

Former cabinet member: Bush pushed war with Iraq long before 9/11

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Former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, forced out of office a year ago, has revealed in a new book that the Bush administration began high-level discussions of invading and conquering Iraq as soon as Bush entered the White House in January 2001. O'Neill's account demonstrates that war with Iraq was decided on long before the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and that the Bush administration seized on September 11 as a pretext.

O'Neill's description of the events is not only convincing, it is fully documented. He gave extensive interviews to the book's author, former *Wall Street Journal* reporter Ron Suskind, and provided Suskind with 19,000 pages of documents from his two years in office, as well as an hour-by-hour diary of his experiences.

In an interview with *Time* magazine and another broadcast Sunday night on the CBS News program *60 Minutes*, O'Neill declared that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq was "Topic A" at the first National Security Council meeting of the new administration, which he attended, on January 30, 2001. "From the start, we were building the case against Hussein and looking at how we could take him out," he said. "It was about finding a way to do it. That was the tone of it. The President saying, 'Fine. Go find me a way to do this.'"

O'Neill said that the NSC never discussed the merits of overthrowing Saddam Hussein, or whether such a US intervention would be legitimate under international law. He himself found the question troubling, saying, "For me, the notion of preemption—that the U.S. has the unilateral right to do whatever we decide to do—is a really huge leap."

But in the eyes of his colleagues in the Bush cabinet, the only question was how to obtain a suitable pretext for war. There was no objective examination of the question of weapons of mass destruction, which became the staple of Bush administration propaganda in the run-up to the war, O'Neill said.

"In the 23 months I was there, I never saw anything that I would characterize as evidence of weapons of mass destruction," he told *Time*. "There were allegations and

assertions by people. But I've been around a hell of a long time, and I know the difference between evidence and assertions and illusions or allusions and conclusions that one could draw from a set of assumptions. To me there is a difference between real evidence and everything else. And I never saw anything in the intelligence that I would characterize as real evidence."

The details supplied by O'Neill make clear that the internal US discussions on Iraq were not simply "contingency planning," as they have been portrayed by administration spokesmen over the past two years, and continue to be portrayed even in news accounts of O'Neill's revelations. O'Neill reviewed—and kept copies of—memoranda from the first days of the administration with titles like "Plan for Post-Saddam Iraq" and "Foreign Suitors For Iraqi Oilfield Contracts," which examined such questions as how Iraq should be governed under US occupation and which countries and companies would be seeking a share of the spoils from the seizure of the second largest oil reserves on the planet.

O'Neill's account confirms that the Bush administration's decision to go to war had a directly criminal character. Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and other top officials are guilty of the very crime for which leading Nazis were convicted at the Nuremberg Tribunal after World II: plotting and waging aggressive war. They wanted to invade Iraq and establish a US-backed regime, and used September 11 as the occasion, even though Iraq had no connection to the terrorist attacks and the Al Qaeda organization was hostile to the government of Saddam Hussein.

The former Treasury Secretary's revelations go beyond providing eyewitness testimony for a future war crimes prosecution. He depicts a government run by what can only be described as corporate gangsters, and presided over by a political cipher. His account demonstrates that the widespread conception of Bush as an out-of-touch and politically illiterate chief executive is, if anything, too generous.

Much of Suskind's book deals with the Bush

administration's decision-making process in O'Neill's areas of responsibility, including trade and taxation. According to O'Neill, there were simply no objective discussions of the merits of specific economic policies, only calculations of how they would benefit the administration politically, or fatten the coffers of its wealthy supporters.

O'Neill had a well-publicized disagreement with the White House early in 2002, when he opposed a decision to impose tariffs on steel imports. He describes a meeting at which a whole series of administration officials explained why they opposed such tariffs. Only Vice President Dick Cheney spoke in favor, citing "political realities"—i.e., the administration's goal of building support in the key steel-producing states of West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Ohio. Cheney conceded the points made by critics of the plan, but concluded, "we can review this in 18 months"—after the mid-term elections.

After the Republican victory in those elections, winning back control of the Senate, O'Neill had a discussion about the administration's plans for further tax cuts, which he opposed, as an orthodox conservative former CEO, because the federal budget was already deeply in deficit. Cheney replied, "Reagan proved deficits don't matter," which left O'Neill at a loss for words.

Then Cheney continued, "We won the midterms. This is our due." O'Neill does not elaborate on the "we," but it is clear that Cheney was referring, not to the Republican Party, but to the social layer which the Bush administration represents and defends: the tiny fraction of the US population with million-dollar assets and incomes. "Our due," as Cheney put it, was Bush's proposal to eliminate all taxation on dividend income, a bonanza for the super-rich that was eventually incorporated, at least partially, in the tax cut legislation adopted by the Republican-controlled Congress last year.

This proposal was such blatant class favoritism that even Bush himself apparently questioned, if not its justice, at least its feasibility. According to Suskind, citing the transcript of a meeting on the tax cut plan, Bush asked, "Haven't we already given money to rich people? This second tax cut's gonna do it again." He then asked, "Shouldn't we be giving money to the middle?" At this point Karl Rove, Bush's chief political adviser, reiterated the need for another cut for the wealthy, urging Bush, "Stick to principle. Stick to principle."

There were many similar discussions, according to O'Neill, in which administration policies were determined, not by President Bush, but by a "praetorian guard" of ideological right-wingers headed by Vice President Cheney. Bush himself seemed to play almost a tangential role in his own administration.

O'Neill describes Bush as so disengaged that cabinet meetings resembled a "blind man in a roomful of deaf people. There is no discernible connection." Cabinet members would come out of such meetings with "little more than hunches about what the president might think," he said, and would then make policy like "blind man's bluff."

The Treasury Secretary had weekly one-on-one meetings with Bush. For the first such session, O'Neill said, "I went in with a long list of things to talk about and, I thought, to engage him on. I was surprised it turned out me talking and the president just listening. It was mostly a monologue."

O'Neill regularly sent Bush brief memos, which he never appeared to read. As one fruitless "discussion" followed another, O'Neill adds, he didn't know whether Bush was ignorant or indifferent. "I wondered from the first, if the president didn't know the questions to ask, or if he did know and just did not want to know the answers," he told Suskind. "It was strange."

Ultimately, after O'Neill made clear his opposition to a second round of tax cuts, Cheney called him to say that Bush had decided to dismiss him as part of a broader reshuffle of his economic aides. As a last service to the administration, Cheney asked O'Neill to tell the press that he had decided on his own to return to private life. O'Neill refused, saying, "I'm too old to begin telling lies now."

White House aides began denouncing O'Neill as soon as his insider's account became public. One administration official declared his conduct to be the worst betrayal since the assassination of Julius Caesar. Others characterized him as bitter, vindictive and "wacky." A former CEO of Alcoa with a personal fortune estimated at over \$50 million, O'Neill said he was not worried about political retaliation. "I'm an old guy, and I'm rich. And there's nothing they can do to hurt me," he told Suskind.

That such a conservative and privileged individual should find the atmosphere inside the Bush administration bizarre and threatening speaks volumes about the nature of this government, and the danger which it represents to the American people and to the world.



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