

Rice Picks Promoter of Iraq War as Counselor

By Jim Lobe | March 6, 2007

In a move that has surprised many foreign policy analysts, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has appointed a prominent neoconservative hawk and leading champion of the Iraq War to the post of State Department counselor.

Eliot A. Cohen, who teaches military history at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in Washington and has served on the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board (DPB) since 2001, will take up the position in April. The job was vacated late last year by Rice's longtime confidant and "realist" thinker, Philip Zelikow.

Cohen is a close friend and protege of former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and an advisory board member of the neoconservative think tank American Enterprise Institute (AEI). He most recently led the neoconservative attack on the conclusions of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group (ISG), which was co-chaired by former Secretary of State James Baker and former Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-IN).

Like his fellow neocons, Cohen was particularly scathing regarding the ISG's recommendations that Washington directly engage Syria and Iran and revive the Israeli-Palestinian peace process—recommendations that Rice has explicitly endorsed in the last few weeks.

"This is a group composed, for the most part, of retired eminent public officials, most with limited or no expertise in the waging or study of war," Cohen wrote about the ISG in a column entitled "No Way to Win a War" published by the *Wall Street Journal* the day after the group released its report in early December. "A fatuous process yields, necessarily, fatuous results," opined Cohen in a wholesale dismissal of what he called the "Washington establishment whose wisdom was exaggerated in its heyday, and which has in any event succumbed to a kind of political-intellectual entropy since the 1960s."

On March 2, State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said, while confirming Cohen's appointment, "Eliot brings a lot to the table in terms of being a counselor, being somebody who can be an intellectual sounding board for [Rice]."

Some Washington analysts, however, said they thought the appointment was designed instead to reduce or preempt criticism of Rice from neoconservatives and other hawks in and outside the administration for the direction she hopes to take U.S. policy, particularly in the Middle East. With no operational

responsibilities, the State Department counselor can be used—or ignored—at the secretary's discretion.

"Condi may feel she needs to have a neocon right next to her to protect her flanks," said Chris Nelson, editor of the widely read insider newsletter *The Nelson Report*. "And, if she's really planning to put her foot down on the Israelis, which [Washington] will have to do if it wants to get a real process with the Palestinians under way as part of a bigger regional deal with the Saudis and Iranians, then a guy like Cohen up there on the [State Department's] seventh floor who is in on it and can claim influence on the outcome can help."

"Bringing on Cohen could help inoculate her from criticism by the [Dick] Cheney camp," agreed Steven Clemons, director of the American Strategy Program at the New America Foundation (NAF). "One of the things that's been consistent is that Rice never takes Cheney head-on and is very careful not to take on people who might antagonize him."

In that respect, Cohen is a nearly ideal choice. Like Cheney, Cohen was a founding member in 1997 of the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), whose positions on how to prosecute the "war on terror"—including the invasion of Iraq and cutting ties to the Palestinian Authority (PA) under Yasser Arafat—he has consistently endorsed.

Although lacking in any regional expertise or policymaking experience, Cohen has written prolifically on U.S. policy in the Middle East.

Cohen first gained national prominence shortly after the 9/11 attacks when he published a *Wall Street Journal* column entitled "World War IV"; the label was intended to put Bush's "war on terror" into what Cohen considered to be the appropriate historical context and to define the enemy as "militant Islam." The label was quickly adopted by hardline neocons like former CIA director and fellow-DPB member James Woolsey, former Commentary editor Norman Podhoretz, and Center for Security Policy president Frank Gaffney (on whose board Cohen also sits).

After defeating the Taliban, Cohen argued, Washington should not only "finish off" Iraq's Saddam Hussein, whom he accused

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of having helped al-Qaida, but also seek to overthrow “the mullahs” in Iran whose replacement by a “moderate or secular government would be no less important a victory in this war than the annihilation of [Osama] bin Laden.”

In another *Journal* article in April 2002, when the second Palestinian intifada was at its height, Cohen—who had just signed a PNAC letter that called for severing ties to the PA and asserted that “Israel’s fight against terrorism is our fight”—argued that proposals to send an international force to separate Israeli forces from the Palestinians were “not ... serious.” “[T]here are times when well-intentioned measures can only make matters worse,” he warned.

“Only a reshuffling of the deck—through the disappearance of Arafat, or an event (such as the overthrow of Saddam Hussein) that profoundly changes the mood in the Arab world—will make something approaching truce, let alone peace, possible,” Cohen argued, using a favorite pre-Iraq War neoconservative theme.

The next summer, Cohen achieved some renown when Bush was photographed carrying Cohen’s book, *Supreme Command*, which argued that the greatest civilian wartime leaders, such as Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill, had far better strategic sense than their generals. It was a timely message; a surprising number of military members were voicing strong reservations about a U.S. invasion.

Cohen also became a charter member of the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq, an administration-supported group that lobbied for war in Iraq, largely on behalf of the Iraqi National Congress (INC). Indeed, Cohen, like his friend Wolfowitz, had been arguing publicly for Washington to rely heavily on the INC in any effort to overthrow Hussein since December 2001.

After the U.S. invasion of Iraq, however, Cohen became progressively more critical of the way in which the occupation and counterinsurgency were handled, despite a brief period of optimism after a Pentagon-sponsored tour of Iraq.

During that short time, Cohen wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*: “After a wretched start, we have the right people at the top and

the right policies in effect—and even more importantly, the right philosophy behind it all.”

Just nine months later, however, he changed his mind. In the same article in which he attacked the ISG, Cohen described U.S. difficulties as “stem[ming] not so much from failures to find the right strategy, as from an astounding and depressing inability to implement the strategic and operational choices we have nominally made.”

Though he characterized U.S. choices in Iraq as ranging between “bad and awful” in a *Vanity Fair* interview in late 2006, Cohen has called for perseverance. He played a key role in selling the AEI-hatched plan to increase troop levels in Iraq to Bush, whom he met with as part of a small group of “surge” boosters at the White House in mid-December.

If the surge should fail, however, Cohen’s preferred and “most plausible” option, which he laid out in an October 2006 *Wall Street Journal* column titled “Plan B,” would be a coup d’etat (“which we quietly endorse”) in Iraq that would bring to power a “junta of military modernizers.” Such a development would, as he noted himself, call into question the administration and Rice’s avowed goal of democratization.

In any event, Cohen argued, “American prestige has taken a hard knock [in Iraq]; it will probably take a harder knock, and in ways that will not be restored without a considerable and successful use of American military power down the road.”

“The tides of Sunni salafism and Iran’s distinct combination of messianism and power politics have not crested, and will not crest without much greater violence in which we too will be engaged,” he asserted.

If Rice’s intent was to reassure Cheney and the neoconservatives that she is not a captive of the ISG or the Washington establishment, that passage alone should do the trick.

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