

Neoconservatives at “the Heights of Power”

By

William R. Polk

While Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle have drawn the most attention from the press, some two dozen less-well-known members of the Neoconservative group occupy what Lenin would have seen as the “heights of power” in the Bush administration.

Traditionally, in the American political system, the vice president played almost no role. In the Bush administration, however, Vice President Dick Cheney has been virtually co-president. In the transition to office of the administration, he placed most of the Neoconservatives in office; then, once in office, he actively promoted their programs. In a series of public pronouncements, he argued for invasion of Iraq, charging that Saddam Husain was armed and ready to attack America and was working in league with Usama bin Ladin’s terrorists.

When the established intelligence organizations found no proof for his accusations, he made unprecedented visits to CIA headquarters to put pressure on analysts to come up with answers acceptable to him. More generally, his office, under the direction of his chief of staff, Lewis Libby, became the command post of the Neoconservatives.

Meanwhile, at the Pentagon, two key Neoconservatives orchestrated moves under Deputy Secretary Paul Wolfowitz. Douglas Feith, as under secretary, ranks just after Wolfowitz as the third highest official of the Defense Department. Like other members of the clique, he is known to be close to the Israeli “hard right” and, while out of office, served as an adviser to then Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. Working under him is

Stephen Cambone as under-secretary of defense for intelligence who took the lead in the campaign to attack Iraq.

Working for Cambone, in turn, is one of the most important but least known of the Neoconservatives, Abram Shulsky. Before it was clear that Vice President Cheney's pressure on the CIA would be successful, Shulsky was empowered to set up a new organization, the "Office of Special Plans," which aimed essentially to supplant the entire American intelligence system. Although never admitted, its task, effectively, was to prove the Neoconservative charge, aggressively pushed by Vice President Cheney, that Saddam Hussein, in conjunction with his ally Usama bin Ladin, was poised to attack the United States with an arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. None of this has proved to be true, but it formed the justification for the invasion of Iraq.

In the State Department, according to Washington gossip, Neoconservative John R. Bolton was appointed under secretary to neutralize Secretary of State General Colin Powell and to silence the State Department's own intelligence evaluation organization, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research. Bolton brought into office as his senior adviser another Neoconservative, David Wurmser, who was also a sometime adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Mr. Wurmser joined the office of Vice President Dick Cheney in September 2003. His wife, Meyrav, an Israeli citizen, was co-founder (with Colonel Yigal Carmon, formerly in Israeli intelligence) of the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) which has acted in America as a propaganda outlet for the Israeli right wing.

Also at the State Department, Richard Haass was made director of the State Department's Policy Planning Council, a post in which he served until becoming, in 2003, president of the Council on Foreign Relations.

Meanwhile, at the White House, Elliot Abrams was put in charge of the Middle East at the National Security Council. Best known for his role in the Iran-Contra affair, one of the more sordid campaigns in recent American history, Abrams was charged in 1991 with two counts of withholding information from Congress; he pleaded guilty and was convicted but was pardoned by the first President Bush. Perhaps because of this controversial background, the White House has kept him somewhat under wraps and will not allow the press to interview him. A long-time colleague and friend of Wolfowitz and Perle, he is married to the daughter of two of the movement's founders. As significant as his role in forming foreign policy, Abrams has also acted as a link between the Neoconservatives and the Southern Christian Fundamentalists who support their policy toward Israel.

In the American political system, the "heights of power" also exist outside government in business, the academic community and ideologically receptive "think tanks." Among these influential actors move frequently and easily. One of the most important of these sometime officials, sometime publicists, has been James Woolsey, the former CIA director. Others like William Kristol, editor of the influential Neoconservative journal *The Weekly Standard*, are active supporters in the press.

Also playing a shadowy role has been another Neoconservative. He alone was in position to be "the" expert on Afghanistan, but he was far more than a regional figure. Trusted by Vice President-elect Dick Cheney, he was assigned the highly sensitive task

of placing the whole Neoconservative group in power during the transition to the Bush administration.

The Afghan-American Zalmay Khalilzad is an anomaly among Neoconservatives as he was born a Muslim. He is, indeed, the “odd man in.” Son of a wealthy Pashtun family, Khalilzad studied in Kabul under royal patronage and then attended the American University of Beirut before doing graduate work at the University of Chicago. There, like Wolfowitz, he studied under the nuclear arms strategist, Albert Wohlstetter. After getting a doctorate in 1979, he briefly taught at Columbia with President Jimmy Carter’s former National Security Council director, Zbigniew Brzezinski. Then, in 1984, he got a one-year fellowship at the State Department where he worked with Wolfowitz at the Policy Planning Council. In the first Bush administration, Wolfowitz got him appointed assistant deputy undersecretary of Defense for policy. During Clinton’s two terms, he left government and took up a post at the RAND Corporation where he founded the “Center for Greater Middle East Studies.”

While at RAND, Khalilzad became a consultant to the large California oil company, UNOCAL, which was then attempting to get approval from the Taliban government to construct a multibillion dollar gas pipeline across Afghanistan. Like another Neoconservative, Richard Armitage, he lobbied the Clinton administration to take a softer line on the Taliban, writing in *The Washington Post* astonishingly that “The Taliban do not practice the anti-U.S. style of fundamentalism practiced by Iran.” After the Taliban was implicated in the attack on US embassies in East Africa, UNOCAL ended its pursuit of the concession. Then Khalilzad abruptly changed his position and began calling Afghanistan a “rogue” state.

After the overthrow of the Taliban regime, Khalilzad was made special US envoy to Afghanistan where he essentially picked the new Afghan ruler, Hamid Karzai. In November 2003, he was named U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, a post that might better be described as proconsular than diplomatic.

Well before these events, Khalilzad began advocating the overthrow of Saddam Husain. His opportunity finally came in late 2001 when Vice President Dick Cheney got him appointed special assistant to the president for the Gulf area. That gave him a base of power in the National Security Council and from there he was appointed the president's "special envoy and ambassador at large for free Iraqis." In this position, he played a key role in the build-up to the invasion of Iraq and again served as a "king maker," fostering the campaign for Iraqi leadership of the Neoconservatives' candidate, Ahmad Chalabi.

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