

The Rise and Decline of the Neoconservatives

By Jim Lobe & Michael Flynn | November 17, 2006

Summary: Shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, an influential, neoconservative-led pressure group called the Project for the New American Century issued a letter to the president calling for a dramatic reshaping of the Middle East as part of the war on terror. Although many of the items on the neoconservatives' agenda, including ousting Saddam Hussein, were eventually adopted by the George W. Bush administration, the group's remarkable string of successes has gradually given way to a steady decline, culminating most recently in the president's decision after the November midterm elections to replace Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, an important erstwhile ally of the neoconservatives, with Robert Gates. This essay examines the rise and decline of the neoconservatives and their post-Cold War agenda. We conclude that although the neoconservatives and their allied aggressive nationalists, such as Vice President Dick Cheney, retain sufficient weight to hamper efforts to push through major reversals in U.S. foreign policy, the increasing isolation of this political faction coupled with recent political events in the United States point to the potential emergence of a more cautious, realist-inspired agenda during the final two years of the Bush presidency.

On September 20, 2001, a mere nine days after the al-Qaida attacks in the United States, the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), a then-obscure neoconservative-led think tank in Washington, DC, located in the same building as the better-known American Enterprise Institute (AEI), published an open letter to President George W. Bush advocating a number of steps the administration should take in its newly proclaimed "war on terrorism." The letter, published in the *Washington Times* and the *Weekly Standard*, urged military action to oust the Taliban in Afghanistan and to "capture or kill" Osama bin Laden, both recommendations widely supported by virtually all U.S. political leaders.

But the group's suggestions did not stop there—in fact, PNAC had an ambitious number of additional targets in mind, which had little or no connection to the actual terrorist attacks. Most notoriously, the letter called for regime change in Iraq, "even if evidence does not link Iraq directly to the attack." The letter also proposed taking "appropriate measures of retaliation" against Iran and Syria if they refused to comply with U.S. demands to cut off support for Lebanon's Hezbollah; argued that Washington

should cut off aid to the Palestinian Authority unless it immediately halted the ongoing intifada against Israel's occupation; and called for a "large increase" in defense spending to prosecute the war on terror. Some of the letter's signers—notably, former CIA director James Woolsey and editor-at-large of the neoconservative *Commentary* magazine Norman Podhoretz—were soon calling this new war "World War IV." Supporting this breath-taking agenda were nearly 40 other influential policy elites and public figures. The group consisted of mostly neoconservatives, but also included a leader of the Christian Right, some aggressive right-wing nationalists, and some pro-Israel liberal interventionists associated with the Democratic Party.

A little over six months later, PNAC released a follow-up letter on April 3, 2002. This second letter focused largely on U.S. policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. PNAC Chairman William Kristol, *Weekly Standard* editor and prominent neoconservative scion, collected the signatures of 34 like-minded power players, including a good slice of the membership of Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld's Defense Policy Board (DPB). One notable signatory

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was Richard Perle, who in addition to being the DPB chairman, an AEI resident fellow, and the chief Washington sponsor of Ahmed Chalabi, is also one of the most powerful neoconservatives of his generation. The letter urged George W. Bush to sever all ties with the Palestinian Liberation Organization's (PLO) Yasser Arafat and to "lend full support to Israel as it seeks to root out the terrorist network that daily threatens the lives of Israeli citizens." Said the letter: "Mr. President, it can no longer be the policy of the United States to urge, much less to pressure, Israel to continue negotiating with Arafat, any more than we would be willing to be pressured to negotiate with Osama bin Laden or Mullah Omar." It added: "Israel's fight against terrorism is our fight. Israel's victory is an important part of our victory." For good measure, the letter reiterated PNAC's call "for removing Saddam Hussein from power."

A little over a year after the publication of these letters, PNAC's agenda seemed to be rapidly advancing. Not only had the Taliban and its al-Qaida allies been ousted from Afghanistan by December 2001, but the Bush administration had also in June 2002 reversed long-standing U.S. policy and severed all contact with the PLO's Arafat, declaring that Washington would only deal with Palestinian leaders who were "not compromised by terror." Washington, in effect, was aligning itself fully behind the Likud government in Israel led by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

By early April 2003, the U.S. military had conquered Baghdad. On May 1, 2003, Bush declared the end of major hostilities in Iraq in his memorable "Mission Accomplished" speech. Senior administration officials and their neoconservative associates at the DPB, AEI, PNAC, and elsewhere soon began publicly warning that Syria and Iran were next on their list. "The liberation of Iraq was the first great battle for the future of the Middle East," wrote Kristol in the *Standard* in early May 2003: "The next great battle—not, we hope, a military battle—will be for Iran. We are already in a death struggle with Iran over the future of Iraq." Within two weeks, the

administration had spurned an unprecedented offer from Iran to negotiate all outstanding differences between the two nations, including its nuclear program and its support for armed anti-Israel groups, in exchange for security guarantees. The Bush administration also broke off all diplomatic contacts with Tehran, including until-then fruitful talks on stabilizing Afghanistan, after accusing Iran of harboring al-Qaida militants allegedly linked to a series of bombings in Saudi Arabia. The neoconservatives were euphoric; their agenda had not only become policy, but their vision of a "new American Century" seemed well on its way to becoming reality.

The euphoria lasted through most of summer 2003, until it became increasingly clear that the administration's optimistic assumptions about its lightning military victory in Iraq and its consequences on the rest of the Middle East—and on the rest of the world—proved profoundly mistaken. In a book released in late 2003, Perle and coauthor David Frum, a former Bush speechwriter, recognized that the neoconservative agenda had lost momentum and was increasingly under threat. But the difficulties, in their view, were a result not so much of the actions of foreign actors, such as the effective and totally unanticipated Sunni insurgency, but rather attempts by the "realists" in the State Department and the CIA, and by senior retired and active-duty military officers, to change the approach in Iraq and elsewhere in the region. Perle and Frum lamented: "We can feel the will to win ebbing in Washington; we sense the reversion to the bad old habits of complacency and denial."¹

Within a few short years, the neoconservatives,² a small group of self-described "public intellectuals," and their allies among aggressive nationalists and the Christian Right had succeeded in setting a radical new foreign policy agenda, inaugurating a new era in U.S. relations with the rest of the world. And then they began to stumble. This paper examines the rise and ongoing decline of the neoconservatives and their post-Cold War agenda. Because their agenda is global in scale and they remain important players—albeit increasingly isolated—within the

U.S. foreign policy elite, understanding the neoconservatives and how they achieved their success is a critical undertaking for anyone wishing to divine the future course of the world's last remaining superpower. We conclude that although the neoconservatives and their allied aggressive nationalists retain sufficient weight to hamper efforts to push through major reversals in U.S. foreign policy, recent political events in the United States—including the resignation of Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and his replacement with Robert Gates—coupled with the growing debacle of U.S. Mideast policy, augur well for the emergence of a realist-aligned agenda during the final two years of the Bush presidency.

From the Gulf War to 9/11

The ostensible “success” of the PNAC agenda through mid-2003 represented a union of two distinct, though mutually reinforcing, agendas that had been laid out by the neoconservatives and their various supporters during the decade before the first presidency of George W. Bush. Shortly after the end of the Cold War, neoconservatives began developing a number of ideas aimed at keeping the United States militarily engaged and dominant in the world. The emerging ideas supported a hegemonic global strategy that had at its core two main elements: ensuring global U.S. preeminence, and radically altering the Middle East to ensure a particular vision of Israel security.

These ideas were initially spelled out in two documents, one drafted by senior Pentagon officials in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, the other by a small group of hard-line neoconservatives with close ties to Israel's Likud Party. The first, a draft of the Defense Planning Guidance (DPG), which was leaked to the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* in the spring of 1992, offered a blueprint for maintaining U.S. solo-superpower status, prompting one Democratic critic, Sen. Joseph Biden (D-DE), to criticize it as “literally a Pax Americana.” The second, a 1996 report entitled “A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm,” was a short memorandum prepared for incoming Israeli Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu. It laid out an Israeli strategy toward the Middle East that could dramatically shift the regional balance of power in Israel's favor, allowing it to “break away” from the Oslo peace process and effectively impose whatever terms it wished for a final settlement with the Palestinians and its other Arab neighbors. While much of the paper focused on the destabilization of Syria, the first step in the proposed strategy called for the ouster of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and his replacement by a pro-Western government.

These two strategies were ultimately embraced by the same coalition of hawks (neoconservatives, aggressive nationalists, and the Christian Right) that later coalesced around PNAC in the late-1990s. In turn, the strategies helped to set the course of U.S. foreign policy immediately after 9/11, when a U.S. president with virtually no international experience or curiosity was grasping for an appropriately dramatic—perhaps even messianic—response to the trauma that had just befallen the nation.

1992 Draft Defense Planning Guidance. The DPG is a regularly updated classified Pentagon policy document that outlines U.S. military strategies and provides a framework for developing the defense budget. After the Gulf War, the task of developing the new DPG, the first since the end of the Cold War, was given to then-Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Paul Wolfowitz and his chief aide, I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby, two of the few neoconservatives who had held posts in the administration of the elder President Bush. Their draft guidance called for a post-Cold War world in which the United States would act as the ultimate guarantor of peace and security and commit itself to “detering potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role.” (Other contributors included influential Pentagon officials Zalmay Khalilzad, J.D. Crouch, and Andrew Marshall, as well as Perle and RAND Corporation founder Albert Wohlstetter.) The draft guidance called for a global order in which U.S. military intervention would become a “constant fixture” and Washington would rely on “ad hoc assemblies” (later known as “coalitions of the willing”) to

enforce its will, rather than on the UN Security Council. (Despite having authorized U.S. military action in the first Gulf War, the Security Council was not mentioned in the draft guidance.) These ad hoc coalitions would be directed above all at preempting—either through co-option or confrontation—potential rivals from challenging U.S. hegemony and at preventing rogue states from acquiring weapons of mass destruction (WMD), particularly in “regions critical to the security of the United States and its allies, including Europe, East Asia, the Middle East, and Southwest Asia, and the territory of the former Soviet Union.”

When the draft DPG was leaked to the press, it provoked a storm of controversy. Democrats charged that the strategy would bankrupt the nation and transform it into a “global policeman,” involving it in wars without end. Other top officials in the realist-dominated administration of George H.W. Bush, endeavoring in the wake of the Gulf War to reassure the world that Washington would accept constraints on its freedom of action, quickly disavowed its contents. According to some reports, Wolfowitz and Libby were nearly fired as a result of the controversy but were rescued by their boss, then-Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, who agreed to substantially tone down the document in its final form.

But the draft DPG and its core ideas did not entirely disappear. Cheney himself was impressed by the document, reportedly commending Khalilzad, the draft’s principal author, for “discover[ing] a new rationale for our role in the world.” *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer was also impressed. “What’s the alternative?” he asked. “The alternative is Japanese carriers patrolling the Strait of Malacca, and a nuclear Germany dominating Europe.” For Krauthammer and other neoconservative cadre, the DPG’s vision of a “unipolar” world not only made sense, now that the Soviet Union was history, but also constituted a strategic and moral necessity—one that was elaborated several years later by PNAC. The draft DPG would ultimately come to serve as the broad framework for forging a new consensus embraced by neoconservatives

(like Libby and Perle), aggressive nationalists (like Cheney, Rumsfeld, and John Bolton), as well as key allies among the Christian Right, and even some liberal interventionists within the Democratic Party.

An early reaffirmation of some of the ideas contained in the draft DPG came in 1996, when William Kristol and Robert Kagan published a notable essay, entitled “Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy,” in *Foreign Affairs* magazine. Kristol and Kagan, both second-generation neoconservatives (William is the son of neoconservative founder Irving Kristol, and Robert the son of Donald Kagan), extolled a philosophy of “national greatness” and called for the United States to exercise nothing less than “benevolent global hegemony.” U.S. hegemony, the authors boldly asserted, would be “based on the understanding that [America’s] moral goals and its fundamental national interests are almost always in harmony.” The essay, which was aimed primarily at countering a growing isolationist trend that had developed in the Republican-led Congress, called, among other things, for Washington to pursue an overall strategy for “containing, influencing, and ultimately seeking to change the regime in Beijing,” reflecting both the chronic neoconservative need for an enemy against which to mobilize public opinion and the growing consensus among foreign policy hardliners that China (not Japan or a German-dominated Europe) represented the greatest threat to U.S. hegemony in the post-Cold War era. In their call for unabashed hegemony, the authors were clearly inspired by the draft DPG, an inspiration which was made explicit in the early publications of the Project for the New American Century, founded by the two authors the following year in an effort to institutionalize the ideas espoused in their essay.

PNAC was founded in 1997 with the issuance of its “Statement of Principles,” which pledged “to make the case and rally support for American global leadership.” Highlighting what it called “the essential elements of the Reagan administration’s success,” namely “a strong military” ready to meet “present and future challenges,” the statement declared: “A Reaganite policy of military strength and moral

clarity may not be fashionable today. But it is necessary if the United States is to build on the success of this past century and ensure our security and greatness in the next.” Among PNAC’s 25 charter signatories were eight people who would become senior members of the future administration of President George W. Bush, seven of whom—Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Libby, Khalilzad, Peter Rodman, and Elliott Abrams—would play key roles in fulfilling PNAC’s agenda five years later. Most of the others—notably Christian Right leader Gary Bauer; former Education Secretary William Bennett; DPB member Eliot Cohen; and Center for Security Policy President Frank Gaffney (as well as Kristol and Kagan themselves)—would work closely with these administration insiders in making the public case for aggressive action, first against the PLO’s Arafat and Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, and then against Syria and Iran.³

“A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm.” Around the same time that Kristol and Kagan were developing their ideas and creating an institutional umbrella (PNAC) for like-minded hawks, a task force of pro-Likud neoconservatives led by Perle at AEI and organized by the Israel-based Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies was working on a strategy to liberate Israel from the Oslo peace process and the “land-for-peace” formula that had been U.S. policy since the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Drafted by David Wurmser with the support of a coterie of neoconservative consultants, including Perle protégé (and later undersecretary of defense for policy) Douglas Feith, the “Clean Break” paper focused primarily on persuading incoming Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu to “destabilize and roll back” the Ba’ath government in Syria as the key to transforming the regional balance of power. That goal would be more easily achieved, the paper emphasized, if Saddam was replaced by a pro-Western government: “[R]emoving Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq [is] an important Israeli strategic objective in its own right.” Wurmser, who under Bush has held key posts in the Pentagon, State Department, and since late 2003 has served as one of Cheney’s main Middle East advisers, later

developed this theme at length in subsequent publications.

PNAC effectively incorporated the “Clean Break” group’s Mideast regional strategy into its early public statements. In 1998, PNAC fired off two open letters regarding Iraq: one to President Bill Clinton in January, and several months later, another to the Republican leadership of Congress. The missives argued that the containment strategy against Iraq was neither effective nor sustainable. “The only way to protect the United States and its allies from the threat of weapons of mass destruction [is] to put in place policies that would lead to the removal of Saddam and his regime from power,” argued the second letter. Among the signatories to these letters were Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Rodman, Abrams, Khalilzad, Bennett, Perle, Bolton, Woolsey, and a pair of realist-oriented foreign policy elites, Richard Armitage and Robert Zoellick, who would later come to regret their association with the neoconservatives. The two open letters on Iraq became part of an intense neoconservative-led lobbying effort for change there—both Perle and Wolfowitz played major roles in this endeavor—which resulted in congressional passage later that year of the Iraq Liberation Act, making “regime change” in Iraq official U.S. policy.

During the years leading up to the election of George W. Bush, PNAC produced a number of other sign-on letters and book-length publications on a wide range of topics, including everything from the defense of Taiwan to the need to overthrow Slobodan Milosevic, which seem in part to have served as tools for reaching out to other elements of the U.S. political landscape. Like PNAC’s first open letters, they were selectively supported by a diverse collection of political elites. These alliances helped legitimize PNAC’s agenda-setting activities and proved critical in drawing support for the neoconservative agenda in the wake of 9/11.

Bush and 9/11. In the run-up to the 2000 election, PNAC published “Rebuilding America’s Defenses” and *Present Dangers*, a paper and a book designed to create a foreign policy platform for the

Republican presidential candidate. When George W. Bush won the Republican primary, however, PNAC and its neoconservative leaders were disappointed: Bush had campaigned on the idea that the United States should be a “humble” global power. That view was cultivated in candidate Bush by Condoleezza Rice, a protégée of former national security adviser and arch-realist Brent Scowcroft. In a 2000 article for *Foreign Affairs*, Rice wrote: “The reality is that few big powers can radically affect international peace, stability, and prosperity.” This perspective was very much at odds with the neo-conservative agenda. As William Kristol has said: “[W]e didn’t have great hopes for Bush as a foreign policy president.”

But as President Bush’s early appointments made clear, the neoconservatives had little reason to despair. His obvious deference to Cheney gave the hawks an unusually influential perch from which to operate, particularly after Cheney chose Libby to be chief of an unusually large national security staff. It was at Cheney’s suggestion that a second PNAC charter member, Rumsfeld, was selected as secretary of defense. Similarly, it was at Cheney’s urging that Wolfowitz—rather than Secretary of State Colin Powell’s candidate, Armitage—was named deputy secretary of defense. With strong lobbying by Perle, Feith was given the Pentagon’s policy brief—an exceptionally influential post in the run-up to the Iraq War—while Rodman was tapped to be assistant secretary for international security affairs. As the first month of the new presidency evolved, the key question was, whom would Bush, a foreign policy novice, ultimately listen to? The realists, presumably led by his father’s favorites, Rice and Powell, or the hawks, Rumsfeld, Cheney, and their mainly neoconservative advisers?

That there was a deep split within the administration soon became abundantly clear. This rift surfaced perhaps most starkly in early March 2001 at the time of a visit from South Korean President Kim Dae Jung, when Bush publicly contradicted Powell’s explicit support for Kim’s “sunshine policy” toward North Korea as well as for Clinton’s 1994 Agreed

Framework. The division again emerged after the April 2001 Hainan Incident, a collision between a Chinese jet fighter and a U.S. spy plane that resulted in the detention by Beijing of the U.S. crew for 10 days on Hainan Island. In response to Bush’s statement of regret to China for the death of the Chinese pilot, whose craft crashed, and for the emergency landing on Hainan, neoconservatives loudly berated the president for supposedly appeasing Beijing. Writing in the *Weekly Standard*, Kristol and Kagan charged that the entire episode was “a national humiliation” and that diplomatic efforts to defuse the crisis led by Powell, whom they singled out for blame, “represented a partial capitulation, with real-world consequences.”

Though Powell and the realists prevailed in that crisis—as they generally have with respect to relations with China since then—9/11 would tilt the balance of power in the administration definitively in favor of the hawks. More than any other political faction in the United States, the neoconservatives had prepared themselves for just such an earth-shattering event, allowing them to respond quickly in a way that would suit their agenda. As previously discussed, just nine days after 9/11, PNAC issued its most provocative letter, calling on the president to overthrow Saddam Hussein “even if evidence does not link Iraq directly to the attack.”

But PNAC was not alone in its idea that 9/11 could be used as a springboard to Mideast change. Indeed, within hours of the attacks Rumsfeld suggested to an aide that 9/11 could be used to justify going after Saddam, according to declassified notes. Yet the most vociferous proponent of going after Iraq was Wolfowitz, who pressed the case repeatedly at Camp David meetings during the first critical week after the attacks. Meanwhile, Perle convened the DPB for its own meeting to recommend policy options. Extraordinarily, he invited Iraqi exile Ahmed Chalabi to take part in the highly classified proceedings. It appears that after 9/11, the network of hawks and neoconservatives that had coalesced around PNAC’s founding agenda had mobilized in a highly coordinated way to fashion

the administration's response to the terrorist attacks and rally the public behind their new agenda.

Many of the initial steps made by the administration on the global level during the weeks after 9/11 showed the hallmarks of the draft DPG.

Deployments of U.S. forces were remarkably widespread—to the Philippines, Georgia, and Djibouti—considering that the main target of the war on terror was billed as Afghanistan. And although securing access to military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan appeared substantially more relevant to routing the Taliban from power and hunting down al-Qaida leaders, it also served the larger geopolitical purpose of establishing a potentially permanent military presence in the heart of Central Asia, close to both China and Russia. Washington's effective spurning of NATO and its declared preference for a U.S.-led "coalition of the willing" were both recognizable features of the draft DPG.

Ideas from the draft guidance also made their way into administration rhetoric shortly after 9/11, including the administration's preoccupation with efforts by "rogue states" to acquire WMD, which was repeated by Bush in his January 2002 State of the Union address, when he famously declared that Iraq, Iran, and North Korea were an "axis of evil." Preemption also crept into the speech; the president warned that the United States would "not wait on events as dangers gathered" or if other countries were "timid in the face of terror." Just one year after 9/11, key concepts of the draft DPG became official U.S. policy with the publication of Bush's first National Security Strategy in September 2002.

The hawks' regional-level plans also began to get under way shortly after 9/11, as indicated by Rumsfeld's immediate reaction to the attacks and Wolfowitz's exhortation during the meetings at Camp David a few days later. Active planning for an Iraq invasion began—at the latest—in early 2002. Without an "off-the-shelf military plan" about how to respond to an attack like 9/11, as reporter Bob Woodard put it in his 2002 book *Bush at War*, the administration was susceptible to ideas that appeared to have little connection to 9/11—

including ideas from "A Clean Break." Writes journalist George Packer: "The idea of realigning the Middle East by overthrowing Saddam Hussein was first proposed by a group of Jewish policy makers and intellectuals who were close to the Likud. And when the second President Bush looked around for a way to think about the unchartered era that began on September 11, 2001, there was one already available."⁴

Regime change in Iraq, if achieved in a sufficiently dramatic and decisive fashion, would not only transform the regional balance of power, the thinking went, but would also assert U.S. power in the very heart of the Middle East, demonstrating to both "rogue states" like Iran and rivals like China that it could intervene unilaterally in a resource-rich region on which their own economies and military power depended.

While the neoconservatives provided the substantive policy agenda, they depended heavily on Cheney and Rumsfeld—both aggressive nationalists who had close and long-standing links to the neoconservatives going back to the Ford administration—to manipulate the process by which the agenda could be translated into policy. That effort was greatly enhanced by Rice's failure, as national security adviser, to ensure the integrity of the traditional interagency policymaking process, with the result that decisions taken at meetings of the National Security Council were often circumvented or simply ignored, particularly by the Pentagon. As a result, the State Department often found itself marginalized by what Powell's chief of staff, ret. Col. Lawrence Wilkerson, later called a "cabal" led by Cheney and Rumsfeld (who in turn were supported and advised by key neoconservatives like Feith, Wolfowitz, and Libby).

The same network worked to manipulate the intelligence process—both by establishing offices to collect or review selective raw intelligence that was sent unvetted by professional analysts directly to the White House and by harassing and pressuring the official intelligence community, notably the CIA, to come up with analyses that were consistent with

the PNAC agenda. Meanwhile, administration insiders and the DPB used sympathetic or credulous media outlets—notably the *Weekly Standard*, *Washington Times*, Fox News, and the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page—and reporters (such as Judith Miller of the *New York Times*) to selectively leak intelligence and threat assessments to help rally the public behind the war.

The rapid progress made in fulfilling the PNAC agenda reflected the degree to which hawks and their neoconservative collaborators effectively dominated U.S. foreign policy decision-making after 9/11. Virtually overnight, Powell and the realists had been marginalized, while fence-sitters like Rice gradually acquiesced or passively enabled the process to be hijacked. By May 2003, shortly after the invasion and just as the insurgency in Iraq had begun to assert itself, the neoconservatives had reached the zenith of their power. It was unclear, however, how long they could stay on top.

In Decline?

By mid-2003, it had become clear, particularly to the military on the ground in Iraq, that the Bush administration and its neoconservative allies had fundamentally miscalculated the nature of the war that they had pushed the country into. Instead of being seen as the liberators of Iraq, the U.S. military and its allies quickly became perceived as an occupying force that was challenged by a bitter and deeply entrenched insurgency, fueled in part by the de-Ba'athification program long advocated by neo-conservatives and overseen by their key partner, Chalabi.

The situation had so deteriorated by fall 2003 that Rice, whose lack of resistance to the neoconservative agenda deeply disappointed Powell and other realists, created the Iraq Stabilization Group (ISG), centered in the National Security Council, which aimed to reduce the Pentagon's control of key aspects of Iraq policy. The establishment of the ISG, which provoked a rare public tiff between Rice and Rumsfeld, launched a process in which the State

Department and the uniformed military (as opposed to the Pentagon's civilian leadership) gradually assumed ever-greater control of Iraq policy. The ISG's creation, in fact, marked not only the beginning of the decline of the hawks' unquestioned dominance, but also of the neoconservatives' influence, which continues to fade.

The most significant reason for this decline has clearly been the growing debacle in Iraq, for which even Perle and other hardline neoconservatives now admit regret, although—predictably—they blame administration realists and erstwhile allies like Rumsfeld for botching the war's implementation, rather than the original decision to go to war.⁵ By late 2004, it had become crystal clear that the assumptions and justifications they used to promote the war were unfounded, if not fabricated. Not only did the United States find no operational ties of any kind between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaida (let alone 9/11), it also found no evidence that Saddam had been developing WMD. In addition, the notion that Saddam's ouster would bring to power moderate, pro-Western secularists was increasingly discredited. Also debunked by reality were several of the neoconservatives' other pre-war assurances, including the idea that winning in Iraq would be a “cakewalk,” as DPB member Ken Adelman had put it; that Washington would be able to rapidly draw down its troop strength to just 30,000 by the end of 2003; and that reconstruction would be essentially self-financing through projected increases in oil export earnings and the end of UN sanctions.

Just as importantly, the hawks' insistence that “shock and awe” in Iraq would send a message to Iran and North Korea was quickly undermined by the inability of U.S. and allied forces to defeat or even contain the growing insurgency. U.S. hegemony not only failed to be “benevolent,” it was also proving to be an illusion, one that the rest of the world—“rogues” included—did not fail to notice. As stories about the growing violence in Iraq, including on the Abu Ghraib prison scandal and the siege of Fallujah, were broadcast by Al Jazeera and other media outlets, anti-Americanism exploded

throughout the Arab and Islamic worlds. Even Israel's hawkish prime minister, Ariel Sharon, sensing that the Iraq War had failed to enhance his country's security as promised by the neoconservatives, committed himself to ending Israel's nearly 40-year occupation of Gaza, splitting his own Likud Party.

These failures produced debilitating tensions—both within the hawks' coalition and among neoconservatives themselves—which indirectly strengthened resurgent realists based at the State Department. Indeed, Kristol, Kagan, and PNAC's secretariat began attacking Rumsfeld, accusing him of being insufficiently committed to serious “nation-building” efforts in Iraq and to expanding the size of U.S. land forces, especially the Army, commensurate with its growing global responsibilities. While the PNAC core eventually demanded his firing, other hardline neoconservatives—like Perle and Gaffney—defended the Pentagon chief. Iraq wasn't the only issue that PNAC was dismayed over regarding the administration. On China, where the realists had held a tenuous advantage since the Hainan Incident, hardliners were infuriated at Bush's late 2003 public rebuke of Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian's call for a “defensive referendum” demanding that China dismantle its missiles aimed at the island. According to PNAC's Kristol, Kagan, and Gary Schmitt, the president was guilty of “appeasement of a dictatorship.”

Just as Sharon's disengagement plan split the Likud Party, it also drove a wedge between the PNAC-led coalition. Hardline neoconservatives and leaders of the Christian Right, who believed in a Greater Israel, found themselves at odds with more pragmatic neoconservatives, like Kristol and Kagan, as well as some of their aggressive nationalist allies. The split presaged a later one that developed during 2005 and 2006 regarding the post hoc justification for the war—democratization of the Middle East. As elections in Iran and the Arab world—notably in Egypt, Iraq, and Palestine—confirmed the popularity of Islamist and anti-American movements across the region, a new debate eventually broke out between

those neoconservatives who had championed the democratization drive, and others, including Perle—not to mention Sharon's government—who believed that free and fair elections in a region radicalized by the Iraq invasion would prove detrimental to Israel's long-term security.

Although clearly in decline, the neoconservatives and other hawks were by no means completely sidelined, particularly after Bush's reelection in November 2004, which they regarded as a public endorsement of the agenda they had so successfully promoted after 9/11. Also seeming to augur well for the hawks was the unceremonious exit of Powell immediately after the election and his replacement by the more malleable Rice, a trend that continued with the appointment of Porter Goss as the new CIA director, which was interpreted as part of an effort to overhaul an agency that had long been at loggerheads with the neoconservatives and their allies.

Adding to their confidence was Bush's soaring pro-democracy rhetoric in his 2005 inaugural and State of the Union addresses, both of which drew heavily from Natan Sharansky's then recently published book, *The Case for Democracy*. Sharansky, a former Soviet dissident, was a key right-wing leader in Sharon's Likud government and a favorite of the neoconservatives. Reports that his book had become “required reading” at the White House were lauded by neoconservatives. “A president who tells his advisers to go read Sharansky is way ahead of his advisers,” Perle told an audience at the Hudson Institute.

Moreover, events in the Middle East seemed to be going their way, at least during the first few months of Bush's second term. The unexpectedly smooth Iraqi elections in January 2005, the outbreak of the “Cedar Revolution” in Lebanon (and other “color revolutions” in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan), and the subsequent isolation of Syria all were claimed by neoconservatives as proof that America's bold demonstration of force in the Middle East was actually transforming the region, if not the world.

But things were not as rosy as they seemed. While still jubilant over Powell's departure, the neoconservatives suffered a number of setbacks on the personnel front shortly into Bush's second term. Within six months of the inauguration, Wolfowitz had left for the World Bank, while Feith, whose key roles in both the manipulation of pre-war intelligence and failures in post-war planning were by then receiving growing attention in Congress and the media, was bound for a teaching post at Georgetown University. By far the biggest blow to the neoconservatives, however, was the loss of Libby as Cheney's chief of staff. Arguably the most powerful neoconservative in the administration, Libby was indicted in October 2005 for lying to a grand jury about his role in leaking the identity of a covert CIA officer, whose husband had publicly accused the administration of manipulating pre-war intelligence about Iraq. Describing the impact of Libby's departure, Bob Woodward writes in his most recent book, *State of Denial*: "Cheney was lost without Libby, many of the vice president's close associates felt. Libby had done so much of the preparation for the vice president's meetings and events, and so much of the hard work. He had been almost part of Cheney's brain."

As secretary of state, Rice was proving to be much more assertive than neoconservatives had anticipated. From the outset of Bush's second term, she stressed that her main concern was mending frayed alliances, particularly with "Old Europe"—for which the neoconservatives had little but contempt—even if that meant serious compromises on issues ranging from Iran to North Korea. "This is the time for diplomacy," she vowed in her confirmation hearings. She soon put her rhetoric into action by publicly committing the United States to the EU-3 in its negotiations with Iran. It became clear that, unlike Powell, Rice had influence with the president that was at least on par with Cheney.

Rice's appointments also indicated a return to her realist roots. Not only did she resist Cheney in declining to appoint Eric Edelman or Bolton (whose subsequent failure to gain Senate confirmation as

UN ambassador highlighted the hawks' declining political fortunes) as her deputy, but her selection of Zoellick, a lifelong Atlanticist and former top adviser to former Secretary of State James Baker, suggested that she resented the pressure put on her by the hawks. She also appointed former NATO Amb. Nicholas Burns as undersecretary of state for policy and Philip Zelikow as her counselor, both committed realists. Burns in particular has proved to be a constant thorn in the side of the hawks, who blame him for a number of what they call "weak" policy moves, including Rice's mid-2006 announcement that the United States would be willing to negotiate directly with Tehran if it abandoned its uranium enrichment program, spurring howls of protest from neoconservatives.

Another concern of the hawks, particularly the neoconservatives, was Bush's decision early in his second term to appoint John Negroponte to the new post of director of national intelligence, with the assurance that he would replace the CIA director as the daily intelligence briefer of the president. A retired career foreign service officer and former deputy national security adviser under Powell, Negroponte was widely regarded as a tough-minded realist and bureaucratic operator who was not afraid to speak his mind. At the CIA, Goss was replaced earlier this year by Negroponte's deputy, Gen. Michael Hayden, who quickly reinstated or promoted a number of senior intelligence officers who had been disillusioned with what they saw as Goss's efforts to politicize the agency.

As a result of personnel changes over the past two years, the network of allied hawks and neoconservatives has degraded significantly, and along with it their ability to control the various processes—like intelligence vetting—involved in foreign policy decision-making. Likewise, their credibility among the uniformed military and bureaucratic insiders has suffered a tremendous blow due to incompetent and costly handling of the Iraq War. Although some prominent neoconservatives have joined Democrats in denouncing the administration's execution of Iraq policy, their efforts to push the country into

war, as well as their role in promoting disreputable personalities (like Chalabi) and disastrous policies (like de-Ba'athification) are unlikely to be forgotten any time soon. Indeed, some former neocon allies—such as the well-known academic Francis Fukuyama (a signatory of the September 20, 2001 PNAC letter), *Newsweek* columnist George Will, and former Secretary of State Alexander Haig—now publicly blame them for the misadventure in Iraq.

In spite of all those blows, neoconservatives over the past nearly two years remained a factor in the power equation both in and outside the administration, with Cheney serving as their principal champion and protector. John Hannah, who once served as a liaison between the vice president's office and Chalabi, was promoted to Cheney's national security adviser after Libby's departure, while David Wurmser remains his Mideast adviser. In the National Security Council, meanwhile, Abrams heads the Middle East desk from which, during the recent Israel-Hezbollah conflict, he helped frustrate Rice's efforts to persuade Bush to initiate contact with Damascus and even reportedly encouraged Israel to extend the conflict to Syria. He has also led the charge within the administration against EU and Arab League pleas to take a more flexible position with respect to the Hamas government in the Palestinian territories.

While their numbers in the senior ranks at the Pentagon have been reduced, neoconservatives have retained an active presence there, too. In a particularly ominous turn of events earlier this year, the Defense Department established an "Iranian Directorate," an office staffed and overseen by the same individuals that ran the Office of Special Plans (OSP), which "cherry-picked" and "stove-piped" raw and questionable intelligence about Saddam's supposed ties to al-Qaida and WMD programs. There is no doubt that the top foreign policy priority for neoconservatives in the final two years of Bush's presidency will be to goad him into attacking Iran's suspected nuclear facilities, if ongoing diplomatic efforts to contain or roll back Tehran's nuclear program stall or fail. Wrote Joshua Muravchik, an AEI

scholar, in the November 2006 issue of the influential magazine *Foreign Policy*: "Make no mistake, President Bush will need to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities before leaving office."

Until recently, it appeared that the remaining two years of Bush's presidency were likely to conform to the pattern set by the previous two. While the realists have made gradual and incremental gains in pushing the administration toward engagement and diplomacy with U.S. foes, the hawks have retained enough strength to limit their room for maneuvering and effectively prevent substantive changes in policy. The State Department, for example, persuaded Bush to offer enough in the Six-Party Talks to coax North Korea into the September 19, 2005, joint declaration on denuclearization, but it was unable to get White House permission to accept the North's invitation to send Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill to Pyongyang for informal talks last May. In the Middle East, the State Department recommended a more forthcoming position on the provision of humanitarian and other assistance to the Palestinian Authority after Hamas's victory in last January's elections, but was unable to prevail at the White House. Similarly, State Department officials reportedly favored a more flexible U.S. position on negotiating security agreements with Iran, as urged by Washington's European partners, if Tehran agreed to freeze its uranium enrichment activities, but hardliners succeeded in vetoing that, too.

While continued internal conflict appeared as the most likely prospect as of the midterm elections, the capture of both houses of Congress by the Democrats, followed by Rumsfeld's resignation and the nomination of Robert Gates as his replacement, point to a potential triumph of the realists in the two years that remain in the Bush presidency. While the Democrats have yet to forge a unified position on key policy issues, their leadership in the new Congress appears poised to push hard for engagement with North Korea and for "redeploying" U.S. troops out of Iraq as quickly as possible, even if that means engaging Syria and Iran to expedite that

process. At the same time, Gates' background in developing alternative policies regarding hotspots like Iran and Iraq suggests that he and other like-minded administration officials such as Rice have an opportunity to forge a new consensus between Republicans and Democrats that could sound the death knell of neoconservative influence on the administration.

A favorite of both President George H.W. Bush and his national security adviser, Scowcroft, Gates has shared their realist approach to U.S. foreign policy and shown little patience with neoconservatives. As recently as two years ago, Gates co-chaired a task force sponsored by the influential Council on Foreign Relations with Zbigniew Brzezinski, Jimmy Carter's national security adviser and one of the Bush administration's most trenchant critics, which called for a policy of diplomatic and economic engagement with Iran. The report was immediately and loudly denounced by leading neoconservatives.

Gates, who according to some sources privately expressed strong reservations about the Iraq War from the outset, was also, until his nomination last week, a member of the bipartisan, congressionally appointed Iraq Study Group, a task force co-chaired by Baker that has emerged, particularly since the elections, as the most likely mechanism for devising an "exit strategy" from Iraq. A consummate realist and the Bush family's longtime counselor who, unlike Scowcroft, has retained good ties with the younger Bush, Baker has already suggested that one of the key recommendations likely to emerge from the study group's work is U.S. engagement with

both Iran and Syria—he has met with senior officials of both governments—as part of any viable solution in Iraq. "It's not appeasement to talk to your enemies," he asserted in a popular Sunday television news program in what appeared to be a calculated rebuke of the hawks, particularly the neo-conservatives. Many analysts, including some neo-conservatives, believe it was Baker who helped engineer Rumsfeld's replacement by Gates as part of a larger strategy to tilt the balance of power in the administration decisively in favor of the realists. Indeed, without Rumsfeld, Cheney, the neoconservatives' main champion and protector within the administration, now appears more isolated than ever.

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END NOTES

- ¹ See Richard Perle and David Frum, *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror*, Random House, 2003.
- ² For a description of the history and worldview of the neoconservatives, see Jim Lobe, "What's A Neo-Conservative Anyway?" Inter Press Service, August 12, 2003. See also, Jim Lobe, "From Holocaust to Hyperpower," Inter Press Service, January 26, 2005.
- ³ Ironically, virtually the only signatory who has not played a leading role since the letter was released has been Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, who in 1997 apparently looked to Kristol and Kagan more presidential than his brother George.
- ⁴ See Packer, *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York, 2005).
- ⁵ See David Rose, "Neo Culpa," Vanity Fair online, November 3, 2006.

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