

Neoconservatives Adrift?

By Jim Lobe | January 21, 2005

Jubilant over President George W. Bush maintaining his position for another four years, neoconservatives who played a leading role in shaping the radical trajectory of U.S. foreign policy after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks appear increasingly divided on key issues and uncertain of their position in Bush's second term.

All are on board for the January 30 elections in Iraq, and military strikes against suspected Iranian nuclear facilities to prevent Teheran from getting a bomb. But they cannot seem to forge a consensus on U.S. military strategy in Iraq, whether to demand greater military spending than the Bush administration appears comfortable with, or whether to back a policy of engagement with Iran prior to a military strike.

They are also worried about key appointments to second-term foreign policy positions, particularly that of U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick to serve as Secretary of State-designate Condoleezza Rice's deputy, as well as other appointments to senior posts in the State Department.

But the biggest blow to their unity and sense of purpose to date has been the deep split that has developed within their ranks following the death of Palestinian leader and "arch-fiend," Yassir Arafat.

The emergence of a "moderate" successor in Palestinian Authority (PA) president-elect Mahmoud Abbas, coupled with his initial embrace by both the Bush administration and a realigned Israeli government seemingly determined to carry out its plan to disengage from Gaza by the end of this year, has drawn harsh criticism from hard-line neoconservatives. These include *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer, and Centre for Security Policy (CSP) chief Frank Gaffney, who fear that both Bush and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, are moving down a "slippery slope" that will put Israel's security in serious jeopardy. They doubtless saw a ray of light in the announcement Friday by Sharon cutting all ties with the PA until it "take(s) the necessary steps to curb

and stop terrorism," in retaliation for the killing of six Israelis and wounding of five others by Palestinian militants at a checkpoint Thursday.

The split in neocon ranks, of course, mirrors that which has taken place between the less-ideological elements in Israel's Likud Party, such as Sharon and Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, and its more-extreme elements who have long opposed any Israeli retreat from the occupied territories for theological or nationalistic reasons.

Because Israel's security is so central to the neoconservative worldview, the split between the hard-line neoconservatives, who are closely aligned with Likud's extremists, and their more pragmatic brethren, such as Rice's top Middle East aide, Elliott Abrams, who lean more to Sharon and even Olmert, deeply threatens its unity and ideological coherence.

These developments are surprising in many ways given the elation of the neoconservatives over Bush remaining in office and subsequently deciding to drop Secretary of State Colin Powell in his second term.

Within days after the election, prominent neocons, such as Danielle Pletka, a Middle East specialist at Neocon Central, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), and their fellow-travelers, such as Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton, were being touted for top spots at the State Department and the National Security Council.

Meanwhile, hard-liners like Gaffney and AEI's Michael Ledeen and David Frum were drawing up



lists of new candidates for “regime change,” including Iran, Syria, North Korea, China, and even Venezuela.

Since then, a number of unanticipated developments appear to have deflated their confidence. Indeed, by early this week, Frum, a former Bush speechwriter who co-authored a book last year with AEI’s Richard Perle, the hub of Washington’s neocon network, was positively sullen over news of the latest appointments and recent statements on Iran and Syria by Bush himself.

The clearest of these developments, of course, was the continued deterioration of the U.S. position in Iraq despite the leveling of Fallujah in late November, which neoconservatives of all hues had confidently declared would mark a turning point in the war.

The prediction just last week by Gen. Brent Scowcroft (ret.), national security adviser to Bush’s father and former President Gerald Ford, that Iraq was headed toward “incipient civil war” regardless of how the Jan. 30 elections turn out, marked the final break of a long-time Bush loyalist and mainstream Republican with the neoconservative foreign policy. But it also served as a dramatic reminder about how disastrously wrong the pre-war predictions by the neocons have turned out to be.

Scowcroft’s statement, which came in a session in which another venerable foreign-policy graybeard, Zbigniew Brzezinski, offered an even more pessimistic forecast of imperial decline, quickly became the talk of the town—an exclamation point for the Establishment’s accumulating horror over the lack of light at the end of the Iraqi tunnel.

While prominent neocons pooh-pooed the old guard for agreeing with “the left,” their crouch has become ever more defensive and sullen.

Contention Over Rumsfeld

With the insurgency as vigorous as ever, many neo-conservatives began rubbing salt in old wounds, reviving complaints that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had failed to deploy a large enough force, either during the invasion or now, with elections pending. Others revived arguments that the fatal mistake was in not relying more heavily on Iraqis themselves, both now and at the time of the invasion.

Indeed, Rumsfeld has now become another major point of contention among neoconservatives with some, like the *Weekly Standard’s* William Kristol and Frederick Kagan, claiming that he should have been fired long ago for bungling the occupation, and others, such as Perle and military historian Victor Davis Hanson, rushing to his defense.

Meanwhile, Gaffney, who has defended Rumsfeld, offered the unkindest cut of all this week in the *Washington Times*, calling proposed administration cuts in missile defense and other big-money military programs to pay for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan “Kerry-like”—a reference to the 2004 Democratic contender for the presidency—and far short of what is needed to maintain U.S. global supremacy, which lies at the heart of the hawks’ strategic vision.

Another nasty fight over Iran policy also blossomed in the neoconservative-dominated Committee on the

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Present Danger (CPD), which, while united in accepting the necessity of ultimately “taking out” Teheran’s presumed nuclear-weapons program, found themselves deeply divided over whether to first “engage” Teheran by fully backing European initiatives or to move straight to the “regime-change-by-any-means-necessary” option.

The result, an unwieldy compromise made possible by the intervention of former Secretary of State George Shultz, did little to heal the breach.

Meanwhile, neoconservative hopes that Rice would either “straighten out” or permanently marginalize the State Department so as not to obstruct the hawks’ second-term agenda, as Powell and his team tried to do during the first term, have largely been dashed with the appointment of Zoellick—a protégé of both Scowcroft and former Secretary of State James Baker—and the likelihood that NATO Ambo. Nick Burns, another Atlantic-oriented realist, will take the number three post.

Worse for the neocons are reports that the regional assistant secretaries of state, including the Near East bureau which neoconservatives had hoped would go to Pletka or someone of her ilk, will be dominated by career diplomats.

Bolton, whom the hawks had hoped would be named Rice’s deputy, will not be promoted to any strategic position outside of Vice President Dick Cheney’s office, which already is overflowing with neoconservatives.

“Unsupported by a clear-eyed deputy like Bolton,” wrote a worried Frum last week, “there is a very real risk that the department will run her, rather than the other way around.”

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