

Bush Administration Foreign Policy Team in Disarray

By Jim Lobe | September 24, 2003

As the Washington, DC area recovers from effects of Hurricane Isabel, President George W. Bush keeps trying to divert the potential “perfect storm” forming from the combination of the constant stream of bad news coming out of the Middle East and growing domestic discontent over the war and occupation in Iraq.

That storm is likely to gain even more force when the public has a chance to absorb this past week’s events, which mostly slid under the media radar as Isabel approached the capital. Particularly striking were signs of growing disarray at the highest levels of the administration, revealed by remarks such as Bush’s assertion that there was “no evidence” linking Iraq to the September, 2001 attacks on New York and the Pentagon. This statement directly contradicted both what Vice President Dick Cheney claimed as recently as September 14th and what he and some Pentagon officials had been advocating months before the war. Similarly, the assertion by the U.S. commander in Iraq, Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, that the popular resistance to the U.S. occupation might be broader than radical Islamists, foreign infiltrators and Baathist “dead-enders” appeared to contradict repeated assurances by top administration officials in recent weeks.

Other developments of the past week—including the seemingly total collapse of the U.S.-led road map for Israel and the Palestinians, and the tepid response to U.S. appeals for more international support for its efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan—suggest that the administration, already reeling from unexpected setbacks in post-war Iraq, is in for a very stormy autumn. Indeed, almost five months after Bush declared an end to major hostilities, his poll and approval ratings have continued falling in the past two weeks and are now close to or below the lowest levels since before the 9/11 attacks.

At the same time, a steadily growing chorus of Democrats, increasingly confident that Bush has made a lethal political error in diverting the “war on terrorism” to Iraq, is clamoring for “heads to roll” at the highest levels of his administration, as the Democratic leader in the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, said this week. Most of those calls are being directed at the Pentagon’s civilian leadership, notably the top three officials: Donald Rumsfeld; his deputy, Paul Wolfowitz; and Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith, who had responsibility for post-war planning. The White House itself is coming under heavy fire, some of it aimed at National

Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, whose passivity and lack of in-depth foreign policy experience are being blamed for letting the hawks around Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney manipulate the intelligence process and thus capture the policy initiative.

Calls for Rumsfeld to Resign

The most striking call for resignations this week came from John Murtha, the powerful ranking member of the appropriations defense subcommittee, who strongly supported the war. Appearing with Pelosi, a pairing that the Capitol Hill weekly Roll Call said “signaled a new level of unity among House Democrats,” the conservative Pennsylvania Democrat, decorated Vietnam veteran and long-time champion of big defense budgets accepted blame for believing what administration officials told him before the war about the threat posed by ousted Iraqi president Saddam Hussein. “I am part of it. I admit the mistake,” Murtha said. “We cannot allow these bureaucrats to get off when these young people (in Iraq) are paying the price ... Somebody’s got to be held responsible for this.”

While absolving Rumsfeld and declining to name others, Murtha has privately been very critical of Wolfowitz and Cheney, whose ties to Halliburton, the company that appears to have cornered many of the most lucrative post-war contracts in Iraq, have also become a political liability. Even staunch Republican supporters of both the war and Bush are now suggesting that the president’s invasion of Iraq has seriously undermined his war on terrorism. “If Iraq was not a sanctuary for al Qaeda before, it certainly is now,” noted Senate Intelligence Committee chairman, Kansas Republican Pat Roberts.

If that was not enough, lawmakers from both parties are also expressing growing alarm at the \$87 billion request Bush submitted almost two weeks ago to fund operations in Iraq and Afghanistan in the coming year. Not only have administration officials conceded that sum will not be sufficient to get them through the year, recent soundings of foreign allies—which the administration was counting on

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to cough up \$10-20 billion more—have been more than disappointing. With a donors' conference scheduled in Madrid next month, analysts say Washington will be lucky to get one-tenth of what it is asking, unless it accepts a new UN Security Council resolution that requires Washington to give up control of the political and economic aspects of the occupation.

While the administration, despite the State Department's urging, is not yet inclined to do so, it faces the brutal fact that any resulting shortfall will have to be financed by Congress at a time when polls show the skyrocketing fiscal deficit—approaching a record \$500 billion this year—is destroying voters' confidence in Republicans to manage the economy and hence their ability to retain the White House in 2004.

Some senior Republicans are now calling publicly for the State Department to assume control of the occupation in Iraq. The chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Richard Lugar, backed by another top Republican foreign policy spokesman, Chuck Hagel, has already promised to hold hearings to “think through what is the most appropriate branch of government” to handle the situation.

Hawk Infighting

Such moves clearly threaten the Pentagon's hold over both Iraq and the policies that have so far guided the administration's “war on terror.” It also threatens Cheney's

position, because, according to a recent article in the *Los Angeles Times*, he personally lobbied the Republican leadership in Congress to back off a bill earlier this year that gave the State Department control over reconstruction and humanitarian plans and assistance.

Rather than spurring the creation of a united front, the recurring attacks have seemed to spark infighting among the hawks. After Cheney revived a two-year-old story on a nationally broadcast television news program last Sunday about an alleged meeting between one of the hijackers and an Iraqi spy in Prague in April, 2001, Rumsfeld told reporters three days later he had seen nothing to connect Saddam Hussein to the September 11th attacks, an assessment backed up by Rice and then by Bush himself. At the same time, neoconservatives outside the administration and close to Cheney, Wolfowitz, and Feith kept up an offensive this week denouncing Rumsfeld's refusal to increase the number of U.S. troops in Iraq to reduce insecurity there. Several neocons, including Frank Gaffney, president of the Center for Security Policy, also assailed Bush's top political adviser, Karl Rove, for allegedly warning Republicans that there must be “no more wars” for the remainder of Bush's first term. The public nature of this infighting is remarkable in an administration that has obsessed about message management and spin control.

(Jim Lobe <jlobe@starpower.net> is a political analyst for Foreign Policy In Focus (online at www.fpif.org). He also writes regularly for Inter Press Service.)

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