

Bottleneck

by Richard Z. Duffee

The Chinese epic novel, *Water Margin*, strains the memory by recounting the adventures of 108 heroes. No such problem for Bob Woodward's *Plan of Attack*. Bush and Cheney want to be certain that all power stays within their inner circle. In 2001, just five people--George Bush, Dick Cheney, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, and Donald Rumsfeld, a sort of seated basketball team—make all the essential decisions about the mythical “War on Terror.” They have three indispensable supports: George Tenet for the CIA, Scooter Libby for other operations inside the beltway, and Tommy Franks for the military. Just outside that circle, partially sidelined in the war on the abstract noun, are four more who serve Bush's normal operations: Karl Rove, White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card, and speech writers Michael Gerson and Stephen Hadley, all with markedly secondary roles. Besides those 12, other characters make only cameo appearances.

Bush, Cheney, Powell, Rice, and Rumsfeld make all their decisions during the five hours or so they spend together each day—usually with some of the other seven in the room and others brought in for special purposes. Half of the rest of each day the five spend gathering information. The remainder they spend giving orders to their staffs. They are working as hard as they can.

To gather information, the five have to train their staff in what they want to know. They have to say, “Don't waste my time with that, tell me this. Find out what we have to know to do this. Are the Israelis willing to give in on this point or is it crucial to them? Can naval logistics handle that within a month?” The staff has to act as it believes the dominant players would and must train the third level to behave as the second level wants and to replicate the process with the fourth level staff. Everything the top will regard as irrelevant must be weeded out while preserving everything the top wants.

Implementation of decisions has the same hierarchical order. No one must do anything the level above it doesn't want; everyone must do everything the level above it does want; and everyone must train the level below it to maintain the same priorities.

All of the time each of the core actors spends out of the presence of the others must be spent in the service of the five hours or so they spend together. The oligarchy is so jealous of its power that it wants no decision to be made except as a direct and faithful consequence of its own decisions. Consequently the significance of all information reaching the clique boils down to the information that is actually exchanged five hours each day, for no other information is supposed to be relevant to the decisions actually made. This means that the USA—and to a great extent, the world—is being run on the basis of information exchanged in five hours each day.

For that information to be mutually acknowledged, it has to be capable of being heard by a half-dozen people. So the flow of information cannot be maintained above the rate at which speech can be heard and considered in normal conversation. A few auctioneers have been clocked at 400 words a minute, but they are speaking repetitive formulas and most people cannot understand them. Normal conversation cannot be maintained at a rate much exceeding 150 words a minute—so 9000 an hour, or about 45,000 per day. Other words may be on paper or in someone's mind, but cannot be part

of the actual decision-making process if decisions are being made on the basis of what is mutually present to those minds.

The core group takes a lot of vacations and trips. Because its time of mutual presence averages less than a 5 day week, its actual exchanged information has to be less than 225,000 words a week. The average mass-market paperback novel has 250,000 words.

Our government is attempting to run the world on the basis of less information than one can obtain by reading a novel every week.

Of course it makes extraordinary claims for its information. It claims its information is selective and of high quality. But what is its selectivity? That it is selective means only that the oligarchy gets the information it wants to hear. What does it want to hear? It presumes it knows the truth. So it doesn't want to hear anything inconsistent with what it presumes it knows. The selectivity of the information is merely its acceptability to the oligarchy.

What of its quality? That is its conformity to the oligarchy's notion of quality. It has no time to consider anything else. If a staffer tries to feed his superior more complex information on an issue, he will quickly reach the point where he has to slow the superior down. Then he will be defeating the superior's purpose, which is to take the information back to the group for timely consideration.

The needs the core group conference feels control everything else. They form an absolute bottleneck.

Imagine a language created solely for this situation. An algorithm calculating the world's current population tonight says 6 billion, 747 million. Say the Bush oligarchy wishes to make a decision about everyone this week, with special mention of us. How carefully can it consider us? It must make its decisions with 225,000 words. In the Bush-War-Room-Decision Language (BWRDL), the most economical way to speak of everyone on earth is to make a language in which each word represents the smallest group of persons possible within the given limits. So the language cannot afford to mention any group smaller than 29,987 persons.

Of course, we have to refine BWRDL a bit. In its first approximation BWRDL would only mention groups of people, 29,987 of them per word. It could not afford to mention the nations of Nauru (13,005 people in 2005) and Tuvalu (10,441.) The Vatican, with 783 people, falls 29,204 short of being worthy of mention. But BWRDL would have some latitude with the 119,261 people Stamford is supposed to have had in 2006; it could afford to use 4 but not 5 words. So it could choose between mentioning Stamford in some detail, as in the phrase "North, East, South Stamford," or it could throw in some non-person-designating words, as in the sentence, "Time to bomb Stamford," but a longer word cluster, like "Give Stamford a tax break" would be so lengthy it would impinge on some other group's time.

So while a group-designating language is clearly the best way to mention everyone, it is not a convenient way to make decisions about them. To make decisions one has to allow words irrelevant to the problem of referring to people—for instance, verbs like kill, stop, and trick, and nouns like pretext, fraud, and game plan. To make room for these words one must either consider people in ever less individuated blocs like

“the Chinese,” “the Arabs,” “Old Europe,” and “Our Enemies” or individuate some, like “Saddam” and “Osama” while leaving ever larger groups nameless and faceless, like refugees, or make up ad hoc groups like “the terrorists” and “the bad guys” without being able to take the time to identify either the rules for membership in the group or any list of members.

This guaranteed incompetence follows necessarily from the bottleneck of time that is created when a group decides to make the world’s decisions in five hours a day. Would it be better for them, like the teacher of 15-year-olds, to recuse themselves? They could say, “We are sorry. We know we are doing incredibly stupid things, but it’s not because we are stupid people. It’s because what we are trying to do is impossible to do.” Of course we might ask, “Isn’t it stupid to pretend one can do things one has every reason to know cannot be done?” But a sterner observer might say, “Whether or not they are stupid is a secondary issue. The question is whether one should do what one knows to be stupid.”