

Office of Special Plans

By Tom Barry | February 12, 2004

In the days after September 11 terrorist attacks, Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith started cooking intelligence to meet the needs of the radically new foreign and military policy that included regime change in Iraq as its top priority.

One might have thought that the priority for a special intelligence would have been to determine the whereabouts of the terrorist network that had just attacked the homeland. But Deputy Defense Secretary Wolfowitz and Undersecretary of Defense Feith, working closely with Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Richard Cheney, had other intelligence priorities.

To bolster the Iraq war party, they needed intelligence that would persuade the U.S. public and policymakers that Saddam Hussein's regime should be one of the first targets of the war on terrorism. Convinced that the CIA, Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), and the State Department would not provide them with type of alarmist threat assessments necessary to justify a preventive war, they created their own tightly controlled intelligence operation at the top levels of the Pentagon bureaucracy.

The day after the September 11 attacks Wolfowitz authorized the creation of an informal team focused on ferreting out damaging intelligence about Iraq. This loosely organized team soon became the Office of Special Plans (OSP) directed by Abram Shulksy, formerly of RAND and the National Strategy Information Center (NSIC). The objective of this closet intelligence team, according to Rumsfeld, was to "search for information on Iraq's hostile intentions or links to terrorists."¹ OSP's mission was to create intelligence that the Pentagon and vice president could use to press their case for an Iraq invasion with the president and Congress.

About the same time the Pentagon took the first steps toward launching a counterintelligence operation called the Office of Strategic Intelligence to support the emerging security doctrine of preventive war. But this shadowy office, whose very purpose was to create propaganda and to counter information coming out of Iraq, was quickly disbanded. Congressional members expressed their concern that a counterintelligence office would not limit itself to discrediting the intelligence of U.S. adversaries.

Such a secret counterintelligence office, critics warned, either intentionally or inadvertently might spread disinformation to the U.S. public and policy community as part of the build-up to the planned invasion.

The OSP did not come under the same scrutiny and played a key role in providing Rumsfeld, Cheney, and the president himself with the intelligence frequently cited to justify the March 2003 invasion. By late 2003 the OSP was closed down, having accomplished its mission of providing the strategic intelligence cited by the administration in the build-up to the invasion. OSP's staff and operations were folded back into the normal operations of the NESAs and into its Office of Northern Gulf Affairs.²

Feith oversaw these efforts to provide the type of "strategic intelligence" needed to drive this policy agenda. As the Pentagon's top policy official in Middle East affairs, Feith had oversight authority of the DOD's Near East and South Asia bureau (NESA). That office came under the direct supervision of William Luti, a retired Navy officer who is a Newt Gingrich protégé and who has long advocated a U.S. military invasion of Iraq.³

When OSP was operating at top capacity—just prior to the invasion—it counted on a staff of eighteen. But a stream of consultants and collaborators flowed in and out the OSP, bypassing normal intelligence procedures and protocol. Operating independently of the established intelligence apparatus, OSP dispensed with the normal guidelines for vetting information. Instead, in the rush to make the case for preventive war, the OSP routinely "stovepiped" its strategic intelligence directly to the top administration officials who then took this unfiltered information directly to the president. As Kenneth Pollack, a former National Security Council expert on Iraq and author of *The Threatening Storm*, told investigative reporter Seymour Hersh: What the Bush people did was "dismantle the existing filtering process that for fifty years had been preventing the policy makers from get-

ting bad information. They created stovepipes to get the information they wanted directly to the top leadership.”⁴

The OSP worked closely with Ahmad Chalabi and others from the Iraqi National Congress (INC), an expatriate group promoted by the neoconservatives to replace the Hussein regime once U.S. troops were in Baghdad. Chalabi assured the Pentagon that a U.S. invasion would be supported by widespread Iraqi resistance, leading to claims by top administration officials and neocon pundits that the invasion would be a “cakewalk.” The OSP also relied on intelligence flows about Iraq from a rump unit established in the offices of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon—who like Chalabi was a proponent of a U.S. military invasion and had close relations with neocons like Wolfowitz and Feith.⁵

OSP was the embodiment of the right’s notion of “strategic intelligence”—intelligence analysis that was policy-driven, flexible, and decentralized rather than being overly constrained by verifiable data. Starting from neocon assumptions about the “intentions” of the Iraqi regime, the OSO fashioned intelligence about Iraq’s capabilities to support a preventive war. With Shulsky, a Straussian political philosopher, as their director, the OSP staff took to calling themselves the “cabal.”⁶

This “cabal” did not operate in complete isolation from other government agencies. However, it worked almost exclusively with like-minded neocon political appointees in the National Security Council, the State Department, and the office of the vice president.⁷ NESAs and its sub-project OSP maintained close relations with the Defense Policy Board, whose members were picked by Feith and approved by Rumsfeld. Initially chaired by Richard Perle of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), the DPB was as nest of neocon and other rightists—including such figures as Elliot Cohen, Newt Gingrich, David Jeremiah, Kenneth Adelman, and James Woolsey. Perle, who stepped down as chairman (but remained on the board), had served as Feith’s mentor during the Reagan administration.

The “group think” of the right’s network of policy institutes and think tanks came to dominate the Bush administration’s foreign policy and was responsible for the Iraq invasion, according to retired Air Force Lt. Col. Karen Kwiatkowski, writing in a *Houston Chronicle* op-ed article. Kwiatkowski, a desk officer at NESAs from May 2002 through February 2003, was struck by “the way this network operates solely with its membership across various agencies.” Such a modus operandi resulted in the “functional isolation of the professional corps” in favor of the

political appointees of the right-wing network, according to Kwiatkowski. She named the American Enterprise Institute, the Project for the New American Century, and the Center for Security Policy as the main institutions in the right’s web of think tanks promoting the war and a new Middle East policy.

“This cliquishness is cause for amusement in such movies as ‘Never Been Kissed’ or ‘Hot Chick,’” she wrote. “In the development and implementation of war planning, it is neither amusing nor beneficial for American security because opposing points of view and information that doesn’t ‘fit’ aren’t considered.”⁸ In an interview with Jim Lobe, an analyst for the progressive Foreign Policy In Focus think tank, Kwiatkowski recalled that during her tenure in the Pentagon the right’s clique of administration officials rarely communicated directly with the CIA.

This Pentagon’s neocon network relied on such heavyweights as Newt Gingrich of the American Enterprise Institute and Vice President Cheney’s chief of staff Lewis (Scooter) Libby to handle communication with the CIA.⁹ Based on his interviews with former and current intelligence officials, Seymour Hersh concluded that the OSP “rivaled both the CIA and the Pentagon’s own Defense Intelligence Agency, the DIA, as President Bush’s main source of intelligence.”

As W. Patrick Lang, former DIA chief of Middle East intelligence, explained in the lead-up to the invasion: “The Pentagon has banded together to dominate the government’s foreign policy, and they’ve pulled it off. They’re running Chalabi. The DIA has been intimidated and beaten to a pulp. And there’s no guts at all in the CIA.” A former CIA expert and a specialist in the political affairs of Iraqi exiles said the OSP considered themselves to be outsiders. At the OSP, he said, there was “a high degree of paranoia. They’ve convinced themselves that they’re on the side of the angels, and everybody else in government is a fool,” the former CIA expert charged.¹⁰

Even though the hawks elevated supposition and half-truths to the level of U.S. national intelligence justifying a break with the United Nations and an unprovoked invasion, they may now be able to stand aside while the investigations on the faulty prewar intelligence focus on the CIA. The neocons and such longtime militarists like Cheney and Rumsfeld have long detested the moderate threat assessments of the CIA. They intend to use the investigations to advance their own intelligence reform agenda to undermine the CIA and DIA while creating more room for “policy-driven” intelligence operations

such as the Office of Special Plans—a cabal that got the job done.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Quoted by Seymour M. Hersh, “Selective Intelligence,” *New Yorker*, May 12, 2003.
- ² Laura Rozen, “Con Tract: The Theory Behind Neocon Self-Deception,” *Washington Monthly*, October 2003.
- ³ Jim Lobe, “Pentagon Office Base for Neoconservative Network Manipulating Iraq Intelligence,” *FPIF Commentary*, Foreign Policy In Focus, September 15, 2003.
- ⁴ Seymour M. Hersh, “The Stovepipe,” *New Yorker*, October 27, 2003.
- ⁵ Robert Dreyfus, “More Missing Intelligence,” *The Nation*, July 7, 2003.
- ⁶ Hersh, “Selective Intelligence.”
- ⁷ At the NSC, the main members of the right’s network members were Stephen Hadley and Elliott Abrams. Rather than working directly with the experts at the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research or its Near East Bureau, the network’s preferred contacts were Undersecretary of State for Arms Control John Bolton and Michael Wurmser (who later became Cheney’s Middle East adviser)—both of whom came to the administration from the American Enterprise Institute—and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs Elizabeth Cheney, the vice president’s daughter. “Scooter” Libby, Eric Edelman, and John Hannah were the network’s representatives in Cheney’s office.
- ⁸ Karen Kwiatkowski, “The Pentagon Has Some Explaining to Do,” *Houston Chronicle*, August 3, 2003. “I personally witnessed several cases of staff officers being told not to contact their counterparts at State or the National Security Council because that particular decision would be processed through a different channel,” said Kwiatkowski.
- ⁹ All Iraq and Israel staff work, according to Kwiatkowski, was conducted by political appointees. In the case of Israel, the desk officer came from the Washington Institute on Near East Policy, a group closely tied to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), which is the main Israeli-nationalist lobby in Washington.
- ¹⁰ Hersh, “Selective Intelligence.”

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