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DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR

Shankar Vedantam

Iraq and the Danger of Psychological Entrapment

As Robert M. Gates appears this week at Senate confirmation hearings for defense secretary, Wesleyan University psychologist Scott Plous sees a hidden trap. To understand it, take a little test.

Let's say your elderly dad has a beloved car. Its reliability was legendary, but it has started to have problems. He gets one thing fixed, and something else goes wrong. Each fix doesn't cost much, but they add up, and then the problems start to get bigger. Your dad is convinced the next repair will get the car as good as new. Would you advise him to pull the plug and get rid of the car?

Or consider this. A friend invests some money after getting a tip about a stock. The price soars, and your friend gains 10 percent overnight. He immediately doubles his investment. A week later, the thing tanks, and he is in the red. A month later, it dives again, and he has lost a quarter of his investment. Should he cut his losses and sell?

One more, and yes, these are all trick questions. A woman you care about falls in love. After many years of a happy relationship, the person she is with develops a vicious streak, starts smashing things and occasionally gives her a black eye. Would you tell her to walk out of the relationship?

The trick in all these questions is that when presented with such scenarios, it is easy for us to answer yes. Your dad should sell that car, your friend should save what money he can, and the person you care about should dump that abuser.

Every day, of course, when it comes to such decisions in our own lives, millions of people answer no.

The difference is because of a widespread phenomenon in human behavior known as entrapment. When you invest yourself in something, it is exceedingly difficult to discard your investment. What is devilish about entrapment is not just that it can result in ever greater losses, but that those losses get you ever more entrapped, because now you have even more invested.

Plous, a social psychologist and author of "The Psychology of Judgment and Decision Making," said experiments show that psychological entrapment comes in at least four guises: the investment trap, in which we try to recover sunk costs by throwing good money after bad; the time delay trap, in which a short-term benefit carries the seed of long-term problems; the deterioration trap, in which things that started out well slowly get worse; and the ignorance trap, in which hidden risks surface suddenly.

What does this have to do with the Gates confirmation? Plous sees the U.S. dilemma about what military course to take in Iraq as a perfect example of psychological entrapment — on a national scale.



BY RICKY CARIOTTI — THE WASHINGTON POST

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"What is remarkable is that the war in Iraq is a kind of super trap that has all these elements," Plous said. "Some weeks things look better, and then they look worse and then there is a setback. What we need is to take a step back and ask, 'If we were faced with the choice today without sunk costs, what decision would we make?'"

Plous is talking about the quick military victory followed by the zigzag decline into nightmare: the lack of intelligence on the ground about Saddam Hussein's supposed weapons of mass destruction; the hundreds of billions of dollars invested to fight the war; and above all, the lives of thousands of Americans that have been lost.

Plous said his alarm bells went off when he realized that President Bush was explicitly using the language of entrapment in speeches to rally support for the war. "Retreating from Iraq would dishonor the service of our brave men and women who have sacrificed in that country and have given their lives in that country, which would mean their sacrifice would be in vain," the president said recently.

Plous's point is not that Bush's appeal is ineffective; the point of entrapment is that it is exceedingly effective. It is utterly human not to want a great sacrifice to go in vain.

Relatives mourned Army Capt. Shane Timothy Adcock, who died last month in Iraq. Psychologist Scott Plous says continuing a war primarily because so many lives have already been lost is an example of psychological entrapment — we do not want those lives to have been lost in vain.

I asked Plous whether he was drawing his conclusion only because the war in Iraq is going badly. Would he have told the British the same thing, for example, during the bleakest days of 1940, when a German victory seemed imminent — and when holding on led to victory over Adolf Hitler?

In other words, how do you tell the difference between getting entrapped in a disaster and being persistent through the difficult phase that can precede victory?

Psychology cannot predict the future or tell you what to do, but Plous said it can warn you to be vigilant if a course of action is *primarily* justified in terms of recovering what has already been lost. It is not wrong to factor in sunk costs, but they should not drive the decision.

In the World War II example, defeating fascism, not honoring dead British soldiers, was the reason it made sense to fight on.

"Rational decision-making should not be driven primarily by recovery of past costs," Plous said. "If you can no longer justify it in terms of what it will bring in the future and what its realistic prospects are, that is a warning sign you may have become entrapped."

Other techniques to avoid entrapment in everyday life include making sure that a decision to continue on a path is not made solely by people who decided on that path in the first place, by setting limits on investments upfront and by triggering automatic reviews if a plan of action hits certain predetermined failure points.

But none of those measures can take the sting out of the dilemma on whether to change course after a substantial investment: "Regardless of whether you supported the war or not," Plous said, "this is going to be heart-wrenching."

THE WEEK

Study Session

One of the year's most important weeks arrives as the Iraq Study Group finishes its work and offers its conclusions on Wednesday. Washington has been awaiting the report, written by a bipartisan panel led by former secretary of state James A. Baker III and former representative Lee H. Hamilton (D-Ind.). Republicans and Democrats hope it will provide a sensible path forward that Americans and their elected officials can endorse.

But early indications last week suggested that the group's advice might not be a panacea. News accounts said the panel was going to back a gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, without a specific timetable, but President Bush suggested that he would find that approach untenable.

» **JUDGING THE WAR'S LEADERS:** Other major war-related events are on the horizon. Today, Bush meets with Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, the leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, a Shiite political party.

Tomorrow, the Senate Armed Services Committee begins hearings on the nomination of Robert M. Gates to replace Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld. The outgoing committee chairman, Sen. John W. Warner (R-Va.), said he hopes that the committee will vote on Gates's nomination tomorrow. If so, the full Senate could vote on it Wednesday.

» **IT AIN'T OVER:** Congress, back in session, has a lot of other work to do this week. The legislators must take up spending measures to continue funding the government, either through passing a full appropriations bill or one that will simply continue current spending into next year.

The House might take up a controversial bill that would require doctors in certain circumstances to ask pregnant women if they would like anesthesia for their fetus before an abortion. The Senate, meanwhile, may tackle a Vietnam trade bill and an Indian nuclear agreement.

» **AROUND THE WORLD IN FIVE DAYS:** Bush will turn his attention to other continents as well this week, meeting on Wednesday with Oscar Arias Sanchez, president of Costa Rica, and on Friday with South African President Thabo Mbeki.

» **ANOTHER SCANDAL VICTIM?** Scandal-plagued Rep. William J. Jefferson (D) will be dealt his political future Saturday when voters in Louisiana's 2nd District choose between him and state Rep. Karen Carter in a congressional runoff.

» **WATCHING THE ECONOMY:** At a time when Federal Reserve Chairman Ben S. Bernanke is watching inflation closely, the markets may react strongly tomorrow to the release of productivity and costs data for the past three months.

— Zachary A. Goldfarb

CORRECTIONS

■ A photograph accompanying a Nov. 10 Business article on the recall of generic drugs showed drugs manufactured by Leiner Health Products Inc. Perrigo Co., not Leiner, was the maker of the recalled drugs.

■ The Nov. 30 Color of Money column in the Business section incorrectly said that tax returns to be filed this coming April are for 2005. They are for 2006.

■ In a Dec. 3 article about Venezuela's business establishment, the name of the president of Entrepreneurs for Venezuela was mis-

spelled. He is Alejandro Uzcátegui, not Uscátegui.

■ In a Dec. 3 Metro article and caption, the record of the Waldorf Wildcats, heading into a championship game, was given as 11-1. It was actually 11-0.

■ A Dec. 1 Associated Press article gave incorrect figures on the increase in the number of prisoners in three states. South Dakota's prison population grew 11.9 percent over the past year, not 11 percent; Montana's grew 10.9 percent, not 10.4 percent; and Kentucky's grew 10.4 percent, not 7.9 percent.

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TODAY ON WASHINGTON POST RADIO

MIKE MOSS 5:30am-10am

- 6:00am **Anthony Shadid** on Crisis in Beirut
- 6:20am **Nell Henderson**: Troubling Economic Indicators
- 6:30am **Babington and Cummings**: Lame-Duck Session
- 7:40am **John Feinstein** on Redskins-Falcons Game
- 7:50am **Energy Outlook**: Winter Heating Bills
- 8:15am **Robert Gates Confirmation Hearings** for CIA

HILLARY HOWARD 10am-Noon

- 10:00am **Supreme Court Case**: School Desegregation
- 11:00am **Marc Fisher** on Controversial Local Issues

SAM LITZINGER Noon-3pm

- 12:40pm **When Hunger Becomes Food Insecurity**
- 12:50pm **"Life at Work"**: Unpaid Sick Leave
- 2:30pm **Religion Hour**: Muslims in Politics

BOB KUR 3pm-7pm

- 3:50pm **TV Week's Best Picks**
- 4:50pm **Wall Street Report** on Money and Markets
- 5:20pm **Reliable Source's Amy Argetsinger**
- 6:15pm **Howard Kurtz** on the Media

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LIVE ONLINE

DECEMBER 4, 2006

(All Times ET)

10 A.M.

Outlook: Historian and author **Douglas Brinkley**, director of the Roosevelt Center at Tulane University, discusses his Sunday Outlook article comparing **President Bush's** legacy to that of other presidents in U.S. history.

11 A.M.

Science: Post science writer **Marc Kaufman** discusses his Monday Science Page feature story about the future of space exploration.

Post Politics Hour: Washington Post chief political reporter **Dan Balz** discusses the latest buzz in Washington and The Post's coverage of political news.

Noon

Media Backtalk: Post media columnist **Howard Kurtz** discusses the press.

Magazine: Editor **Tom Shroder** fields questions and comments about The Washington Post Magazine's 20th Anniversary issue.

1 P.M.

Cuba: **Julia Sweig**, director for Latin America Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations and author of "Inside the Cuban Revolution," takes questions about **Fidel Castro's** poor health and the country's future.

Dr. Gridlock: **Robert Thomson** diagnoses your traffic and transit problems and offers up his prescription for a better commute.

1:15 P.M.

The Chat House: Post columnist **Michael Wilbon** takes questions and comments about the latest sports news.

2 P.M.

American Idol: Fifth season winner **Taylor Hicks** talks about his upcoming new album and life after the show.

Talk About Travel: The Post's Travel **Flight Crew** answers your questions about seeing the world.

Personal Tech: The Post's **Rob Pegoraro** answers your personal tech questions, discusses recent reviews and gives advice for finding the right gadget for the holidays.

FOR A COMPLETE SCHEDULE OF THIS WEEK'S LIVE ONLINES, VISIT WASHINGTONPOST.COM/LIVEONLINE