

Who's Who in the Neoconservative Clique

By

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When the Neoconservatives began to dominate American government policy after the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington, the first man to attract press attention was the newly appointed Deputy Secretary of Defense, Paul Wolfowitz. The instinct of journalists was right: Wolfowitz was the most influential, most strategically placed and most experienced of the two dozen or so members of the group.

Born in New York City in 1943 of Polish Jewish parents, he went to Washington as a young man right out of college. Then, after a short government apprenticeship, he enrolled in graduate school at the University of Chicago. At Chicago he fell under the influence of two men who would set the ideological parameters of the whole Neoconservative movement, the Cold War strategist Albert Wohlstetter and the then-little-known political scientist Leo Strauss.

Armed with a doctorate in political science, he returned to Washington in 1972 for his first stint at the Pentagon. Already recognized as a young man of great ability and firm ideology by senior members of the Regan administration, he was quickly promoted. In the crucial years from 1977 to 1980, he served as an assistant secretary and was then made head of the State Department's Policy Planning Council. From that post, the first President Bush moved him to the post of assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs and then sent him as American ambassador to Indonesia.

When Bill Clinton became president, Wolfowitz joined the Republican exodus from government. With his doctorate from Chicago, his wide government experience and his connections among the Republican establishment he was an attractive choice as dean of School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at Johns Hopkins University. SAIS proved to be a

seedbed to prepare men of his persuasion for the Republican return to power under George W. Bush.

As a charter member of the Bush administration, Wolfowitz seems to have become an intimate friend of the President. Experienced, intelligent, a hard-liner and armed with a plan, he offered the administration a program that fit both its needs for a coherent foreign policy and its political leanings. Washington gossip had it that Bush flirted with the idea of naming him Secretary of Defense but, warned that he was too controversial for such a high profile post, made him deputy to the less radical, more “establishment” Donald Rumsfeld, over whom, it was expected, his influence would be strong.

In an almost perfect theatrical scenario, Wolfowitz was in his office on September 11, 2001 when the Pentagon was hit by the third terrorist-hijacked aircraft. He had just told a visiting group of Congressmen that “we are in for some nasty surprises” from overseas enemies. So the event made a vivid and lasting impression on him – and on them.

In response, Wolfowitz knew just what to do. In fact, he had planned what to do for over a decade. “That weekend, in front of the president at Camp David,” wrote Sam Tanenhaus in *Vanity Fair*,ⁱ “he would startle some officials by advocating an attack not on al-Qaeda’s bases in Afghanistan but on Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.” That was a proposed course of action to which for a decade he had single-mindedly adhered until he made it American government policy and finally made it happen two years later.

Wolfowitz was surprisingly outspoken on the reasons for the war in Iraq. While everyone else in the Bush administration focused on the presumed search for weapons of mass destruction, he said that that justification was simply “bureaucratic” – it was the one issue on which everyone could agree. Nor did he pay much attention to other then-current justifications such as Saddam’s tyranny or the charge, already known to be spurious, that Saddam was supporting terrorism. Rather, he zeroed in on the key strategic issue, oil. At the Asia security summit in Singapore, he startled his audience by ascribing the war to the fact that Iraq was

“swimming” in oil. As newsworthy as it was, completely different from what the administration was saying, his remark was not reported in the American press but was picked up by two German newspapers.ⁱⁱ

Less experienced and less coherent in his strategic thinking than Paul Wolfowitz, his friend and colleague Richard Perle was appointed chairman of the Pentagon’s influential Defense Policy Board. Unlike Wolfowitz who was willing to devote himself entirely to government, Perle kept his hand in business. For him, that meant the arms trade and journalism.ⁱⁱⁱ These activities were to involve him in a conflict of interest scandal, his second, which forced him to resign as chairman in 2003. The scandal was “papered over,” in the Washington phrase,^{iv} and he remains a member of the Board.

An ardent Zionist and personal friend of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Perle is also a member of the board of directors of *The Jerusalem Post*, a “resident fellow” of the American Enterprise Institute and a director of several other Neoconservative lobbyist and policy organizations.

Like Wolfowitz, Perle was a protégé of Albert Wohlstetter with whom he had worked at the Pentagon-sponsored RAND Corporation in the 1960s. Moving to Washington, Perle took a different route from that followed by Wolfowitz. He worked as legislative aide to the most influential of the defense-oriented members of the Senate, Henry M. Jackson (whom Washingtonians called “the Senator from Boeing”). As Senator Jackson’s aide, he drafted the “Jackson/Vanek Amendment” which made American trade with the Soviet Union dependent upon its allowing emigration of Russian Jews. This act made possible, among many others, the emigration of Natan Sharansky who is now deputy prime minister of Israel. That, in addition to other acts, cemented Perle’s close relationship with the Israeli government.

During the Reagan administration, Perle moved from Capitol Hill to the Pentagon where he became one of eleven assistant secretaries. There he quickly established a reputation as the most bellicose hardliner: in the last phases of the Cold War he was nicknamed “the prince of

darkness.” Colleagues have described him as a “one man wrecking crew of arms control negotiations.”^v

During his time in office, Perle became enmeshed in his first conflict of interest, a pattern that was to mark his career. In this first brush with the law in 1983, he allegedly arranged an American arms contract for which was paid by an Israeli armaments manufacturer. Also, showing his affinities with Israel, Perle was suspected^{vi} (but never formally charged) of passing classified documents to Israeli agents. A deputy, whose appointment he had arranged, Steven Bryen, was actually indicted by a grand jury on suspicion of espionage.^{vii}

Wolfowitz and Perle have drawn the most attention from the press, but the other members of the Neoconservative group, while not so well known to the public, collectively occupy what Lenin would have seen as the “heights of power” in the Bush administration.

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ⁱ July 2003.

ⁱⁱ *Der Tagesspiegel* and *Die Welt*. Reported by George Wright, *The Guardian*, June 4, 2003.

ⁱⁱⁱ Perle had been a lobbyist for Israeli weapons manufacturers and still acts as a consultant for private firms doing business with the federal government; he is also a member of the board of the Israeli newspaper, *The Jerusalem Post*.

^{iv} As reported in *The New York Times* of November 15, 2003, the Pentagon’s inspector general ruled that a \$2.5 million fee his company received was not a violation of ethnics laws because Perle actually served in the government for less than 60 days a year.

^v Sam Tanenhaus, *Vanity Fair*, July 2003.

^{vi} Seymour Hirsh in his book on Henry Kissinger, *The Price of Power* (New York: Summit Books, 1983).

^{vii} The indictment ultimately lapsed under the statute of limitations. See Richard H. Curtiss in *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, April 2003.