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Parallel movies

By Shari Cohen | February 20, 2007

WITH ADDITIONAL TROOPS en route to Iraq, and Congress debating resolutions critical of the surge, all sides in the conversation remain stuck in wishful thinking, paralysis, or denial. Despite Iraq's mind-boggling uncertainty and complexity, every pundit and politician has their own pet theory, solution, and scenario. Few admit they don't have the full answer. Still fewer spell out the longer-term implications of their positions. The approaching 2008 election only contributes to the short term-ism.

These habits of public conversation and decision-making are not particular to Iraq. They are an American public policy challenge. Assuming a single predictable future produced the "failure of imagination" that the 9/11 report flagged. Wishful and short-term thinking resulted in the remarkably poor planning before Hurricane Katrina. Unless Americans overcome these habits it will be difficult for the United States to develop wise and effective solutions in a world of increasing complexity and uncertainty.

One way to begin is to acknowledge the uncertainty by moving away from planning and debate based on single scenarios -- be they best or worst case. At the heart of the debate about Iraq are a number of critical unknowns. For example, there is evidence that the Iraqi government can still avert a civil war *and* that Iraq is headed for bloody fragmentation. Likewise, no one knows for sure whether Al Qaeda's activities in Iraq will remain limited or whether the opposite is true -- that Iraq is on its way to becoming a base for attacks in the United States and Europe. Yet each side in the debate proceeds as if they do know where these trends -- and many others -- are headed. Instead, they should consider the several possible outcomes side by side -- like watching parallel movies.

The first movie is one in which the Iraqi government comes together and Al Qaeda and other extremists can be defeated. This one is playing in the minds of the Bush administration. The second is the horror movie: the Iraqi government fails and Al Qaeda grows. Like the hurricane that could break through the New Orleans levees, it is the catastrophe that no one wants to think about. Third is the possibility that the Iraqis would successfully reconcile but extremism in Iraq still grows. No one is talking about this movie. Yet it asks if the assumption that a stronger Iraqi state would control fundamentalist extremism is true. The "withdraw now" school visualizes a fourth movie: the Iraqi government falls apart but Al Qaeda remains limited and Iran controllable. In this film the United States lets Iraq decline into civil war, but by pulling out gain credibility and energy to defang the Islamic fundamentalist appeal and advance other initiatives in the Middle East and beyond.

Thinking about these movies side by side it's clear how easy it is to ignore the later scenes in the film, to avoid the unbearable parts, or not watch them at all because the story or the actors are objectionable. Yet without considering all four films, and watching them until the end, a strategy that has a chance of working effectively in all of them cannot be developed.

Imagining and visualizing parallel movies is a technique, sometimes called scenario planning, that is increasingly used by corporations and governments to make decisions in the face of uncertainty. Such methods of analysis and deliberation could help policy makers and the public

understand the prerequisites for happy, unhappy, and mixed outcomes. By requiring decision makers to spell out and assess the plausibility of scenarios they prefer not to imagine and how solutions fare across them, these tools challenge deeply held assumptions that can impede wise decision making.

In the "morning after" discussions -- after triumph in Iraq turns to quagmire, the twin towers are destroyed, or New Orleans is flooded -- the lament is always that there was a failure to anticipate the unexpected. To avoid this recurring lament, leaders should kick the bad habits that keep them from visualizing the futures they don't want to see or are afraid to discuss.

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