

In response to exposé on Pentagon war hawk's conflict of interest

Richard Perle brands journalist Seymour Hersh a “terrorist”

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12 March 2003

A noted journalist's unearthing of evidence of profiteering by a leading architect of the Bush administration's war on Iraq has evoked an extraordinary response. Richard Perle, chairman of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board, answered the exposure of his use of public office for private gain by denouncing veteran investigative reporter Seymour Hersh as a “terrorist.”

Hersh's article, appearing in this week's *New Yorker* magazine, alleges that Perle used his position on the Defense Policy Board and his influence on the Bush administration's war plans to seek millions of dollars in investments from Saudi businessmen for a venture capital firm where he is a managing partner. The firm, Trireme Partners, L.P., specializes in homeland security and defense.

The *New Yorker* story centers on a January meeting in France between Perle and two prominent Saudi businessmen. One of them was Adnan Khashoggi, a Saudi arms dealer with intimate ties both to the royal family in Riyadh and the CIA in Washington. He gained international notoriety in the 1980s for his role in the Iran-Contra conspiracy, and later was implicated in the spectacular collapse of the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI).

Khashoggi described himself to Hersh as a “go-between,” who agreed to arrange the meeting after being solicited by a letter from one of Perle's associates in Trireme Partners, L.P. The letter boasted that three of Trireme's managers “advise the US Secretary of Defense by serving on the US Defense Policy Board and one of Trireme's principals, Richard Perle, is chairman of that board.” The other two board members referred to were former secretary of state Henry Kissinger and Gerald Hillman, a close business associate whom Perle had brought onto the Pentagon panel despite his lack of

significant government or military experience.

While Perle has publicly denounced the Saudi regime as bearing a major responsibility for terrorism, the aim of the meeting in France, according to the Hersh article, was to secure homeland security contracts with the Saudi ruling family. The other Saudi participant in the meeting was wealthy industrialist Saleh Al-Zuhair, who said he came with the aim of presenting Perle with a proposal for avoiding war with Iraq.

Afterwards, Perle's associate Hillman sent Al-Zuhair a “12-point memorandum” asserting that if Saddam Hussein admitted to possessing weapons of mass destruction and agreed to resign and leave Iraq with his sons and some of his ministers, the US “would not have to go to war against Iraq.” Hillman's letter was leaked to the Saudi and Lebanese press, where it was portrayed as a plan, backed by Perle, being negotiated with the Saudi government.

Asked by Hersh about the meeting, Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the US, Prince Bandar Sultan, dismissed the claim about peace feelers, saying it was a cover for a shakedown operation aimed at the Saudi regime.

“There is a split personality to Perle,” he said. “Here he is, on the one hand, trying to make a hundred-million-dollar deal, and, on the other hand, there were elements of the appearance of blackmail—‘If we get in business, he'll back off on Saudi Arabia’—as I have been informed by participants in the meeting.”

This is not the first time that Perle has been accused of a conflict of interest. He is one of a number of leading figures in and around the Bush administration who are closely identified with Israel, and specifically with the right-wing Likud Party of Ariel Sharon. They include the second- and third-ranking officials in the Pentagon's civilian leadership—Deputy Defense Secretary Paul

Wolfowitz and Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith.

In 1983, when he was an assistant secretary of defense, Perle came under scrutiny in relation to charges that he recommended that the Army buy weapons from an Israeli company whose owners had paid him a \$50,000 fee just two years earlier. He has also been accused of funneling classified information to the Israeli embassy in the early 1970s, when he was an aide to Senator Henry Jackson (Democrat of Washington)

Going back to the mid-1990s, the Defense Policy Board chairman has been among the most vociferous proponents of a war to topple Saddam Hussein. He was among those claiming—long after administration officials knew that the story was fabricated—that the alleged leader of the September 11 hijackers, Mohammed Atta, met an Iraqi official in Prague.

Perle's contemptible accusation against Hersh came in a television interview with CNN's Wolf Blitzer broadcast March 9. Blitzer read from the concluding paragraph of Hersh's *New Yorker* article: "There is no question that Perle believes that removing Saddam from power is the right thing to do. At the same time, he has set up a company that may gain from a war." He asked Perle to respond to the accusation of a conflict of interest.

Perle made no attempt to refute the substance of Hersh's report, merely claiming that any suggestion that he would seek personal profit from promoting war is "complete nonsense."

Asserting his belief that the US invasion of Iraq will "diminish the threat of terrorism," Perle defended his quest for investments, saying that they were for "homeland defense, which I think are vital and are necessary." Then he added, "Look, Sy Hersh is the closest thing American journalism has to a terrorist, frankly."

An incredulous Blitzer repeatedly asked Perle why he would call Hersh a terrorist, and Perle defended the remark. He denounced the journalist as "irresponsible," adding that he was a "terrorist" because "he sets out to do damage and he will do it by whatever innuendo, whatever distortion he can."

Hersh is one of the most accomplished US investigative reporters, having established his reputation by exposing the US massacre of 600 Vietnamese civilians at My Lai in 1968. He is the recipient of over a dozen major journalism awards, including the Pulitzer Prize and four George Polk Awards.

To call Hersh a "terrorist" is not merely hyperbole.

Perle's statement is indicative of the fascistic inclinations of an entire layer that exercises enormous influence within the Bush administration.

It has to be considered in light of the Bush administration's ongoing attack on democratic rights. This is an administration that has asserted near dictatorial powers in the name of fighting the "war on terrorism." Bush and other administration officials have frequently spoken of the "home front" in this war. Attorney General John Ashcroft, in testimony before Congress, defended the sweeping curtailments of civil liberties in the Patriot Act passed after 9/11 on the grounds that Bush, as a war-time president, has license to take any measures he deems necessary to uphold national security.

The Bush administration has made a practice of detaining alleged terrorists without charges and holding them indefinitely without a hearing or trial. It claims it has no obligation to even admit that such people have been seized, creating conditions for the "disappearance" of people, as under the Latin American dictatorships of the 1970s.

In the recently disclosed draft of the Justice Department's Domestic Security Enhancement Act, often referred to as "Patriot Act II," the designation "terrorist" is extended to domestic opponents of the government. This proposed measure would grant the president or attorney general the power to label someone a "terrorist" and strip him of his US citizenship.

Perle's statement about Hersh stands as a chilling warning of how these police state statutes could be put to use. Those who challenged the policies of the government, or even the filthy business practices of individual officials, could face being labeled "terrorists" and thrown into a military prison.



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