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HEADLINE: The wrong approach

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BODY:

UNUSUALLY in this election year, foreign policy and the economy are running neck and neck as candidates for the issue most important to voters.

In each area, the choice is similar. The Bush administration and its supporters stand for simple propositions: Tax cuts are good. We have to be tough on terrorists.

Many voters are attracted by the seeming clarity of these appealing truths. Should they be?

Such simple propositions endanger us and especially endanger future generations. It is not enough to want to cut taxes; one must also know when, where and how. It is not enough to use military force; one must also know when, where and how.

Indiscriminate tax-cutting, without careful consideration of the spending side of the budgetary equation, gives some Americans a burst of disposable income that feels good at first. But later it leaves the economy saddled with the burden of a huge national debt.

Similarly, the indiscriminate, unilateral use of military force, without careful consideration of the "soft power" side of the foreign policy equation, gives us a burst of firepower that makes some Americans feel safer at first. But later it leaves our national security saddled with the burden of terrorist forces that have grown more numerous, allies that have grown more suspicious and polls indicating a massive increase in hostility toward the United States, especially in the Islamic world.

The most disturbing aspect of this White House is that decisions are made by a process that lacks the elementary steps of information-gathering and evaluation of policy options. The shortcomings are equally in evidence in the foreign policy and economic spheres.

Any successful business person has a system for making important decisions. Goals are formulated, information is gathered, the relevant options are listed, pros and cons are considered, probabilities are evaluated and a decision is made. The process of gathering information continues subsequently, so that if events develop differently from what was predicted, appropriate midcourse adjustments can be considered.

How does the Bush administration operate? Former Treasury Secretary Paul H. O'Neill and Richard A. Clarke, the former terrorism director at the National Security Council, paint remarkably similar pictures in their books.

Through some unknown intuitive leap, the answer regarding the correct policy appears, these insiders tell us, at the beginning of the process. Apparently no real consideration of alternatives or consequences is encouraged or even allowed. Intelligence, models and arguments are solicited only to bolster the preconceived answer.

When critics predict the tax cuts will lead to budget deficits rather than surpluses, or the invasion of Iraq will increase terrorism rather than diminish it, they are ignored or ridiculed. Most remarkably, when reality subsequently departs from the prepared script, there is apparently no feedback from anyone in the White House. No matter how many times events falsify earlier statements, there is no confession of error, only new assurances that it has become even more important to redouble the folly.

Without meaningful analysis or debate, the White House launched tax cuts that were peculiarly designed to give relatively little stimulus when it was needed but to ensure very large revenue losses in the coming decade and to benefit those earning more than \$200,000 a year.

First they said the tax cuts weren't going to hurt the budget surplus. Then when the record surplus they had inherited turned to a record deficit, as the critics had warned, the story became that the deficits would help reduce the rate of growth of spending, and more tax cuts were needed. Then when spending continued to grow much faster than during the Clinton years, as the critics had said, the story changed again - deficits don't much affect interest rates.

An analogous story applies to foreign policy. With very little real analysis or debate, the Bush administration decided to respond to 9/11 by attacking Iraq, a country that was not involved. When evidence of Iraqi connections to 9/11 could not be found, other rationales were offered. Iraq's weapons of mass destruction posed an imminent threat to our security, we were told. Democracy was going to spring up in Iraq and set a precedent for the rest of the region.

When it became apparent that this was not likely to happen, the administration switched emphasis yet again. Apologists argued that at least people are no longer being tortured in Iraqi jails. In remarkably short order, the photos of Abu Ghraib discredited that rationale as well. Terrorism is on the rise. The number of terrorist incidents worldwide has nearly doubled in the two years after 9/11 compared with the two years prior.

It's not just that the short-term outlook looks bleak. Even more worrisome is that America's image is stained. Today, few outside America see the United States as a beacon of human rights and democracy. This tarnished image is likely to impair our ability to conduct foreign policy for years.

How can we explain this unusual approach to policy-making in the White House? Our president keeps reminding us of the virtues of steadfastness and resolve. But is resolve a virtue or a vice if our approach is wrong? Deaths and debts continue to mount. Future generations may well wonder: What could we have been thinking?

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