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A Nod to Irresponsibility

By Shankar Vedantam
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Accountability is in the air in Washington.

At one end of Pennsylvania Avenue, Paul Wolfowitz is struggling to save his job as president of the World Bank after getting caught arranging a sweetheart deal for his, well, sweetheart. A few blocks down the road, President Bush faces endless questions about his Iraq policy and the reasons he took the country to war. Farther down the avenue, congressional Democrats are hauling up administration officials by the bucketful to testify about a variety of alleged misdeeds -- last week, they grilled Attorney General Alberto Gonzales about the firings of several U.S. attorneys.

An unspoken assumption -- shared by those in government, the press and the public -- is that accountability is always a good thing. Holding people's feet to the fire, the thinking goes, improves decision making and integrity. Ultimately, accountability supposedly leads to soul-searching, introspection and better policymaking.

A growing body of psychological experiments, however, shows that this assumption is wrong. The principal flaw that accountability seems to correct is laziness. When people know they are watched, they become more alert and work harder. But when it comes to many other errors, accountability often does not make things better.

"The first counterintuitive thing about accountability is that it is not necessarily a good thing and, in fact, there is hard evidence showing it is sometimes a bad thing and you would be better off without any accountability at all," said Jennifer Lerner, a social psychologist at Carnegie Mellon University. "Many kinds of accountability don't help at all -- they make things worse."

Lerner is moving to the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard in part because she wants to change the belief that more accountability is always better in public life. What she and numerous other experts have found is that particular types of accountability are needed for particular situations. Get the nuances wrong, and accountability backfires on you.

There are several examples that illustrate what the research has found. Take the current field of Republican candidates for the 2008 presidential race. Many of the stars in that race, including Rudy Giuliani, Mitt Romney and John McCain, have modified their positions on some social issues to win the hearts of conservative voters. Should one of these men win the nomination and be elected president, the fact that he will be held accountable by the conservatives who elected him is likely to keep him from following policies that he has long believed are best for the country as a whole. (It will be easier for conservatives to see the problem when the shoe is on the other foot: Democratic candidates get pulled to the left during the nominating process, and their sense of accountability to liberals makes it harder for

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them to be president to all Americans when elected.)

Accountability also prompts leaders to choose split-the-difference solutions to policy problems, even when situations call for bold new initiatives: When you have to explain your actions to others, you tend to choose the option that allows you to explain yourself to the largest number of people. The need to give explanations also draws people to solutions that are the *easiest* to explain. Physicians, Princeton psychologist Eldar Shafir once found, prefer medical choices they can clearly explain -- to a jury in a malpractice lawsuit, for example -- rather than choices that are better for patients but harder to explain.

"Some better decisions may be harder to justify, and some weaker decisions may be easier to justify, and that is what leads to the problem," Shafir said in an interview.

Experiments have found that accountability can indeed improve judgment and decision making, but only when leaders have to answer to people whose views they do not know, and when they know *before* they make difficult decisions that they are going to be held accountable.

Washington-style accountability, however, rarely works this way.



When Republicans such as Gonzales are brought by Democrats to testify before Congress, the officials in the hot seat know where their interrogators are coming from. When people are confronted by their critics or enemies, they dig in their heels instead of looking into their souls. It does not help, by the way, for Republicans to be questioned by other Republicans -- when people know they are talking to sympathizers, what results is an echo chamber that encourages conformity.

Accountability in Washington also usually involves judgment-by-hindsight. Bush lacked a skeptical Congress as he was making decisions to go to war, and Wolfowitz lacked internal World Bank critics as he weighed whether to increase the salary of his girlfriend. When accountability kicks in *after* a decision has been made, it invariably makes people defensive. Experiments show that when people expect tough questioning *before* they make a decision, it prompts them to question their own beliefs -- they exercise what University of California at Berkeley psychologist Philip Tetlock calls preemptive criticism. They explore multiple alternatives in order to anticipate critics -- and this leads to better decisions. People who face questions after they have made decisions, by contrast, usually end up defending their decisions, even if that means ignoring overwhelming evidence that shows they were wrong.

"Things would be a lot better if we could think clearly about accountability systems rather than having these universal beliefs that more accountability is good," Lerner said. "Matching the right kind of accountability to specific kinds of judgment is important."

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