

Is the Neocon Agenda for Pax Americana Losing Steam?

By Jim Lobe | September 8, 2003

President George W. Bush's speech to the nation last night was notable in many ways, most critically for marking what appears to be a weakening of the steep unilateralist trajectory on which neoconservative and right-wing hawks set U.S. foreign policy two years ago. Who would have thought it would lose momentum so quickly after Washington's stunning military victory in Iraq in early April and plummet back to earth?

Now, just a week before the second anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon, the Bush administration appears to have decided that Washington really cannot run Iraq, let alone the entire Middle East, by itself and must rely on others—even the much-despised United Nations—to help out.

Whether the UN will agree to do so—and on what conditions—remains to be determined, but, for the first time in two years, it appears that the administration's more multilaterally inclined, led by Secretary of State Colin Powell, may actually be moving into the driver's seat. While the battle for control is far from over, the signs of what is being euphemistically called a "policy adjustment" have already emerged.

Powell and the UN

Not only has Powell been given the authority to launch serious negotiations over a new UN Security Council resolution that will almost certainly reduce Washington's control over the political process and reconstruction in Iraq, but even the ultra-unilateralist Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, Douglas Feith—whose office was responsible for post-war planning in Iraq—insisted publicly that he has long favored going to the UN for help.

Feith's scarcely credible protests underline the degree to which the hawks, particularly his two superiors, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld, have been placed on the defensive. Hailed as strategic geniuses as recently as July, their repeated assurances that everything was going according to plan despite steadily mounting U.S. casualties, a series of disastrous bombings, and skyrocketing estimates of the financial costs of occupation—the latest estimates call for as much as \$80 billion next year, or four times the State Department's annual administrative and foreign aid budget—have become the stuff of late-night comedy routines and growing anger in key institutional sectors, particularly the military and Republicans in Congress.

Thus, carefully orchestrated clarion calls by Wolfowitz and his allies in the media to stay the course in Iraq in order to defeat international terrorism once and for all, published at the beginning of the week in the neoconservative *Wall Street Journal* and *Weekly Standard*, were quickly drowned out by Republican lawmakers returning from the August recess demanding that the administration quickly devise an "exit strategy" for Iraq and, explicitly evoking the Vietnam War, show them a "light at the end of the tunnel."

"Wolfowitz frankly has very little credibility up here," said one congressional staffer who recalled that the Pentagon's number two man had led the campaign to persuade Congress that Iraq had vast quantities of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and close ties to al Qaeda before the war. He has since admitted that the intelligence on both questions was "murky." Wolfowitz, along with Vice President Dick Cheney, also argued that U.S. troops would be greeted as "liberators" by the Iraqi operation, rather than occupiers. "For him, of all people, to be the point man for arguing that Iraq is now the decisive battlefield in the war on terrorism simply defies common sense," the aide added, noting that Wolfowitz also supervised Feith's post-war planning, which is now seen as an appalling failure.

But while Republican lawmakers, fresh from public meetings with their constituents back home and only one year away from the 2004 elections, expressed growing impatience with the costs in U.S. lives and money of an open-ended occupation, senior military officers, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff, appear to have decided that their civilian bosses represent a major threat to their institution.

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Uniformed Discontent

The *Washington Post* reported September 4th that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Gen. Richard B. Myers, and his deputy, Gen. Peter Pace, effectively circumvented the Pentagon's civilian leadership in lobbying in support of Powell's efforts to turn to the Security Council for a new resolution. The result was that when Powell presented the idea to Bush earlier this week, he was able to speak for the uniformed military, as well as the State Department, effectively undermining Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz.

The willingness of the top brass to defy their civilian leadership is remarkable, but their discontent has grown by leaps and bounds since just before the Iraq war when Wolfowitz publicly berated then-Army chief Eric Shinseki for telling lawmakers that at least 200,000 soldiers would be needed to keep the peace in Iraq, an estimate that Wolfowitz called "wildly off the mark" at the time, but which is now seen as an accurate forecast. For his impertinence, Shinseki was made to retire a year earlier than would normally have applied in his case.

Now, the Army is seen as stretched far beyond its limits both in Iraq and around the world, fulfilling another warning by Shinseki in his farewell address earlier this year: "Beware the 12-division strategy for a 10-division Army."

All of this has emboldened retired senior officers to unleash unprecedented criticism of Rumsfeld and his chief aides. At a meeting Thursday of several hundred Marine

and Navy officers, retired Marine Gen. Anthony Zinni, who served as head of the U.S. Central Command until 2000 when he supported Bush's presidential candidacy, issued a blistering attack on the Pentagon leadership's performance in Iraq, even comparing it to the Vietnam War. "My contemporaries, our feelings and sensitivities," said Zinni, "were forged on the battlefields of Vietnam, where we heard the garbage and the lies, and we saw the sacrifice," he said. "I ask you, is it happening again?"

Zinni, who now works for Powell on Middle East issues at the State Department, also complained bitterly about both the Pentagon's planning for post-war Iraq and the decision to circumvent the UN in going to war. "We certainly blew past the UN," he said. "Why, I don't know. Now we're going back hat in hand."

Zinni received "prolonged applause at the end," according to the *Washington Post*, which noted that some officers bought tapes of the speech to give to others.

"I've never seen so much discontent among the retired community," former Marine Lt. Gen. Paul Van Riper, who served as a commander in the Gulf War, told another *Post* reporter. At a meeting last week with eight other retired generals, Van Riper said, one asked about Rumsfeld, who was on an unannounced visit to Baghdad at the time. "When are they going to get rid of this guy?"

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