L'échec américain en Irak : complot avorté ou erreur stratégique? Une explication à travers le processus décisionnel

The U.S. failure in Iraq: The U.S. Decision-Making Process and Conspiracy Theories

By

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> *Conspiracy theories either posit fantastic plots that do not exist or distort actual plots, usually by inflating them beyond what is reasonable. Conspiracies consist in actions, conspiracy theories in perceptions.*[1]

…

Conspiracies *per se* are not new. The conspiracy theories that have dotted the ideational landscape of the past two centuries[2] recall the witch-hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries,[3] and indictments from the still more distant past.[4] Since the end of the Second World War, however, there has been a new crop of tales of intrigue in which the United States figures as either setting[5] or main protagonist[6] — the price, perhaps, of the superpower status it

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[1] Véronique Campion-Vincent, *La société parano. Théories du complot, menaces et incertitudes,* Paris, Payot, 2005, p. 9.

[2] "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," a forgery by the Tsarist police, are archetypical. in this respect See Raoul Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques,* Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1986, p. 32, and Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion,* London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1967. See also Olivier Dard, *La synarchie ou Le mythe du complot permanent*, Paris, Perrin, 1998, and Yves-Marie Bercé and Elena Fasano Guarini (eds.), *Complots et conjurations dans l'Europe moderne*, Rome, École française de Rome, Paris, Boccard, 1996.

[3] See Julio Caro baroja, *Les sorcières et leur monde,* Paris, Gallimard, 1973; P.G. Maxwell-Stuart, *Satan's Conspiracy: Magic and Witchcraft in Sixteenth-Century Scotland*, East Linton, Tuckwell Press, 2001.

[4] See Richard M. Bennett, *Conspiracy – Plots, Lies and Cover-Ups,* London, Virgin Books, 2003, pp. 3-47. See also Victoria Emma Pagán, *Conspiracy Narratives in Roman History*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2004.

[5] See Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003; Harry G. West and Todd Sanders (eds.), *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2003.

[6] See Frédéric Charpier, *L'obsession du complot,* Paris, Bourin éditeur, 2005; Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to X-Files,* London and New York, Routledge, 2000; Mark

acquired after the war. Each break in the historic continuum — the end of the Vietnam War, the end of the Cold War, 9/11 — spawns its own spate of conspiracy theories.[7] The George W. Bush presidency, dominated by 9/11 and studded with scandals and attempts to cover up egregious mistakes, has fed the conspiracy frenzy, spurring an unprecedented upsurge in conspiracy theories championed by figures as diverse as Michael Moore, Thierry Meyssan, Andreas Von Bülow and Mathias Broeckers.[8] In what is a complex situation, the contradictions, prevarications and mistakes of the current administration have led a number of conspiracy enthusiasts to imagine that the U.S. staged 9/11 in order to reburnish its image and reshape the geopolitics of the Arab world. Thus, "the Carlyle group, the Pentagon, the White House and Halliburton, to mention only the least far-fetched culprits,[9] allegedly mounted a plot involving members of Al-Qaeda and requiring silence of the FBI, the CIA and its field agents, bureaucrats in a number of ministries, and White House advisors and staff."[10] Clearly, 9/11 marked the beginning of a new age, the shape of which remains to be clearly defined: with no objective enemy and no clear motivation on the part of Al-Qaeda, conspiratorial interpretations have proliferated. There is a reason for this: "Paradoxically, the Conspiracy myth tends to perform a social function of some importance, which is an explanatory function […] all the facts are traced back, by an apparently relentless logic, to a single cause, at once elementary and

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Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture,* Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

[7] Jane Parish, Martin Parker (eds.), *The Age of Anxiety: Conspiracy Theory and the Human Sciences*, Oxford, Blackwell, Sociological Review, 2001. Willard Scott Thompson, "Rumors, Conspiracies and the Psychological Climate of World Politics," *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs,* Winter/Spring 1998, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 17-28.

[8] And many others. See for example James H. Fetzer (ed.), *The 9/11 Conspiracy: The Scamming of America,* Peru, Ill., Catfeet Press, 2007; Jim Marrs, *The Terror Conspiracy: Deception, 9/11 and the Loss of Liberty,* Disinformation Company, 2006; Barrie Zwicker, *Towers of Deception: The Media Cover-up of 9/11*, New Society Publishers; 2006; Mathias Broeckers, *Conspiracies, Conspiracy Theories, and the Secrets of 9/11*, Progressive Press, 2006; David Ray Griffin, *Debunking 9/11 Debunking: An Answer to Popular Mechanics and Other Defenders of the Official Conspiracy Theory*, Olive Branch Press, 2007.

[9] Others have pointed to Skull and Bones, the Jewish lobby, the oil lobby, the Bilderberg Group or the military-industrial complex. See for example Hugh Wilford, "CIA Plot, Socialist Conspiracy, or New World Order? The Origins of the Bilderberg Group," *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, September 2003, Vol.14, No. 3, pp.70-82. Examples also include two films made in 2004: Michael Moore's *Farhenheit 9/11,* winner of the Palme d'or at Cannes, and the French film *Le Monde selon Bush* by William Karel. See as well John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, "The Israel Lobby," *London Review of Books,* Vol. 28, No. 6, March 23, 2006, available online at www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n06/print/mear01_.html [consulted on May 15, 2007], and Alexandra Robbins, *Secrets of the Tomb,* Boston, Little Brown, 2003.

[10] Élisabeth Vallet and Charles-Philippe David, "La formulation de la politique étrangère aux États-Unis, *Le Banquet,* No. 23-1, 2006.

all-powerful."[11] The simplicity of the explanation also endows a complex set of facts with rationality, the sequence of events with meaning, and it organizes a series of chance occurrences and coincidences into a system,[12] orchestrating them into a perversion of Occam's razor, so to speak.[13] In this sense, conspiracy theories can be understood as an attempt to resolve chaos and reclaim control of a degraded world.[14] The collapse of the bipolar global structure that provided simple answers in an apparently fixed situation ushered in an era of confusion, exemplified by 9/11: in an untidy world,[15] conspiracies are, according to the philosopher Pascal Bruckner, "a way of reducing complexity."[16] The reversal of the burden of proof, whereby it is up to the accused (the plotter) to prove that he is not part of the conspiracy, violates elementary legal principles and makes it impossible to disprove the conspiracy theory:

> Questioned by a journalist, who asked him what happened to the plane if it didn't crash into the Pentagon,[17] Thierry Meyssan replied, "Ask the American government!" So it is pointless to contradict him.

Indeed, one cannot readily dismantle the syllogistic reasoning which holds that one *ad hoc* lie begets others and turns into a series of lies, for the conspiracy narrative[18] is driven by "economic cycles"[19] and supported more by circumstance[20] than authority.[21] We shall

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[11] Raoul Girardet, *op.cit.,* pp.54-55. See also Neil C. Livingstone, "Terrorism: Conspiracy, Myth and Reality," *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs,* Winter/Spring 1998, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 1-15, and Yves Viltard, "La figure de l'ennemi intérieur dans les théories conspiratrices aux États-unis," *Sociétés,* No. 2, 2003, pp. 89-98.

[12] Pierre-André Taguieff, *L'imaginaire du complot mondial : aspects d'un mythe moderne,* Paris, Éditions mille et une nuits, 2006, and *La foire aux "illuminés" : ésotérisme, théorie du complot, extrémisme,* Paris, Mille et une nuits, 2005.

[13] See Joël Biard, *Guillaume d'Occam, Logique et philosophie*, Paris, PUF, 1997.

[14] See Antoine Vitkine and Barbara Necek, *Le 11 septembre n'a pas eu lieu,* documentary, Arte, France, 2004.

[15] Widespread doubts around the world about who was responsible for 9/11, Al-Qaeda or the U.S. administration, provide fertile soil for conspiracy theorists. Antoine Viktine (*op.cit.*) cites media outlets ranging from *Der Spiegel* to Al Jazeera and Hezbollah's television station.

[16] Antoine Vitkine and Barbara Necek, *Le Grand Complot,* documentary, Arte, France, 2004.

[17] In "L'effroyable imposture," (published by Carnot in 2002), Thierry Meyssan, secretary general of the Réseau Voltaire, argued that the Pentagon was not struck by a third plane; rather, the attack was manufactured out of whole cloth by the U.S. administration. Guillaume Dasquié and Jean Guisnel responded by dismantling Meyssan's argument in *L'effroyable mensonge,* Paris, La Découverte, 2002.

[18] See David Coady (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate,* Aldershot and Burlington, Ashgate, 2006; Joseph Theodore Remington, *Conspiracy Narratives as Political Rhetoric,* doctoral disseration, University of Iowa, 2002, Ref. AAT 3058437; Earl George Creps III, *The Conspiracy Argument as Rhetorical Genre,* doctoral dissertation, Northwestern University, 1980, Ref. AAT 8104701.

[19] Véronique Campion-Vincent, *La société parano : théories du complot, menaces et incertitudes*, Paris, Payot, 2005.

consider the conspiratorial explanation of the U.S. decision-making process from two points of view and show that it can withstand neither examination of the structure of power nor analysis of the conspiracy theory's premises as to the rationality of the decision-makers.

1. The myriad of actors in the U.S. policy-making process

It is somewhat paradoxical, in and of itself, to ascribe to the U.S. administration the cunning required to plan and execute a global conspiracy, while at the same time heaping scorn on its supposed inability to make sensible decisions.[22] How can it be supposed that "the same administration (or the same industry groups or bureaucracies) that was able to pull off a plot of such complexity (get everyone in the right place at the right time, get insiders to make financial transactions, train the pilots, make sure the bureaucracy kept quiet[23]) couldn't figure out how to bury a few nuclear weapons in the Iraqi desert to justify the 2003 invasion?"[24] That is one of the first contradictions in the conspiracy argument: the gap between the immense power attributed to the faceless decision-makers (spoofed as the *World Compagnie* on the French satirical show "Guignols de l'Info"[25]) and the ineptitude of leaders known for their slips and blunders.[26] Indeed, "what is surprising is the gulf between the observed facts, as they can be objectively established, and the construction placed upon the facts by the mythological narrative."[27] The actual explanation that can be offered, which relates to the fragmentation of power, is rather

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[20] Given the changing structure of international relations and the advent of powerful vehicles such as the Internet; on this point, see Pascal Froissart, "Rumeurs sur Internet," *Les Cahiers de médiologie,* 1st half, 2002, pp. 205-208. For a feminist approach, see Valerie Rose Holliday, *Conspiracy Culture in America after World War II*, doctoral dissertation, Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College, 2005, Ref. AAT 3167100.

[21] See Hans Jürgen Krysmanski in *Tous Manipulés?,* interview on Arte France, available online. The power of the Internet must also be taken into account: "One reaction to 9/11 was a furious media gun battle among practical jokers and conspirators, in which anything went and the first to click gained an advantage in disseminating his 'truth'," wrote Pascal Lardellier in "A Tangled Web," *Le Monde diplomatique,* September 2006, p. 28.

[22] On this point, see Alexander Cockburn, "The Age of Irrationality: The 9/11 Conspiracists and the Decline of the Anmerican Left," www.counterpunch.org/cockburn11282006.html.

[23] Éric Laurent has conducted an investigation (the results of which are open to dispute) into the alleged silence of the players involved in 9/11. Éric Laurent, *La face cachée du 11 septembre,* Paris, Plon, 2004.

[24] Élisabeth Vallet and Charles-Philippe David, *op.cit.,* 2006.

[25] Yves Derai, Laurent Guez, *Le pouvoir des Guignols*, Paris, Brodard et Taupin, 1998.

[26] Bob Woodward provides an impressive compilation of the decision-making mistakes made with respect to Iraq in *State of Denial,* Simon and Schuster, 2006.

[27] Raoul Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques,* Paris, Seuil, 1986, p. 52.

disappointing: it refers us to the structure of the U.S. decision-making system, in which fragmented power has institutionalized the "leak" as an instrument of democracy.

1.1. Fragmentation of power

The American political system is based on a system of horizontal and vertical separation of powers (Montesquieu would have called it a balance) that defines the entire U.S. administrative structure. Within the cabinet itself, the Chief Executive is enmeshed in a system of checks and balances similar to what Madison advocated,[28] precisely in order to create a balance and contain any abuses of power: "The system of checks and balances established by the Constitution operates more *within* than without the Executive branch."[29] There is no principle of cabinet solidarity or collegiality: the government is not subject to the imperatives of cohesion that bind a cabinet in a parliamentary system. The fragmentation of power is also reflected in the bureaucratic structure: with no pyramidal hierarchical principle requiring absolute subservience of the civil service to the President, public servants and administrators enjoy considerable manoeuvring room and decision-making power, and are a powerful force for inertia: "The bureaucracy is at once an instrument of presidential power, when the President is able to dominate it, and a source of trouble when it is undisciplined."[30] So much so that the federal bureaucracy is often the main locus of opposition.[31] The Oval Office is the fulcrum of the system. The President's position within the structure will determine the successes and failures of his administration.[32] Overlapping jurisdictions and mandates foster competition between agencies: throughout the decision-making process, each seeks to control the cogs and win influence over the individuals who set the tone of foreign policy. According to Graham

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[28] See Shirley Anne Warshaw, "The Formation and Use of the Cabinet," in Philipp G. Henderson, *The Presidency Then and Now,* Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, p. 119.

[29] Charles-Philippe David et al., *La politique étrangère des États-Unis – Fondements, acteurs, formulation,* Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2003, p. 177.

[30] Élisabeth Vallet, *La présidence des États-Unis,* Québec, Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2005, p. 163.

[31] According to Sam Sarkesian et al., *US National Security – Policymakers, Processes, and Politics,* Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 2002, p. 97.

[32] See Charles-Philippe David, *Au sein de la Maison Blanche – La formulation de la politique étrangère des États-Unis,* Québec City, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2004, p. 642; Andrew Rudalevidge, "The Structure of Leadership: Presidents, Hierarchies, and Information flow," *Presidential Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 35, No. 2, June 2005, pp. 333-360.

Allison, the bureaucratic approach[33] challenges utilitarianism as an explanatory scheme for foreign policy, insofar as it is based on the fragmentation of power and a vision of the State as a constellation of organizations that tend to converge towards the acme of the political structure. In this understanding, these organizations' own interests prevail over any higher national interest and determine policy directions. Each decision, then, is "the outcome of bargaining between groups within the government apparatus."[34] Without any overarching plan imposed from above, there can be no ideal decision-making model, "only an imperfect set of factors that explain the frequent shifts and unexpected turns in international relations."[35] Even the president's personal style and management style are subject to the opposing pressures exerted by bureaucratic bargaining.[36] In fact, foreign policy is more a collection of disjointed parts than a well-ordered structure controlled by a single design. Interviews with U.S. foreign policy operatives have provided an inside view of this system. For example, according to Zach Selden, a former civilian officer with NATO,[37] two factors are key: the limited ability of officers simply to assimilate and manage the daily flood of information inhibits their capacity to project themselves into the future, and the weight of bureaucratic habit leads officers to respond in terms predefined by the internal administrative culture and circumscribes their ability to "think outside the box." Selden cites the example of the alleged weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and explains that intelligence officers had to find an explanation for the disappearance of materials that could potentially be used to produce WMDs. In the absence of any evidence that these materials had not been diverted, the *only* valid explanation, from the point of view of administrative culture, was that they had indeed been diverted for military ends. The groupthink that prevailed at some levels of the intelligence community was simply due to administrative mechanisms, a hierarchical structure and limited field intelligence. However, groupthink cannot conceal dissent:

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[33] Graham Allison and Morton Halperin: "Bureaucratic Politics: A Paradigm and Some Policy Implications," *World Politics*, Vol. 24, Spring 1972, pp. 40-79; David Kozak and James Keagle (ed.), *Bureaucratic Politics and National Security*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 1988, pp. 3-15.
[34] Charles-Philippe David and Élisabeth Vallet, "Analyse du processus décisionnel," in Jean-Jacques Roche (ed.), *Méthodologie des relations internationales,* forthcoming.
[35] Ibid.
[36] See Charles-Philippe David, 2004, *op.cit.,*
[37] Interview with the author, May 20, 2007.

since opposing views find no outlet in the bureaucratic maelstrom, they often resort to leaks, which become an instrument of pluralism.

1.2. Leaks as an instrument of pluralistic democracy

There exists a more prosaic and perhaps disappointing explanation for 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq, to the extent that the latter was based on the existence of weapons of mass destruction: incompetence and the fragmentation of power.[38] The U.S. decision-making process is organized around a tangle of checks and balances in which there is a counterweight, somewhere in the system, to each actor, serving to curb any excesses. However, these mechanisms are weighed down by inertia, and it took three years for Congress, the national press and the Supreme Court to rebel against the abuses of what had become an omnipotent administration. Their silence and deference feeds the conspiracy theories. But those theories ignore three points. First, they neglect the unifying power of the "rally round the flag" reflex, which has often been observed; this impulse has an unbalancing effect of varying duration, depending on the course of events.[39] Secondly, they neglect the differences that can arise within an administration, of which the Pentagon Papers leaked by Daniel Ellsberg are the archetypal example. Thirdly, they ignore the fact that infra-state organizations will push their own agendas by orchestrating leaks.[40] This is why scandals eventually come to light, though the administration strives to cover them up (examples include Watergate, Irangate, Monicagate, Plamegate). Conspiracy theories therefore posit a superior intelligence where there are only fallible, opportunistic and vain human beings. The "comfort" of conspiracy is an illusion:[41] 9/11 was only a particularly successful attack; there was nothing behind the invasion of Iraq other than the opportunism of a group of neoconservative advisers stuck in Cold War thinking, the centripetal pull of groupthink

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[38] Carl Cavanagh Hodge, "America's Empire by Default," *Orbis: A Journal of World Affairs*, Winter 2005, Vol. 49, No. 1, pp. 61-73.
[39] See Sabine Lavorel, *La politique de sécurité nationale des États-Unis sous George W. Bush,* Paris, L'Harmattan, coll. Raoul-Dandurand, 2003.
[40] On this point, see Karine Prémont, "Les médias et la présidence américaine," in Élisabeth Vallet (ed.), *La présidence des États-Unis,* Sainte-Foy, Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2005, pp. 283-285.
[41] Robert Alan Goldberg, "Who Profited from the Crime? Intelligence Failure, Conspiracy Theories and the Case of September 11," *Intelligence and National Security*, Summer 2004, Vol. 19, No. 2, pp. 249-261. See also Pierre-Louis Malfatto, *Le renseignement et le 11 septembre,* Paris, L'Harmattan, 2008, forthcoming.

and a fearful population paralyzed by its sense of vulnerability.[42] Conspiracy theories also assume absolute silence on the part of all involved — planners and executors. There can be no leaks, deliberate or otherwise. However:

> As experience shows, there have been many conspiracies but few of them have achieved their end. This is because the conspirator needs others to help him, and those have to be men who, he believes, are disgruntled. But as soon as he reveals his mind to a man who is dissatisfied, he gives him the means to get satisfaction, because by telling all he knows the latter can hope to obtain all he wants. Seeing the sure profit to be won by informing, and the highly dangerous and doubtful alternative, a man must be either a rare friend indeed or else an utterly relentless enemy of the prince to keep faith with you.[43]

Given its tentacle-like structure, the lack of any hierarchical principle uniting all its agencies behind a single interest, and the system of checks of balances, the American democratic system is probably one of the most open among Western nations. Because it is not leak-proof, far from it, "a massive amount of information is available...This is one of the distinguishing features of the U.S. political system. However, the mass of data must be untangled."[44] Therefore, foreign policy-making cannot be subordinated to any "grand design," for the process involves a multitude of actors and a host of external constraints related to both domestic politics and the international environment. Conspiracy theories stray into explanation of decision-making, casting the process as at once foolish and rational. Its rationality is highly questionable, however, for it is riddled with contradictions, deviations, mistakes and, in the final analysis, the very opposite: irrationality. "This belief testifies, paradoxically, to blind faith in American power, although it has been known to fail in far less impressive enterprises than carrying out (and then covering up) a plot of this scale."[45]

2. Lack of rationality in the U.S. decision-making process

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[42] See Charles-Philippe David, 2004, *op.cit.,* pp. 627.

[43] Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince,* Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1961. Translated by George Bull. Chapter XIX, pp. 103-104.

[44] Charles-Philippe David, "Les instruments de recherche sur la présidence," in Élisabeth Vallet (2005), *op.cit.,* p. 342.

[45] Alexander Cockburn, cited in "Scepticisme ou occultisme? Le complot du 11 septembre n'aura pas lieu," *Le Monde diplomatique,* December 2006, p. 3.

Ideally, the White House should arrive at a decision on the basis of reasoned consideration and a thorough cost-benefit analysis. If this were so, the decision would be carefully calculated, driven by comprehensive foreign policy considerations, and the variables under consideration would be confined to the objectives of the state or of the central protagonist, and the immediate environment in which they are acting.[46] The utilitarian approach[47] embraces this view, supported by rational choice theory, which models an ideal decision-making situation. Ultimately, conspiracy theories are consistent with this theoretical framework. They assume that decision-makers possess absolute knowledge, full command of all variables, and an unmatched ability to anticipate (or reduce) contingencies. However, the reality is quite different: "Decision-makers often act on the basis of information that is at once copious and fragmentary, awash with imponderables, impairing any theory that assumes ideal rational behaviour."[48] Each decision-maker carries an irreducible kernel of subjectivity that bends at least some of the decision parameters, reducing the rationality of the process — and therefore its susceptibility to conspiracy. The subjectivity of the decision-makers, which by definition cannot be "objectified," is one of the key flaws in any conspiracy theory.

2.1. Subjectivity of decision-makers

Decision-makers do not make *the* best decision; they make *a* decision, the one that seems most appropriate to them in view of their life experience, government experience, and the information at their disposal. The perceptual approach[49] attends to these factors, rejecting at least in part the tenets of rational choice theory:[50] "Here, the idea of the national interest is displaced by the manner in which the situation is defined."[51] In times

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[46] Most introductory texts try to balance systemic analysis with foreign policy analysis. Both levels of analysis are addressed in Frédéric Charillon (ed.), *Politique étrangère. Nouveaux regards*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2002.

[47] See Howard Wiarda, *American Foreign Policy: Actors and Processes*, New York, Harper Collins, 2nd edition, 1996, Chap. 2.

[48] See Élisabeth Vallet and Charles-Philippe David, 2006, *op.cit.*

[49] See Alexander George, *Presidential Decision-Making in Foreign Policy*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1980, Chap. 3. Paul 't Hart, *Groupthink in Government: A Study of Small Groups and Policy Failure*, Amsterdam, Swets & Zeitlinger, 1990.

[50] Alexander George and Juliette George (eds.), *Presidential Personality and Performance*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1998.

[51] Élisabeth Vallet and Charles-Philippe David, 2006, *op.cit.*

of crisis, perceptions play a crucial role in decision-making: stress and a sense of urgency can increase stereotypical reactions that often spring more from immediate individual interests than from national concerns or overarching perspectives.[52] Such reactions narrow the range of available options, on the basis of purely circumstantial factors.[53] The decision-maker (who rarely acts alone but rather in concert with others, increasing the complexity of the decision-making process[54]) sees the situation through the distorting lens of his own perceptions, not from an eagle's-eye view informed by a higher design. Often, therefore, "urgency and intuitive choice carry the day."[55] According to Charles-Philippe David, cognitive factors shape decision-making through a four-pronged process: first, "the decision-makers mentally relate the situation to references drawn from the past (historical analogies); secondly, they attempt to render their perceptions internally consistent (coherency); thirdly, they seek out simple explanations that legitimate their solutions (economies of simplicity); finally, they carry over the same perceptions from one issue to another in order to preserve their core beliefs (stability)." David relates cognitive attitudes to the level at which they play out (i.e. the individual or the group), thereby multiplying the decision-making arenas, the variables involved[56] and therefore the uncertainties.[57] At the group level, the tug of groupthink, or the tendency towards uniformity in groups, is a quasi-natural complexity reducing mechanism that systematically affects the rationality of the decision-making process, but to varying degrees.[58] The search for consensus, at the expense of healthy dissent, partially explains certain foreign policy mistakes.[59] The style that a particular National Security Advisor or President brings to the office is emblematic of the influence that subjective factors exert on the decision-making process, leaving us far removed from any kind of transcendent

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[52] See Charles-Philippe David, 2004, *op.cit.,* pp. 28-30.

[53] Richard Hermann and Michael Fischerkeller, "Beyond the Enemy Image and Spiral Model: Cognitive-Strategic Research After the Cold War," *International Organization*, Vol. 49, Spring 1995, pp. 415-450.

[54] Charles-Philippe David, "Les principaux acteurs de la prise de décision dans la formulation de la politique étrangère," in Denis Lacorne (ed.), *Les États-Unis,* Paris, Fayard, Ceri, 2006, pp. 351-364.

[55] Nicolas Tenzer, "Les institutions contre la décision ?" *Le Banquet,* No. 23, March 2006, p. 52.

[56] See Alexander George, *Presidential Decision-Making in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice,* Boulder, Westview Press, 1980, Chap. 2.

[57] Charles-Philippe David, 2004, *op.cit.,* pp.28, 31 and 33.

[58] See Irving Janis, *Victims of Groupthink,* Boston, Houghton-Mifflin, 1972.

[59] See for example Charles-Philippe David et al., *Foreign Policy Failure in the White House: Reappraising the Fall of the Shah and the Iran-Contra Affair,* Lanham, University Press of America, 1993.

rationality.[60] Still, one might think, it could be possible for decision-makers at the top of the power pyramid to bend the entire process to their will and design. This assumes that there is a single group of decision-makers driven by a single idea and capable of imposing it. But while it is true, for example, that the neo-conservative discourse reshaped U.S. policy in the wake of 9/11,[61] its ascendancy[62] can hardly be considered more than a passing phase[63] produced by temporary circumstance. There is no "coherent, organized structure," strictly speaking, that defines U.S. power.[64]

2.2. Absence of coherent overall structure

The architecture of the U.S. decision-making system contains a myriad of organizations that stream the information and data available to them towards the White House.[65] However, they are not all drawn by a centripetal force of equal strength and the information they provide is influenced by ideological fault lines that often mark out bureaucratic turf wars. The intelligence community, which is a key instrument of foreign policy-making, is shot through with jurisdictional rivalries and opposed analytical claims that can produce dysfunctional responses (and therefore flawed decisions) quite unrelated to any conspiratorial intent.[66] David argues, however, that Graham Allison's suggestion that decision-making conflict is inevitable is overstated. It is true, once again, that in addition to bureaucratic loyalties, factors such as personal perceptions, beliefs and political affiliations will influence an advisor or decision-maker in favouring one option

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[60] For two studies with opposed results, see Charles-Philippe, "Who Was the Real George Bush? Foreign Policy Decision-Making under the Bush Administration," *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 7, March 1996, pp. 197-220, and by the same writer, "James Earl Carter," in Carl C. Hodge and Cathal J. Nolan, *U.S. Presidents Foreign Policy From 1789 to the Present,* Santa Barbara, ABC Clio, 2007, pp. 331-336.

[61] David Grondin, "Une lecture critique du discours néoconservateur sur l'hégémonie et l'empire : le redéploiement et la perception de la puissance américaine," *Études Internationales,* Vol. XXXVI, No. 4, December 2005, p. 498.

[62] In this connection, Arnaud Blin ascribes to the neocons a masterplan that hinges on a strategy of permanent war. See Arnaud Blin, *Le désarroi de la puissance. Les États-Unis vers la guerre permanente?,* Paris, Éditions Lignes de repères, 2004.

[63] In fact, the "ideological radicalization" discussed by David Grondin (*op.cit.,* p. 497) has had its day and the recovery of checks and balances, coupled with the election of a Democratic majority in the House of Representatives in 2006, has made it clear that the forces in play, of whatever nature, are indeed short-lived.

[64] Michel Wieviorka (ed.), *L'empire américain,* Paris, Balland, 2004, p. 24.

[65] On this point, see Charles-Philippe David and Élisabeth Vallet, "Le conseil de sécurité nationale et la politique étrangère américaine," *Diplomatie,* No. 6, November-December 2003, p. 17.

[66] See Pierre-Louis Malfatto, *op.cit.*

over another.[67] At the same time, according to David, administrative subcultures[68] play a decisive role in moulding individual perceptions. And the interdepartmental mechanisms that have been created to reduce these distortions[69] also have a real impact on decision-making. The diversity of cognitive inputs from individuals and groups, from bureaucrats and advisors, reduces the likelihood that a plot could be fomented and actually carried out. The bureaucratic and individual obstacles are colossal, precisely because the bureaucratic, political and administrative systems are not organized around a predefined centre.[70] To be sure, the fact that the decision-making system lacks a coherent, unifying structure does not mean it is impossible for one group to dominate at a particular point in time – on the contrary, it may even facilitate it[71] – but it will also render any such domination short-lived, given the unpredictable but inescapable pendulum motion of checks and balances in the American political/administrative system. In other words, any hypothetical conspiracy would have a very narrow window of opportunity, and this only if we assume airtight separation between the levels of the decision-making system, extraordinary events, the total absence of internal disagreement and unprecedented centralization of power. None of these features is characteristic of American decision-making. Consequently, there is no rationality that is consubstantial with the decision-making mechanisms and instruments, and which could be harnessed for the purposes of a conspiracy.

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U.S. foreign policy is formulated through a process that is in constant flux.[72] Its movement cannot be foreseen, for too many factors combine to determine its direction.[73] Therefore, the plotters themselves would not be able to rely on this system; its shifting

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[67] Charles-Philippe David, 2004, *op.cit.,* p.41.

68 Jutta Weldes, "Bureaucratic Politics: A Critical Constructivist Assessment," *Mershon International Studies Review*, Vol. 42, Fall 1998, pp. 216-225.

[69] Alexander George and Eric Stern., "Harnessing Conflict in Foreign Policy Making: From Devil's to Multiple Advocacy," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 32, September 2002, pp. 484-508.

[70] See Justin Vaïsse and Pierre Mélandri, *L'empire du milieu. Les États-Unis et le monde depuis la guerre froide,* Paris, Odile Jacob, 2001.

[71] See Charles-Philippe David, "L'invasion de l'Irak : les dessous de la prise de décision de la présidence Bush," *La Revue internationale et stratégique,* No. 57, Spring 2005.

[72] See Valérie Hudson, "Foreign Policy Analysis: Actor-Specific Theory and the Ground of International Relations," *Foreign Policy Analysis,* Vol. 1, No. 1, March 2005, pp. 1-30.

[73] Charles-Philippe David, "Introduction: Lectures sur l'hégémonie et l'avenir de la puissance américaine," *Études Internationales,* Vol. XXXVI, No. 4, December 2005, p. 441.

nature would make the outcome of their conspiracy impossible to predict. Beyond these strictly practical considerations, we must return to the sociological roots of conspiracy theories: "A central characteristic of the conspiracists is that they have a devout, albeit preposterous belief in American efficiency."[74] Indeed, they personify the American national character,[75] the faith in the experts,[76] the confidence that the technological means available to the U.S. government will compensate for any human failing. The conspiracy theorists assume that U.S. power is invulnerable, that the American defence and intelligence agencies are infallible. They simplistically trust the flat assertions of the spokespersons for the Department of Defence, the Department of State, the Department of Homeland Security: "They believe that military systems should work they way Pentagon press flacks and aerospace salesmen say they should work....They appear to have read no military history, which is too bad because if they did they'd know that minutely planned operations...screw up with monotonous regularity, by reason of stupidity, cowardice, venality."[77] Far from exposing the "American peril,"[78] the conspiracy theorists actually embrace the cultural underpinnings of U.S. foreign policy: they have internalized the conventional discourse and are incapable of genuine criticism. In the final analysis, they are boosters of absolute power. If we dissect the mechanisms of a conspiracy theory, we find that it "is comparable to typical delusions of persecution: it leaves no room for chance or accident."[79] And there's the rub. For it is clear that foreign policy, like any policy, is studded with chance events and accidents, such as 9/11, which irreversibly alter the course of history, and with it the fate of the conspirators.

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[74] Alexander Cockburn, *op.cit.*

[75] See Louis Balthazar, "Le cadre culturel : le style national," in Charles-Philippe David et al., *La politique étrangère des États-Unis,* Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2003, pp. 41-70.

[76] Stanley Hoffman, *Gulliver's Troubles, or the Setting of American Foreign Policy,* New York, McGraw-Hill, 1968, p. 226.

[77] Alexander Cockburn, *op.cit.*

[78] Octave Noël, *Le péril américain,* Paris, De Soye et fils, 1899.

[79] Raoul Girardet, *op.cit.,* p.56.