

Neocons in Trouble?

By Jim Lobe | March 31, 2003

What a difference a week makes. Shortly after the launch of the war in Iraq, Richard Perle, the powerful chairman of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board (DPB) and the leader of the neoconservative hawks who have led the drive to war, reportedly threw a victory party at his house in celebration of the U.S.-led invasion.

One week later, a far less cheerful Perle not only resigned as DPB chairman amid mounting conflict-of-interest questions, but also "slammed down the phone" on an inquiring *New York Times* reporter who had disclosed his controversial financial relationship with the bankrupt Global Crossings company last week. "Let me just tell you something," the *Times* quoted an "angry" Perle as saying before his abrupt termination of the conversation. "If I had [resigned], you'd be the last person in the world I'd want to talk to."

Perle's anger—particularly remarkable given his reputation as the "Prince of Darkness" for charm and diplomacy—may only have reflected his personal feelings about having been embarrassed by a possible ethical breach of the kind that is only too typical of influential Washington consultants with extensive government contacts and experience. Or it could signal something much, much more important that may determine the balance of power within the administration of President George W. Bush.

On the Defensive

For the first time in memory, the neoconservatives, whose ideology and media and political savvy have fueled the imperial trajectory of the administration since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, are on the defensive and are taking hits from just about every direction. They are being blamed in particular for the growing public impression that the U.S. military campaign is not going according to plan and may, indeed, be bogging down, thereby exposing U.S. servicemen and women to much greater risks and a much longer war than virtually anyone, especially the neoconservatives who surround Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney, had foreseen.

More than any other group, it was the neocons like Perle and Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz

who had predicted that the regime of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein would collapse like a house of cards once the Pentagon's "shock and awe" strategy was on full display. It was they who also predicted that the Iraqi military would surrender in their tens of thousands at the first hint of battle and that common Iraqis, particularly the Shi'ites in the southern part of the country, would greet the U.S. "liberators" with flowers and sweets.

"I believe demolishing Hussein's military power and liberating Iraq would be a cakewalk," argued Kenneth Adelman, a prominent neocon and member of Perle's DPB, in a *Washington Post* column last February that was cited in both the *Post* and the *Times* on Friday, March 28th as typical of the neocons' confidence. "There may be pockets of resistance, but very few Iraqis are going to fight to defend Saddam Hussein," Perle said in one of scores of television appearances at the same time in what appeared to be a concerted and ultimately successful propaganda effort to move the focus of Bush's war on terrorism from Afghanistan and al Qaeda to Hussein and Iraq.

Although Hussein's regime may indeed be as brittle as the neocons have argued, their favored scenarios, on which much of the war's planning was ultimately based, do not appear to be playing out, as even Adelman said to the *New York Times* when he admitted that he might have been "too glib."

This was confirmed rather thunderously on March 27th by none other than the commander of the Army forces in the Gulf, Lieutenant General William Wallace, who told reporters that indeed the war was likely to take longer than had been predicted by confident Pentagon policymakers. "The enemy we're fighting is a bit different than the one we war-gamed against, because of these paramilitary forces," he said. "We knew they were there, but we did not know how they would fight."

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Despite these admissions, the hawks, including Rumsfeld and the neocons like Wolfowitz who surround him, still insist that the war is going well and blame what setbacks and disappointments have taken place on sandstorms and atrocities committed against the civilian population and the Iraqi soldiers who wish to lay down their arms by Hussein's *fedayeen* militia and armed Ba'athist Party forces. "We probably did underestimate the willingness of this regime to commit war crime," Wolfowitz said. "I don't think we anticipated such a level of (pro-Hussein) execution squads inside Basra," the southern town where U.S. officials anticipated a popular uprising against the government.

Rising Doubts

But these explanations have failed to quash doubts, even among some of the neocons' closest allies. "I think we hawks might have underestimated the Iraqis' sense of national violation at being invaded, despite their hatred of Saddam," magazine columnist Andrew Sullivan told the *Times*.

If so, that was a major strategic miscalculation, and while no one here is yet predicting that Washington will not ultimately win the war, the big question has become at what cost—in U.S. and Iraqi lives, particularly if U.S. troops have to fight street-by-street and house-to-house in Baghdad, and to Washington's plummeting global image from beneficent hegemon to arrogant bully. Already, the knives are out, and it's clear that the neocons are the most natural and easiest targets.

Not only have they been the principal and most visible—not to say ubiquitous—cheerleaders for war against Iraq virtually since the September 11 attacks. They were also the champions for an Afghanistan-like war strategy that relied exclusively on lightly armed Special Operations Forces (SOF) working with rebel forces based in northern Iraq and precision-guided bombing, with a force of only 50,000 U.S. troops held in reserve.

Faced with strong opposition from the Joint Chiefs of Staff who argued that such a strategy would become a "Bay of Goats," Rumsfeld insisted on a compromise "shock and awe" plan of aerial dominance and a dash to Baghdad. That strategy has stretched supply lines to the breaking point and made convoys more vulnerable to the kind of hit-and-run attacks by the militia forces that had not been anticipated. In fact, in the opening days of the campaign, neocon writers, such as Max Boot of the Council on Foreign Relations, enthused that the actual plan was much closer to their original strategy than even Rumsfeld's compromise. Now the neocons' foes in the bureaucracy are essentially saying, "We told you so."

Retired generals noted repeatedly this week that the Army had always argued for a much heavier invading force moving at a far more deliberate speed. The lightning strike to Baghdad, they said, was inconsistent with the post-Vietnam military doctrine of using overwhelming force at all points of the battlefield. At the same time, unnamed officials at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) are telling reporters that they had warned that Hussein's militias would indeed resist U.S. forces, but that these warnings were not passed up. The same sources have complained repeatedly over the past year that neocons in the Pentagon and the White House were shading or side-tracking analyses with which they did not agree.

While these explanations might appear to be ordinary bureaucratic buck-passing, they are clearly hitting their target. Not only are the neocons worried and on the defensive, but their most powerful fan, the super-confident Rumsfeld himself, has been uncharacteristically testy all week.

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