

A Real Realist Takeover?

By Jim Lobe | March 12, 2007

It was just nine months ago that *Newsweek* spoke for the conventional wisdom at that moment when it pronounced “The End of Cowboy Diplomacy.”

The phrase signaled the apparent victory of the State Department-led “realist” wing over hawks led by Vice President Dick Cheney and then-Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld in gaining control of the foreign policy of the George W. Bush administration.

A month later, however, conflict between Israel and Hezbollah broke out in Lebanon, and the hawks, particularly neoconservatives around Cheney and Rumsfeld, enjoyed a strong resurgence.

Bush not only spurned the pleas of Washington’s European and Arab allies to press Israel for a cease-fire, but his top Middle East aide, Elliott Abrams, reportedly encouraged Israel to expand the war into Syria—to the horror of his State Department colleagues and his Israeli interlocutors.

Now, after a Democratic election landslide and the departure of Rumsfeld—not to mention the longest-running record of sustained low public approval ratings for any U.S. president in more than 50 years—conventional wisdom has again concluded that the realists have finally taken the reins of power.

That such an assessment coincided with last Tuesday’s felony conviction of I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby—Cheney’s former chief of staff and the most powerful neoconservative in Bush’s first term—for lying to federal investigators was probably not entirely coincidental, given the “shadow,” as chief prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald described it, that it cast once again over the vice president’s office.

That the case—which involved the lengths to which Cheney’s office and the White House went to discredit critics who charged that the administration had manipulated intelligence to justify the 2003

U.S. invasion of Iraq—seems likely to soon become the subject of congressional hearings will almost certainly darken that shadow.

Even before Libby’s conviction, however, the notion that the realists had finally triumphed was growing.

“Diplomacy Could Define End of Bush’s Terms: Pragmatism Colors Policy, Experts Say,” read a recent headline in *USA Today*. And in early March the *New York Times* ran an analysis titled “Pragmatism in Diplomacy” about Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s efforts to engage North Korea, Iran, and Syria.

“White House Foreign Policy Has Shifted,” noted a front-page *Los Angeles Times* article last week, asserting that recent moves reflect “the ascendancy of Rice and her State Department team over hawks once led by [Cheney and Rumsfeld].”

The *Washington Post* noted that “Bush Shows New Willingness to Reverse Course,” while one of the newspaper’s columnists, David Ignatius, argued that Bush has apparently embraced the recommendations of the bipartisan, realist-led Iraq Study Group (ISG) in a piece titled “After the Rock, Diplomacy.” In another column titled “What Has Happened to Dick Cheney,” Jim Hoagland suggested that the vice president has been effectively marginalized by Rice, who “has won full agreement and support from the president on strategic goals and methods she and her diplomats are pursuing.”

The most dramatic sign of the realist ascendancy was the February accord reached during the Six-Party Talks in which North Korea agreed to shut down its plutonium processing plant and allow the

return of international inspectors in return for normalization of relations and the supply of fuel oil.

The multilateral deal, which in some ways resembles a 1994 bilateral U.S.-North Korea accord repudiated by Bush early in his term, marked a sharp reversal of the administration's stance. It was cleared by Bush after a direct appeal from Rice, who reportedly circumvented the normal interagency process.

It has been Gates who, in contrast to Cheney's persistent mutterings that "all options are on the table," has been most insistent that Washington has no plans to attack Iran, despite its military buildup in the Gulf. In taking this stance, Gates is reportedly reflecting the views of the military brass, who, freed from Rumsfeld's bullying and contempt, have reportedly become far more outspoken in internal discussions about their opposition to any new military actions so long as U.S. forces remain bogged down in Iraq.

At the same time, the State Department's tacit support for Saudi Arabia's efforts to midwife a Palestinian government of national unity last month in Mecca—a deal that infuriated the hawks and Abrams, in particular—has been seen by some analysts as demonstrating a new flexibility that would have been inconceivable just a few months ago.

But what has gotten the most attention to date was Rice's announcement at the end of February that Washington would participate in at least two

regional meetings convened by the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki that would also include Syria and Iran. The first meeting took place recently in Baghdad, and the second, in which Rice will participate, is scheduled for early April either in Istanbul or Cairo.

Her announcement confirmed the growing impression that Rice was indeed trying to move the administration toward implementing the recommendations of the ISG, which was chaired by former secretary of state and neoconservative nemesis James Baker and former Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-IN). The group called explicitly for Washington to engage Tehran and Damascus as part of a larger regional strategy that also include a renewed commitment to a credible Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Rice's announcement came while Cheney was out of the country. Significantly, White House spokesman Tony Snow insisted on the day after Cheney's return that U.S. participation did not constitute any change of policy and that, in any event, "There will not be bilateral talks between the United States and Iran, or the United States and Syria, within the context of these meetings."

But in another demonstration of the State Department's confidence, its spokespeople have been less categorical. While insisting that U.S. officials participating in the meetings will focus on the main issue—stabilizing Iraq—they have also repeatedly refused to rule out talking directly with Syrian and Iranian counterparts about "related" issues.

Moreover, the presence at these meetings of senior diplomats from the other four permanent members of the UN Security Council—to be augmented by the Group of Eight foreign ministers in the second round—increases the likelihood of broader discussions of the kind advocated by the ISG.

Meanwhile, realists have made other gains, beginning with the replacement of Rumsfeld by Robert Gates, who, until his nomination as defense secretary last November, served on the ISG and is believed to share its conclusions.

Gates and Rice—and for that matter, the new directors of National Intelligence and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Adm. John McConnell and Gen. Michael Hayden, respectively—served on the National Security Council together under former President George H.W. Bush and his national security adviser, Gen. Brent Scowcroft, who, even more than Baker, is considered anathema to neoconservative thinking, particularly with respect to Mideast policy.

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The *National Journal* also recently reported that Gates is moving to curb the ability of U.S. Special Forces to conduct covert operations in foreign countries without congressional oversight or CIA direction and to “dismantle” some of the intelligence programs that helped pave the way to war in Iraq. Such moves would suggest that Gates is taking independent action to roll back some of Rumsfeld’s most controversial innovations.

“Bob Gates is about to shut down a significant chunk of Vice President Cheney’s intelligence eyes and ears—and to some degree, an inappropriate ability to help drive covert actions,” according to Steven Clemons, director of the American Strategy Program at the New America Foundation.

But while the realists are clearly ascendant, they are not yet dominant, particularly with respect to Mideast policy, where they remain hostage to events in Iraq, Iran, Israel, Syria, Lebanon, and the occupied territories—and to potential provocateurs—that in many ways are increasingly beyond their control.

Cheney, whose office remains a neoconservative stronghold, retains considerable influence, particularly in coordination with like-minded colleagues in the White House’s National Security Council, notably Abrams and others in the Middle East bureau, and deputy national security adviser J.D. Crouch.

And a significant question lingers over Rice’s willingness to take risks in pursuing the realist agenda, and the ISG recommendations in particular. Some observers note that she has been very careful to permit other actors—Saudi Arabia and the Europeans in the case of both the Palestinians and Syria, and the Iraqi government in the case of Iran—to take the diplomatic lead, leaving her less vulnerable to attacks by the hawks.

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“She understands that she has a very short leash,” said Joshua Landis, a Levant expert at Oklahoma University. “She knows she can’t get too far off the reservation.”

Thus, while she replaced hawk Robert Joseph with a realist in the key position of undersecretary of state for arms control and international security, she also appointed Eliot Cohen, a dyed-in-the-wool neoconservative who is considered close to both Abrams and Cheney, to the top advisory post of state department counselor.

An even bigger question looms regarding Bush. While he has clearly given Rice more room to maneuver than her predecessor Colin Powell, particularly with respect to North Korea, Bush's own views, especially on the Middle East, remain a subject of unceasing speculation among the capital's cognoscenti, hawks, and realists.

Just last week, for example, he hosted a "literary luncheon" in honor of Andrew Roberts, author of *History of the English-Speaking Peoples Since 1900*. In a recent interview, Roberts called on Bush to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan "for as long as it takes to achieve complete and final victory over Radical Islam ... [and] not be afraid of threatening to widen the struggle to include foreign countries that aid and

abet the insurgents." Guests included some of the country's most hawkish neoconservatives, such as Norman Podhoretz, editor of the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial page Paul Gigot, and AEI fellow Michael Novak.

"Roberts said that history would judge the president on whether he had prevented the nuclearization of the Middle East," wrote Irwin Stelzer, another prominent neoconservative, in the *Weekly Standard*.

Observers abroad seem unconvinced that the realists have indeed taken the reins in Washington. As the *Financial Times* reported last week in an article entitled "Four Years of Turmoil Put Pragmatists in Driving Seat," the consulting firm Eurasia Group has advised its clients that it rates the chances of a U.S. and/or Israeli military attack on Iran before September 2008 at 60%.

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