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Trends. Bombing Iraq: The Relativity of Time

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As this article is being written (December 17, 1998, 9:15am EDT), the most salient discourse among politicians and citizens throughout the world concerning the military attack on Iraq by the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) is on the time of attack. Two elements of time seem to be of special interest: (1) absolute temporal contiguity between the attack’s initiation and an impending US House of Representatives vote of impeachment of the US President and (2) relative temporal duration between the latest United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) report on Iraqi noncompliance with UN resolutions and the military attack.

Absolute Temporal Contiguity. A significant amount of social psychological research suggests that the absolute temporal contiguity of two events--irrespective of the occurrence and type of previous temporal pairings--may reinforce attributions of a causal relationship linking the two. Thus, some observers are advocating that the military attack was at least partially intended to forestall an impeachment vote. The practical utility of temporal contiguity findings often is suspect, however. For example, one could just as easily advocate that the impending impeachment vote was intended to have some effect on a response to Iraqi noncompliance. Moreover, given the many concurrent, proximal, and even distal events that fill a temporal interlude, one could pose many causal relationships among two or more events, including an impeachment vote and/or the military attack.

Relative Temporal Contiguity. A significant amount of social psychological research suggests that a discontinuity of the temporal contiguity between two events relative to previous temporal pairings of the two events often may be indicative of an intermediary factor causing the discontinuity. Thus, some observers are advocating that the impending impeachment vote caused the duration between the UNSCOM report and the military attack to be much shorter than that between previous reports on Iraqi noncompliance and the coordination diplomatic/logistical buildup to actual military attack. The problem in applying psychological findings to relative temporal contiguity is the acontextual nature of the analysis. The notion that each temporal paring of events could in and of itself respectively and causally reduce the temporal duration between events for future pairings is discounted for a separate, independent analysis of each paring. Thus, a relatively short duration between Iraqi noncompliance and buildup for military attack compared to previous pairings is viewed as an anomaly crying out for explanation through a third event than as a logical and consistent progression towards an inevitable endpoint.

Yet the True Believers, false believers, the venal, the morally stalwart, the partisan, the bipartisan, the constitutional subverters, discounters, and upholders--all are partially encumbered by temporal chains and partially able to break these chains to suit their purposes. So it can be argued dispassionately whether the timing of the military attack is appropriate. But the timing has inevitably led to the subjugation of time as another usual suspect and victim of the true, oldest profession--politics. (See Collins, W.A. (1973). Effect of temporal separation between motivation, aggression, and consequences: A developmental study. Developmental Psychology, 8, 215-221; Combe, C. (1997). Temporalite et contiguiete: La deformation coherente de la memoire. Revue Francaise de Psychanalyse, 61, 1831-1839; Miller, R.R., & Barnet, R.C. (1993). The role of time in elementary associations. Current Directions in
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