

American Enterprise Institute conference

# Demoralization grips Iraq war's ideological architects

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Just a day before President Bush's speech last week portraying the war in Iraq as the frontline in the worldwide battle against terrorism, a conference held in Washington bemoaned the evident shipwreck of the administration's previous preferred pretext—the struggle for “democracy” in the Middle Eastern country.

The October 5 conference was significant because it was sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). This right-wing think tank performed the ideological spadework for the US war and provided a large share of the personnel who launched it.

Among the more than two dozen AEI alumni who joined the administration were Vice President Cheney and his wife Lynn, US Ambassador to the UN John Bolton, Cheney's Middle East advisor David Wurmser and former head of the Defense Policy Board Richard Perle.

Beginning in October 2002, the AEI held a series of conferences on the theme, “The day after: planning for a post-Saddam Iraq.” It issued statements and articles arguing that the US invasion was unpostponable, and that it would have to remake the country through thorough “de-Baathification” and the sweeping privatization of the Iraqi economy, particularly its vast oil resources.

In February 2003, on the eve of the invasion, Bush spoke before the institute, putting forward his improbable “vision” of a “liberated” Iraq serving as the catalyst for a “democratic revolution” spreading throughout the Middle East.

Two-and-a-half years later, after the killing of more than 100,000 Iraqis and nearly 2,000 American soldiers, the giddy mood that prevailed at the AEI during the lead-up to the invasion and in its immediate aftermath has given way to profound demoralization.

It is not the war's death and human suffering that have deflated the neoconservatives, but rather the growing conviction that Washington lacks the stomach for the war and that the US effort is headed for failure.

This conviction has solidified over the US drive to force through a new Iraqi constitution in a referendum scheduled for October 15.

The constitution is the product of the occupation, imposed in the final analysis at the point of US guns. It has been drafted by a government controlled by Shia and Kurdish political forces acting in their own parochial interests, with the country's 20 percent Sunni minority largely excluded from the process.

The Bush administration pressured the Iraqi regime to rush through the document—rejecting calls for a six-month extension of deliberations—out of fear that any delay would be seen as a political setback for the White House. Both US and Iraqi officials now warn that the draft document's rejection—which would require a two-thirds “no” vote in the three predominantly Sunni provinces of Anbar, Salah al-Din and Ninevah—would spell chaos.

It is by no means clear, however, that its passage will be any less catastrophic. The draft calls for a radical decentralization of the Iraqi state, essentially laying the foundations for an autonomous Kurdish region in the north and a Shia one in the south, which between them would control the great bulk of the country's oil wealth. The Sunnis would be left in the center, landlocked and without significant resources.

All basic questions of political processes and political rights have been left to be determined through future legislation, while the framework has been created for the domination of Islamic religious law—at least in the Shia southern provinces.

US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad has reportedly continued working to broker amendments that would prevent a combination of boycott and rejection by the Sunni population. Though the draft constitution has been printed and brought into Iraq from abroad, the great bulk of the population has yet to see it, less than a week before they are to vote. If the US envoy is successful, the document that they vote on will not be the one that is to be imposed.

Passage of the constitution would likely fuel the insurgency among the Sunnis, while its rejection could well stimulate separatism among both the Kurds and the Shia majority. In either case, the document's fate threatens to intensify the drive toward civil war.

Among the principal speakers at the AEI conference last week was Kanan Makiya. A former key ally of Ahmed Chalabi, whose Iraqi National Congress exile group was promoted by the Pentagon's civilian leadership as an Iraqi government in waiting, Makiya was one of the most enthusiastic proponents of US “regime change” in Iraq.

When US occupation forces staged the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad in 2003, Makiya was invited to join Bush in the Oval Office to watch the propaganda spectacle.

“Instead of the fledgling democracy that back then we said was

possible, instead of that dream, we have the reality of a virulent insurgency whose efficiency is rivaled only by the barbarous tactics it uses,” he told last week’s conference. This armed struggle, he added, “is destroying the very idea or the very possibility of Iraq.”

He described the draft constitution as a “fundamentally destabilizing document,” drafted on the basis of “sectarianism and ethnic self-interest.” He added, “The deal we have is a patently unworkable deal. To the extent that it is made to work it will work toward fratricide.”

Also speaking at the conference was Rend Rahim, the American citizen and former currency trader tapped by the misnamed and brief-lived Iraqi Governing Council to serve as its ambassador to Washington in 2003. Like Makiya, Rahim worked closely with the Pentagon’s right-wing civilian leadership in pushing for Iraqi regime change.

She warned that the new constitution left the central government so weak that it could “spin the state out of control.”

No doubt, the views of both Makiya and Rahim reflect the sense of betrayal among those elements around Chalabi who believed they were going to be installed as a pro-US government in the wake of the American invasion. In the end, however, the US-backed exile group enjoyed virtually no popular support, and Washington felt compelled to work through other forces.

But these sentiments were not limited to the Iraqi Quislings. The official voice of the AEI at the conference was that of Danielle Pletka, the institute’s vice president for foreign and defense policy studies. In the period leading up to the war, she acted as a semi-official advocate of launching the US “war of choice.”

Pletka summed up her views—and presumably those of the AEI—in an article published on the institute’s web site two days after the conference.

“Because of the ongoing violence, and an increasingly obvious desire to exit Iraq, Bush administration officials have urged Iraqis to move forward with their political process in the face of confusion and disarray,” she wrote. “The Iraqi constitution, arguably one of the most important documents for the future of the Middle East, was hustled along. Attempts by Iraqi drafters to slow deliberations and wrangle through problems were nixed by interfering US Embassy officials.”

Describing the document as “flawed,” Pletka said that it left “unresolved vital questions of power-sharing.” Most Iraqis, she added, will vote without having a “clue how the new constitution differs from the old.”

Her conclusion was an unsparing right-wing denunciation of the Bush administration’s policy as one of accommodation and retreat: “The lesson from Iraq is clear: the United States’ staying power is waning.”

“The Bush revolution has indeed lost its energy,” she wrote. “Perhaps the president of the United States is tired...but if fatigue results in the dilution of the central tenets of what is now known as the Bush doctrine, then one must question why it was that Bush so desired reelection in 2004.”

The proceedings at the American Enterprise Institute cast in somewhat of a different light Bush’s strange speech last week attempting to resurrect the terrorist bogeyman and warning of an

Islamist fundamentalist empire spanning from “Spain to Indonesia.”

“Some observers look at the job ahead and adopt a self-defeating pessimism. It is not justified,” Bush said, referring to the US occupation of Iraq in last Thursday’s speech. “The elected leaders of Iraq are proving to be strong and steadfast.”

“Some observers question the durability of democracy in Iraq,” he continued. “They underestimate the power and appeal of freedom.”

Anyone reading these lines could be forgiven for thinking that the US president was talking to the majority of Americans who oppose the war and want a withdrawal of US troops. In reality, however, he was arguing with an infinitely smaller audience—his own band of disillusioned right-wing “neoconservative” supporters, who see America’s neo-colonial project in Iraq collapsing and are calling into question why they bothered supporting him in last year’s election.

A second target for his remarks, no doubt, was the Pentagon’s uniformed brass, who have made it increasingly clear that they view the current occupation as unsustainable and the “war on terror” in Iraq as a self-perpetuating enterprise, generating more insurgents than it kills.

The dismay within both the Republican right and the military over the administration’s failure to overcome the quagmire in Iraq is part of a deepening crisis gripping the Bush administration. Within the Republican camp, there is the acrimonious infighting between the White House and sections of the religious right over Bush’s nomination of Harriet Miers to the Supreme Court. Corruption scandals, meanwhile, are dogging the key Republican leaders of both the House and the Senate as well as the president’s top advisor.

Underlying this intensifying political breakdown is the massive and growing popular opposition to the government over the Iraq war, the disastrous response to Hurricane Katrina and to social and fiscal policies that exacerbate the social conditions of the vast majority of the population.

The depth of the political crisis of confidence within America’s ruling elite remains largely hidden from public view thanks to a Democratic Party that defends the same social interests as the administration and a mass media that is for the most part content to echo the official pronouncements from Washington.



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