

THE PERILS OF “STRATEGIC MESSAGING”

“We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.” Senior Bush aide, quoted by Ron Suskind

The WSJ has a fascinating account of how President Obama’s efforts to extend our will without military intervention failed in Syria.

Early in the article, it describes that, as the Administration was debating intervening directly last summer, senior officials “misjudged” the situation because rebels “appeared” to be getting close to killing Bashar al-Assad.

Just as pressure to intervene grew last summer, White House officials were buoyed by a series of attacks where rebels appeared to be getting close to killing Mr. Assad. Several senior officials now acknowledge the U.S. misjudged how long Mr. Assad could hold on.

Many paragraphs later, the article elaborates on what caused this “misjudgment” about Assad’s resilience. It describes how in this period last summer, the Obama Administration was focused on post-Assad planning, rather than on getting rid of Assad, because the intelligence had “created a sense” that Assad would be ousted by the rebels acting alone.

The administration committee charged with Syria policy was kept on a tight leash by Mr. McDonough, then the deputy national security adviser and a close confidante to Mr. Obama, participants say. They said Mr. McDonough made clear that Mr. Obama wasn’t interested in proposals that could lead the U.S. down

a slippery slope to military intervention; instead, he had the committee focus mostly on post-Assad planning.

“It was clear to all participants that this was what the White House wanted, as opposed to really focusing on key questions of how do you get to the post-Assad period,” one participant said.

Administration officials said one of the reasons the committee was told to focus on post-Assad planning was because intelligence at the time created “a sense” in the White House that Mr. Assad could be killed by rebels or his own people, eliminating the need for riskier measures to support the rebel campaign.

“Appeared to be getting close” ... “created a sense.”

The article doesn’t say it explicitly, but either the intelligence the White House was getting about Syria was faulty, or the White House was reading into the intelligence what it wanted to hear (perhaps in their hopes that the “Obama Doctrine” would work better than Donald Rumsfeld’s fetish for a light footprint).

That passage on how problematic intelligence led the Administration to assume Assad’s downfall is almost immediately followed by the airing of a dispute about whether or not the Administration was also focused on “strategic messaging.”

Likewise, high-level White House national security meetings on Syria focused on what participants called “strategic messaging,” how administration policy should be presented to the public, according to current and former officials who took part in the meetings.

Another administration official disputed that account, saying there were multiple

cabinet-level meetings “with extensive and rigorous analysis presented” and that he didn’t recall strategic messaging ever being a “central topic of discussion at senior levels.” [my emphasis]

I find it telling that WSJ so closely follows a description of some kind of problem with intelligence with the (disputed) suggestion that even as the Administration was acting on faulty intelligence, it was focusing on its own “strategic messaging.”

Go skim Moon of Alabama’s archive from last July. It’s a very good read not only of the abundant open source evidence Assad might not be ousted so easily (and if he was, the problems that would create), but also of how much western propaganda was spinning what was going on in Syria.

That’s the thing: much of what was being reported – in public western reports, at least – was propaganda. Perhaps Israeli, perhaps rebel, perhaps Turkish, perhaps American. But obviously propaganda.

Now, the article presents a different chronology: the Administration got faulty intelligence (or misread what it got), and in response moved onto spinning what they were doing in Syria.

But I can’t help but wonder whether the Administration fell for its own propaganda about what it was doing in Syria?