an established mindset persists despite evidence of clear and compelling reasons to change directions because a particular strategy risks becoming ineffectual or even counterproductive. As one analyst summarized this dilemma:

> The United States' political system, designed and painfully evolved to prevent tyranny, has grave difficulty formulating coherent policy that is responsive to common interest. Coordination of a deliberately divided and protectively restrained government depends on a degree of consensus that is difficult to achieve and even more difficult to change once it has been achieved. Provisions for protecting (certain) minority rights, moreover, make government policy highly susceptible to the self-serving influence of interests that are economically privileged and intensely invested in a particular cause. Those features pose a question as to whether the American political system is capable of adapting to rapid and radical changes of circumstance that do require highly organized defense of common interest in terms that are different from established habits.[2]

One result of these inherent tensions is that mindsets about the way the world is organized and about where and how the United States must defend its "vital interests" have tended to linger well after the underlying rationales and guiding assumptions proved inaccurate and inappropriate for redressing contemporary challenges. This is a systemic challenge in U.S. policymaking for which there are no easy remedies. It is nonetheless important to acknowledge that such a challenge exists and to try to understand how it may contribute to unintended and costly consequences.

The dominant mindset evident during the three decades the cases cover reflects the exigencies of Cold War-style *realpolitik*. Manifested at the broadest level in the policies of containment and deterrence, *realpolitik* helped to determine American policy priorities in a world in which the overarching threat was strategic confrontation with a belligerent and expansionist rival superpower. The consideration of internal developments and domestic conditions in other states had relevance to security only in so far as these could be perceived as affecting states' ability to

upset the larger international equilibrium through the accretion of military force. Americans refer to the Cold War system as "bipolar," a period in which the world was perceived as divided into pro- and anti-Western states and that many perceive with some nostalgia as somehow simpler and easier to manage compared to twenty-first-century security challenges.

The assumptions of *realpolitik* proved invaluable in helping to articulate American security imperatives, creating a clear hierarchy of interests and instruments required to pursue them. At the same time, a preoccupation with the global military balance discouraged attention to other potential indicators of instability, including those arising from incipient political and societal discontent in other countries. Predictions of political and economic events that could compel senior officials' urgent attention proved difficult to articulate unless framed and understood to be part of an incipient and calculable military threat. As the cases demonstrate, senior policy-makers tend to treat reports about signs of domestic instability as little more than surveys or regionally specific analyses that lacked sufficient precision or urgency to serve as a call to action.

From the perspective of *realpolitik*, the idea that military capabilities are virtually synonymous with power is common sense. Deterring the Soviet Union provided the raison d'état for U.S. foreign policy throughout the Cold War while the threat of radical nationalism trumped all other forms of potential instability, including far more "obscure" forces like populist religious fervor. The need to contain the potential for state-based military aggression occluded the recognition of threats that could arise out of internal political or societal transformations, including when non-state, genuinely transnational terror movements epitomized by al-Qaeda began to join together actively to conspire against the West. Despite ample evidence about the violent anti-American objectives sought by Osama Bin Laden and his followers going back to the early 1990s, this threat was not taken seriously until after terrorists launched a devastating attack against U.S. territory—notwithstanding the clear warning offered by successive attacks on American assets, culminating in the simultaneous bombings of two American embassies by these same operatives just a few years earlier.

The idea that the United States could safely ignore developments occurring in large parts of the world to focus on more urgent military missions has not generally been challenged over many decades. In other words, this pattern of waiting until matters come to a head before addressing them has effectively become the status quo. Until quite

recently, the Defense Intelligence Agency organized the international system into three categories: the Soviet Union, United States/NATO, and the "rest of the world" (or ROW, for short). Other agencies such as the State Department obviously have a far more nuanced view of the international order, but the chronic underfunding of diplomatic missions relative to military targets—from intelligence allocations for diplomacy to support for diplomatic engagement to advance American security interests—has long impinged on the ability of the State Department to play an effective role. The idea that an increasing number of international challenges are not amenable to solution through coercion or military force still lacks both widespread acknowledgement and understanding in current American strategy.

As a classified memorandum sent by senior State Department officials to National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski in 1979 noted:

> Over the last few years, there has been a steady decline in the number of political reporting officers in the Foreign Service, the number of analysts in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, and funds available for local travel by political officers and analysts abroad. At the same time, the requirements we have placed on our missions for non-political reporting and analysis tasks have risen steadily.

The memo goes on to urge review of the "self-imposed constraints" on U.S. professionals overseas to "avoid jeopardizing relations with governments in power by meeting with individuals or groups opposing those governments."[3] The memo agues for a change in this long standing practice in light of "(the) absence of reliable information on the views, attitudes, and policies of major political segments of the population of key countries can under some circumstances pose major problems for U.S. policy analysis and intelligence evaluation."[4]

Though left unstated, this memo is clearly about developments on the ground in pre-revolutionary Iran, but it captures challenges that are still highly problematic for the United States in the second decade of the twenty-first century. The many far-reaching effects of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, followed by the attacks on September 11, shattered much of the Cold War consensus and elevated the importance of "new" security dangers on a global scale—whether arising from the collapse of central governments, ethnic and religious conflict, or transnational phenomena such as terrorism, refugees, or illicit trafficking. A stupefying succession of internal conflicts from Bosnia to Afghanistan required

a whole new kind of statecraft as the United States was drawn into quasi-military interventions in which the ability to wield superior force can prove an at best unreliable instrument for redressing chaotic challenges on the ground. Two decades after the end of the Cold War, the United States still appears caught off guard and unprepared to cope with "unforeseen" developments around the world, even in countries where it has had long-standing and vital interests, such as Egypt.

The debates in the United States following the popular uprisings in Tahrir Square and the "Arab Spring" share many similarities with the bewilderment expressed about events in Iran in the late 1970s and Afghanistan in 1990s. The United States still seems to lack the habits and instruments to track and understand—let alone to try to influence—events leading to internal political upheaval; or to know how to engage and with whom after repressive and failed governments get toppled by angry populations. The quick and tumultuous transitions between governments, coupled with their tenuous relationships with their populations, highlight ever so clearly the sheer inadequacy of U.S. policy and response in dealing with this area of the world. The policies and institutions that accorded priority to military containment for so long did not adequately consider the implications of leaving American officials focused only on the interests of ruling regimes. It is against this backdrop that many of the systemic challenges considered in the case studies come into stark relief.

Objectives and Methodology

In light of the many urgent security challenges for the United States as it enters the second decade of the twenty-first century, an important objective of this study is to try to identify ways American officials might learn from the experiences of its predecessors. The analysis focuses on three ways in which improvements to the policy process should be considered:

1. Promoting a more reliable "marketplace of ideas" in official discourse to ensure that policy-makers can take advantage of the best possible intelligence and information from all appropriate sources in order to make optimal policy choices.
2. Identifying structural changes, procedural reforms, or new incentives that can help maximize the type and quality of information and expertise flowing into the decision-making process.

3. Exploring mechanisms that can encourage routine reexamination of policy frameworks and mindsets at all levels of the government, especially as international conditions evolve and the definition of both threats and opportunities undergo rapid and chronic change in the twenty-first century.

The case studies include (1) an examination of U.S. policy toward Iran prior to the fall of the Shah in 1979; (2) an examination of how American policy-makers inadvertently contributed to the rise of the *mujaheddin* after the withdrawal of Soviet occupation forces from Afghanistan in 1989, followed by a decision to sever relations with Afghanistan altogether in 1991; and (3) an examination of the way in which the United States perceived and tried to manage the threat of transnational, anti-Western Islamic terrorists who masterminded attacks on U.S. embassies in East Africa in 1998.[5] Each case examines the dynamics among national security and intelligence agencies, the president and his key advisers, the Congress, the media, and various interest groups and experts who evaluate information about international events and help to define the boundaries of American national security priorities and policy choices.

The criteria used for selecting the cases for this study included (1) the significance of the setbacks to American objectives and interests that were defined as key priorities at the time when a preferred strategy proved ineffectual in addressing shifting regional or international conditions; (2) the significance of the failure of the strategy for American goals when the chosen course proved inadequate or mismatched for the challenges it was designed to address; (3) evidence of the availability of information and intelligence that might have provided warning about new threats had it been considered seriously and objectively; (4) the presence of discernible, practical alternatives to existing policies which, if implemented, might have avoided or at least mitigated an impending crisis; (5) indicators of systemic issues in the decision-making process allowing for faulty or outmoded policies to persist beyond a point when the outlook for the current course was questionable; and (6) the relevance of the lessons of the case to current security challenges.[6]

Each case contains the following analysis:

- the nature of the security dilemmas for which the United States was not prepared,
- the events leading up to the crisis,

- the kind of intelligence that was available to or requested by policy-makers as the events leading to the crisis unfolded,
- the character and content of the prevailing consensus and preferred strategy of the time, and
- the kind of policy and intelligence discourse that could have helped policy-makers to devise to prepare against or avoid being surprised.

The preparation of each of the case studies began with a detailed assessment of the role of intelligence and the intelligence community in informing policy choices. The key issues considered include how well the intelligence community detected and identified developments that *could* have a major impact on U.S. security interests, how this information was interpreted by analysts, how it was communicated to decision-makers, and the character of the debate which ensued. The experts who contributed to these assessments reviewed declassified intelligence and policy documents. The analysis was then augmented and corroborated by testimony of participants from several administrations who had firsthand knowledge of intelligence operations and policy-making in each case.[7]

Addressing the question of whether or not a particular case represents a failure of policy deliberations (despite the presence of intelligence and official expertise that could have informed alternative policies), the study provides a review of the intelligence that was available at the time—including to a best approximation to whom it was distributed and at what junctures of the evolving debate. A summary of the prevailing mindset that informed the perspectives of senior officials follows, informed by the testimony of key individuals who participated in the decision-making. This analysis includes the underlying assumptions and beliefs that constituted the prevailing strategic consensus, as well how this consensus worked to set the boundaries of acceptable policy discourse. The key question is whether and to what degree this particular mindset among senior officials inhibited the ability of decision-makers to assimilate and consider critical information about changing international conditions that perhaps could have allowed for needed policy correction.

Much of the information presented was collected through interviews and study groups of senior officials. It is important to note that the ongoing and intricate dialogue with senior policy and intelligence officials conducted for this book, many of whom occupied senior positions and were highly influential in the management of events of the time,

made it possible to delve into the dynamics of decision-making of each case with unusual detail and nuance. Many individuals have requested anonymity so they could speak freely and as such their observations usually are not attributed. However, the members of the study groups are listed in the Appendix.

The accounts of the policy debates as they unfolded in real time provided invaluable and unique insights about systemic factors that seem to repeatedly inhibit the ability to shape new policies and the lessons we might learn from these experiences. It was particularly useful to have senior policy-makers share specific examples of times when they ceded to the impulse to protect the policy consensus despite informed misgivings about the likely outcome. Officials also shared accounts of how their and others' complicity and urge to conform narrowed the range of policy options discussed by officials. Conversely, a number of individuals discussed how they, at various times, faced tangible risks to their careers when trying to present information that deviated from common assumptions.

The cases presented in this book illustrate just a few of the occasions when leaders resisted adaptation of a chosen strategy despite strong misgivings and mounting evidence that staying the course would not achieve desired results. Only three cases are presented here in detail. These cases are nonetheless illustrative of the dynamics of numerous other instances of American policy setbacks that share significant similarities. This book does not include a case study of decision-making involving officials currently serving in government, leaving it to history—and the reader—to decide how the systemic constraints examined here pertain to current circumstances, in what instances, and to what end.