

# Bush, Bremer clash over decision to disband Iraq's army

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The clash between President Bush and the man he tapped to serve as Washington's proconsul in the early period of the US occupation of Iraq over how the decision was taken to disband that country's army provides a revealing glimpse into the nature of the US military adventure in the Middle East and the character of the Bush administration itself.

Bush's version of this pivotal event—cited by many within the political and foreign policy establishment as key to the eruption of armed resistance to the American occupation—was provided in an interview with Robert Draper, whose new book on the American president, *Dead Certain*, was released on Tuesday.

In one of six interviews, Bush told the author in his signature off-hand manner, “The policy had been to keep the army intact; didn't happen.”

Pressed as to how the contrary decision was made and his own reaction when it “didn't happen,” Bush responded, “Yeah, I can't remember, I'm sure I said, ‘This is the policy, what happened?’”

He added, “Again, Hadley's [National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley] got notes on all of this stuff.”

The picture presented is that of an uninformed, uninterested, and disengaged individual occupying the White House, with basic policy decisions being taken elsewhere without his knowledge, much less approval.

As Draper makes clear in his book, this modus operandi applied not just to the president's handling of Iraqi matters, but to all major questions confronting his administration. The book suggests that one of the few things that held the American president's interest was his obsession with riding his bicycle. According to the book, on the eve of Hurricane Katrina striking the Gulf Coast, Bush was too “gassed” after an 80-minute bike ride at his Crawford, Texas ranch to participate meaningfully in a briefing on the impending disaster.

The implications of Bush's ignorant and shameless comments were not lost on the man who actually issued the order to disband the Iraqi army—L. Paul Bremer, who headed the US Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) from May of

2003 until June of 2004.

According to an article in the *New York Times*, “Mr. Bremer made it clear that he was unhappy about being portrayed as a renegade of sorts by former administration officials.”

Fearing that he is being made the scapegoat for a policy decision that has been widely condemned, Bremer contacted the *Times*, releasing letters between him and the president that he claims prove that Bush was informed of and agreed with the decision.

Given Bush's studied disinterest, it is far from clear that the letters demonstrate any such thing.

Bremer included a brief reference to the plan to disband the Iraqi army in the middle of a fawning three-page letter written to Bush in May 2003. The thrust of this dispatch, delivered to the White House by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, was an account of the gratitude supposedly shown by the Iraqi people to the US “and to you in particular for freeing Iraq from Saddam's tyranny.”

In Mosul, he continued, “an old man, under the impression that I was President Bush ... rushed up and planted two very wet and hairy kisses on my cheeks.”

Bush responded to this flattery with what amounted to an official pat on the back, writing to Bremer, “Your leadership is apparent. You have quickly made a positive and significant impact. You have my full support and confidence.”

The American proconsul's description of the decision regarding the army expressed all of the arrogance and ignorance of the leading sections of the US political establishment as Washington embarked on its project to colonize Iraq and lay claim to its vast oil wealth.

“We must make it clear to everyone that we mean business: that Saddam and the Baathists are finished,” Bremer wrote to Bush. Announcing that he had already launched a campaign to purge 50,000 members of the former ruling Baath Party from government—a move that drove the vast majority of Iraqi qualified professionals from their posts—he said he was preparing to “parallel this step with an

even more robust measure,” by disbanding the Iraqi army.

Bremer told the *Times* that the decision “was not controversial” and had been reviewed by Rumsfeld, then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith, who was under secretary of defense for policy, and other Pentagon officials.

The newspaper indicated, however, that a number of senior officials, including then-Secretary of State Colin Powell, had no advance notice of the dissolution of the Iraqi army. Gen. Peter Pace, who at the time was vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told a February 2004 conference organized by the Council on Foreign Affairs that the joint chiefs “were not asked for a recommendation or advice” on the action.

What emerges from this account is yet another view into a secretive state within a state, which holds itself unaccountable to and is utterly hostile towards democratic control and constitutional restraints as it pursues its agenda of militarism abroad and the systematic destruction of basic social and democratic rights at home. It is not only Bush’s reactionary outlook, but also his ignorance and disinterest in matters of policy that make him the ideal figurehead for such a regime.

The functioning of this government was aptly described in an October 2005 speech by Lawrence Wilkerson, Colin Powell’s chief of staff at the State Department during the Iraq war buildup: “The case I saw for four-plus years was a case I have never seen in my studies of aberrations, bastardizations, perturbations, changes to the national security decision-making process. What I saw was a cabal between the vice president of the United States, Richard Cheney, and the secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld on critical issues that made decisions that the bureaucracy did not know were being made.”

The decision to abolish the Iraqi military—which constituted the most enduring institution in post-colonial Iraqi society—and demobilize some 400,000 officers and enlisted men has been widely criticized as a disastrous error that played a critical role in stoking the insurgency that has continued to this day.

In his book *State of Denial*, Bob Woodward recounts a discussion between Bremer’s predecessor as the US administrator in Iraq, Jay Garner, and Rumsfeld, in which Garner described Bremer’s orders to purge the Baathists and disband the army as “tragic decisions ... tragic mistakes.” Garner, Woodward writes, went on to urge that these actions be reversed, to which Rumsfeld replied, “We’re not going back.”

Whether US imperialism could have better pursued its goals in Iraq by trying to reactivate and coopt the Iraqi military as a puppet force is open to question.

What is clear, however, is that these goals had nothing to

do with the Bush administration’s hollow claims that Washington was intent on building a “free and democratic Iraq.” Rather, its aim was to demolish the existing foundations of Iraqi society, not only destroying its government and military, but dismantling its state-run industries and economy and carrying out a systematic attack on its educational, health and cultural institutions and heritage.

The conception held by those who launched the war of aggression was that the US would then be able to impose a colonial-style regime of its own making to pursue its interests in Iraq and throughout the region.

That this predatory project has created a catastrophe is now undeniable. Proof of this is the mounting mutual recriminations between those most involved in implementing this policy.

Just four months ago, former CIA Director George Tenet published his memoir, *At the Center of the Storm*, claiming that he was being made the scapegoat for the decision to invade Iraq in the first place. Now, Bremer feels compelled to go to the press to defend himself against the charge that he was singularly responsible for decisions that are widely deemed key to sparking armed resistance to the American occupation. Both men, it should be recalled, were awarded the Medal of Freedom by Bush in 2004 after they had left office.

Notwithstanding the mutual finger-pointing and bitter divisions that have emerged within the ranks of those most responsible for the debacle in Iraq, neither the Bush administration nor its ostensible political opponents in the leadership of the Democratic Party have any intention of ending the US war or abandoning the original goal of seizing oil reserves and strategic advantage by militarily subjugating an entire people.



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