

Commentary

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The danger of a leader's 'positive illusions'

President Lyndon Johnson once told us, "Democracy is a constant tension between truth and half-truth and, in the arsenal of truth, there is no greater weapon than fact."

What did these simple words mean for us during LBJ's Vietnam War presidency? What might they mean for us now during President Bush's "war for democracy" in the Middle East?



Johnson had a superb grasp of the gritty realities of democratic government. He was the quintessential self-made man of power. His own frank self-assessment explains why biographer Robert Caro called him "Master of the Senate": "One thing I do know about is power. I know where to look for it and how to use it."

Johnson knew from long experience that Americans prefer to be comforted by "what can later be shaded into the truths we would like to believe. And this is not unnatural."

White House Chief of Staff Andy Card says President Bush "believes that leadership carries with it an obligation to think big and act big. And he does think big and act big."

The freedom we are supposedly spreading in Afghanistan and Iraq is proof of the president's big thinking and big doing. America is leading a "march of freedom" at home and abroad. The administration is puzzled, even annoyed, that many Europeans and Americans are skeptical about such claims. What is going on here?

Part of the answer can be found in the political reality of "positive illusions." All human beings and human societies need to construct "myths" to believe in

and live by. According to Dominic Johnson's recent book "Overconfidence and War," it is a Darwinian fact that our leaders become our leaders because they have an extraordinary capacity for "positive illusions" and can inspire us to believe in these illusions and act upon them. The "positive" in this theory means optimism about how things will work out, not that things actually will or did turn out positively. Dominic Johnson applies his theory convincingly to historical test cases: World War I, the Munich Pact before World War II, the Cuban Missile Crisis and Vietnam.

I think positive illusions theory explains President Johnson's thoughts about truths and half-truths. He knew that people need visions and ideals to sustain them, and that leaders are likewise susceptible to thinking that by their energy and determination they can virtually will things to turn out for the best.

He also understood, by the time he announced he would not run for reelection, that the same strong beliefs that sustain us in hard times, like war or the Great Depression, can lead to bad outcomes. The most important determinative of where "positive illusions" will lead is a willingness to face reality — what Johnson called the weapon of fact.

Our leaders will only check their "positive illusions" against reality if they engage in open political debate, listen to the views of political opponents and weigh the contradictory data brought in by different intelligence sources. Otherwise, "positive illusions" can lead to disaster.

There are many reasons then to be uneasy. First, Bush's belief that a 51 percent to 48 percent electoral majority gives him a mandate to carry forth a

one-sided agenda is unquestionably a false "positive illusion." Another leader might work hard to include the views of the near majority opposition.

Second, the consolidation of the power of the president and his advisers over intelligence sources and military analyses makes "reality checks" on prevailing illusions about military actions less likely.

Third, the like-mindedness of Bush's chief advisers has been reinforced since the last election. This makes self-reinforcing "group think" likely.

Finally, there is the ultimate reality check. Many skeptics who refuse to join the president's militaristic "march of freedom" have historical memories.

On Aug. 5, 1964, President Johnson, in response to an alleged attack in the Gulf of Tonkin that is now known to have been every bit as non-existent as Iraqi WMD's, asked Congress to pass a measure "expressing the unity and determination of the United States in supporting freedom in southeast Asia."

We hailed the "democratic" elections we staged in South Vietnam as part of the march of freedom. In January 1973, President Nixon assured South Vietnamese President Thieu and Vice President Ky that we would not abandon their "democracy." Thirty-two years later, the Web site Vietnam Democracy monitors the suppression of human freedoms and violations of human rights by the communist government of Vietnam. Still, we are four years into normalizing trade relations and doing billions of dollars of business with communist Vietnam.

What will democratic Iraq look like in 30 years? Will it be a fact — or another bad illusion?

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