

Policymakers vs. Intelligence

By Jonathan Tkachuk

“Perfect prewar intelligence from the intelligence community about the state of Iraqi weapons programs would have necessitated some modifications in the Bush administration’s sales campaign...But it is remarkable how much, even under this unrealistically extreme assumption, would not have to be changed in the campaign...Cheney himself cited the Duelfer report as support in arguing three years into the war that the invasion was justified and that the dangers from what Saddam Hussein could do with WMD had been one of the reasons justifying it.”

-Paul R. Pillar, “Intelligence and U.S. Foreign Policy”, p. 88-89

“According to Duelfer, “Saddam wanted to re-create Iraq’s WMD capability...after sanctions were removed.” Duelfer cited Iraqi diplomat Tariq Aziz’s opinion that Saddam would have restarted WMD programs, beginning with the nuclear program, after sanctions and noted that Saddam had purposely retained the men and women who knew how to do so. He also had dual-use infrastructure readily at hand that he could use to reestablish a biological weapons program and produce chemical weapons within months. But there were no stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction.”

-Vice President Richard Cheney, “In My Time”, p.412

In their latest books, “In My Time” and “Intelligence and US Foreign Policy,” former Vice President Cheney and former intelligence official Paul Pillar agree on little when it comes to intelligence and its role in shaping American foreign policy.

Their differences emerge in their interpretations of the issues related to pre-Iraq War intelligence. These issues include: 1) Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program, 2) Saddam Hussein’s ties with Al-Qaeda, 3) Saddam’s ties with “terrorism” more generally and 4) his ability to threaten the United States.

Yet, where the two have their sharpest disagreement is not with the details of pre-Iraq war intelligence but with the nature of the relationship between policymakers and intelligence officials.

Simply put, Cheney portrays the relationship as one of almost co-equals: the Administration is credited for a sound policy (in this case the Iraq War) while the intelligence community gets the blame for the flawed details of the policy. Pillar argues that the relationship is one of superior and subordinate with the intelligence community playing the latter role. In addition, Pillar argues that no policy, successful or not, can ever be attributed to the intelligence community. Policymakers make policy. Intelligence officers serve to complement the policy that is already decided upon. All adopted policies are political.

There are at least **three** occasions in which Cheney's account affirms Pillar's broader argument.

The first can be found in his reflection on the flawed 2002 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) of Iraq's WMD threat. Cheney implies that the policy would not have been different had he known its premises were flawed. He also correctly points out that the intelligence on Iraqi WMDs was "essentially the same" as those produced during the Clinton Administration as well as by the intelligence agencies of other countries.

He fails to acknowledge that in spite of this universal assessment, the Bush Administration (primarily) decided that Iraq posed a threat worthy of invasion. Countering Vice President's subtle assertion of the imminence of the Iraq threat, Pillar notes the 2001 NIE identified terrorism as the primary threat to the United States. The report only mentioned Iraq in passing and was described as "contained."

The second can be found in Cheney's recollection of the CIA's resistance to the argument that Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Al Qaeda were allies in some way. He characterizes their conclusions as "hesitant" and attributes this to the internal politics of the agency at the time. Rather than acknowledging the accuracy of the CIA's claims, Cheney casually dismisses them.

According to Pillar, this dismissal was characteristic of the Bush Administration and the time. In addition to Cheney, Pillar cites other policymakers, notably Douglas Feith of the Defense Department, as having not only dismissed the CIA's reporting on the issue, but also having actively worked to obstruct and undermine it altogether.

The third can be found in Cheney's addressing the charge that he put inordinate pressure on the CIA to twist intelligence. He rejects the claim on the grounds that the intelligence assessment mirrored those produced by the previous Administration as well as other intelligence agencies. While his rejection is firm, this is not all he says. On at least three occasions in his memoir, Cheney reveals a somewhat cynical view of the intelligence community. The first is his description of Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) George Tenet's inquiry into the story of Ambassador Joseph Wilson in Niger as "amateur hour out at the CIA." The second is his overly political interpretation of Director Tenet's resignation as DCI in 2004: "For him to quit when the going got tough, not to mention in the middle of a presidential campaign, seemed to me unfair to the president, who had put his trust in George Tenet." The third is the blatantly political interpretation of CIA's description of any link between Al Qaeda with Saddam Hussein as one of "no authority, direction or control": "The phrase turned out to be handy for administration critics, because it seemed to say that Saddam had no responsibility for terrorism while we were asserting he did."

The relationship between policymaker and intelligence has always been a sensitive and potentially political one. This is nothing new. Unlike the intelligence community, the American policymaker has always possessed the democratic responsibility to make policy on behalf of the United States. Unlike in domestic politics, the political liability of a foreign policy failure can be deflected, at least in part, to another party: the intelligence community. It is up to the electorate to make sure such deferrals do not go unpunished.

