Washington Post defends Bush, Iraq war against Paul O'Neill's exposures

David Walsh
16 January 2004

The revelations of former US Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill about the inner workings of the Bush administration, featured on CBS's *60 Minutes* program January 11 and providing the substance of former *Wall Street Journal* reporter Ron Suskind's new book, *The Price of Loyalty*, have further laid bare the divisions within the American political establishment. O'Neill's assertion, backed up by extensive documentation, that the Bush government was plotting a war against Iraq from its first days in office in January 2001, is a particularly devastating exposure.

The revelations have been cited by leading Democrats, most of whom voted to authorize Bush to launch a war against Iraq or supported such an authorization, to step up their criticisms of the present government's foreign policy. Their disagreements with Bush are purely tactical—none of the Democrats demand the immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraq or oppose the right of the US to intervene militarily wherever it wishes—but they are sharp nonetheless.

Citing both O'Neill's comments and the recent report issued by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace debunking the weapons of mass destruction claims of the Bush administration, Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts made a widely-publicized speech January 14 in which he claimed that the war in Iraq had increased hatred for the US overseas, diverted attention from the broader "war on terror" and put the US more "at risk" than it was before. Although Kennedy voted against the resolution giving Bush the power to go to war, he supported the provocative policy of the US toward Iraq over the last decade, including the constant threat of military force.

Two days earlier former army general Wesley Clark, a leading participant in US imperialist machinations in the Balkans and now a candidate for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, told a Dallas audience: "I think we're at risk with our democracy. I think we're dealing with the most closed, imperialistic, nastiest administration in living memory. They even put Richard Nixon to shame." Clark, along with Democratic congressman Charles Rangel, also called, in light of O'Neill's revelations, for a congressional investigation into the "real reasons" for invading Iraq, an elementary demand that has not been publicized or discussed in the US media.

In response the Bush administration and its right-wing backers have not been idle. O'Neill has come in for considerable abuse, so much so that he has back-pedaled somewhat, claiming that the Bush administration's pre-September 11 discussions of war with Iraq were merely a "continuation of work" begun under the Clinton government.

Treasury Department officials made it known January 12 that they had instructed their Inspector General to investigate whether O'Neill had divulged the contents of secret documents in his television and book interviews, a charge he vehemently denies.

The former treasury secretary's remarks have been labeled "sour grapes" by administration officials. The right-wing media has suggested that O'Neill—a former Alcoa executive and an official in two previous Republican administrations—has more or less lost his marbles.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld acknowledged January 13 that he had twice telephoned O'Neill after learning that his former cabinet colleague was going to publish an "insider" account of his days in the government, clearly in an effort to convince O'Neill not to go ahead with the work.

One of the most cynical attempts to refute O'Neill's account has come from the *Washington Post*. Despite having had at least four days to work up their position, the *Post* editors manage to come up with only a few weak and thoroughly dishonest paragraphs. ("Mr. O'Neill and Iraq," January 15)

They begin by complaining that the ex-treasury secretary's damning revelations have been taken up by the contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination—i.e., by Bush's ostensible political opponents—and conclude with the comment by Ohio congressman Dennis Kucinich, in regard to O'Neill's account, that "the American people, in effect, have been misled." This opening betrays one of the editors' real concerns, that O'Neill's exposé of Bush policy will help those Democrats seeking to appeal to antiwar sentiment, and only increases the possibility that the Iraq war will be placed before the American people, in no matter how limited a form, as a subject for debate in the upcoming election.

Following the reference to Kucinich's comment, the *Post* asks meaningfully, "Who is doing the misleading?" and proceeds to suggest that O'Neill had a "rocky tenure" as treasury secretary and was something of a "loose cannon" while in office. The editorial continues with the sneering assertion that Bush's former treasury secretary was given to "holding forth with extreme confidence on subjects ... about which he knew little." They suggest that O'Neill is continuing this practice by insisting "that President Bush was determined from the moment he took office to oust Saddam Hussein."

The third paragraph contains the crux of the newspaper's specious argument. First, the editors claim, it was not surprising that National Security Council meetings in January 2001 should have discussed Iraq, since "after all, the United States was patrolling the skies above Iraq to enforce [self-proclaimed] 'no-fly' zones." Nor is it surprising, the newspaper comments, "that the Bush team should have contemplated regime change: That was the declared policy of the United States, supported by the Clinton administration and Congress. Mr. O'Neill's account is new only insofar as he suggests that the

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administration had moved beyond the contemplation of options to a decision on Iraq."

No doubt the reactionary and provocative policy of the Clinton administration, including the launching of virtually non-stop air strikes and enforcement of murderous economic sanctions, paved the way for the invasion and occupation of Iraq. However, there is a difference between a stated policy of "regime change" and the preparation of an unprovoked war. The latter is a war crime under the Nuremberg precedent, as the editors of the *Post*, implicated in this process, are entirely aware.

Bush officials and their supporters at the *Post* and elsewhere are now making much of the alleged "continuity" between the present government's policy and Clinton's. In the general historical sense of course, that continuity does exist: both administrations have pursued the aims and interests of American imperialism, which find expression at this point in history in a drive for global domination.

Moreover, the Clinton administration by its actions in Bosnia and particularly Kosovo opened a breach in the post-World War II framework of "multilateral" intervention. *USA Today* on January 14 published a letter written in 1995 by Howard Dean, then governor of Vermont, urging Bill Clinton to "take unilateral action" in Bosnia against the Bosnian Serbs.

Continuity is not the same thing, however, as identity. Responsibility for launching an aggressive war in the face of worldwide popular opposition and in defiance of the UN Security Council falls on the shoulders of the Bush administration. All the chatter about "continuity" fails to take into account a fundamental political reality of the 1990s: the zeal with which the ultra-right sought by any means necessary—including a manufactured sex scandal—to undermine and replace the Clinton administration. The right wing claimed, among other things, that Clinton's foreign policy was "weak" on terrorism and permitted Saddam Hussein to "thumb his nose" at the US. Nor does the *Post* account explain the ferocity with which the Republicans organized the hijacking of the 2000 presidential election.

The Bush camp and the *Post* cannot have it both ways. The reality is that the failure of the Clinton government to intervene more aggressively in the Middle East, to actively prepare for the military conquest of Iraq and its oil fields, was one of the issues that outraged the Republican right.

In 1998 Rumsfeld, his present deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Armitage (currently Deputy Secretary of State), pro-war hawk Richard Perle and others, lobbied the Clinton administration, in the name of the Project for a New American Century (PNAC), to launch a preemptive war against Iraq and place Saddam Hussein on trial for alleged war crimes.

When the Clinton administration refused to act on this advice, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and the others wrote another letter on May 29, 1998 to Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich and Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, calling for the establishment of a strong US military presence in the region and for the use of that force "to protect our vital interests in the Gulf—and, if necessary, to help remove Saddam from power." They advocated this in clear *opposition* to the existing Clinton policy of reliance on sanctions, the mechanisms of the UN and US military encirclement and air strikes to "contain" the Hussein regime. The *Post* is now seeking to rewrite history to conceal the specific criminality of the present administration and its own filthy role in the process.

The editorial continues: "But if this is what Mr. O'Neill believes [that the administration had already arrived at the decision to go to war against Iraq], his memory conflicts with other versions of history." The editors go on to cite the *Post*'s own accounts of the national security meetings in early 2001, suggesting that "Iraq policy had indeed been discussed but that the administration was divided on the right course." A few weeks later, "the press accounts of the time describe a debate in the administration, but no clear conclusion. Even as late as Aug. 5, 2002, as the *Post*'s Bob Woodward has described it, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell had a two-hour meeting with the president in which he laid out the dangers of going to war in Iraq."

This is simply an attempt to throw dust in the readers' eyes. In fact, no one would dispute the contention that there were divisions in the Bush cabinet over Iraq policy. That was well known. But what O'Neill's testimony, that of an eyewitness, makes indelibly clear is that the dominant faction, represented by Vice President Richard Cheney and Rumsfeld, with Bush as their figurehead, were set on a course for war with Iraq from the first days of the administration (and indeed for years before that out of office, as the PNAC documents make clear).

Until the middle of March 2003 Bush came before the American public claiming that he had not "made up his mind" about war with Iraq, that diplomacy would be pursued, that military force would only be a last resort when all other options were exhausted, etc., etc. O'Neill's exposures, including the existence of documents, prepared months before the September 11 terrorist attacks, that outlined plans for a "post-Saddam" Iraq and the handing out of lucrative contracts, reveal Bush's performance as a charade filled out with falsehoods.

The transformation of the *Washington Post* into a servile propaganda organ of the most rabid warmongering faction of the Bush administration reflects in a particularly sharp manner the degeneration and degeneracy of the American press. This is the newspaper of the Watergate investigation, after all, during which process its reporters were obliged to grill government officials about Richard Nixon's crimes against the American people. One can assert without hesitation that the present incarnation of the *Post* would have fired Woodward and Carl Bernstein before they ever got started.

O'Neill's account, as far as it goes, rings absolutely true. One has the external activity of the administration—the stealing of a national election, the preparation of an illegal and brutal war that has already cost tens of thousands of lives, the wholesale attacks on democratic rights—with which to compare its "internal" life as presented in O'Neill's comments. Is there a single aspect of his story—including his vivid descriptions of Bush's cluelessness—that one has reason to doubt? On the contrary, the situation is far worse and far more advanced than a respectable bourgeois like O'Neill, albeit possessed of a certain honesty, could ever imagine or describe.

We are not the least surprised by the *Post*'s response. The newspaper has been a rabid accomplice in the colonial-style war and occupation of Iraq. It is now responding to the deepening crisis of the Bush administration, the exposure on every side of its criminality and lies, by attempting to silence or intimidate anyone who provides a glimpse into its real inner workings.

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