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# *Anatomy of a National Security Fiasco: The George W. Bush Administration, Iraq, and Groupthink*

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*These were people who were selectively picking and then emphasizing pieces of intelligence, I believe, in order to support their larger purpose, which was to bring in a way that they thought possible, to bring democracy to Iraq, and through Iraq to transform the Middle East. I thought that was far-fetched. I didn't think it was going to happen, but that was their real purpose. They thought that this was going to be a transforming event in history. My frustration is that there was never a national security decision-making process in the administration where people such as me really had a chance to take that on.*

Richard Haass, Director of Policy  
Planning at the State Department  
2001-2003, Interview with Chris  
Matthews on "Hardball," May 6, 2009

In February 2002, one year before the U.S. military intervention in Iraq began, neoconservative writer Ken Adelman predicted that demolishing Saddam Hussein's regime and liberating Iraq would be a "cakewalk."<sup>1</sup> At a town hall meeting at the Ameri-

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<sup>1</sup> Ken Adelman, "Cakewalk in Iraq," *The Washington Post*, 13 February 2002, A27.

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can air base in Aviano, Italy, on February 7, 2003, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld added that, if force were to be used in Iraq, the war “could last six days, six weeks. I doubt six months.”<sup>2</sup> On October 31, 2010, nearly eight years after the U.S. military intervention in Iraq commenced, the Iraq War seemingly came to an end for the United States. Saying it was “time to turn the page,” President Barack Obama declared in a nationally televised address: “Tonight, I am announcing that the American combat mission in Iraq has ended.”<sup>3</sup>

In the intervening seven and a half years, the “cakewalk” that Adelman predicted had resulted in the loss of 4,487 U.S. troops and the wounding of over 32,223 others—20% with serious brain or spinal injuries.<sup>4</sup> The cost of the war, at its peak, reached \$10 billion per month with the total cost of the war estimated at \$806 billion, through fiscal year 2011, according to the Congressional Research Service (CRS).<sup>5</sup> In 2013, the Costs of War project of the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University put the total cost of the Iraq War at \$1.7 trillion, over double the earlier CRS estimate, with an additional \$490 billion in benefits owed to war veterans.<sup>6</sup>

*The cost of the war was far greater than policymakers expected.*

According to an April 2008 National Defense University study titled *Choosing War: The Decision to Invade Iraq and its Aftermath*, Iraqi civilian casualties by fall 2007 were estimated to have reached 82,000, with over 7,500 Iraqi soldiers and police officers killed.<sup>7</sup> The National Defense University (NDU), an arm of the Pentagon, estimated that 15% of Iraqis had become

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<sup>2</sup> BBC News, *World Edition*. Middle East, 7 February 2003, accessed at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/2738089.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2738089.stm)

<sup>3</sup> Anne E. Kornblut, “‘Time to turn the page’ on the Iraq War,” *Washington Post*, September 1, 2010, A1.

<sup>4</sup> The casualty figure is from the Associated Press, March 10, 2011. The *Los Angeles Times* lists total U.S. deaths in the war at 4,484, and total wounded at 32,200. “War in Iraq: 2003-2011,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 18, 2011, accessed at: <http://timelines.latimes.com/iraq/>

<sup>5</sup> Amy Belasco, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11*, Congressional Research Service, Washington, D.C., 29 March, 2011, accessed at: <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL33110.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Trotta, “Iraq War Costs U.S. More than \$2 Trillion,” Reuters, March 14, 2013: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-war-anniversary/iraq-war-costs-u-s-more-than-2-trillion-study-idUSBRE92D0PG20130314>

<sup>7</sup> Joseph J. Collins, “Choosing War: The Decision to Invade Iraq and its Aftermath,” *Institute for National Strategic Studies, Occasional Paper 5* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, April 2008), 1.

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refugees or displaced persons. A central finding of the 2008 NDU study was that “U.S. efforts in Iraq were hobbled by a set of faulty assumptions and a flawed planning effort.”<sup>8</sup> The NDU study stated: “Measured in blood and treasure, the war in Iraq has achieved the status of a major war and a major debacle.”<sup>9</sup>

It is an understatement to say that the American intervention in Iraq in 2003 will have broad and decisive implications for how the administration of former President George W. Bush will be evaluated by historians. The observations of many former Bush administration insiders, including the Director of Policy Planning at the State Department Richard Haass, Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill, and White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan, among others, raise important questions on the extent to which decision-making on Iraq was being driven by a flawed process and inaccurate predispositions. Lawrence Wilkerson, who served for 27 months as Secretary of State Colin Powell’s top aide at the State Department, has stated that, in reality, there were two decision-making processes at work within the administration. The traditional National Security Council was used sparingly, and mostly for show. Behind the façade of the formal NSC, a much smaller and more informal decision-making group, which was “insular and secret” in its work, called the shots on Iraq.<sup>10</sup> In this more insular setting, President Bush “gave over much of the critical decision-making to his vice president and his secretary of defense.”<sup>11</sup> Much like Lyndon Johnson’s famous “Tuesday Luncheon Meetings,” Iraq War decision-making was largely confined to and dominated by a small group of like-minded Bush administration insiders, weighted heavily in favor of a cadre of neoconservatives who believed that military intervention in Iraq was essential to the nation’s security. Below, evidence will be presented that the closed decision-making environment of the Bush administration created the conditions conducive to *groupthink*.

*Bush’s insular advisory meetings were heavily influenced by Rumsfeld and Cheney.*

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence B. Wilkerson, “The White House Cabal,” *Baltimore Sun*, 29 November 2005, 15A.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 15A.

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### *Characteristics of Groupthink*

The word *groupthink* was first popularized by psychologist Irving Janis in his book by the same title.<sup>12</sup> *Groupthink* not only fosters an assumed consensus about an adversary that displaces critical analysis and reality-testing; it also fosters pressures to conform to the predominant group's agenda and sense of purpose through the suppression of personal doubts. *Groupthink* engenders a smugness or moral certitude about the correctness of the actions that the cohesive "inner group" advocates, and a resistance to any opposing viewpoints. Other symptoms of *groupthink* identified by Janis include an incomplete survey of alternatives, incomplete survey of objectives, failure to examine risks of the preferred course of action, and an illusion of invulnerability.<sup>13</sup> The belief that the policies being pursued are morally imperative is often accompanied by buoyant or excessive optimism concerning the likelihood and ease of success. *Groupthink* also tends to foster selective perception and biased processing of information in a manner that reinforces the predispositions of the inner group.<sup>14</sup>

*Key elements of Groupthink were present in the Bush advisory process.*

Most, if not all, of the symptoms that Janis associated with *groupthink* were present in the Bush administration as the stage was set for the war in Iraq. Bush's inner circle of advisors on Iraq had pronounced neoconservative views and personal ties which shaped powerful preconceptions on the need to go to war with Iraq, remove Saddam Hussein from power, and eliminate Saddam's purported stockpile of weapons of mass destruction. Several members of Bush's inner circle had signed a January 26, 1998, letter to President Bill Clinton urging the Clinton administration to "implement a strategy" for "removing Saddam Hussein and his regime from power."<sup>15</sup> The letter went on to say that the administration must act decisively "to end the threat of weapons of mass destruction

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<sup>12</sup> Irving Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, second ed., 1982).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 174-175.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 244. Also see John P. Burke and Fred I. Greenstein, *How Presidents Test Reality: Decisions on Vietnam 1954 & 1965* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1989), 238.

<sup>15</sup> Letter to President Clinton on Iraq, January 26, 1998, Project for the New American Century. This letter can be found at: <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~govdocs/docs/iraq/letter.htm>

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against the U.S. or its allies. . . .” The signatories stated, quite clearly, that the U.S. had authority under “existing U.N resolutions to take necessary steps, including military steps, to protect our vital interests in the Gulf.” The letter was signed by influential neoconservative pundits Bill Kristol and Robert Kagan, as well as several individuals who would become part of George W. Bush’s inner circle three years later, including Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, John Bolton, and Elliott Abrams. The latter three, like Kristol and Kagan, were well-known neoconservative thinkers. The 1998 letter is remarkable for showing that a predisposition to use military force against Iraq had formed among Bush’s eventual advisors long before the Al Qaeda terrorist attacks on U.S. targets that took place on September 11, 2001.

*The neoconservative predisposition for war with Iraq was pervasive before 9/11.*

By the time George W. Bush had taken office in January 2001, the neoconservative mindset that had led several of Bush’s top advisors to encourage Bill Clinton to go to war in 1998 was pervasive among the policymakers that constituted Bush’s dominant inner circle. The belief that Saddam Hussein must be removed from power was so firmly formed among Bush’s top advisors that scant attention was given to the pros and cons of the pre-ordained option of military intervention, and almost no discussion was devoted to alternative courses of action, including tougher sanctions, increased arms inspections, and continued containment of Saddam—this despite the fact that Secretary of State Colin Powell and former Marine Corps General Anthony Zinni believed strongly that containment of Saddam was working.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, little thought was given to the possible negative consequences of intervention in Iraq, including the scenarios of protracted conflict or possible civil war. Perhaps more importantly, the Bush administration paid little attention to the arguments made by White House counter-terrorism advisor Richard Clarke, and others, who pointedly stated that Iraq was not involved in 9/11 or tied to Al Qaeda “despite repeated intimations and claims by the president and others to the contrary.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of the containment of Saddam Hussein see Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006), 13-15.

<sup>17</sup> Richard N. Haass, *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq*

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There is striking evidence of internal pressures within the administration to force skeptics to conform to the dominant pro-war mindset on Iraq or face the prospect of losing influence in the administration. There also is strong evidence of optimism about the ease of transforming Iraq from a non-democratic state into a democracy. Finally, as the processing of intelligence from CIA and other intelligence agencies indicates, key players in the Bush administration had a clear bias in the selection and interpretation of information concerning the purported threat posed by Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). Intelligence was manipulated, politicized, and stretched beyond acceptable limits to build and reinforce the rationale for war with Iraq.

*Iraq and the Bay of Pigs Compared:  
The Lack of Sound Process*

As with other notable examples of *groupthink*, including the Bay of Pigs fiasco of the Kennedy administration and the decisions on escalation of the Vietnam War during the Johnson administration, the decision to intervene militarily in Iraq was the product, at least in part, of weak national security procedures and processes, the absence of a thorough vetting of pros and cons and alternative courses of action, and the tendency of those in the inner group to push through their agenda dogmatically and with fierce tenacity. Those who did not agree with the inner group were frequently pressured to conform or forced to resign.

Irving Janis's study of the Bay of Pigs fiasco early in the administration of John F. Kennedy vividly illustrated the perils of small-group, unsystematic decision-making. Theodore Sorensen captured the essence of the flawed nature of the decision-making process during the early weeks of the Kennedy presidency when he noted that the closed nature of Kennedy's advisory group made "virtually impossible any systematic criticism" or discussion of alternatives. "No strong voice of opposition was raised in any of the key meetings, and no realistic alternatives were presented." Moreover, "no realistic appraisal was made of the chances of success or the consequences of

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*Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 235.

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failure.”<sup>18</sup>

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., would later write: “Our meetings took place in a curious atmosphere of assumed consensus.”<sup>19</sup> The Joint Chiefs of Staff could have been encouraged to spell out the military pros and cons of the invasion plan and to state their misgivings, but this did not happen. Moreover, Secretary of State Dean Rusk could have spelled out his reservations concerning the exaggerated prospect for armed uprisings inside Cuba or his belief that an invasion from the United States naval base at Guantanamo may have provided a better escape route than the *Bay of Pigs* if things went badly. But Rusk also remained silent. Months after the failed invasion, Schlesinger said: “I bitterly reproached myself for having kept so silent during those crucial discussions in the Cabinet Room, though my feelings of guilt were tempered by the knowledge that a course of objections would have accomplished little save to gain me a name as a nuisance.”<sup>20</sup>

As in the early days of the Kennedy administration, when the fateful decision to launch the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba took place, the lack of an open and effective decision-making process in the administration of George W. Bush, created an environment in which assertions regarding Iraq could be made uncritically. From the start, there were signs that the administration lacked rigor and discipline. Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill noted that President Bush appeared to be learning on the job and that this made him susceptible to the strong opinions of his top advisors, particularly Vice President Cheney, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, and Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz.

According to O’Neill, President Bush was not an active participant at many of the NSC meetings that the treasury secretary observed first-hand. The president often nodded, but seldom commented or raised questions. On a similar note, Wilkerson observed that Bush was “too aloof,” and “too distant from the details.”<sup>21</sup>

Former Press Secretary Scott McClellan reinforces the view

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<sup>18</sup> Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 304.

<sup>19</sup> Janis, *Groupthink*, 38.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted by Janis, *Groupthink*, 39.

<sup>21</sup> Wilkerson, “The White House Cabal,” 15A.

*The Bush  
NSC lacked  
rigorous  
analysis and  
open debate.*

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of Bush as a detached leader who let instinct substitute for probing questions and intellectual discussion of issues and alternative courses of action.<sup>22</sup> President Bush himself noted in an interview with Bob Woodward that his decision-making style was “just instinctive—I’m not a textbook player. I’m a gut player.”<sup>23</sup> In explaining to Woodward that his internal “clock” and his “instincts” were “pushing” him to take action in the aftermath of the attacks of 9/11, Bush said: “My instincts were beginning to tell me that there was kind of an anxiety beginning to build. And I wanted to make sure that our coalition knew we were tough.”<sup>24</sup> Asked if he had informed Condoleezza Rice or members of the NSC that he was planning on pushing them toward decisive action, Bush responded: “Of course not. I’m the commander—see, I don’t need to explain—I do not need to explain why I say things. That’s the interesting thing about being the president. Maybe somebody needs to explain to me why they say something, but I don’t feel like I owe anybody an explanation.”<sup>25</sup> Bush later commented: “I listen to all voices but mine is the final decision . . . I’m the decider, and I decide what’s best.”<sup>26</sup>

*Bush relied on instinct more than in-depth analysis.*

One of the central concerns of dealing with a president who relies heavily on “instinct” and “gut” decision-making is that there is a greater need for the president’s advisors to make sure that different positions and contradictory information are vetted in front of the president. This, however, was not the case in the Bush administration. Bush’s advisory group was confined to a very small group of advisors who seldom debated the pros and cons of issues or discussed possible adverse consequences to decisions. As one observer put it, “it’s a too tightly managed decision-making process. When they make a decision, a very small number of people are in the room, and it has a certain effect of constricting the range of alternatives being offered.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Scott McClellan, *What Happened: Inside the Bush White House and Washington’s Culture of Deception* (New York: Public Affairs Press, 2008), 145.

<sup>23</sup> Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon & Schuster 2002), 137.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-146.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted by James P. Pfiffner, “The First MBA President: George W. Bush as Public Administrator,” *Public Administration Review*, (January/February 2007), 7.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

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*There was no honest broker to ensure that pros and cons were discussed.*

Former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill described the Bush NSC process as "broken." There was no apparatus to assess the pros and cons of policy and to facilitate open debate and deliberation.<sup>28</sup> O'Neill added that the NSC meetings seemed "scripted." Another first-hand observer, Richard Haass, commented in an interview that, "It's important to keep in mind that this President got the National Security Council and process that he wanted, not the one that he needed. So there was simply no one out there playing the [role of] honest broker."<sup>29</sup> Haass was perplexed that the administration "never had a meeting before this war was launched, as extraordinary as it is . . . in which this issue was argued out from A to Z—where basically advocates and opponents could argue it out in any sort of fair way. It simply never happened."<sup>30</sup>

Even after the war had begun, the NSC was often a passive spectator of events. When L. Paul (Jerry) Bremer made the momentous decision to dissolve the Iraqi Army of 350,000, the decision was not even discussed or debated in the NSC. The decision actually reversed an earlier plan "that would have relied on the Iraqi military to help secure and rebuild the country, and had been approved at a White House meeting that Mr. Bush convened just 10 weeks earlier."<sup>31</sup> Although President Bush approved Bremer's plan, the *New York Times* reported that "the decision was made without thorough consultations within government, and without the counsel of the Secretary of State or the senior American commander in Iraq, Lt. General David D. McKiernan."<sup>32</sup> The decree by Bremer to disband the Iraqi Army was "assailed by critics as all but ensuring that American forces would face a growing insurgency led by embittered Sunnis who led much of the army."<sup>33</sup> The President and Condoleezza Rice agreed that since Bremer was on the

*Disbanding the Iraqi army gave rise to the insurgency.*

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<sup>28</sup> Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty: George Bush, the White House, and the Education of Paul O'Neill* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 97.

<sup>29</sup> Richard N. Haass, "Interview with Chris Matthews," *Hardball*, 6 May 2009.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Michael R. Gordon, "Fateful Choice on Iraqi Army Bypassed Debate," *New York Times*, accessed 17 March 2008: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/17/world/middleeast/17bremer.html>.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

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ground, in Iraq, that there should be deference to his judgment. Bremer's decision to do away with the Iraqi army was announced at an NSC meeting as a *fait accompli*.

As with the plan to dissolve the Iraqi army, there was little consultation with the Joint Chiefs of Staff prior to the Bush administration's 2003 decision to invade Iraq. Richard Haass suggests that the Joint Chiefs were "effectively silenced" by Defense Secretary Rumsfeld.<sup>34</sup> In part because of their realism and reticence about using military force in Iraq, Haass notes, "in this administration, the Joint Chiefs essentially lost their independent voice. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld preferred to deal directly with his field commanders—the so-called CINCs, or combatant commanders—who lacked a Washington voice, while more independent voices in Washington often found themselves sidelined."<sup>35</sup> The neglect of alternative views in the decision-making on Iraq will be further demonstrated below.

*Joint Chiefs  
silenced by  
Rumsfeld.*

The lack of a sound process described by O'Neill and Haass undoubtedly facilitated *groupthink*. A strongly cohesive inner group can dominate decision-making and can pressure those outside the group to suppress their concerns or risk being ostracized by the inner group. O'Neill recommended to Vice President Cheney that Bush's NSC process be reformed to encourage broad, systematic debate of issues with position papers circulated in advance of the NSC meetings, but these reforms were never implemented.

### ***LBJ and Vietnam: Parallels with Bush and Iraq***

The Bush administration's relatively closed and disjointed approach to national security policymaking is suggestive of parallels with the administration of Lyndon Johnson during the Vietnam War. Townsend Hoopes noted that the informality of Johnson's advisory process, and his reliance on Tuesday Luncheon meetings as his principal policymaking forum, exacted a heavy price with regard to policy outcomes.

The decisions and actions that marked our large-scale military entry into the Vietnam War in early 1965 reflected the piecemeal consideration of interrelated issues . . . the natural consequence of a fragmented NSC and a general inattention to long-range

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<sup>34</sup> Haass, *War of Necessity War of Choice*, 184.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

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policy planning. Consultation, even knowledge of the basic facts, was confined to a tight circle of Presidential advisors, and there appears to have been little systematic debate outside that group.<sup>36</sup>

A central quality of Lyndon Johnson's Tuesday Luncheon meetings that paralleled the Bush administration's practice was "the narrowing of the scope of who was present at policy discussions and therefore of what views were represented in administration deliberations on Vietnam policy."<sup>37</sup> The Tuesday luncheon meetings "magnified the influence" of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who was "supremely confident and assertive."<sup>38</sup>

In many respects, Donald Rumsfeld appears to have reprised Robert McNamara's role. Not only was the secretary of defense a central figure (along with his top aides, Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith) in President Bush's small inner group of decision-makers; he also was an imposing and, at times, intimidating figure in his relationship with the military commanders in the field and top officers at the Pentagon. Major General John Batiste, who commanded a division in Iraq, suggested that Rumsfeld's authoritarian style had made it more difficult for professional soldiers to do their job. Calling on Rumsfeld to resign in 2006, Batiste said: "We need leadership up there that respects the military as they expect the military to respect them. And that leadership needs to understand teamwork."<sup>39</sup>

Retired Army Major General Paul Eaton, who oversaw the training of Iraqi army troops until 2004, also went public with his criticism of the civilian leadership, writing in the *New York Times* that "Rumsfeld has put the Pentagon at the mercy of his ego, his Cold Warrior's view of the world and his unrealistic confidence in technology to replace manpower."<sup>40</sup>

The proclivity towards conformity that *groupthink* engen-

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted by Charles W. Kegley Jr. and Eugene R. Wittkopf, *American Foreign Policy: Pattern and Process* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 253.

<sup>37</sup> John P. Burke and Fred I. Greenstein, *How Presidents Test Reality* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998), 184.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>39</sup> Suzanne Goldenberg, "General Joins Attack on Rumsfeld over Iraq War," *The Guardian*, accessed 14 April 2006: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/apr/14/usa.iraq1>.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

*Rumsfeld is an imposing figure, much like McNamara during escalation in Vietnam.*

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dered in the Bush White House seems to have had impact at the Pentagon as well. Shortly after retiring, Marine Corps Lt. General Gregory Newbold, the former director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, published in *Time* magazine a strongly worded critique of the planning for war in Iraq in which he expressed regret for “not objecting more forcefully to the invasion of Iraq while still in uniform.”<sup>41</sup> Listing a series of mistakes in Iraq, including “McNamara-like micromanagement,” General Newbold called for “replacing Rumsfeld and many others unwilling to fundamentally change their approach.”<sup>42</sup>

The tension between the civilian leadership at the Pentagon and military leaders spread beyond military officers to seasoned professionals in the intelligence community at CIA, DIA, and elsewhere. Seymour Hersh traces the impetus for rising tensions to the creation of the “Office of Special Plans” at the Pentagon. This office was conceived by one of the neoconservative architects of the Iraq War—Under Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz—and it became a driving force supporting the rationale for war with Iraq. Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz relied heavily on information provided by Iraqi defectors belonging to the Iraqi National Congress while frequently ignoring the advice of military and civilian professionals who were skeptical about the need for war.

*The Office of Special Plans circumvented the officer corps and intelligence community.*

One of the informants, who carried great weight with Bush administration insiders, was Rafid Ahmed Alwan al-Janabi, codenamed “curveball” by German and American intelligence officials because of his questionable veracity. In February 2011, al-Janabi acknowledged that he “fabricated tales of mobile Bioweapons trucks and clandestine factories” in order to help provide a rationale for ending the regime of Saddam Hussein.<sup>43</sup> “Curveball” was the main source for many of the assertions made by Secretary of State Colin Powell in his famous pre-war speech at the United Nations. Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, “Rumsfeld Rebuked by Retired Generals,” *The Washington Post*, 13 April 2006, A1.

<sup>43</sup> Martin Chulov and Helen Pidd, “Curveball: How US was duped by Iraqi Fantasist Looking to Topple Saddam.” *Guardian.co.uk*, accessed at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/15/curveball-iraqi-fantasist-cia-saddam/print>.

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has stated that John McLaughlin, Deputy Director of the CIA, misled Secretary of State Powell by stating quite emphatically that CIA had independent corroborating sources to back up Curveball's assertions on WMD in Iraq—a claim that Wilkerson describes as dubious.

Hersh chronicles the unusual influence that the Office of Special Plans exerted in his book *Chain of Command*.<sup>44</sup> W. Patrick Lang, the former chief of Middle East intelligence at the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), told Hersh that Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and Douglas Feith had browbeat and sidestepped the traditional intelligence agencies by making Iraqi defectors the major source of information on Iraq. In Lang's words "the D.I.A. has been intimidated and beaten to a pulp, and there's no guts at all in the C.I.A."<sup>45</sup> Secretary of State Colin Powell became so frustrated with the neoconservative-dominated Office of Special Plans, headed by Feith, that he called it a separate little government—"Feith's Gestapo Office."<sup>46</sup>

In addition to having appointed a brash and opinionated secretary of defense, President Bush shared with Lyndon Johnson a proclivity to make policy with a small group of intimates rather than fostering broad debate in the formal NSC. One Bush administration official who participated in high-level planning on Afghanistan and Iraq told journalist James Fallows that "there was absolutely no debate in the normal sense. There are only six or eight [individuals] who make the decisions, and they only talk to each other. And if you disagree with them in public, they'll come after you, the way they did with [General] Shinseki."<sup>47</sup> The group that developed policy on Iraq consisted primarily of the president, Vice President Cheney, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, the vice president's Chief of Staff Lewis "Scooter" Libby, Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, the director of the Office of Special Plans at the Pentagon Douglass Feith, CIA Director George Tenet,

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<sup>44</sup> Seymour Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>46</sup> Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004). Also, see: Bob Woodward, "Cheney was Unwavering in his Desire to go to War," *Washington Post*, April 20, 2004, A1.

<sup>47</sup> James Fallows, "Bush's Lost Year," *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 2004, 79.

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and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice. On the periphery of this group was Secretary of State Colin Powell, who was under constant pressure to conform to the dominant mindset on Iraq within the administration.

Richard Armitage, who served as Powell's deputy, described the pressure to go along with the "inner group's" decisions in an interview with Bob Woodward of the *Washington Post*. Woodward notes that when Armitage arrived at the White House for a presidential briefing in the Situation Room in early July 2003 he was taken aside by deputy National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley who said to him: "Some people are saying your body language is very bad at the meetings."<sup>48</sup> A surprised Armitage said: "My body language is bad?" Hadley reiterated that Armitage's body language seemed to be "telegraphing" his discomfort at White House meetings. Armitage responded: "Steve, I don't like what the president is being told. So yeah, I'm very unhappy. I am not unhappy with the president. I am unhappy with the brief we are getting. It is a sophomoric brief."<sup>49</sup> Intending to put Armitage at ease, Hadley indicated that the real work on Iraq was being done upstairs in the Oval Office with the President, Cheney, and Rumsfeld. This revelation did not assuage Armitage's concern. According to Woodward, it made him realize, once again, that he and Powell "were window dressing, about as influential as a couple of potted plants. In the meetings upstairs, it was mostly Rumsfeld's positive spin, because there was no one to challenge him, and no NSC or interagency review to test his assessments."<sup>50</sup>

*Armitage is told that his body language is bad. There is pressure to conform.*

Armitage's comments reinforce the view that the Bush White House, much like Lyndon Johnson's, emphasized agreement as a test of loyalty. Differences of opinion were viewed as forms of disloyalty. As Woodward writes:

Armitage concluded that the penalty for disagreement in the Bush White House was an implied or explicitly stated accusation that you were not on the team. If he or Powell said something might be harder than it looked, Rice or Hadley judged them not on the team. If they said, as they had, "Maybe the Iraqis might not like it if we occupy their country very long,"

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<sup>48</sup> Bob Woodward, *State of Denial* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 230.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

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that meant they were not on the team.

Powell was getting about 20 minutes a week with Bush. In theory they were supposed to meet alone, but Cheney was often there. The vice president wouldn't say a word, but afterward, Powell was convinced, Cheney would offer Bush one version or another of "He's not on the team."<sup>51</sup>

James Fallows suggests that the small group of principals involved in making policy under Bush were not in the habit of coordinating and clearing policy with others. As one White House aide put it: "There was no established way to make sure that State knew what Defense was doing and vice versa, as became disastrously obvious after the fall of Baghdad. And there was no recognized venue for opportunity-cost discussions about the emerging Iraq policy, even if anyone had wanted them."<sup>52</sup>

The coordination of information between the NSC principals should have been the responsibility of former National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice. Indeed, it is the role of the national security advisor to help safeguard against *groupthink* by making sure the president is receiving information from a broad array of sources and advisors, whether that information reinforces or disagrees with the predispositions of the president. Ironically, Rice was so close to the president that she could not sustain the role of a neutral facilitator or honest broker of advice and information that her mentor, Brent Scowcroft, had practiced with great skill during the presidencies of Gerald R. Ford and George H.W. Bush. In fact, Scowcroft came closer to the Eisenhower model of "neutral competence" than any of the seventeen national security advisors who had been appointed through Stephen Hadley's tenure in the Bush administration. Scowcroft always made sure that all positions were aired fully and openly before President Ford and President George H.W. Bush. As the elder President Bush said in an interview with Jeffrey Goldberg of the *New Yorker*, Scowcroft "was very good about making sure that we did not simply consider the 'best case,' but instead considered what it would mean if things went our way, and also if they did not."<sup>53</sup> The

*Rice's  
advocacy for  
the president  
precluded  
dispassionate  
analysis.*

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 328-329.

<sup>52</sup> Fallows, "Bush's Lost Year," 80.

<sup>53</sup> Suzanne Goldberg, "Breaking Ranks: What turned Brent Scowcroft

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senior Bush's Chief of Staff, John Sununu, added: "We always made sure the President was hearing all the possibilities. That's one of the differences between the first Bush administration and this Bush administration."<sup>54</sup>

A common criticism of the Bush administration, Goldberg notes, "is that it ignores ideas that conflict with its aims."<sup>55</sup> Rice did not follow the example set by her mentor Scowcroft in making sure that all contingencies in Iraq were fully debated. Indeed, Goldberg reports that when Scowcroft and Rice joined several others for dinner at Georgetown's famous 1789 restaurant in September of 2002 the two engaged in a heated argument over the impending plans for Iraq. "Rice said irritably, 'The world is a messy place, and someone has to clean it up.' The remark stunned the other guests. Scowcroft, as he later told friends, was flummoxed by Rice's 'evangelical tone.'"<sup>56</sup>

Rice's attempt to wear two hats, as a forceful policy advocate, on the one hand, and as process manager of the flow of national security information to the president, on the other, suggests another important parallel with Lyndon Johnson's administration. Johnson's policy-making on Vietnam, according to John Burke and Fred Greenstein, was impeded by the fact that National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy "was in the potentially contradictory position of both managing the deliberations and advancing his own views." Like Bundy, Rice often became a policy advocate, losing sight of her role as an honest broker of information.<sup>57</sup>

Former Bush administration weapons inspector David Kay stated in testimony to the Senate Intelligence Committee that Rice and the NSC had failed to protect the president from faulty prewar intelligence and had left Secretary of State Colin Powell "hanging out in the wind" when he tried to gather intelligence before the war about Iraq's weapons programs.<sup>58</sup> "Where was the NSC?" Dr. Kay asked. "The dog that did not

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Against the Bush Administration," *New Yorker*, 13 October 2005, 58.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>57</sup> David J. Rothkopf, "Inside the Committee that Runs the World," *Foreign Policy*, March/April 2005, 32-34.

<sup>58</sup> Philip Shenon, "Former Iraq Arms Inspector Faults Prewar Intelligence," *New York Times*, 19 August 2004.

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bark in the case of Iraq's WMD program, quite frankly, in my view, is the National Security Council."<sup>59</sup>

### *Neoconservative Groupthink*

How is it that the Bush administration's policymaking on Iraq came to be dominated by a mindset that closed off alternative viewpoints concerning intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and forestalled open debate about the pros and cons of intervention or of possible scenarios concerning post-Saddam Iraq? Why did the presumed consensus that democracy could be readily constructed in Iraq go unchallenged? The simple answer to these questions is that as in other instances of *groupthink*, particularly Vietnam and the Bay of Pigs, a dominant mindset on the preferred course of action developed early and was shared without question by a highly cohesive inner-group of advisors and decision-makers. In the Bush administration, a strong consensus emerged concerning the imminent threat posed by Iraq and the need for decisive military action. As in the other cases of *groupthink*, the inner-group reinforced shared images of the perceived threat while simultaneously discounting contradictory information.

The same elements of group cohesion and assumed consensus that were prevalent in the decision-making on Vietnam were present in the Bush administration's decision-making regarding Iraq. Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill recalled wondering after the very first meeting of the National Security Council whether there was already an "in group and an out group" in the administration. A key nucleus of the "in" group consisted of prominent "neoconservatives" holding significant policymaking positions.

In the contemporary era, neoconservative notions of democratism have become attractive even to some who were once considered realists, i.e., opponents of unnecessary wars and extravagant attempts at nation-building. Traditional conservative-leaning Republicans like George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and Donald Rumsfeld aligned themselves with neoconservatives like Irving and Bill Kristol, John Bolton, and Ken Adelman in their desire to project American power abroad.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

*As in decision-making during the Vietnam War, there was strong cohesion in Bush's inner circle.*

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It is clear, in retrospect, that Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld followed the lead of the tightly-knit neoconservative elite in adopting the commitment to regime change and nation-building as tools for reshaping threatening nations. They should be transformed into presumably friendly and peaceful democracies. Iraq became the first sweeping test of preventive war and democratic nation-building. The neoconservative success in shaping the Bush administration policy on Iraq is described in an article on the “neoconservative convergence” written by Charles Krauthammer for *Commentary* in 2005. Noting that conservatives like Cheney and Rumsfeld had allied with and worked closely with neoconservatives throughout the 1990s, Krauthammer wrote:

*The drum-beat for war and nation-building is spearheaded by neoconservatives.*

What neoconservatives have long been advocating is now being articulated and practiced at the highest levels of government by a war cabinet composed of individuals who, coming from a very different place, have joined . . . the neoconservative camp and are carrying the neoconservative idea throughout the world.<sup>60</sup>

A cornerstone of the neoconservative movement, which would have a profound impact in shaping the Bush administration policies on Iraq, was the creation of the Project for a New American Century (PNAC), which is headquartered with the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) in Washington, D.C. PNAC was founded in 1997 with Bill Kristol as chairman. Robert Kagan and John Bolton served as co-directors of the Project. Kagan’s wife, Victoria Nuland, later became Deputy National Security Advisor to Vice President Dick Cheney. John Bolton was appointed by President Bush to the state department as Secretary for Arms Control and later as ambassador to the United Nations (as of January 2019, he was National Security Advisor for President Donald Trump.).

PNAC’s founding Statement of Principles spelled out the doctrine of preemptive engagement, stating: “The history of the 20th century should have taught us that it is important to shape circumstances before crises emerge, and to meet threats

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<sup>60</sup> Charles Krauthammer, “The Neoconservative Convergence,” *Commentary* 120, No. 1, July/August 2005, as quoted in C. Bradley Thompson, *Neoconservatism: An Obituary of an Idea* (Boulder & London: Paradigm Publishers, 2010), 177.

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before they become dire.”<sup>61</sup> Borrowing from PNAC’s language, President Bush stated that the United States “will act against such emerging threats [as Iraq] before they are fully formed.”<sup>62</sup> Martin Sapiro noted that the war against Iraq in 2003 was “not designed to pre-empt a specific threat, but to prevent Saddam Hussein from threatening the United States in the future.”<sup>63</sup> The American Enterprise Institute became an important intellectual clearinghouse for neoconservative thought. Dick Cheney undoubtedly became attracted to neoconservatism while serving as a senior fellow at AEI from 1993 to 1995. His wife, Lynne, also became a senior fellow at AEI. In 2005, Vice President Cheney said: “Both Lynne and I have a long history with the American Enterprise Institute, and we value the association.”<sup>64</sup>

In a speech delivered by President Bush at AEI on February 28, 2003, just weeks before the Iraq War began, the president began by apologizing, facetiously, for not meeting the dress code for the dinner. He then said: “They were about to stop me at the door but Irving Kristol said, ‘I know this guy, let him in.’”<sup>65</sup> Bush went on to say: “At the American Enterprise Institute, some of the finest minds in our nation are at work on some of the greatest challenges to our nation. You do such good work that my administration has borrowed 20 such minds.”<sup>66</sup>

In his AEI speech, Bush outlined the position of his administration on preventive war to the very audience that helped generate the idea, stating:

In Iraq, a dictator is building and hiding weapons that could enable him to dominate the Middle East and intimidate the civilized world—and we will not allow it. This same tyrant has close ties to terrorist organizations, and could supply them with

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<sup>61</sup> PNAC, “Project for the New American Century,” *Statement of Principles*, accessed at: [www.newamericancentury.org/statementofprinciples](http://www.newamericancentury.org/statementofprinciples) 3 June 1997.

<sup>62</sup> Louis Fisher, *Presidential War Power*, 2nd edition (Lawrence, Kansas: The University of Kansas Press, 2004), 204.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>64</sup> Payson Schwinn, “AEI: The Root of Bush’s Right-Wing Ideology,” *Think Progress*, February 15, 2007.

<sup>65</sup> George W. Bush, Speech at AEI Annual Dinner, February 28, 2003, accessed August 18, 2018: [www.aei.org/publication/president-george-w-bush-speaks-at-aeis-annual-dinner/](http://www.aei.org/publication/president-george-w-bush-speaks-at-aeis-annual-dinner/).

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

*Bush’s affinity for and alliance with AEI.*

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the terrible means to strike this country—and America will not permit it. The danger posed by Saddam Hussein and his weapons cannot be ignored or wished away. The danger must be confronted. We hope that the Iraqi regime will meet the demands of the United Nations and disarm, fully and peacefully. If it does not, we are prepared to disarm Iraq by force. Either way, this danger will be removed.

The safety of the American people depends on ending this direct and growing threat. Acting against the danger will also contribute greatly to the long-term safety and stability of our world. The current Iraqi regime has shown the power of tyranny to spread discord and violence in the Middle East. A liberated Iraq can show the power of freedom to transform that vital region, by bringing hope and progress into the lives of millions. America's interests in security, and America's belief in liberty, both lead in the same direction: to a free and peaceful Iraq.<sup>67</sup>

### *Groupthink and the Rationalization of War*

One of the key characteristics of *groupthink* identified by Janis is a shared mindset and presumed consensus within the inner-group of decision-makers. As noted earlier, the Kennedy administration's Bay of Pigs planning took place in an environment of consensus that was so strong that Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., despite his own reservations and reservations at the State Department concerning the Bay of Pigs plan, later acknowledged that no one voiced any opposition to the plan at White House meetings. The mood in the White House, according to Schlesinger, was buoyant optimism that the plan would work.<sup>68</sup>

A similar consensus can be seen in the Johnson administration during the early stages of escalation in Vietnam. McNamara and Bundy were confident that 85,000 troops would be enough to win the war. Those who were not as optimistic, including George Ball and Chester Bowles, were kept at a distance, ensuring that their skepticism would not deeply influence discussions of Vietnam policy.

Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill tried to provoke debate at the very first meeting of Bush's National Security Council on January 30, 2001, but already there was evidence of a certain mindset on Iraq among some of the participants. O'Neill was

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Janis, *Groupthink*, 35.

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*O'Neill is skeptical about WMD "evidence."*

surprised that the first item on the NSC agenda that day was Iraq's "destabilizing influence" in the Middle East. CIA Director George Tenet presented photos of a factory in Iraq that he asserted was producing chemical or biological weapons. O'Neill, a former CEO, said: "I've seen a lot of factories around the world that look a lot like this one. Why do we suspect that this one is producing chemical or biological weapons?"<sup>69</sup> Tenet "mentioned a few items of circumstantial evidence—such as the round-the-clock rhythm of shipments in and out of the plant" but admitted there was 'no confirming intelligence' as to the materials being produced."<sup>70</sup> O'Neill's skepticism concerning the CIA assertion that Iraqi factories were producing chemical and biological weapons was well-founded. In an interview on NBC news three years after the 2001 NSC meeting, Colin Powell acknowledged that the sourcing for the assertion that Iraq was trying to use trucks and trains to deliver chemical and biological weapons "was inaccurate and wrong, and in some cases deliberately misleading." Expressing his discomfort, Powell said, "I am disappointed and I regret it." In the same interview, Powell expressed regret that the intelligence he used when he presented the administration's case for war before the United Nations in February 2003 was "inaccurate and wrong."<sup>71</sup>

*Bush's very first NSC meeting discusses military options against Iraq months before 9/11.*

Near the end of the NSC meeting of January 30, 2001, President Bush asked Rumsfeld to "examine our military options" in Iraq—"how it might look" to use U.S. ground forces in the north and south of Iraq and how the armed forces could support groups inside the country who could help challenge Saddam Hussein.<sup>72</sup> Hence, nearly eight months before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, that is, long before any discussion of a possible link between Iraq and Al Qaeda, the NSC was already engaged in a discussion of military options in Iraq. Secretary O'Neill did not understand the urgency about Iraq. He viewed Saddam Hussein as "caged and defanged." But he thought the clear import of the first NSC meeting was

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<sup>69</sup> Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty*, 73.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Quoted by *Baltimore Sun*, 17 May 2004, 1A. NBC News broadcast interview with Colin Powell, 16 May 2004.

<sup>72</sup> Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty*, 75.

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that “getting Hussein was now the administration’s focus.” O’Neill wondered when exactly the why—“why Saddam, why now, and why this was central to U.S. interests”—would be discussed.<sup>73</sup>

At the second meeting of the Bush NSC, on February 1, 2001, Colin Powell advocated targeted sanctions against Iraq to avoid war. Rumsfeld responded: “What we really want to think about is going after Saddam.” When Colin Powell said we “don’t just want to replace one bad guy with another bad guy,” Rumsfeld hedged, saying: “It’s not my specific objective to get rid of Saddam Hussein. I’m after the weapons of mass destruction.”<sup>74</sup> After the meeting, O’Neill recorded his personal notes of the meeting: “From the start, we were building the case against Hussein and looking at how we could take him out. It was all about finding a way to do it. And that would solve everything.”<sup>75</sup>

The mindset of the Bush appointees who had been involved in the Project for the New American Century or belonged to the wider neoconservative network had undoubtedly influenced the Bush administration to start these early discussions of preparing for war with Iraq, and the terrorist attacks by Al Qaeda of September 11, 2001, provided the pretext for staging actions in Iraq. Just as the Gulf of Tonkin incident gave Lyndon Johnson grounds for seeking approval from Congress to take military action in Vietnam, the events of 9/11 provided George W. Bush the rallying point for focusing the nation’s attention on the perceived threat from Iraq.

By August of 2002, the administration had begun making the case in public for the need to take on Iraq militarily. At the Veterans of Foreign Wars 103rd National Convention on August 26, 2002, Vice President Cheney said: “Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction.” Cheney added, “We know that Saddam has resumed his efforts to acquire nuclear weapons.”<sup>76</sup> Cheney bluntly warned: “Many of us are convinced that Saddam will acquire nuclear weapons fairly soon. . . . There is no doubt he

*The purported threat posed by Iraqi WMD is greatly exaggerated.*

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 75-79.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>76</sup> Woodward, *Bush at War*, 165.

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is amassing [WMD] to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us.”<sup>77</sup> Two days after Cheney’s speech, Ken Adelman published an op-ed piece in the *Wall Street Journal* arguing that Saddam Hussein posed a bigger threat than Al Qaeda because Iraq had billions of dollars in oil revenues and scores of labs cranking out WMD. “Every day Mr. Bush holds off liberating Iraq is another day endangering America,” Adelman wrote. The Adelman op-ed appears to have been part of a coordinated public relations campaign to make the case for war on the editorial page of a publication that often served as a forum for neoconservative opinion.

Vice President Cheney’s dire warning of August 26, 2002, was reinforced by comments made by President Bush to reporters at Camp David twelve days later. In discussing Iraq’s nuclear capability Bush said: “I would remind you that when the inspectors first went into Iraq and were denied, finally denied access, a report came out of the . . . IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] that they [Iraq] were six months away from developing a weapon. I don’t know what more evidence we need.”<sup>78</sup> But as James Pfiffner notes, Bush’s mention of the IAEA report was erroneous. It is true that the IAEA report referred to by Bush concluded eleven years earlier, in 1991, “that Iraq had been 6 to 24 months away from the capacity to produce a nuclear bomb.” The IAEA also concluded, however, that Iraq’s nuclear capacity “had been destroyed by UN inspectors before 1998.”<sup>79</sup> When inspectors left Iraq in 1998 they stated: “Based on all credible information to date, the IAEA has found no indication of Iraq having achieved its program goal of producing nuclear weapons or of Iraq having retained a physical capability for the production of weapon-usable nuclear material or having clandestinely obtained such material.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> James P. Pfiffner, “Did President Bush Mislead the Country in his Arguments for War with Iraq?” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 34:1, March 2004, 29.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

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### *Groupthink and Selective Perception*

Rumsfeld argued that American intelligence analysts were unwilling “to make estimates that extended beyond the hard evidence they had in hand.”<sup>81</sup> A less restrictive reading of intelligence, in Rumsfeld’s view, produced a clearer appreciation for the dire threat posed by Iraq. At a Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee hearing in March of 2001, Richard Perle, a neo-conservative long influential in defense and national security circles inside and outside of government, made a similar argument, saying: “Does Saddam now have weapons of mass destruction? Sure he does. We know he has chemical weapons. We know he has biological weapons. . . . How far he’s gone on the nuclear-weapons side I don’t think we really know. My guess is it’s further than we think. It’s always further than we think, because we limit ourselves, as we think about this, to what we’re able to prove and demonstrate.”<sup>82</sup>

The implication of the remarks made by Rumsfeld and Perle, and many others in the Bush administration, was that a closer reading of intelligence, reading between the lines, would uncover the real threat posed by Iraq. In fact, Abram Shulsky, a top neoconservative aide to Wolfowitz and an admirer of the political theorist Leo Strauss, had published an article with Gary Schmitt, a co-founder of The Project for the New American Century, that cited Strauss as an expert on close textual analysis, hidden, “esoteric” meaning, and the role of dissemblance. Titled “Leo Strauss and the World of Intelligence,” the article argued that the U.S. intelligence community “failed to appreciate the duplicitous nature of the regimes it deals with.”<sup>83</sup> The intelligence community, Shulsky said, “is susceptible to social science notions of proof, and is therefore incapable of dealing with deliberate concealment.”<sup>84</sup>

*Strauss and the “close reading” of intelligence.*

Hersh notes that Shulsky, who studied under the direction of Leo Strauss at the University of Chicago, adopted a Straussian notion that intelligence, like the great books, requires a “close reading” in order for the hidden or real meaning to be discerned. Raw intelligence, and intelligence documents,

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<sup>81</sup> Seymour Hersh, *Chain of Command*, 209.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>84</sup> Quoted by Hersh, *Chain of Command*, 220.

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*Strauss  
believed that  
"noble lies"  
and deception  
are necessary.*

also require a "close reading" to discern the true meaning. As Shulsky and his colleague Gary Schmitt put it, Strauss's idea of a hidden meaning in texts "alerts one to the possibility that political life may be closely linked to deception. Indeed, it suggests that deception is the norm in political life, and the hope, to say nothing of the expectation, of establishing a politics that can dispense with it is the exception."<sup>85</sup> Robert Pippin, a critic of Strauss, in an interview with Hersh, said: "Strauss believed that good statesmen have powers of judgment and must rely on an inner circle. The person who whispers in the ear of the king is more important than the king. If you have that talent, what you do or say in public cannot be held accountable in the same way." Another critic of Strauss, Professor Stephen Holmes of the New York University Law School, told Hersh that "Strauss's idea 'actually Plato's' [is] that philosophers need to tell noble lies not only to the people at large but also to powerful politicians."<sup>86</sup>

In the fall of 2002, Rumsfeld openly quibbled with the CIA over the agency's inability to document significant direct ties between Al Qaeda and Iraq. Rumsfeld and his advisors, particularly Douglass Feith, Abram Shulsky, and Paul Wolfowitz, believed that the CIA "was simply unable to perceive the reality of the situation in Iraq. The goal of the Office of Special Plans at the Pentagon was to put the data under the microscope to reveal what the intelligence community can't see."<sup>87</sup> At a post 9/11 briefing, Rumsfeld said that he had already been informed that there was "solid evidence of the presence in Iraq of Al Qaeda members." Indeed, Rumsfeld told the press that the relationship between Iraq and Al Qaeda was "bulletproof."<sup>88</sup> In a major address to the nation on October 7, 2002, President Bush added: "We know that Iraq and Al Qaeda have had high-level contacts that go back a decade. . . . We've learned that Iraq has trained Al Qaeda members in bomb-making and poisons . . ." <sup>89</sup> As with many other elements of the Bush administration's case for war with Iraq, the insinuation

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<sup>85</sup> Hersh, *Chain of Command*, 220.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>88</sup> Pfiffner, "Did President Bush Mislead the Country," 26.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

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of a strong alliance between Iraq and Al Qaeda proved to be embellished and erroneous.

Paul Pillar, the national intelligence officer responsible for the Middle East at the CIA, wrote in *Foreign Affairs*: "The Intelligence community never offered any analysis that supported the notions of an alliance between Saddam and Al Qaeda, yet it was drawn into a public effort to support that notion."<sup>90</sup> The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence offered specific evidence of Saddam's distrust of Bin Laden in their 2006 report on *Post-War findings on Iraq's Links to Terrorism*. Based on FBI debriefings of Saddam's top associates, and captured documents, the Senate Intelligence Committee concluded that "Saddam did not trust Al Qaeda or any other radical Islamist group and did not want to cooperate with them."<sup>91</sup> Saddam's former Deputy Prime Minister, Tariq Aziz, added: "Saddam only expressed negative sentiments about Bin Laden."<sup>92</sup> When the Taliban was in power in Afghanistan, Aziz noted, Saddam's government "deliberately avoided opening an embassy in Kabul." And when Taliban-styled Wahabists came to Iraq, "the Iraqi regime issued a decree aggressively outlawing Wahabism in Iraq and threatened offenders with execution."<sup>93</sup>

*The Senate Intelligence Committee discredited assertions of an alliance between Saddam and Al Qaeda.*

The Senate report notes that Bin Laden did meet with an Iraqi Intelligence Service Official by the name of Faruq Hijazi in Sudan in 1995. However, the FBI wrote that "Hijazi told debriefers that he was selected by Saddam" to meet with Bin Laden "because he was secular, which would make him less sympathetic" to Bin Laden's radical message. Hijazi noted that Saddam gave him explicit instructions that he was "only to listen and not negotiate or promise anything to Bin Laden."<sup>94</sup> In his report to Saddam, Hijazi criticized Bin Laden for his "hostile speech and his insistence on the Islamization of Iraq." Hijazi concluded that "working with Bin Laden would damage

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<sup>90</sup> Paul Pillar, "Intelligence, Policy, and the War in Iraq," *Foreign Affairs* 85:2, March/April 2006, 20.

<sup>91</sup> Senate Report, Select Committee on Intelligence Report on "Postwar Findings About Iraq's WMD Programs and Links to Terrorism and How They Compare With Prewar Assessments," 109th Congress, 8 September 2006, 66.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

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relations with Arab countries throughout the region.”<sup>95</sup>

Were the Bush advisors sincere in their belief that Saddam had ties to Al Qaeda and that he possessed a massive arsenal of weapons of mass destruction? Possibly. Were they willing to slant information or cherry-pick intelligence to fit their preconceived notions? The record strongly suggests elements of exaggeration and outright manipulation of intelligence. The exaggeration or embellishment of information occurred most obviously among the policymakers who wanted military intervention in Iraq. George Tenet did not help matters with his “slam dunk” comment on WMD, but the biased interpretation of intelligence had already taken on a momentum of its own.

The Pentagon’s Office of Special Plans put a high premium on the reports of defectors from Iraq. Ahmed Chalabi and the Iraqi National Congress (INC) became a major source of so-called intelligence on Iraq. Even though the INC had a record of manipulating information to fit its agenda, their information was given great weight. As noted earlier, even the false information of the source “Curveball” made its way into top level reports. And as Seymour Hersh notes, great reliance also was placed on the early testimony of General Hussein Kamel, who had been in charge of Iraq’s weapons program before he defected to Jordan. Vice President Cheney cited as authoritative evidence Kamel’s statement that Iraq had produced 30,000 liters of anthrax and other deadly biological weapons. The trouble is that Kamel’s interview went on to say that Iraq’s stockpile of chemical and biological warheads, which had been produced before the 1991 Gulf War, had been destroyed, in some cases in response to ongoing inspections. Kamel told one of the UN inspection teams that he had personally ordered the destruction of all chemical and biological weapons. Kamel also questioned the credibility of the testimony of Dr. Khidhir Hamza, an Iraqi nuclear scientist who defected in 1994.<sup>96</sup> After defecting to the U.S. Hamza became highly vocal about Iraq’s alleged nuclear ambitions. However, Kamel called Hamza a “professional liar.” David Albright, a former UN weapons inspector, said in 1998 that Hamza had sent publishers a book proposal for a book titled “Fizzle: Iraq and the Atomic Bomb,”

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>96</sup> Hersh, *Chain of Command*, 207-216.

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which described how Iraq had failed in its quest for a nuclear device.<sup>97</sup>

Vice President Cheney and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld urged President Bush to release more than \$90 million in federal funds to INC leader Ahmed Chalabi on the basis that the INC was providing the administration with “unique intelligence” on Iraq.<sup>98</sup> Another Iraqi defector asserted that an Iraqi hospital had an underground lab producing chemical and biological weapons. UN inspector Hans Blix noted that his teams had physically examined the hospital with ground-penetrating radar equipment and found no underground facilities for chemical or biological production or storage.<sup>99</sup>

Pillar, who was the CIA’s national intelligence officer for the Near East and South Asia from 2000 to 2005, wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that a pattern of “politicization” of intelligence on Iraq unfolded in which the White House helped steer intelligence in favor of military intervention in Iraq by calling on the intelligence community “to uncover more material that would contribute to the case for war.”<sup>100</sup> According to Pillar, the Bush administration “used intelligence not to inform decision-making, but to justify a decision already made. It went to war without requesting—and evidently without being influenced by—any strategic-level intelligence assessments on any aspect of Iraq.”<sup>101</sup> Pillar, who was in charge of coordinating all of the intelligence community’s assessments regarding Iraq, noted that the first request he received from any administration policymaker for an assessment of Iraq’s capabilities did not come until a year into the war.<sup>102</sup> Pillar concedes that “official intelligence on Iraqi weapons programs was flawed,” but even with its flaws, it did not provide the grounds for going to war. As Pillar writes:

*The intelligence on Iraq was politicized to justify decisions already made.*

On the issue that mattered most, the intelligence community judged that Iraq probably was several years away from developing a nuclear weapon. The October 2002 NIE also judged that

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>100</sup> Quoted by Walter Pincus, “Ex-CIA Official Faults Use of Data on Iraq,” *Washington Post*, 10 February 2006, A1.

<sup>101</sup> Pillar, “Intelligence, Policy, and the War in Iraq,” 18.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 18.

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Saddam was unlikely to use WMD against the United States unless his regime was placed in mortal danger.<sup>103</sup>

According to Pillar, the CIA also was at odds with the Bush administration in its assessment of the neoconservative view that a democracy in Iraq would revolutionize the entire Middle East. The CIA, Pillar writes,

argued that any value Iraq might have as a democratic exemplar would be minimal and would depend on the stability of the new Iraqi government and the extent to which democracy in Iraq was seen as developing from within rather than being imposed by an outside power. More likely, war and occupation would boost political Islam and increase sympathy for terrorists' objectives—and Iraq would become a magnet for extremists from elsewhere in the Middle East.<sup>104</sup>

According to Pillar, the Bush administration repeatedly posed questions about the “supposed connection” between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda. “Feeding the administration’s voracious appetite for material on the Saddam-al Qaeda link consumed an enormous amount of time and attention.”<sup>105</sup> Pillar, who was responsible for coordinating assessments on Iraq from all 15 intelligence agencies, wrote that top policymakers “would frown on or ignore analysis that called into question a decision to go to war and welcome analysis that supported such a decision.”<sup>106</sup>

Top intelligence analysts, Pillar observed, “felt a strong wind consistently blowing in one direction. The desire to bend with such a wind is natural and strong, even if unconscious.”<sup>107</sup> It became clear, Pillar argues, “that intelligence was misused publicly” by the Bush administration “to justify decisions already made.” Moreover, “damaging ill will developed between policymakers and intelligence officers, and . . . the intelligence community’s own work was politicized.”<sup>108</sup>

Closer scrutiny of the intelligence may not have made a difference with some, but former Secretary of State Colin Powell conceded in February of 2004 that the administration’s convic-

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<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>105</sup> Quoted by Pincus, “Ex-CIA Official Faults Use of Data on Iraq,” A14.

<sup>106</sup> Pillar, “Intelligence, Policy, and the War in Iraq,” 24.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

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tion that Saddam Hussein already possessed weapons of mass destruction had made the case for war more urgent. When asked if he would have recommended an invasion of Iraq knowing that there were not stockpiles of WMD Powell said: "I don't know, because it was the stockpile that presented the final little piece that made it more of a real and present danger and threat to the region and to the world."<sup>109</sup> The "absence of a stockpile," Powell added, "changes the political calculus; it changes the answer you get."<sup>110</sup>

### *Groupthink and the Pressures to Conform*

The historical record is replete with examples of internal pressures to conform to the prevailing viewpoint in key national security decisions. When Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., expressed misgivings about the Bay of Pigs invasion plan in the Kennedy administration, Robert Kennedy took him aside at a birthday party and asked him why he was opposed to the invasion plan. After listening rather coldly, Robert said, "you may be right or you may be wrong, but the President has made his mind up. Don't push it any further. Now is the time for everyone to help him all they can."<sup>111</sup> Similarly, Under Secretary of State Chester Bowles, who was given no opportunity to express his dissenting view at a White House meeting, wrote a memo opposing the CIA plan on Cuba, but Secretary of State Dean Rusk kept the memo from going to the president.

Three years later, in the Johnson administration, both Dean Rusk and General Maxwell Taylor used self-censorship regarding key decisions to employ bombing and increase ground troops in Vietnam. On a related matter, Under Secretary of State George Ball's memorandum of October 5, 1964, titled: "How Valid are the Assumptions Underlying Our Vietnam Policies?," was suppressed for several months until after the president had already decided to order sustained air attacks on North Vietnam.<sup>112</sup> Historian James Thomson, who served on McGeorge Bundy's NSC staff in the Johnson administration

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<sup>109</sup> Glenn Kessler, "Powell Says New Data May Have Affected War Decision," *Washington Post*, 3 February 2004, A1.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, A1.

<sup>111</sup> Quoted by Janis, *Groupthink*, 40.

<sup>112</sup> John P. Burke and Fred I. Greenstein, *How Presidents Test Reality*, 236.

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during the critical period of escalation in 1965, suggests that “every senior official was subjected to conformity pressures, which took the form of making those who openly questioned the escalation policy the butt of an ominous epithet: ‘I’m afraid he’s losing his effectiveness.’ This ‘effectiveness trap’ ‘the threat of being branded as a ‘has been’ and losing access to the seats of power’ inclines its victims to suppress or tone down their criticism.”<sup>113</sup>

When individuals in Johnson’s inner circle began to express doubts, subtle pressures from quizzical facial expressions to crisp retorts were used to “domesticate” the dissenter. After Bill Moyers expressed concern over the bombing campaign in Vietnam, the President greeted him at a meeting with the words: “Well, here comes Mr. Stop-the-bombing.”<sup>114</sup> A dissenter was made to feel at home so long as he did not express doubts to outsiders and kept criticisms within bounds by not challenging fundamental assumptions.

As in the Johnson administration, individuals in the George W. Bush administration who voiced dissenting views on Iraq, or who merely held *less* optimistic views about the level of success in Iraq, often found themselves ridiculed, under pressure to suppress or submerge alternative perspectives. When a 2004 report written by the CIA station chief in Baghdad suggested that the war was not going well, President Bush questioned the author’s outlook, saying: “What is he, some kind of defeatist?”<sup>115</sup>

Several examples can be given of instances in which views on Iraq that did not conform to the mindset of Bush’s policy-making clique led to conformity pressures, marginalization, or outright dismissal from the Bush administration.

Early in the Bush administration, Greg Thielmann, a career diplomat at the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research, was given responsibility for briefing John Bolton, the Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security. Thielmann was ultimately shut out of Bolton’s early

*There were significant pressures to conform.*

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<sup>113</sup> Janis, *Groupthink*, 115.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>115</sup> Quoted by James P. Pfiffner, “The First MBA President: George W. Bush as Public Administrator,” *Public Administration Review* (January/February 2007), 15.

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morning staff meetings because he did not see eye to eye with Bolton on the Under Secretary's interpretation of intelligence on Iraq. Thielmann was trying to provide context for raw intelligence data but was told by a Bolton aide that the Undersecretary "does not need you at this meeting anymore." When Thielmann protested being banned from the morning meetings he was told that "The Undersecretary wants to keep this in the family."<sup>116</sup> According to Thielmann, Bolton "surrounded himself with a group of hand-picked loyalists and found a way to get CIA information directly."<sup>117</sup>

The ultimate punishment for failing to conform to the inner group's sentiments is dismissal from the administration. According to journalist James Fallows this was the fate of Bush's top economic advisor, Lawrence Lindsey. Lindsey was fired shortly after he stated publicly that the total cost of the war in Iraq might reach as high as \$200 billion, "far in excess of the predictions made by senior administration officials." Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, argued that Iraq's oil revenues, along with contributions from allies, would significantly reduce the cost of the war for the United States.<sup>118</sup>

*Lindsey is fired for "overestimating" the cost of war.*

Another type of pressure to conform came in the form of public reprisals in the media. When Mohamed El Baradei, the director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, stated that the documents on shipments of Niger uranium to Iraq "are not authentic," Vice President Cheney responded by saying: "I think Mr. El Baradei, frankly is wrong. And I think if you look at the track record of the IAEC on this kind of issue, especially where Iraq's concerned, they have consistently underestimated or missed what it was Saddam Hussein was doing." Three days later, the Iraq war began.<sup>119</sup> The documents that El Baradei thought were not authentic turned out to be bogus, forgeries replete with factual errors.

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<sup>116</sup> Hersh, *Chain of Command*, 222.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> Fallows, "Bush's Lost Year," 70-71.

<sup>119</sup> Hersh, *Chain of Command*, 207.

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*A better advisory process may have helped prevent groupthink.*

### **Conclusion**

It seems clear that in the case of Bush's national security advisory system better organization, more systematic debate and review of options, and better planning would have provided necessary safeguards against *groupthink*. The Bush National Security Council was not employed with the regularity and rigor that are necessary to make sure that options and disagreements are not swept under the rug and that the pros and cons of major policies are fully debated. As Richard Haass notes, it is striking that at no time before the decision to intervene militarily in Iraq was there a full NSC meeting with the principals in which the strengths and weaknesses of military intervention in Iraq were fully vetted. There was no mechanism equivalent to the NSC Planning Board of the Eisenhower years, which was intended to make sure that position papers were carefully prepared and debated before the NSC principals. Even with better organization and procedural safeguards, however, it is possible that the neoconservative mindset on Iraq, powerfully represented as it was throughout the national security and foreign policy establishment and in the media, would have prevailed. Lyndon Johnson faced dissent from George Ball, Hubert Humphrey, and, ultimately, McNamara himself, but the momentum toward escalation of the military commitment in Vietnam was so powerful that the war hawks prevailed.

As the *Tower Commission Report* noted after the Iran-Contra fiasco, there is no substitute for formal and systematic use of the National Security Council to ensure broad review of policy options, open debate of issues, and multiple advocacy. A well organized and routinely utilized national security apparatus can serve as a bulwark against incomplete information and bad decisions. If the historical record is any indication, the regular use of the NSC, under the direction of a national security advisor who serves as a neutral facilitator of advice and information, can help ensure the type of probing discussion and debate necessary when dealing with such monumental questions as war and peace. None of these elements were present in any substantial and consistent manner in the Bush administration. High level discussions, carefully brokered by the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, likely would have produced greater clarity, greater skepticism, and greater consideration of

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the pros and cons of military intervention in Iraq. Much more weight should have been given to the costs and consequences of the war. As with the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam, future presidents are well advised to learn the lessons of Iraq. They should take note of the procedural and advisory shortcomings of the Bush administration and institute practices to help safeguard against the perils of *groupthink*.

There is more than a touch of irony in that the very architects of the war, who had convinced President Bush that Iraq would be a “cakewalk” and that a military solution was imperative, were by 2006 turning on the very person and administration they had persuaded to go to war. What was at issue was not a reassessment of the unrelenting neoconservative push for war with Iraq; the entire problem was with the supposedly inept *execution* of the war. As Ken Adelman put it: “I just presumed that what I considered to be the most competent national-security team since Truman was indeed going to be competent. They turned out to be among the most incompetent teams in the post-war era. Not only did each of them, individually, have enormous flaws, but together they were deadly, dysfunctional.”<sup>120</sup>

The neoconservatives’ self-righteous view that the war was essential was now supplanted with the “we didn’t fight to win” mantra. The policy was not wrong, but the execution was bad. Adelman elaborated: “The policy can be absolutely right, and noble, beneficial, but if you can’t execute it, it’s useless, just useless. I guess that’s what I would have said: that Bush’s arguments are absolutely right, but you know what, you just have to put them in the drawer marked CAN’T DO.”<sup>121</sup>

Richard Perle nicely frames the attempt to escape blame for the Iraq War by suggesting that the advocacy for war and for democratization of Iraq is not what got the Bush administration into trouble. Rather, it was the purported incompetence of the military in implementing the policies advocated by the neoconservatives that led to disaster. “Huge mistakes were made,” Perle conceded, but “I want to be very clear on this: They were not made by neoconservatives, who had almost no voice in what happened, and certainly almost no voice in

*Flawed execution of bad policy does not absolve the architects of blame.*

<sup>120</sup> David Rose, “Neo Culpa,” *Vanity Fair*, November 3, 2006, 2.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

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what happened after the downfall of the regime in Baghdad. I'm getting damn tired of being described as an architect of the war. I was in favor of bringing down Saddam. Nobody said, 'Go design the campaign to do that.' I had no responsibility for that."<sup>122</sup>

*The neoconservative attempt to escape responsibility for the Iraq debacle is untenable.*

This neoconservative argument is convenient for them: we can now separate flawed policy and grandiose policy objectives from flawed execution of that policy. The "Political Policy" versus "Administrative Execution" dichotomy is no more tenable today than when Woodrow Wilson argued in his article "The Study of Public Administration," published in 1887, that Politics and Administration are separate and distinct enterprises.<sup>123</sup> In reality, the Bush administration accepted the neoconservative premises for war all-too-readily and all-too-faithfully.

Richard Lowry called out the neoconservatives on this very point in an article that appeared in *The National Interest*. As Lowry put it:

Neoconservatism displays impatience at any reminder that the world is not infinitely plastic and that not all problems will break down under the solvent of American power. It assumes a universal admiration for America that does not exist, and it tends to dismiss the desire of local actors to have a say in how a project is carried out. For neoconservatives, liberal democracy can be achieved simply by an American invasion . . . or a ritual invocation of the policy of "regime change."<sup>124</sup>

Ultimately, Bush's acceptance of the neoconservative belief that policy objectives, no matter how pristine, can be achieved simply because they are noble and can employ military might, conveys general naiveté and ignorance of war. As Eisenhower once said, anyone can start a war, but to predict how war will go once it is started is foolhardy. An even greater and more dangerous deficiency in a policymaker is letting political ambition or wishful thinking distort reality.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>123</sup> Woodrow Wilson, "The Study of Public Administration," *Political Science Quarterly*, 1887.

<sup>124</sup> Richard Lowry, "Reaganism v. Neo-Reaganism," *The National Interest*, No. 79, Spring 2005, 36.