

Is the Neo-con Reign Over?

By Jim Lobe | June 17, 2004

Just a little more than one year after reaching the height of their influence over U.S. foreign policy as represented in the invasion of Iraq, neo-conservatives appear to have fallen entirely out of favor. They're feeling increasingly ostracized both inside the Bush Administration and in tumultuous Baghdad itself.

The signs of their defeat at the hands of the so-called "realists" inside the State Department are virtually everywhere but probably best marked by the recent Newsweek cover depicting the framed photograph of the neo-cons' favorite Iraqi, Ahmad Chalabi, which had been shattered during a joint police-U.S. military raid on his headquarters in Baghdad.

"Bush's Mr. Wrong" was the title of the feature article.

The victory of the realists, who include Secretary of State Colin Powell, the uniformed military, and the Central Intelligence Agency, appeared complete with the unveiling of the interim Iraqi government, expected to take up the reins at the end of this month.

Not only was Chalabi's arch-rival-in-exile, Iyad Allawi, approved by the Iraqi Governing Council as prime minister, but neither Chalabi nor any of his closest council associates, especially Finance Minister Kamel al-Gailani—who is accused of handing over much of Iraq's banking system to Chalabi during his tenure—made it into the final line-up.

"It looks like Chalabi is the big loser," said one congressional aide who follows Iraq closely." And neo-con has become a dirty word up here," he added, referring to the Congress, where Republicans have become increasingly restive as a result of recent debacles in Iraq, including the scandal over the abuse by U.S. soldiers of Iraqi detainees and leaks that Chalabi had been passing sensitive intelligence to Iran, and may have done so for years.

"We need to restrain what are growing U.S. messianic instincts—a sort of global social engineering

where the United States feels it is both entitled and obligated to promote democracy—by force if necessary," said Senator Pat Roberts, a conservative Kansas member of Bush's Republican Party and chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, in a speech last week that was understood here as a direct shot at the neo-cons.

The neo-conservatives, a key part of the coalition of hawks that dominated Bush's post-9/11 foreign policy, were the first to publicly call for Saddam Hussein's ouster, which they saw as a way to transform the Arab world to make it more hospitable to Western values, U.S. interests and Israel's territorial ambitions.

Since the latter part of the 1990s, when they led the charge in Congress for the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act, Chalabi and his Iraqi National Congress were their chosen instruments to achieve that transformation.

While no neo-cons were appointed to cabinet-level positions under Bush, they obtained top posts in the offices of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld—where Paul Wolfowitz was named deputy defense secretary and Douglas Feith under secretary for policy—and Vice President Dick Cheney, whose chief of staff and national security adviser was Lewis "Scooter" Libby.

On the White House National Security Council staff, they were able to place former Iran-contra figure Elliott Abrams and Robert Joseph in key positions dealing with the Middle East and arms proliferation, respectively.

Rumsfeld's Defense Policy Board was dominated by neo-cons, notably its former chairman, Richard Perle, former CIA Chief James Woolsey, former arms-con-



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trol negotiator Kenneth Adelman and military historian Eliot Cohen.

Neo-cons and the Push for War

More than any other group, these neo-cons pushed for war in Iraq after 9/11 and predicted (backed up by Chalabi's assurances) that the conflict would be, among other things, a "cakewalk" and that U.S. troops would be greeted with "flowers and sweets."

Within the administration, the neo-cons, again relying heavily on Chalabi's INC, developed their own intelligence analyses to bolster the notion of a link between former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and the al-Qaeda terrorist group and exaggerated Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction to provide a more credible pretext for war. A friendly media more than played on the public's terrorism fears with frequent TV rotation and a barrage of newspaper columns and magazine articles.

While analysts and regional experts at the CIA and State Department, which had dropped Chalabi as a fraud and a con-man in the mid-1990s, tried to resist the juggernaut, they were consistently outflanked by the neo-cons, whose influence and ability to circumvent the professionals was greatly enhanced by their access to Rumsfeld and Cheney, who served as their champions in the White House and with Bush personally.

Their influence reached its zenith in early April when Chalabi and 700 of his paid INC troops were airlifted by the Pentagon to the southern city of Nasariyeh on Cheney's authority against Bush's stated policy that Washington would not favor one Iraqi faction over another. Bush's own national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, professed surprise when informed of the move by reporters.

While they were still riding high as U.S. troops consolidated their control of Iraq, the neo-cons' star began to wane. Last August it became clear that their and Chalabi's predictions about a grateful Iraqi populace were about as well-founded as their certainties about Hussein's ties to al-Qaeda and his WMD stockpiles.

Sensing trouble ahead, Rice asked former ambassador to India, Robert Blackwill, to return to the

White House, where he had been her boss during the presidency of the senior Bush. By October, she and he had formed an interagency Iraq Stabilization Group that gradually wrested control of Iraq policy from the Pentagon.

It was a process in which Coalition Provisional Authority chief Paul Bremer, who had come to detest Chalabi and his neo-con backers in Baghdad and Washington, was an enthusiastic participant and which was effectively completed with the announcement late last month that the State Department was taking over the \$14 billion in reconstruction money for Iraq that the Pentagon has yet to spend.

In the last month, the neo-con retreat has turned into a rout, particularly as reports of Chalabi's coziness with Iran gained currency and, just as importantly, senior military officers indicated that a military victory over the Iraqi insurgency was not possible. The public attention given to a blistering attack on the neo-cons by the former chief of the U.S. Central Command, Gen. Anthony Zinni, on the popular television program 60 Minutes, also demonstrated that the media, ever cautious about taking on powerful figures, now saw them as fair game.

When Perle, Woolsey and several other neo-cons visited Rice at the White House on May 1 to protest the shoddy treatment Chalabi was receiving at the hands of the CIA, Bremer and the State Department, participants said she thanked them for their views and offered nothing more. Neither Rumsfeld nor Cheney nor any of their neo-con aides attended.

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