

Middle East Myopia

Newly declassified documents illustrate the danger of letting military disaster blind us to emerging international threats.

Forty years ago this summer, a president who had lost the public's trust—and that of many lawmakers on Capitol Hill—faced war in the Middle East. On June 5, 1967, Israel launched a preemptive strike at Arab armies massed on its southern, western, and northern borders. Six days later, the fighting was over, with Israel having pushed back the Egyptians, Jordanians, and Syrians and taken the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights. For Arabs and Israelis, the Six-Day War is the seminal event that defined not just that summer, but the region's prospects ever since.

The Six-Day War caught the United States by surprise. “Rarely in the annals of American foreign policy had an international crisis caught an entire administration so completely off-guard,” writes Michael Oren in his definitive history of the conflict. Details of how the American foreign policy establishment dealt with the quickly unfolding run-up to the war—beginning with Egypt ordering

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UN troops out of the Sinai—have long been classified. But in March, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee released the transcripts of the confidential executive sessions that it held during 1967. The documents cover a wide range of topics, from a rebellion in the Congo to trade negotiations. But it is the briefings by Secretary of State Dean Rusk before the Committee—whose membership included such liberal lions as Democrats William Fulbright (the committee chair), Albert Gore, Sr. (Tenn.), Claiborne Pell (R.I.), and Mike Mansfield (Mont.)—on that summer’s Mideast crisis that provide the greatest insight into how American foreign policy works under the weight of a foreign adventure gone horribly wrong.

Parallels with our current situation abound. Today we are wrestling with looming threats in the Middle East while bogged down in Iraq; then, policymakers were doing the same while mired in Vietnam. To be sure, unlike in 1967, an Arab-Israeli war is not imminent. But with the growing threat of Iran and the tensions between Israel and Hezbollah, Hamas, and Syria, it’s not implausible in the foreseeable future. Of course, comparing Iraq to Vietnam is by now a Washington parlor game that borders on the trite. But the newly released transcripts give new meaning to one overarching comparison between the summer of ’67 and the present—specifically, how a president’s past mistakes can so preoccupy political leaders that they lose sight of the dangers ahead or the principles they hold dear.

By the spring of 1967, it had been a year since Fulbright and his Committee held their now-famous hearings on the Vietnam War, in which the Arkansan broke publicly with the Lyndon Johnson Administration and pronounced the conflict an example of America’s “arrogance of power.” So when Rusk went to Capitol Hill on May 23, he encountered a Committee already openly skeptical of the president handling of foreign affairs. The day before, Egypt’s Gamel Abdel Nasser had closed the Straits of Tiran, blocking Israel’s access to the Red Sea and beyond. The Administration feared not just a regional war, but the possibility that the crisis would set off a global conflict involving the Soviet Union. Yet no sooner had Rusk described the series of actions that were rapidly leading toward war in the Levant than senators began demanding assurances that the United States would not enter the conflict alone. “I certainly hope that this country does not act unilaterally in the Middle East. We have enough troubles in Vietnam now, more than enough,” warned Mansfield. Frank Lausche of Ohio, a Democratic hawk, strongly seconded those sentiments and added that “every effort imaginable should be made to have the United Nations take control of this subject.”

With the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution undoubtedly fresh in his mind and those of his colleagues, Senator Karl Mundt (R-S.D.) raised another concern of the war-weary senators: Would the Administration consult with Congress before it made any commitment to defend Israel? “Is there something we are going to read about in the newspaper that the President has decided that troops are on their way, or are you coming back to Congress [to consult]?” he asked. Stuart Symington (D-Mo.), who had been the first secretary of the Air Force, then pursued a line of questioning strikingly familiar to us today, namely that the United States was stretched too thin to respond to another conflict: “If military commitments are an important part of political and economic commitments, then this nation is overextended in all three categories.”

In many ways, this is how the Senate is supposed to work—questioning the actions of the executive, especially in such critical matters as war and peace. Yet one can’t but read these transcripts and see a group of lawmakers already so burned by the experience of Vietnam that their preoccupation with avoiding a repeat experience was hampering their ability to respond to new challenges. Of course, none of them could have anticipated the stunning Israeli victory to come—or the conflict that such a win would fuel for the next four decades. However, there is a point at which oversight leads to myopia—where excessive focus on the mistakes of the past harden into a paralysis when confronted with the threats of the future.

In Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s Iran, Israel is again staring down a possible existential threat, and the United States is once more facing a serious challenge to its interests in the region. And yet, as in 1967, too many progressives—so chastened by the Bush Administration’s deceptions over Iraq and the egregious mistakes that followed—are in danger of letting the past prevent them from focusing on the real threats looming ahead. Some even go so far as to excuse the Iranian regime, the better to deny the very existence of a threat. One prominent blogger, Ezra Klein, wrote, in a post titled “Autocratic Iran?” that the “attempt to make the country look like some sort of tyrannical, dictatorial regime is just another element of the war propaganda.”

Skepticism is not only healthy for democracy; it’s vital. But it would be a disservice to our progressive ideals if we allowed disgust with the Bush Administration to lead to a softness toward totalitarian, anti-egalitarian, atavistic regimes and movements. In this case, the ideological enemy of my political enemy is not my friend. That means we must aggressively oppose knee-jerk anti-Americanism and the strange alliances rampant among Islamic radicals and left-wing politicians in Europe, what Fred Halliday of the London School of Economics,

writing in *Dissent*, artfully deemed “the jihadism of fools”—and ensure that it does not spread to our shores. And it means that we cannot let the call for “realism” and “competence”—no matter how vital they may be as qualities in a commander-in-chief—become touchstones around which we build an aimless and disjointed foreign policy. To progressives, foreign policy is not just a global game of “Deal or No Deal.” As the United States tries to handle a volatile Middle East and repair the damage done by the Iraq war, it is incumbent upon us to provide a coherent foreign-policy alternative to Bush’s neoconservative vision, one that is true to the progressive legacy of internationalism—liberal democracy, rule of law, and equal opportunity. And that will take looking beyond the procedural underbrush and mistakes of the past to grasp the stakes at hand—for our interests and our principles.

During the debates of the summer of 1967, there was one senator, Wayne Morse (D-Ore.), who did just that. Near the end of the May 23 session with Rusk, after hearing senator after senator grill the secretary of state, Morse tried to focus his colleagues on the issue “we are skirting, what we have to face up to.” Morse reminded his colleagues of the “very important moral obligation” the United States had to defend Israel: “We have to make the other free nations understand the relation of freedom in this matter because if they do get into a war, then you have got totalitarianism seeking to drive this country into oblivion.” That such sentiments came from a man like Morse may be surprising to some. After all, he was one of only two senators to vote against the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution three years earlier and whose outspoken opposition to the Vietnam War helped cost him his seat the following fall. He is remembered today, if at all, as a hero of the antiwar movement. But, as this exchange shows, Morse did not allow his opposition to one specific war cloud his judgment of future threats or distract him from America’s responsibilities in the world.

Once again, the Middle East and its lone democracy are threatened. Once again, senators—now from both sides of the aisle—are deeply skeptical of the president. At a moment like this, to defend American interests and the values we stand for, progressives should heed the sage words of Morse and not use anger at one war as an excuse to blink when confronting a future threat head on. **D**