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Trends. Cognitive Complexity, Moral Complexity, and Foreign Policy: Commonalities between President Suharto and William Weld

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

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Two very different politicians are having similar political problems. Should President Suharto and Indonesia, the country he leads, be evaluated based on single moral Issues such as human rights and East Timor, degree of association with illegal campaign contributions in the 1996 United States (US) national elections, or corruption and nepotism related to international business deals? Single strategic Issues such as potential in countering or influencing the designs of the People's Republic of China or significance within the Association of South East Asian Nations? Or a strategic-moral calculus covering the entire playing field?

Should former Governor of Massachusetts and current nominee for US Ambassador to Mexico be evaluated based on single positive Issues of competence such as familiarity with the Spanish language, prior criminal justice system experience, or managerial experience leading as a governor? Single negative Issues of competence such as alleged "softness" on combating illicit drug trafficking or not manifesting intense affiliation behavior towards the Chairperson of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee? Single (seemingly) ambivalent Issues such as alleged independence of mind or willingness to be used to exploit divisions among congresspersons of the Republican Party? Or an evaluation of all of the above and more?

President Suharto and Ambassador-nominee Weld both confront allies and adversaries who sincerely believe that a litmus test of one Issue is sufficient in evaluation. Others who seize upon an Issue to further some other objective and are always willing to play "low ball," "bait and switch", and other versions of sting operations. And still others who vary in their ability and motivation to engage in comprehensive evaluation regardless of political agenda (See IBPP article cited below.)

The current dilemmas of complexity facing President Suharto and Ambassador-nominee Weld are not novel. As Thucydides wrote about the conflicts faced by Athens and Sparta leading to the Peloponnesian War, "As to the reasons why they broke the truce, I propose first to give an account of the causes of complaint...but the real reason for the war is...most likely to be disguised by such an argument." (See Hutus and Tutsis: A case for cognitive complexity and social intelligence in foreign policy. International Bulletin of Political Psychology, 1(3), 1-4; Thucydides. (1967.) The Peloponnesian War. (Tr. R. Warner.) Baltimore, MD, Penguin Books, Book 1, Chapter 1, p.25. (Originally written c. 420-400 B.C.)