

The Crisis of Feith

By Jim Lobe | November 7, 2003

In light of falling poll numbers, pressure is building for a top-level scapegoat to be sacrificed at the Pentagon as a sign that someone is being held accountable for what have become widely acknowledged failures in the Bush administration's occupation of Iraq.

The leading candidate is Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith, and "What's gonna happen with Feith?" is the question animating the Washington cogniscenti as the debate heats up over whether a major shift in the Bush administration's unilateralist and ultra-hawkish foreign policy is or is not underway. Feith, who occupies an obscure but nonetheless strategic position, reports directly to the deputy secretary, Paul Wolfowitz, and Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld.

If the administration is looking for a scapegoat for the situation it faces in Iraq, Feith is the most likely candidate because of both his relative obscurity compared to other administration hawks and the fact that, of virtually all of them, his ideas, particularly on the Middle East, may be the most radical.

Perle's Protégé

A protégé of Richard Perle, the former chairman of Rumsfeld's Defense Policy Board (DPB) who stands at the center of the neoconservative foreign policy network in Washington, Feith has long opposed territorial compromise by Israel and was an outspoken foe of the Oslo process and even the Camp David peace agreement mediated by former President Jimmy Carter between Egypt and Israel. His former law partner, L. Marc Zell, is a spokesman for the Jewish settlers' movement on the occupied West Bank.

But, more to the point, virtually everything that has gone wrong in Iraq—especially those matters that Congress is either investigating or is poised to investigate—is linked directly to his office. "All roads lead to Feith," noted one knowledgeable administration official this week.

It was his now-defunct Office of Special Plans (OSP) that is alleged to have collected—often with the help of the neoconservatives' favorite Iraqi exile, Ahmed Chalabi—and "cooked" the most alarmist pre-war intelligence against Saddam Hussein and then "stovepiped" it to the White House via Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney unvetted by the intelligence agencies.

It was also his office that was in charge of post-war planning and rejected the product of months of work by dozens of Iraqi exiles and Mideast experts in the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) who anticipated many of the problems that have wrong-footed the occupation. It also excluded many top Mideast experts from the State Department from playing any role in the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq.

And it is his office that, with the CPA, has recommended companies for huge and, in some cases, no-bid contracts in Iraq that have amounted, in the eyes of some critical lawmakers, to flagrant profiteering.

Waning Influence?

Among the companies that have profited the most are those whose consultants or officers also serve on the Pentagon's DPB—members of which are chosen by Feith. Indeed, in a particularly provocative move that raises a host of conflict-of-interest questions, Feith's former law partner, Zell, has set up shop with Chalabi's nephew in Baghdad to help interested companies win contracts for reconstruction projects.

"Until they get rid of Feith, no one is going to believe that the administration is seriously reassessing



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its policies,” said one congressional aide whose boss has been a strong critic of administration policy in Iraq.

There are hints that Feith has seen his authority dwindle since the first half of October when national security adviser Condoleezza Rice announced that she would head a new interagency Iraq Stabilization Group (ISG). The move appeared designed not only to give the appearance that the White House was taking control of a situation that had contributed to a precipitous decline in Bush’s approval ratings, but also to ensure that the Pentagon could no longer simply ignore other bureaucracies, Rice included, as it has for much of the past year.

Creation of the ISG followed growing public criticism, even by otherwise loyal Republican lawmakers, of the administration’s failure to anticipate post-war problems and the appointment of former U.S. ambassador to India Robert Blackwill, who was Rice’s boss on the National Security Council (NSC) in the first Bush administration, to a special, high-ranking NSC post. Other hints that Feith’s and other hawks’ grip on policy has been loosened came in the form of a distinct softening of the rhetoric against the other two members of the “axis of evil,” Iran and North Korea. Then, last week, a top Feith aide, former assistant defense secretary for international security policy J.D. Crouch II, abruptly resigned his position without explanation.

There have been unconfirmed reports that top White House officials reached a decision two months ago that Feith had to go, but were then dissuaded by Rumsfeld, who argued that his departure would be seen as an admission that things had gone seriously wrong in Iraq. It was in that context, according to these reports, that the administration moved to quietly reduce Feith’s authority in part by creating the ISG.

Hard-liner on Arms Control

Like his mentor, Feith has long been a hard-liner on foreign policy and arms control. He was an outspo-

ken opponent of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the Chemical and Biological Weapons conventions, which he has criticized as ineffective and dangerous to U.S. interests. Among other clients, his firm represented arms giants Lockheed-Martin and Northrop Grumman.

Also like Perle, Feith has long taken a strong interest in Israel and its security. His father, Dalck Feith, a philanthropist and major Republican contributor from Philadelphia, was active in the militantly Zionist youth movement Betar, the predecessor of Israel’s Likud Party, in Poland before World War II. Both father and son have been honored by the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) which, unlike other mainstream Jewish groups in the U.S., has consistently supported Likud positions and the settlement movement in the occupied territories and actively courted the Christian Right.

Feith also served with Perle on the board of the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA), a think tank that promotes military and strategic ties between the U.S. and Israel.

Feith first entered government as a Middle East specialist on the National Security Council (NSC) under Ronald Reagan in 1981 but was abruptly fired after only one year. Perle, who was then serving in the Pentagon as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security, however, hired him as his deputy, a post he retained until leaving in 1986 to found Feith & Zell.

Three years later, Feith was retained as a lobbyist by the Turkish government and, in that capacity, worked with Perle to build military ties between Turkey and Israel.

In 1996, he participated in a study group chaired by Perle and sponsored by a right-wing Jerusalem-based think tank that produced a report calling for incoming Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to build a strategic alliance with Turkey, Jordan, and a new government in Iraq that would transform the balance of power in the Middle East in such a way

that Israel could decisively resist pressure to trade “land for peace” with the Palestinians or Syria.

In 1997, Feith published a lengthy article, titled “A Strategy for Israel” and published in *Commentary* magazine, in which argued that Israel should repudiate the Oslo accords and move to re-occupy those parts of the West Bank and Gaza that had been transferred to the Palestinian Authority.

Two years later, he and Perle signed an open letter to President Bill Clinton calling for the U.S. to work with Chalabi’s Iraqi National Congress (INC) to oust Saddam Hussein. In May, 2000, they signed a report calling for the U.S. to be prepared to attack Syria militarily unless Damascus failed to withdraw its troops from Lebanon.

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