

Does the Departure of a Recent Pentagon Hawk Foreshadow a Policy Shift?

By Jim Lobe | November 7, 2003

Facing falling poll numbers and renewed initiatives at engagement from both Iran and North Korea, the harder edges of the Bush administration's hawkish foreign policy is seen as a growing liability for next year's election. Further speculation along this line has deepened as a major Pentagon hawk has abruptly resigned his post. Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy, J.D. Crouch II, resigned effective Friday, October 31, in order to return to his academic post at Southwest Missouri State University (SMSU).

Significantly, the announcement did not give a reason for his departure or the suddenness with which it is taking place. Nor was anyone named to replace him.

While officials stressed that Crouch, who has a long association with many of the key figures who have promoted military pre-eminence as U.S. post-cold war strategy, was leaving voluntarily, some sources said his resignation reflected a loss of influence on the part of right-wing and neoconservative hawks concentrated in the Pentagon and Vice President Dick Cheney's office.

"He's not being fired, but they're starting to move people around," said one knowledgeable source. "It's all about (Bush's) re-election and how to get rid of the loonies without look like they screwed up."

As assistant secretary, Crouch reported to Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith, whose office has been responsible for post-war strategy in Iraq. Feith also oversaw the work of the now-disbanded Office of Special Plans (OSP), which has been charged by retired intelligence and State Department officials with "cherry-picking" intelligence that bolstered the case for going to war and sending it directly to Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld and Cheney's office without having it vetted by professional analysts for credibility.

As a result, Feith's office has become a major target of critics of both the war and the post-war situation which, given its rising cost in money and the lives of U.S. soldiers, is being blamed for Bush's plummeting poll numbers.

Extremist Opponent of Arms Control

Crouch, an arms-control specialist, had very little to do with the preparation for war against Iraq. But he has long taken what have been regarded as extreme and extremely unilateralist positions on a number of key issues.

A champion of U.S. withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, Crouch has supported military action against Cuba; defended the development of offensive chemical weapons; opposed the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT); and advocated the development of new nuclear weapons for such purposes as destroying underground facilities (bunker-busters).

Before his appointment in 2001, he also strongly criticized the previous Bush administration's decision to withdraw nuclear weapons from South Korea and called for Washington to unilaterally destroy suspected nuclear and missile installations in North Korea



unless Pyongyang complied with an ultimatum to dismantle them.

Crouch's departure is the latest in a series of developments that have suggested to some analysts here that a significant foreign policy shift is underway.

Those hints began with the announcement by National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice earlier this month of a new interagency committee to coordinate Iraq policy in the National Security Council. Rumsfeld's unusually tetchy reaction to the announcement suggested that the move was more than cosmetic.

The next shoe that dropped came during Bush's recent trip to Asia where he repeatedly stressed his willingness to sign a five-nation security guarantee if North Korea agreed to fully and verifiably dismantle its nuclear program.

While this did not go as far as Pyongyang's demand for bilateral non-aggression pact, it was a more flexible offer than what Bush had previously put on the table, prompting Donald Gregg, the chairman of the Korea Society and a former top aide to George H.W. Bush, to assert that "a corner has been turned and the administration's pragmatists are in charge."

Engaging Iran

In just the past week, a number of other developments suggested that the White House was tacking to the middle, away from right-wingers and neoconservatives like Crouch and Feith.

Testifying before Congress Tuesday, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage affirmed that Washington was not seeking "regime change" in Iran and indeed expected to engage Teheran in a dialogue over its nuclear program and other issues shortly. His remarks, which appeared to align the administration behind a recent European initiative on Iraq's nuclear program, also included an unusually strong denunciation of the Pentagon's decision to negotiate a cease-fire with an Iraq-based Iranian rebel group during the Iraq war. "We shouldn't have been signing a cease-fire

with a foreign terrorist organization," he told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Pentagon hawks had reportedly favored keeping the group, the Mujahadin e Khalq (MeK), intact for possible use as leverage against Teheran. "Armitage is always blunt," said one congressional aide, "but he must have had a lot of confidence in his position to say what he said."

Finally, Bush's decision Wednesday to "drop by" a meeting between visiting Chinese Defense Minister Gen. Cao Gangchuan and Rice was considered particularly disappointing to hawks who had lobbied hard against such an encounter.

While none of these developments by themselves would warrant the conclusion that the hawks are in decline, the totality suggests that they may be more than mere straws in the wind. "This could be the beginning of a change," according to Charles Kupchan, a foreign policy analyst at the Council on Foreign Relations. "What's new is that Bush's poll numbers are nosediving, and he's scared."

Some sources say that Robert Blackwill, the administration's former ambassador to India who was taken on as a senior aide by Rice last month, may be most responsible for the shifts. Blackwill, who was Rice's boss in the National Security Council during the first Bush administration, is a savvy Republican operator with friends and proteges in key posts in the national security bureaucracy and on Capitol Hill. While considered on the right, he reportedly shares the first Bush's distrust of neoconservatives, in particular.

Ties to the Neocons

While Crouch is not considered a neoconservative, he has long been closely associated with them. A former member of the board of advisers of the Center for Security Policy, he worked for former Republican Sen. Malcolm Wallop, a far-right Republican from Cheney's home state of Wyoming before joining the Pentagon as the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security in the first Bush administration.

In that capacity, he worked under then-Undersecretary for Policy Paul Wolfowitz for whom he reportedly helped prepare the controversial 1992 Defense Planning Guidance (DPG) draft which called for, among other things, Washington to pursue military dominance in and around Eurasia; carry out pre-emptive attacks against potential threats; and to rely more on ad hoc alliances than multilateral mechanisms, like the UN or NATO, to promote U.S. interests.

When the paper was leaked to the *New York Times* that spring, it was repudiated by the administration, and Wolfowitz, the current deputy defense secretary and Feith's superior, and a close aide, I. Lewis Libby (currently Cheney's chief of staff and national security adviser) were reportedly almost fired. Crouch himself left the Pentagon in July, 1992, just three months after the draft DPG was exposed. The current administration's September 2002 National Security Strategy, however, was based largely on the DPG developed under Wolfowitz, Libby, and Crouch ten years before.

Crouch is a long-time protege of William van Cleave, a nuclear-arms specialist who played a key role in the mid-1970s in derailing détente with the Soviet Union, in part by working with Rumsfeld and neoconservative hawks in derailing then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's efforts to reach a major strategic arms agreement with the Soviet Union.

Van Cleave, who heads the SMSU department of defense and strategic studies to which Crouch will be returning, has been a major, if low-key, champion of U.S. military dominance and of developing new nuclear weapons that can be used in conventional warfare. Van Cleave also serves on the boards of advisers of the CSP and two Israel-based institutions closely tied to the right-wing Likud Party—the Ariel Center for Policy Research and the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies.

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Recommended citation:

Jim Lobe, “Hawks Fleeing the Coop: Does the Departure of a Recent Pentagon Hawk Foreshadow a Policy Shift?,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, November 7, 2003).

Web location:

<http://www.presentdanger.org/commentary/2003/0311crouch.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Jim Lobe

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

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