4-18-2003

Special Article. A Statement on the Iraq War from Psychologists for Social Responsibility: Sense and Nonsense

Editor

Recommended Citation

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Abstract. This article identifies problematic attributions in a statement by Psychologists for Social Responsibility on the United States-led military intervention in Iraq.

Psychologists for Social Responsibility (PsySR) has recently Issued Statement on the Iraq War (April 11, 2003) that is intended to be "distribute(d) as widely as possible," "useful in public dialogue," and "a basis for….discussions with legislators, colleagues, (and) friends." The statement's focus is on "concrete steps with regard to post-war Iraq."

As with any statement Issued by an advocacy group of socially sanctioned professionals, one is quickly confronted with at least four assumptions. First, the statement may yield an accurate opinion of some situation based on some alleged special knowledge stemming from the alleged expertise that is the essence of a group's professional identity. Second, the statement may yield an accurate opinion of some situation based on some alleged special knowledge stemming not from the alleged essential expertise of the professional group but on other alleged traits or characteristics of that group--e.g., intelligence, human compassion, or a cornering of the market on the Truth and the Good as they apply across the board or to a specific commodity such values related to violence. Third, both alleged essential expertise and other alleged traits and characteristics might be linked to accuracy. Fourth, the professional identification of the advocacy group might be a tip off that the advocacy position is to be disbelieved, discounted, or even perceived as irrelevant to or the converse of what is accurate. At Issue in the present article are attributions bearing on the assumption that some special psychological knowledge may inform the PsySR advocacy that is clearly oppositional to the United States (US)-led military intervention in Iraq and US Government (USG) plans for its aftermath. This Issue is important in that the very name PsySR reinforces an inference that the advocacy group members have special expert knowledge about people, that this knowledge is being applied in a socially responsible fashion, and that opponents of PsySR may have neither equal or equivalent expertise and a socially responsible penchant. What follows, then, is a commentary on attributions taken from the PsySR document.

The Bush administration's "so-called preemptive strike on Iraq." This attribution seems to imply that either there has been no preemptive war or that a preemptive war did not need to occur. As to the former, because there has been and is a war, one might assume that it has not been preemptive but something else of a proactive or even a reactive nature. Many of these other possibilities could still support the morality, ethics, and legality of the war--unless all war would essentially be immoral, unethical, and illegal. This latter possibility may be the case, but the special psychological knowledge to support it is not being made.

As to the implication that a preemptive war has occurred but did not need to occur, one would, then, search for what threat was on some temporal horizon that could be reduced through a war. That the threat was nonexistent or minimal in kind or geographical or temporal proximity might be the case, but PsySR does not provide data supporting this and such data, if presented, would not necessarily be

1

psychological in nature. The same is the case for positing that there was a significant threat that could have been adequately addressed through non-war means.

The war "was done ... without exploring nonviolent strategies for accomplishing the same ends with less damaging means. It is falsely assumed that this was the only way." Although there appear to be many possible ends to the war--viz., finding and destroying weapons of mass destruction, liberating a majority of the Iraqi people, inducing a democratic Iraq, inducing democracies throughout the Mideast, successfully prosecuting a war on terrorism with global reach--the facts are to the contrary of the PsySR attribution. The contemporary historical record is replete with strategies and tactics short of violence involving negotiations, other diplomatic activities, inspections, economic sanctions, and so on. A better PsySR argument might involve exploring the USG's sincerity in implementing non-war strategies and tactics and a presentation of facts suggesting differential sincerities within the USG. Expounding on sincerity and insincerity based on the psychology of motivation and intentionality could be one psychological approach--an approach not taken by PsySR.

 "Military action has the potential to reduce the security of the United States, erode our basic freedoms, and civil rights, and ultimately hasten the decline of US influence for good in the world." One problem with this attribution is that the same can apply to any USG policy. Another is that the same can apply to not having a specific USG policy. A psychological point of departure might focus on factors--e.g., locus of control, narcissism, authoritarianism, private and public self-consciousness--bearing on the omnipresent tension between the civil liberties of individual on the one hand and the collective security of body politic on the other.

"Full UN control of the post-war rebuilding process in Iraq should be pursued to thwart claims that the US has imperialist intentions in the Mideast.". The fact remains that there are state and non-state political actors--e.g., adversaries, neutrals, and even some oppositional allies--who will assert that the USG is imperialist and worse regardless of UN control--especially because the USG is a member of the United Nations Security Council that would largely control control. Moreover, there are many robust examples of social, cultural, economic, and political imperialism that constitute the praxis of USG and US individuals, groups, organizations, and other entities that would, presumably, remain. Moreover, the very construct of imperialism does not necessarily suggest noxious intentions and/or noxious consequences when making attributions concerning moral and ethical behavior. Whether specific instances of imperialism attributions are examples of the projections of the attributor or of the insidious evil of who or what is being by the labeled by the attribution could merit psychological analysis.

-----....."to reverse images of the US as a country that is unable to cooperate with other countries, threatens force when it doesn't get its way, and breaks its word in international agreements." On closer examination of contemporary public discourse, one might better claim to be concerned about the USG cooperating when it sees it in its interest to do so--and otherwise not cooperating. Such realpolitik certainly can be attacked, but one would need to attack it through contrasting the intentional and/or consequential aspects of other conceptions of appropriate foreign policy--perhaps through an applied behavioral analysis. Of course, if political actors such as PsySR repeat the concern of not being able to cooperate with other countries frequently enough and regardless of the actual actions of the target towards which attributions are being made, the concern certainly may become a an even more robust image that needs to be reversed. And here PsySR would be identifying and proposing a solution for an iatrogenic problem.

2

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

The same sort of analysis can be applied to the attributions about using force and about breaking its word. As to the former, the core of counterarguments would focus on using force as a means of supporting vital national interests as opposed to using force when the USG does not get its way. Often enough, there may be viable alternatives to using force, but to posit viable alternatives always as a given would require a psychological argument not yet presented by PsySR.

As to the latter (breaking its word), one can strongly argue that the Bush administration has rarely broken its word in the context of treaties, but has rightly or wrongly chosen not to support and to extricate itself from agreements apparently supported by PsySR. Legality and ethics--if not morality--are on the side of the USG in leaving strategic defense agreements, not supporting some international environmental agreements, and not continuing the Clinton administration's support for the International Criminal Court. That such decisions may be very bad policy is a legitimate point of dialogue--but one to which special psychological knowledge is not being applied.

 "(n)o one who has been part of Saddam Hussein's regime should have anything to do with reconstruction." This attribution is a recipe for disaster in two ways. First, as with most totalitarian regimes, there are very few Iraqis who have not been part of the regime. Second, the exclusion of these Iraqis would set up a huge impediment to integrating the Iraqi population into some conception of democratic process.

 "The threatened use of preemptive and unilateral military force sends an undemocratic image of the US to the rest of the world and fuels the efforts of those that seek to do us harm." One can (at least arguably) still be democratic and use force whether that force is preemptive and/or unilateral or not. Moreover, there are many terrorism experts with empirical data (the intentional and unintentional self-reports of terrorists) to support the position that it is the frequently non-violent and otherwise (until 9/11) only mildly violent response of the USG that has fueled and encouraged the efforts of terrorists with global reach. That both violence and no violence (and all acts are one, the other, or a combination) may both fuel and deter or defuse terrorist behavior may suggest that only lethal force will significantly reduce at least certain types of terrorism. PsySR has a tremendous opportunity to judiciously apply a huge database on the social psychological effects of violence to matters of antiterrorism and counterterrorism.

 "Serious attention needs to be paid to reducing the conditions in other countries that spawn terrorist thinking and commitment to terrorist acts." PsySR rightly cites the need to support humanitarian aid and the resolution of other festering problems. However, many terrorism experts note that the common lay perception of poverty and human rights violations driving terrorist motivation is often incorrect. An ongoing empirical research project identifying the motivators of terrorist behavior would be a significant contribution from an advocacy organization of psychologists.

In conclusion, one might well make the case that the PsySR statement is one of political advocacy masquerading as expert psychology, as opposed to expert psychological opinion on matters, ultimately, of life and death. It would seem that a socially responsible organization would do more to be less easily tarred with such an attribution. (See Buijs, F. (2001). Political violence: Threat and challenge. Netherlands Journal of Social Sciences, 37, 7-23; Butler, J. (2003). Violence, mourning, politics. Studies in Gender & Sexuality, 4, 9-37; Jacobs, D., & Carmichael, J.T. (2002). Subordination and violence against state control agents: Testing political explanation for lethal assaults against the police. Social Forces, 80, 1223-1251; Papadopoulos, D. (2003). The ordinary superstition of subjectivity: Liberalism and technostructural violence. Theory & Psychology, 13, 73-93; Psychologists for Social Responsibility

3

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Statement on the Iraq War (April 11, 2003). http://www.psysr.org/iraq%20future.htm; Shamir, J.; & Shikaki, K. (2002). Self-serving perceptions of terrorism among Israelis and Palestinians. Political Psychology, 23, 537-557.) (Keywords: Iraq.)

4