

Bush meets the “wise men”: A cynical charade to legitimize Iraq war

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President Bush’s meeting Thursday with most of the living former secretaries of state and defense was a public relations spectacle aimed at demonstrating the consensus in official Washington behind continuing the US occupation of Iraq.

By assembling a bipartisan group of former top national security officials—five from Democratic administrations, eight from Republican—the Bush administration sought to marginalize opposition to the Iraq war. White House spokesman Scott McClellan emphasized that none of the 13 officials supported an immediate withdrawal of US military forces in Iraq.

While the television cameras were present, Bush played the role of a genial host soliciting the views of a distinguished panel of policy heavyweights. But according to those participants who spoke with the press afterwards, the session consisted largely of reports of US successes in Iraq by Bush, General George Casey Jr., the top US commander in Iraq, and US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad.

Less than 10 minutes were left for questions and comments from the 13 visitors, after which they were shuffled off to the Oval Office for the group picture with Bush that was the real purpose of the affair. The group was then whisked to another meeting room to continue discussion with National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley if they chose, while Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and Rice went on their way.

According to former defense secretary James Schlesinger, a fervent supporter of the Iraq war, Bush from the beginning precluded any discussion of the decision to invade and occupy Iraq, focusing instead on what should be done now to insure success for the US occupation regime. “Needless to say,” Schlesinger noted, there was “little debate given the implied ground rules.”

Former Clinton defense secretary William J. Perry told the *New York Times*, “The message was, briefly stated, that the political process is working.” Another participant told the *Times*, “It would be a stretch to say he was really interested in many thoughts from around the table.” Former Clinton defense secretary William Cohen, a Republican, confirmed the character of the session, telling the *Los Angeles Times*, “I don’t think anyone walked in there believing this would be a real opportunity to effect changes in policy.”

At a press briefing afterwards, McClellan said, “I think there’s a common commitment within that room to succeed in Iraq. Everybody in that room understands the importance of succeeding. And I think everybody in that room would say the same publicly.”

This bipartisan unity was underscored by the comments of the most vocal critic of the Bush administration’s handling of the Iraq war to attend the session, former Clinton secretary of state Madeline Albright. She said afterwards that she had rejected Bush’s claim that the decision to go to war was unavoidable, but regarded a US success in postwar Iraq as absolutely vital: “I said this was a war of choice, not necessity. But getting it right is a necessity and not a choice.”

Former Carter defense secretary Harold Brown agreed, saying, “there is a fairly broad consensus” that “we have to try to make it work as far as we can,” although he voiced greater doubts about the ultimate prospects for the US-backed regime in Baghdad than the public optimism of the Bush administration.

One purpose of the meeting clearly was to suggest that the only legitimate debate on the war in Iraq is over what methods should be used to insure an American “success.” The participation of the Democratic foreign policy establishment signifies their assurance that the legitimacy of the war itself will not be challenged by the Democrats in the 2006 election campaign, just as antiwar sentiment was marginalized in the 2004 campaign.

There was one other area of bipartisan accord, according to McClellan. Asked whether any of the former state and defense secretaries asked any questions about Bush’s authorization of illegal spying by the National Security Agency on phone calls and e-mails of US residents, the White House spokesman said not a single one of the 13 ex-officials raised the issue, “not in any way.”

It is hardly a surprise that an audience of former top national security officials would offer general support to the Bush administration’s goal of establishing an American protectorate over Iraq. Domination of Persian Gulf oil has been a key strategic concern of the US ruling elite since the end of World War II, and particularly in the period from 1973 on, following the quadrupling of oil prices by OPEC and the Arab oil

embargo against the US for its military support to Israel in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War.

Given their own record of aggression and subversion in the service of American imperialism, the 13 officials brought to the White House Thursday undoubtedly felt a certain fellowship as they were briefed by the current crop of American war criminals. Consider the lineup:

Robert S. McNamara, the oldest of the group at 89, was defense secretary from 1961 to 1967, overseeing the US buildup in Vietnam and bloody fighting during a period when more than a million Vietnamese and some 20,000 Americans lost their lives. Melvin Laird was defense secretary in the Nixon administration, during the second half of the Vietnam War, a period of even greater casualties.

Schlesinger was defense secretary in the Nixon and Ford administrations, holding office during the final collapse of the US puppet state of South Vietnam. He also headed the CIA during the months in which the September 1973 coup in Chile was prepared.

Harold Brown was defense secretary in the Carter administration, which began the US policy of support for the Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan against pro-Moscow regimes and then against the Soviet occupation. This led ultimately to the creation of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, formed by Osama bin Laden after he went to Afghanistan to fight with the US-backed mujaheddin. The Carter Doctrine, enunciated by the “peace-loving” president and implemented by Brown at the Pentagon, declared that any threat to oil shipments from the Persian Gulf would be treated as a threat to US national security and would evoke a military response.

Four secretaries of state of the Reagan and first Bush administrations—Alexander Haig, George Shultz, James Baker and Lawrence Eagleburger—participated in the White House session. Haig is best known for giving the green light to Ariel Sharon for Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

Shultz’s crimes are too numerous to attempt a thorough listing, but he was one of the main architects of the contra terrorist war against Nicaragua and the overall Reagan policy of backing military torture regimes throughout Latin America. He also had dealings with Saddam Hussein during the period when the Reagan administration tacitly backed the Iraqi regime as a counterweight to Iran.

Baker is a Bush family retainer—playing a lead role in the theft of the 2000 presidential election—and was secretary of state during the first US war against Iraq, in 1991, as well as the US invasion of Panama and occupation of Somalia.

Frank Carlucci was defense secretary for the last year of the Reagan administration, after a long national security career that included engineering the assassination of Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba.

The Clinton administration, in which Perry, Cohen and Albright served, maintained the US embargo of Iraq and the deployment of thousands of US troops in the region, begun

under the first Bush administration. Clinton authorized repeated bombing attacks on Iraq and, at one point, early in 1998, Albright and Cohen attempted, in public appearances with national security adviser Samuel Berger, to whip up public support for more substantial US military action against Baghdad.

The political debacle of these efforts led the advocates of war with Iraq to organize themselves in the neo-conservative Project for a New American Century and await the installation of a new administration, under George W. Bush, and a suitable pretext, provided by September 11, 2001, to achieve their goal.

It is doubtful that the White House spin-doctors were aware of it, but Thursday’s meeting had its historical parallel in the Vietnam War era. The differences outweigh the similarities, however, and demonstrate the profound decay of both the political institutions and personnel of the American national security establishment.

On March 25-26, 1968, newly installed defense secretary Clark Clifford convened a meeting of what were sometimes called the “wise men,” a group of former top national security officials of the Roosevelt, Truman and Eisenhower administrations, to discuss the deepening US debacle in Vietnam. The consensus among these former officials was for a rapid change in course, and they conveyed this to President Lyndon Johnson in a private meeting at the White House. Five days later, Johnson startled the country by announcing he was withdrawing as a candidate for reelection and would attempt to achieve a negotiated end to the war.

Some 38 years later, a similar group is assembled, not to tell a president some bitter truths about a strategic disaster, but to listen to administration happy talk and allow themselves to be photographed with a president whose ignorance and duplicity they certainly recognize. After this degrading spectacle, the current crop of “wise men” dispersed ignominiously.

As Marx said so well, echoing Hegel, “History repeats itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.”



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