Reflections on Collective Consciousness: The Persian Gulf Debate

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Abstract

The traditional theory of international relations presents collective consciousness as a single, simple foreign policy mindset deciding issues of peace and war. However, the Persian Gulf debate demonstrated a more complex, multiplistic view, one that displayed varied interests and opinions. The outcome of this collective consciousness was war. Maintaining progress toward peace requires constructive collective learning that creates a change in collective consciousness allowing people to conceptualize and enhance peaceful images and to inhibit warlike ones. A smarter and wiser humanity with a more comprehensive and complex view of international relations will incorporate and reflect a more developed collective consciousness.

Introduction

At the beginning of August 1990, Iraqi military forces entered Kuwait. A period of concentrated diplomatic activity followed. Led by the United States, the allies of Kuwait attempted to persuade Iraq to withdraw. At the same time, there was an intense American domestic debate. This debate occurred in the general public, the media, and in the United States Congress. It culminated in the middle of January 1991, when the U.S. Congress voted to authorize the president to use military force.

The Persian Gulf debate may be the most comprehensive war initiation debate in our history. The discussion was impressive from many points of view. It dealt with one of the most important and difficult issues any state faces. It was long and thorough. The members of Congress deeply felt its gravity.

The Field and Properties of Collective Consciousness

We may take the debate as one reasonable reflection of the state of collective American consciousness about peace and war at this time. Talk is not thought. Yet talk

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implies a thinking speaker and a thinking audience who try to communicate through conversation. If our words do not completely reflect our ideas, they still suggest how we attempt to represent our thinking and create ourselves for our fellow citizens.

The Persian Gulf debate thus provides a rhetorical self-portrait of the collective American mind. This self-portrait includes multiple dimensions, among which are past precedents stored in memory. Issues are formed and given meaning through frames and scripts derived from Constitutional law, economics, religion, ethics, and morality, and the superordinate national interest.

Past Precedents

One of the important dimensions of American collective consciousness lies in shared memories of past historical events. American legislators paid strongest attention to their own history, but their discourse also touched some of the precedents in the experience of other actors in the Persian Gulf.

Munich and the Gulf of Tonkin. In the Persian Gulf debates, precedents from World War II and Vietnam were particularly important. Munich and the Gulf of Tonkin were the symbols that condensed these experiences. Haunted by the ghosts of the past, Americans were torn between two courses of action. The generation which had lived through the 1930s had burned in its collective memory the lessons of that painful history. Neville Chamberlain's shameful policy of appeasement culminated in his agreement at Munich to accept the German occupation of Czechoslovakia without resistance. If the Allies had forcefully resisted earlier, as Churchill had wanted them to, they could have deposed Hitler and avoided the terrible bloodshed that followed. Based on the Munich precedent, the United States should intervene early and directly, with sufficient military force.

The generation which had come of age in the 1960s had other memories. The United States had resisted communism in Southeast Asia for dubious benefits and at a terrible price. The United States had no clear, tangible major interest that it was defending. President Johnson had tricked Congress into supporting a major war through his manipulation of the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Tens of thousands of young Americans had died in faraway jungles to support a regime that may have been more corrupt than its opponent. And finally, it was all for nothing. The United States withdrew, and North Vietnam controlled a unified Vietnam. The Vietnam precedent suggested that direct military force was not the answer. A continuing economic embargo could bring the same benefits with much lower risks and costs.

Jews and Arabs. Preoccupation with strictly American precedents overshadowed the importance of different precedents for particular groups. American Jews remembered long centuries of discrimination and segregation in the ghettos of Europe and the regular pogroms that denied them the status and security of other citizens. Jewish experiences with Hitler and the Third Reich were still alive. Jews remembered the yellow stars that they were forced to wear, which stigmatized and separated them. Those who escaped the horrors of the concentration camps and fled from their neighbors into foreign exile had etched into their minds such names as Auschwitz, Babi Yar, Buchenwald, Dachau, and Treblinka. Jews would never forget the lesson that weakness meant death, that the only hope for survival in a hostile world was in forceful resistance to attack, wherever and whenever it occurred. Better the honorable destruction of Masada, than the corrosive shame of surrender.

Arabs could proudly remember historical precedents including events from the long ebb and flow between the Christian and Muslim world: the glories of early Mesopotamian civilizations, the spread of Arab culture and science across the Mediterranean into southern Europe. But history also carried memories heavy with humiliation and bitterness: the burning of the library at Alexandria and the destruction of Carthage, the Crusades, the yoke of British and French colonialism, the expropriation of Palestine and the pauperization of the Palestinians.

Commander in Chief and Declaration of War

These deep memories ran through the debate over the Persian Gulf. Yet much more was involved. The Administration conducted its foreign policy far from the watchful eyes of Congress. As war drew closer, Congressional leaders grew increasingly concerned about the constitutional issues involved in taking the country to war

In hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations and House Foreign Affairs Committees, Secretary Baker stated his belief that the president, as commander in chief, had the authority to order American forces into battle. The president, as head of the executive branch, was responsible for the conduct of foreign policy.

Past presidents were past precedents. Other national leaders—Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson—had acted forcefully and aggressively by themselves to defend the national interest. President Bush had patiently explored and finally exhausted all diplomatic means of redress. Acting in the spirit of American tradition, and in the present circumstances, he now had no recourse except military means and deserved Congressional support.

Senators and representatives recognized the president's proper diplomatic and military prerogatives. Many, particularly Republicans, gave very heavy weight to the need to stand behind the president. They felt their patriotic duty to "rally round the flag," to follow the president, and to present a united American front confronting a foreign aggressor.

At the same time, members of Congress forcefully asserted their rights under the Constitution and the War Powers Act to authorize such action. They maintained their rights to declare war, to provide funds, and to give their assent. Their position stood on the ground of constitutional law. It was also based on a very practical political desire to show the weight of majority opinion behind the president before moving on to this fateful step.

Spending and Taxing

Economic issues also entered the peace/war debate. During fall, 1990, Congress rebuffed the president's bargain with Congressional leadership over taxes. The continuing crisis of the national debt threatened to activate mandatory cuts required by the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Act. The debate over the new budgetary agreement required a balance between financial stringency, equitable burden sharing, and concern for the weakest members of society. While the rich resisted heavier taxation, increasing numbers of the poor were homeless. In its own way, the budget debate was as complex and agonizing as that over the Persian Gulf. And the two were related. If the United States did not act, it ran the risk of higher oil prices that would worsen its financial problems.

If it did act, the costs of the military operation would strain the already unraveling American economy. Further, increasingly hard-pressed Americans were reluctant to pay more money to the state. They hardly wanted to give their lives and those of their loved ones in the absence of a clear and present national emergency.

With the collapse of the Berlin Wall, many Americans were relieved that the long, dispiriting Cold War was finally over. Mikhail Gorbachev's new policy of *glasnost* and *perestroika* had won him the Nobel Peace Prize. Americans were ready for a military demobilization. The resulting "peace dividend" would help the United States solve its financial problems. Taxes could be reduced. Money would still be available for deferred maintenance on bridges and roads, hospitals and schools. The decay of the cities and an emerging underclass, AIDS and cancer, global warming and the ecology all needed urgent attention.

Those who opposed the war evoked the preceding debate. Those who favored the war promptly forgot it. As the country made up its collective mind, many of the same people who had fought in the trenches, at the bridgeheads, for maintaining a balanced budget, almost overnight forgot about it.

Church and State

Many Americans were concerned by the military dominance of foreign policy and the economy. Not only did this produce undesirable political and economic distortions; it also involved the most serious ethical issues that impinged on the separation of church and state. Religious debates between the right to life and the right to choice had dominated political campaigns in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Issues at the core of private religious belief stimulated public discussion and required public decision.

American use of military force recalled some of the same issues. Theologians had debated the issue of the just war for centuries. More contemporary concerns such as the right to life and the right to choice took on new meaning in the military context. Americans debated whether or not war against Iraq was just. Those in favor of military action pointed to dictatorship and atrocities. Saddam Hussein was neither legitimated by, nor accountable to, any democratic process. He had supported international terrorism and fought a long bloody war against Iran. He had developed chemical weapons and was well on the way to a nuclear capability. Indeed he would already have nuclear weapons had the Israelis not attacked and destroyed them several years earlier. The most awful evidence of his brutality and cruelty was his premeditated use of chemical weapons on his own defenseless people, the Kurds of northern Iraq. The present aggression against Kuwait must be quickly stopped and reversed, lest Saddam Hussein further export violence beyond his borders and terrorize the entire Middle East.

Those who opposed the war countered that national rulers operated under the international law of sovereignty. Sovereignty covered a multitude of sins. There was much injustice in the world, including the United States itself and its close allies. Democracy was still the exception rather than the rule, including in Kuwait. Millions of children were sick, suffered, and died from malnutrition. Terrorism, murder, and even attempted genocide were morally deeply repugnant but continued to exist. The United States could not clean the Augean stables of the world. Even if it could, military force was not the only, or even the best, way to do this. American use of military force would add the deaths of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of innocent victims to the atrocities that had already occurred. It was unsophisticated, primitive, and barbaric. The cure was worse than the disease.

Where did the lesser evil lie? Was the balance of reasons sufficient for individual Americans to make the ultimate sacrifice, to give up their lives and the lives of their children? Saddam Hussein's own rhetoric spoke to this concern when he warned of death in the sand and the sad, black body bags returning home. Many Americans were increasingly concerned with the other side of the coin: the obligation to kill, especially when they were not deeply persuaded of the justice of the cause. An absolute religious ethic was particularly powerful when individuals strongly disagreed with the timing and objectives of the war. Many suspected that economic rather than moral concerns were the deep causes, the hidden agenda of the war. For such citizens, "blood for oil" was a bad exchange. A more patient, measured, deliberate policy was preferable. Continuing economic embargo against Iraq would ultimately prove effective, as it had for Rhodesia, and would soon for South Africa. Embargo was a less violent and more civilized way for the international community to exert pressure on a deviant regime.

Religious concerns also mixed with ethnicity. In spite of its formal absence from the allied coalition against Iraq, Israel was a central player and a major issue in the crisis. American Jews were torn between their identification with Israel and with the United States, between the concern for their own lives, as well as the lives of husbands, sons, and grandsons. For the first time, women serving in the armed forces expanded these concerns to wives, daughters, and granddaughters. Americans were worried for the lives of those in the Jewish state. Though it was less publicized, American Muslims and those of Arabian descent had the same difficulties.

Short- and Long-Term Interests

Finally there were those who were concerned over the implications of war for the long-term national interests of the United States. An American-led war against Iraq might regain Kuwait and safeguard the oil fields, the "moderate" Arab regimes, and the state of Israel. But it would not solve the continuing grievance of the Palestinians who had been ejected from their homeland and were making a permanent life in desperate refugee camps. It would not solve the problem of the Intifada in Israeli-occupied territories. It would not solve the inequalities between the very rich and the very poor in the Arab world, nor the undemocratic nature of most of their regimes, including that of Kuwait. War would not solve the clash between traditional Arab and Muslim spiritual values and those of the more secular West, nor the long-standing Arab resentment over Western imperialism and its aftermath. War, even a short, victorious war, might make all of these problems worse, rather than better.

Collective Consciousness and Stable Peace

The idea of collective consciousness suggests that there is a single, simple foreign policy mindset, deciding issues of peace and war. This has certainly been the view of the traditional theory of international relations. There is a collective consciousness according to this theory. Foreign policy makers represent this collective consciousness when they decide peace and war on the basis of national interest defined in terms of power.

Competing Images

The Persian Gulf debate suggests a different and more complex view. Collective consciousness about peace and war swirled and eddied through different currents. The national interest, as always, appeared in different costumes. What was the national interest of the United States? Which components should be given heavier or lighter weight? Which policy or policies promised to maximize benefits and minimize costs? Should greater attention be given to short- or long-run concerns?

Further, the contents of the debate were partly determined by past experiences and memories that were stimulated by the immediate crisis in the Persian Gulf. Was Munich or Vietnam the relevant image driving American interests? Legal, economic, and cultural perspectives also competed for attention. Who should make the final choice, Congress or the president? How much importance should different economic issues have in the decision? What was the proper place for religious concerns? Ultimately, was the use of force necessary and desirable?

The outcome, the culmination of the debate, came in the final votes in the Senate and the House. These votes reflected the final weight of collective opinion. This final specification defined the collective consciousness and the national interest of the United States.

Multiple Minds

If there is a collective consciousness, its reality may be much different than the one imagined by traditional international relations theory. At some level, such consciousness might be imagined as a unified field. Yet the collective consciousness of peace and war, as it is reflected in the Persian Gulf debates, appears extremely complex and multiplistic.

It may be more useful to think of collective consciousness as an emergent property of a massively parallel, multidimensional system. We may imagine that this system includes multiple interconnected minds. These minds perceive, decide, and influence issues of peace and war on very different grounds in very different ways. The various minds, in turn, contain multiple images. Each war activates old images—land mines in the minds. Each war also creates new images waiting to be activated in new wars at some future time.

Collective Learning and Evolution

This paper has focused on external observation of collective consciousness as revealed in speech acts. The individual actors and observers change from war to war, but some collective learning occurs.

Observation encourages collective learning. It leads us to be more reflective about the role of our own consciousness in peace/war events. Further, such reflection has a reflexive effect on our subsequent thoughts and actions. As we think about our collective consciousness, we subtly change it.

Progress toward stable peace finally depends on constructive collective learning (Alexander & Langer, 1990). It depends on our ability to conceptualize and enhance peaceful images and to inhibit warlike ones. If we are to make progress, we must also develop a better understanding of phase and sequence. It does little good to develop peaceful learning, if it disarms some for the profit of others, if the peaceful become prey for the belligerent. If humanity is to evolve further, it needs to become much smarter and wiser, at a faster rate than in the past (Salk & Salk, 1990). Such evolution is far from certain. If it does happen, it will require a more comprehensive and complex view of international relations. It will necessarily incorporate and reflect a more developed collective consciousness.

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