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National Security Policymaking and the Bush War Cabinet

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George W. Bush certainly did not expect to be a war president. In his private sector career and as Governor of Texas he had seldom traveled abroad, and he did not demonstrate much interest in international affairs. In his campaign for the presidency he expressed skepticism about foreign entanglements and a disdain for “nation building.” Yet events conspired to make war the central concern of his presidency; after the terrorist attack on the United States in September 2001, Bush saw the war on terrorism as the primary mission of his presidency. “I’m here for a reason, and this [the war on terrorism] is going to be how we’re to be judged.”¹ Soon thereafter he decided that the U.S. should conduct a campaign for regime change in Iraq, by military means, if necessary.

Within his first two years in office, President Bush was to pursue two quite different wars: one against terrorism that toppled the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and hunted terrorists throughout the world; the other war he pursued was intended to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and to rid that country of weapons of mass destruction. This paper will examine President Bush and his war cabinet during the conduct of the war in Afghanistan. It will then turn to his domestic and international campaign for a war with Iraq during which he had to overcome domestic skepticism about the wisdom of attacking Iraq as well as international concerns that war in Iraq would dangerously destabilize the whole Middle East region. The final section will compare President Bush’s approach to national security policy making with some previous post World War II presidents.

I. The Bush Cabinet Before 9/11

President Bush quickly overcame the problems of his shortened transition into office, appointed his cabinet, and began on his policy agenda. From the beginning, it was clear that the White House staff would dominate policy making in his administration and that the cabinet secretaries would play a supporting and implementing role.² In the spring of 2001 he undertook several policy initiatives and achieved victory with his tax cut proposal, but after the defection of Republican Senator James Jeffords in May 2001, the Democrats took over the Senate and made future domestic policy victories more problematic.

Several members of his cabinet were having difficulties, particularly Donald Rumsfeld and Colin Powell. Rumsfeld had undertaken to reform the military in order to

change it from its Cold War stance of heavy divisions designed to fight traditional wars to a more flexible, mobile force structure that was adaptable to the less traditional warfare he envisioned for the 21st century. His reform plan engendered the opposition of much of the officer corps, particularly in the Army, who saw his style as too brusque and his ideas as too radical. He had also managed to irritate defense-oriented members of Congress who did not favor his reform plans and felt they had not been sufficiently consulted.³ In the summer of 2001 there was speculation that Rumsfeld might resign by the end of the year.

Colin Powell had been chosen to be Secretary of State because of his experience and stature. He had supported Bush during the campaign but was not a close advisor, and Karl Rove, Bush's top political strategist, felt that he was not sufficiently politically aligned with the president. In his first six months in office, Powell had lost a number of minor foreign policy skirmishes, for instance, on relations with North Korea, U.S. commitments in the Balkans, the Kyoto global warming treaty, and the abandonment of the AMB Treaty. His foes in the administration were trying to marginalize him and undercut his effectiveness. In early September, *Time* magazine came out with a story on him with a cover that asked, "Where Have You Gone, Colin Powell?"⁴ According to Bob Woodward, "It was a very effective hit by the White House," that is, by staffers who wanted to undermine Powell.⁵

While chief of staff Andrew Card was in charge of managing the White House, Vice President Cheney was clearly the dominant person, short of the president. Cheney had played a major role in the transition, which he directed, and in the administration's early domestic and foreign policies. Because Cheney's experience and expertise overshadowed the president's, White House officials were careful to emphasize his subordinate position to the president. Cheney's counselor, Mary Matalin, felt the need to assert, "The vice president has no personal or political agenda other than advising President Bush."⁶ One White House official said, "For the first time since Truman, you have a Veep who does not dream, does not wonder, does not think every day about being President."⁷ President Bush said, "Dick's doing a good job because he's told me he doesn't want to be president."⁸

Condoleezza Rice had worked for Brent Scowcroft when he was national security advisor to President H.W. Bush and had gone back to Stanford where she was professor of political science and then became provost of the University. In the late 1990s she became the leader of a group of foreign policy advisors to George W. Bush as he campaigned for the presidency, a group called the "Vulcans" (the Roman god of fire). In 1999 she resigned as provost of Stanford to become candidate Bush's foreign policy advisor.⁹ When Bush appointed her assistant to the president for national security affairs, she became at 46 the youngest person and first woman to hold the position.

Rice began her job by downsizing the NSC staff by a third and adopting the role of policy facilitator. Her job would be difficult, given the stature, experience, and egos of the other major national security principals: Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Powell. Her major asset, aside from her intelligence, was her relationship with the President. She had

become a close personal friend of the President and Laura Bush, spending more time with him and them than any other White House staffer. In the fall of 2001, the importance of her role in the administration was to expand considerably.

II. The Administration Transformed and the War Cabinet

The tragedy of the September 11 attacks transformed the world and the administration in striking ways. The first and most striking political effect of the terrorist bombings of September 11 was a huge jump in public approval of President Bush. In the September 7-10 Gallup poll public approval of the President stood at 51 percent; the next poll, on September 14-15 registered 86 percent approval – a 35 percent jump virtually overnight.¹⁰ The broad outpouring of grief, anger, and political support for the president provided the backdrop for the administration's war on terrorism.

To plan the administration's response to the terrorist attacks, President Bush assembled his "War Cabinet," which included Cheney, Rice, Powell, Rumsfeld, Card, and Director of Central Intelligence, George Tenet. When it was suggested that Cheney might chair the war cabinet for the president, Bush rejected the idea and said that he would chair the meetings and that Rice would act as chair in his absence.¹¹

Although Tenet had been appointed to head the CIA by President Clinton, President Bush came to trust him personally and came to rely on his judgment. In the previous administration, President Clinton had approved several intelligence orders and increased funding for human intelligence sources so that the CIA could undertake covert operations against Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda.¹² Thus in the days immediately following September 11, it was Tenet who was most prepared with intelligence about the terrorists, al Qaeda, and their base in Afghanistan. Tenet prepared a Memorandum of Notification that would give the CIA broad new authority and flexibility in dealing with international terrorism that the president approved in the first days after 9/11.¹³

The war cabinet considered several options for the U.S. pursuit of al Qaeda in Afghanistan. A strike with cruise missiles could have been implemented quickly, but the targets might have been abandoned by the terrorists, and that option seemed too much like President Clinton's strike in 1998 that achieved nothing. Another option was cruise missiles along with bomber attacks, and a third was a combination of the first two along with "boots on the ground," that is U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan.¹⁴ The president decided that it was important to have U.S. soldiers committed to battle in order to demonstrate U.S. resolve and commitment. The problem was that there were no existing military plans, and it would take time to set up staging areas and rescue teams before U.S. personnel could be placed in the country.

The U.S. bombing attack on Taliban targets began on October 7, and the president was impatient to get U.S. troops into Afghanistan, but by September 26 only the CIA had a covert team of about 10 men in Afghanistan.¹⁵ Although some hard Taliban targets were hit (e.g. buildings and airfields), the major early challenge was the lack of targets to bomb. The Taliban did not mass their troops, and there were no U.S. personnel on the

ground in position to call in air strikes on the enemy.¹⁶

During October President Bush was impatient to get U.S. troops into Afghanistan. At one point when Rice informed him that more planning and staging was needed by the military, he responded, “That’s not acceptable!”¹⁷ Rice was in the position of absorbing the president’s frustration and explaining the military’s position to him. Often close presidential advisors take the brunt of presidential anger as part of their jobs, for instance H.R. Haldeman for Nixon, George Stephanopolous for Clinton, or many White House staffers for Lyndon Johnson. Bush felt comfortable expressing his frustration to Rice. “I can be totally unscripted or unrehearsed with Condi.”¹⁸

In mid-October, early in the war with still no military personnel in Afghanistan, Rumsfeld became exasperated at the seeming CIA dominance of war planning and operations. “This is the CIA’s strategy. They developed the strategy. We’re just executing the strategy. . . you guys are in charge. You guys have the contacts. We’re just following you in. We’re going where you tell us to go.” President Bush then told Rice, “Get this mess straightened out.” Rice had to go to Rumsfeld later and convince him that he ought to be in charge of military strategy and tactics, “Don, this is now a military operation and you really have to be in charge. . . .One person’s got to be in charge of this, and it’s you.” Rumsfeld replied, “Got it.” When Bush asked her, “Am I not the quarterback?” she replied, “No, I think you’re the coach.”¹⁹ Rice’s role as NSC advisor had expanded during the months after 9-11. Beginning the administration as junior to the other principals in age and experience, she demonstrated her skill in her role as neutral broker as well as enforcer of the president’s wishes.

Later in October the Army had placed several Special Forces units on the ground, but the lack of targets was still a problem. Bush had made a key decision not to introduce significant numbers of American troops to fight the war. Instead, the U.S. would depend on the “tribals” in Afghanistan, including the loose “Northern Alliance” to confront the Taliban and do the ground fighting. While not as well-equipped or trained as the professional U.S. troops, the local ethnic groups had the advantage of knowing the territory and language as well as having scores to settle with the Taliban, which they had been fighting for years. But the U.S., while spending millions of dollars supplying and “renting” the tribals, could not make them engage the enemy before they felt they were ready.

This delay in the U.S. timetable by the Northern Alliance made it seem like the war was stagnating and the specter of a Vietnam quagmire was being raised in the press. On October 25 the situation prompted Rice to tell Bush, “. . . we’ve bombed everything we can think of to bomb, and still nothing is happening.”²⁰ This situation was the backdrop for a dramatic war cabinet meeting the next day in which Bush asserted his leadership to quell second thoughts in his war cabinet. With stories in the papers about bogging down in Afghanistan, some of his advisors began to consider the possibility of introducing significant numbers of U.S. ground troops and Americanizing the ground war.

At the NSC meeting in the Situation Room in the White House, Bush told his war

cabinet, "I just want to make sure that all of us did agree on this plan, right?" When there were no dissents, he asked, "Anybody have an ideas they want to put on the table?"²¹ No one suggested any because it was clear that the president had decided. The president was not asking their advice, but demanding their agreement. This was not the time for exploring options or voicing concerns; the president wanted them to affirm their confidence in the plan.²²

Bush pointed out that it had been only 19 days that they had been pursuing the strategy and that it was too soon to abandon it. He wanted them to be patient while they waited for the Northern Alliance to decide to move against the Taliban; then the U.S. could use its air power to support them and destroy the enemy. Bush later referred to his leadership in this instance, "First of all, a president has got to be the calcium in the backbone. If I weaken, the whole team weakens. If I'm doubtful, I can assure you there will be a lot of doubt."²³ His stiffening of the spine of the war cabinet served to forestall discussion of further commitment of U.S. troops to the war. The irony was that a week later, on November 2, the president himself was considering the possibility of sending in more than 50,000 U.S. troops to do the job that the local tribals did not seem to want to initiate. This possible Americanization of the war was seen as a worst case scenario by U.S. military planners.²⁴

In early November the U.S. had four CIA paramilitary and three military Special Forces teams in Afghanistan that were assisting the local warlords and preparing to call in airstrikes when the battle was engaged.²⁵ Despite the doubts and contingency planning by the president and his advisors, by mid-November the whole picture had turned around. The Northern Alliance had begun to attack the Taliban, which had begun to mass its troops. One of the indicators of the type of war being conducted was a cavalry charge of 600 men on horses attacking Taliban forces at the same time they were being hit by massive and accurate bombing support by U.S. planes using the most sophisticated guidance systems in the world.²⁶ Once the tribal warriors began to attack in the north and the south, the tide quickly turned against the Taliban, and within several weeks Kabul had been taken in the north (Nov. 12) and Kandahar (Dec. 7) in the south of Afghanistan. Even the president expressed his surprise, "It's amazing how fast the situation has changed. It is a stunner, isn't it?"²⁷

The total number of U.S. personnel in Afghanistan during the war were 110 CIA paramilitary troops and 316 Special Forces soldiers, and the defeat of the Taliban had taken only 102 days, with very few U.S. casualties (26 dead and 121 wounded as of January 25, 2003).²⁸ The new president, Hamid Karzai, took his oath of office in Kabul on December 22. The key to the U.S. victory was the desire of the Afghanistan tribal leaders to rid Afghanistan of the Taliban, which had oppressed the country for years. But the key to getting the active support of the tribal leaders was the strategic dispersion by the CIA, in country, of \$70 million in cash to the various leaders to gain their support and supply their troops. U.S. air power was decisive, but victory could not have been achieved without the Afghan warriors on the ground. Indigenous troops were probably more effective than would have been the better-equipped and more professional U.S. soldiers in the mountains and valleys of Afghanistan.

President Bush had molded his cabinet into an effective advisory mechanism for the conduct of the war and exhibited his leadership style. He was willing to be decisive, and was often impatient with the progress of the military in getting assets in place in Afghanistan. Despite understandable disagreements within his cabinet, often between Powell and Cheney or Powell and Rumsfeld, the president with the assistance of Rice contained the disagreements and used them constructively.

Bush later reflected on his role as leader of his war cabinet. “One of my jobs is to be provocative. . . seriously, to provoke people into – to force decisions, and to make sure it’s clear in everybody’s mind where we’re headed.”²⁹ Woodward asked whether he warned his staffers when he was being provocative or overstating his position in order to elicit a reaction. The question was about how to effectively exploit staff advice. Would the president get a better response, for his purposes, if they knew he was playing devil’s advocate or if they thought he was serious? Bush’s response was to ignore the implications of the question and respond to the question of whether he warned his staffers:

Of course not. I’m the commander – see, I don’t need to explain – I do not need to explain why I say things. That’s the interesting thing about being the president. Maybe somebody needs to explain to me why they say something, but I don’t feel like I owe anybody an explanation.³⁰

While consensus may be useful, Bush clearly did not see building consensus as the key to presidential leadership; making the right decision and holding to the course was more important. Bush commented further on the need for unanimity in his war cabinet,

. . . one of the things I know that can happen is, if everybody is not on the same page, then you’re going to have people peeling off and second-guessing and the process will not, will really not unfold the way it should, there won’t be honest discussion.³¹

It seems that his concern for “honest discussion” was expected to take place from the perspective of the “same page” rather than venturing beyond the assumed (or imposed) consensus.

After Afghanistan had been liberated from its Taliban rulers, U.S. forces were introduced in large numbers to ensure the peace and begin rebuilding the country. They engaged Taliban forces with mixed success in the Tora Bora area mountains adjacent to Pakistan. Their mission was to destroy remnants of the Taliban and their supplies and block their escape across the border into Pakistan. During this period Osama bin Laden apparently slipped out of the country while his aide took his cell phone on a different route to mislead U.S. forces.

Although President Bush rejected the idea of U.S. troops as nation builders, there was little choice but to try to establish stability so that the country could rebuild itself. After the Soviets withdrew their forces in defeat, warring factions led to chaos and

anarchy and paved the way for takeover by the oppressive Taliban regime. By the fall of 2002 there were 10,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, though the new government did not fully control the country outside the capital of Kabul. U.S. troops were training a new Afghan army, but the government had trouble raising the money to pay the new recruits. Although the U.S. was spending billions of dollars on maintaining the U.S. military in Afghanistan, spending on reconstruction projects was relatively small. According to one account in the fall of 2002, "Abject poverty, malnutrition and starvation still haunt each section of the country."³²

Along the Afghanistan border with Pakistan, U.S. forces continued to search for terrorists and Taliban fighters, many of whom sought refuge in tribal areas in Pakistan and intermittently fired rockets and set up small guerilla operations against American forces. The area was difficult to control because the opposition to U.S. forces did not mass troops or present significant targets, but rather used snipers and set mines and bombs in classic guerilla fashion.³³

III. The Campaign for War with Iraq

Although the public campaign for war with Iraq did not begin until 2002, President Bush and part of his administration began considering it immediately after September 11, 2001. At the war cabinet meeting at Camp David on September 15, 2001, the issue of Iraq was raised by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz who strongly favored going after Saddam Hussein and argued that war in Iraq might be easier than war in Afghanistan. Powell argued that the coalition backing the U.S. would not hold if the target was shifted to Iraq. Cheney said, "If we go after Saddam Hussein, we lose our rightful place as good guy." Tenet and Card agreed against attacking Iraq. The president finally decided not to pursue Iraq at that time and recalled, "If we tried to do too many things . . . the lack of focus would have been a huge risk."³⁴

On September 17, 2001 President Bush signed a top secret plan for the war in Afghanistan that also contained a direction for the Defense Department to plan for a war with Iraq.³⁵ Attacking Iraq was the subject of a meeting of the Defense Policy Board, a group chaired by Richard Perle, that advised the president on national security issues. In 2003 White House officials said that Bush decided soon after the terrorist attacks that Iraq had to be confronted, but that he did not make his decision public because, "He didn't think the country could handle the shock of 9/11 and a lot of talk about dealing with states that had weapons of mass destruction."³⁶

President Bush did not make public his decision to pursue Iraq until the State of the Union message on January 29, 2002, though his decision was somewhat obscure and stated at a high level of generality because of his inclusion of Iraq, Iran, and North Korea in what he called an "axis of evil." The phrase, which carried heavy freight for both his partisans and his critics, worked its way into the speech gradually, as his speech writers labored over drafts in late 2001. One of them was assigned to "provide a justification for war" with Iraq.³⁷ He came up with the phrase "axis of hatred" in order to evoke the

Axis powers in World War II (Germany, Italy, and Japan). As the drafts progressed, Condoleezza Rice decided to include Iran along with Iraq, and near the end of the drafting the phrase was changed to “axis of evil,” and North Korea was added to the list of evil states.

In the speech Bush declared that the U.S. will “prevent regimes that sponsor terror from threatening America or our friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction. . . . States like these and their terrorist allies constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.” He argued that the United States could not afford to delay, “We’ll be deliberate; yet, time is not on our side. I will not wait on events while dangers gather. I will not stand by as peril draws closer and closer. The United States of America will not permit the world’s most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world’s most destructive weapons. . . . History has called America and our allies to action. . . .”³⁸

Officials at the State Department were not sure what the president meant by designating the “axis of evil” states in his talk. They concluded that it did not constitute a shift in policy.³⁹ They were concerned about the tone of the speech, but Powell instructed them that there would be no criticism of the speech from State.⁴⁰ In the spring of 2002, military planning for Iraq began, and in April Bush told a British reporter, “I made up my mind that Saddam needs to go.”⁴¹ The administration started talking about “regime change” in Iraq. The next major public pronouncement by the president on national security and Iraq came at the 2002 commencement address he gave at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. The president said:

Containment is not possible when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction can deliver those weapons on missiles or secretly provide them to terrorist allies. . . . We cannot put our faith in the word of tyrants. . . . If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long. . . . Yet, the war on terror will not be won on the defensive. We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst threats before they emerge. In the world we have entered, the only path to safety is the path of action, and this nation will act. . . . We are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name.”⁴²

During the summer of 2002 some of the professional military began to voice reservations about U.S. plans to attack Iraq. It is not unusual for the professional military to not see eye-to-eye with the White House, but it is very unusual for their concerns to be voiced so openly to the press. *Washington Post* articles cited “senior U.S. military officers” and “some top generals and admirals in the military establishment, including members of the Joint Chiefs of staff,” who argued for a cautious approach to Iraq. They were not convinced that Iraq had any connection to the 9/11 terrorist attacks; they felt that containment had worked up until then; they thought a military invasion would be costly; and they thought that a likely U.S. victory would entail a lengthy occupation of Iraq.⁴³

Echoing another president from Texas, Lyndon Johnson, who similarly minimized the concerns of opponents of the Vietnam War, George Bush dismissed the concerns of the professional military: “There’s a lot of nervous nellies at the Pentagon”⁴⁴

In August, members of President Bush’s father’s administration came out publicly against war with Iraq. Brent Scowcroft, Bush’s (41) national security advisor and Rice’s mentor, wrote in an op-ed piece entitled “Don’t Attack Saddam” that “. . .there is scant evidence to tie Saddam to terrorist organizations, and even less to the Sept. 11 attacks. . . . An attack on Iraq at this time would seriously jeopardize, if not destroy, the global counterterrorist campaign we have undertaken. . . . Worse, there is a virtual consensus in the world against an attack on Iraq at this time.”⁴⁵ James Baker, Secretary of State for Bush (41), also expressed reservations about an attack on Iraq. “If we are to change the regime in Iraq, we will have to occupy the country militarily. The costs of doing so, politically, economically and in terms of casualties, could be great.”⁴⁶

Combat veterans also expressed reservations about the wisdom of war with Iraq.⁴⁷ Vietnam veteran Chuck Hagel (R-NB) said, “It is interesting to me that many of those who want to rush this country into war don’t know anything about war.”⁴⁸ Retired General Anthony Zinni, senior advisor to Secretary of State Powell and former chief of the U.S. Central Command (which includes the Middle East), said: “We need to quit making enemies that we don’t need to make enemies out of. . . . It’s pretty interesting that all the generals see it the same way and all the others who have never fired a shot and are not to go to war see it another way.”⁴⁹ James Webb, Vietnam veteran and assistant secretary of defense and secretary of the Navy in the Reagan Administration argued that war with Iraq was ill-considered. Webb wrote:

Meanwhile, American military leaders have been trying to bring a wider focus to the band of neoconservatives that began beating the war drums on Iraq before the dust had even settled on the World Trade Center. Despite the efforts of the necons to shut them up or dismiss them as unqualified to deal in policy issues, these leaders, both active-duty and retired, have been nearly unanimous in their concerns. Is there an absolutely vital national interest that should lead us from containment to unilateral war and a long-term occupation of Iraq?⁵⁰

General Wesley Clark, former NATO Supreme Allied Commander, said, “Had I been [in Washington, D.C.], I would have recommended we not go against Saddam Hussein yet.” Clark continued, “We have not gone far enough in the war on terror. . . No evidence supports the Bush administration’s assertion that the United States may need to invade Iraq soon, or else suffer terrorism at the hands of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.”⁵¹ General Norman Schwartzkopf, commander of U.S. forces in the 1991 Gulf War, also expressed reservations about an attack on Iraq in early 2003. “. . . I don’t know what intelligence the U.S. government has. . . . I guess I would like to have better information. . . . I think it is very important to wait and see what the inspectors come up with, and hopefully they come up with something conclusive.”⁵²

On August 5, 2002 at Powell’s initiative, Rice arranged for him to spend two

hours with the president in order to explain his own reservations about war with Iraq. He argued that it would destabilize the whole Middle East, that an American occupation would be seen as hostile by the Muslim world, and that it could not be done unilaterally. He argued that if the president wanted to pursue a military attack, that the U.S. had to recruit allies, preferably through the United Nations.⁵³ Although Bush was not persuaded by Powell's reservations about war with Iraq, by mid-August the administration decided that the president should make his scheduled speech of September 12 to the UN about Iraq.

The Bush administration felt that opposition to war with Iraq was building and had to be countered, so Vice President Cheney took the occasion of an address to the Veterans of Foreign Wars convention on August 26, 2002 to lay out the administration's case in blunt terms.

Deliverable weapons of mass destruction in the hands of a terror network or a murderous dictator, or the two working together, constitutes as grave a threat as can be imagined. . . . The risks of inaction are far greater than the risk of action. . . . Armed with an arsenal of these weapons of terror and a seat atop 10 percent of the world's oil reserves, Saddam Hussein could then be expected to seek domination of the entire Middle East, take control of a great portion of the world's energy supplies, directly threaten America's friends throughout the region, and subject the United States or any other nation to nuclear blackmail.⁵⁴

Cheney also dismissed the possibility that UN inspections would be effective. "A return of inspectors would provide no assurance whatsoever of his compliance with UN resolutions. . . . On the contrary, there is a great danger that it would provide false comfort that Saddam was somehow 'back in his box'."⁵⁵ Cheney's public argument that a preemptive strike against Iraq was justified and that further UN inspections were useless seemed to undercut Powell's argument to seek UN inspections and approval of U.S. action against Iraq.

President Bush had carefully gone over the speech with Cheney before it was delivered, but that was not immediately released to the public. According to a senior adviser to the Vice President, "Dick Cheney doesn't freelance. He said what he did because the President wanted him to."⁵⁶ Cheney's bellicose statements allowed the president to adopt a seemingly more moderate stance on the war issue. "If you didn't have the Cheney side out there to tell the whole world 'we're studded up here and ready to go,' if you didn't announce that to the whole world, then Bush couldn't move to the other side of all that," said a senior administration aide.⁵⁷

At a meeting on September 7 the president reaffirmed his decision to go to the UN in early September, though Cheney and Rumsfeld pressed their argument that the U.S. should move against Saddam and that there did not have to be a new UN resolution to do it. Whether the president should ask the UN for a resolution during his speech on September 12 was the subject of vigorous debate among the principals, with Powell arguing that Bush ought to ask for a new resolution and Cheney arguing that it would

allow Saddam to delay indefinitely. Bush decided to include a call for a new resolution in the speech, but the lines in the speech were mysteriously dropped out of the final, 25th draft of the speech. When Bush noticed that the sentence was not coming up on his TelePrompTer, he ad-libbed the call for “necessary resolutions.”⁵⁸

After the administration convinced Congress to give the president authority to attack Iraq,

Colin Powell and U.S. diplomats went to work building a coalition to convince the UN Security Council to pass a new resolution on Iraq. Intense negotiations took place throughout the month of October and early November 2002 to bring around the members of the UN Security Council. The United States backed off its insistence that a new resolution was not needed and agreed to French insistence that if Saddam did not comply with the inspection regime, that the Security Council would meet again to “consider” options. At the last minute France, Russia, China, and Syria went along with the rest of the Council on a strongly-worded, unanimous resolution. Resolution 1441 gave Iraq one week to promise to comply with it and until February 21, 2003 at the latest for the UN inspectors to report back on Iraq’s compliance.

While the U.S. did not get everything that it sought in the Resolution, it was a major victory for the administration. Saddam was on notice that he had to comply with UN orders to get rid of his weapons of mass destruction, and if he did not, there would be widespread international support for U.S. military action against Iraq.

The UN weapons inspectors searched Iraq with seeming carte blanche and surprise visits to sites of possible weapons manufacture, but by late January had found no “smoking gun.” Chief UN inspector, Hans Blix, said that he needed more time to do a thorough job. The U.S. began to deploy troops to the middle east in preparation for war with Iraq, and the build-up was expected to exceed 150,000 troops in the region by late February.⁵⁹

As the initial reporting date for the UN inspectors (January 27, 2003) approached, the Bush administration became increasingly impatient with the inability of the UN inspection team to locate evidence of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction. Rice called the Iraqi declaration accounting for its weapons a “12,200 page lie.” She argued that the declaration was “intended to cloud and confuse the true picture of Iraq’s arsenal. . . . and constitutes a material breach of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441. . . .”⁶⁰ Donald Rumsfeld said in response to a statement of Hans Blix, “The fact that the inspectors have not yet come up with new evidence of Iraq’s WMD [weapons of mass destruction] program could be evidence, in and of itself, of Iraq’s noncooperation.”⁶¹ President Bush said, “This business about, you know, more time – you know, how much time do we need to see clearly that he’s not disarming?. . . . This looks like a rerun of a bad movie and I’m not interested in watching it.”⁶²

Secretary of State Colin Powell also expressed impatience with U.S. allies who wanted to give the UN inspectors more time in Iraq before deciding whether a military attack was justified. “The question isn’t how much longer do you need for inspections to work. Inspections will not work.”⁶³ Powell’s statement came after France declared at a

UN Security Council meeting on January 20, 2003 that it would not vote for a resolution authorizing a military attack on Iraq.⁶⁴ Two days later at a NATO meeting in Brussels, France and Germany blocked the alliance from supporting the U.S. in an attack on Iraq.⁶⁵ The preemptive moves by France and Germany undercut Powell's position within the administration. He had convinced Bush that achieving UN support was necessary for an effective war against Iraq and that it was possible. Hard-liners in the administration had argued that going to the UN would allow Saddam to delay indefinitely any decisive UN action by pretending to cooperate with inspectors but in fact continuing to hide his weapons of mass destruction.⁶⁶

In his State of the Union address on January 28, 2003, President Bush said that the UN had given Saddam Hussein his "final chance to disarm," but "he has shown instead utter contempt for the United Nations and for the opinion of the world." Bush declared that ". . . the course of [the United States] does not depend on the decisions of others," and that "We will consult, but let there be no misunderstanding. If Saddam Hussein does not fully disarm for the safety of our people, and for the peace of the world, we will lead a coalition to disarm him."⁶⁷

IV. The National Security Policy Making Process

Over the first two years of the Bush administration the president's national security advisory team underwent significant changes as a consequence of the war on terrorism and planning for the war on Iraq. Condoleezza Rice had risen from a low-key advisor and tutor to an influential actor within a very senior and more experienced national security team. Donald Rumsfeld had been transformed from a resented Pentagon reformer to a very visible spokesman for the war on terrorism, though he managed to retain the resentment from the professional military, Congress, veterans groups, and the "old Europe" of France and Germany.⁶⁸ Colin Powell was resurrected from being "odd man out" in the administration to playing a major role in the lead up to both wars. Richard Cheney continued to play a key role as advisor to the president and driver of policy, with his public visibility waxing and waning but his policy clout steady and significant.

Rice's role as national security advisor resembled most closely that of her mentor, Brent Scowcroft who served both Gerald Ford and George Bush (41) in that capacity. Scowcroft was the classic "neutral broker" among the other principals; he did not have strong policy preferences in opposition to other actors, and he faithfully presented their views to the president. He gave his personal advice to the president but did not load the process to favor his own views. And he, like Rice, had a close personal relationship to the president. Rice saw her job as,

. . . first, to coordinate what Defense, State, the CIA and other departments or agencies were doing by making sure the president's orders were carried out; and second, to act as counselor – to give her private assessment to the president,

certainly when he asked, perhaps if he didn't. In other words, she was to be the president's troubleshooter.⁶⁹

According to President Bush:

She is an honest broker. She does not share with me her private opinions on issues (nor should she). I imagine she gives the President her unvarnished opinions, but she also is sure the President receives without distortion or prejudice the views of his key foreign policy leaders such as Secretaries Powell and Rumsfeld.⁷⁰

Rice's approach to her job was certainly in contrast to some previous national security advisors, such as Henry Kissinger or Zbigniew Brzezinski who played much more visible and confrontational roles for their presidents.

At the beginning of the Nixon administration Kissinger developed a large support staff and, in effect, created a counter bureaucracy in the White House to give him his own policy development capacity independent of the State Department. Nixon wanted to run foreign policy out of the White House and distrusted the State Department, and so he gave Kissinger free rein. Kissinger developed back channels of communication, shut Secretary of state William Rogers out of the action, and ran major diplomacy (e.g. the SALT talks, the opening to China, and the Paris Peace process) from the White House.

In the Carter administration Zbigniew Brzezinski did not approach Kissinger's domination of foreign policy for President Carter, but he did manage to dominate advice to the president at the expense of Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. Brzezinski had an aggressive personality and strong preferences in foreign policy, and by the second year of the administration there were open disputes between the hawkish Brzezinski and the more diplomatic Vance. Predictably, this led to incoherence in the Carter administration's foreign policy and ended in the resignation of Vance after the failed hostage rescue attempt.⁷¹

A closer parallel with Rice's NSC was the national security team that served President Bush (41) during the Gulf War in 1991. The principals, James Baker at State, Richard Cheney at Defense, Brent Scowcroft as national security advisor, and Colin Powell as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff all knew each other and the president and worked together as smoothly as any recent national security team.

The process of national security policy making in Bush (41) also resembled that in Bush (43) in that formal processes were at a minimum and personality played a crucial role. In the decision making that led up to the U.S. decision to go to war to oust Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1991 important decisions were made by the president without full consultation or deliberation by his "war council" (e.g. the decision to make the liberation of Kuwait U.S. policy, the decision to double U.S. forces in the gulf, and the decision to offer the final Baker trip to Iraq).⁷² Although Colin Powell, and to a lesser extent, James Baker were willing to make the case for a regime of sanctions rather than

war, the president had made up his mind about war and did not invite the arguments to be made.⁷³ Bush (43) heard out Powell's arguments and accepted some of them. The Bush approach (both 41 and 43) was in sharp contrast to President Eisenhower's approach to national security decision making.

President Bush (43) felt uncomfortable with process, and he depended on people, rather than structures or processes, for his advisory system. "If I have any genius or smarts, it's the ability to recognize talent, ask them to serve and work with them as a team."⁷⁴ The Bush administration did not resemble the Eisenhower White House with its formalistic system of NSC meetings and processes. Eisenhower had a full career working in large organizations before he got to the White House, and he used them effectively. According to Burke and Greenstein, Eisenhower's policy deliberation meetings were "spirited, no-holds-bared debate" in which "[t]he participants did not appear to hold back out of deference to the president or to tailor their advice to him."⁷⁵ Eisenhower said:

I know of only one way in which you can be sure you've done your best to make a wise decision. That is to get all of the people who have partial and definable responsibility in this particular field, whatever it may be. Get them with their different viewpoints in front of you, and listen to them debate. I do not believe in bringing them in one at a time, and therefore being more impressed by the most recent one you hear than the earlier ones.⁷⁶

President Bush conducted NSC meetings in the wake of the terrorist attacks to deliberate about the U.S. response and strategy. Contrasting views would be presented, but Bush did not encourage spirited debate over important issues. For instance, recalling one meeting when Rumsfeld became upset about the CIA seeming to dominate war planning, Bush said, "That's the kind of discussion that frustrates me, because I like clarity." He did not pursue the disagreement and settle it; he told Rice, "Get this mess straightened out." Some of the most spirited debates among the principals took place when the president was not there. Like John Kennedy who occasionally left Executive Committee meetings during the Cuban Missile Crisis in order to let his team speak more freely, Bush observed, "It's hard for a deputy to go against a principal in a debate at an NSC meeting."⁷⁷

Bush was impatient with formal structures and processes, but that did not mean that he did not hear alternative perspectives on major issues. But the presentation of these alternatives was dependent upon the people he chose, not a formal process of deliberation. In her role of neutral broker, Rice was able to tell the president bad news and explain the concerns of others, as when she told him that the military was not yet ready to move in Afghanistan. She was also able to arrange meetings between the president and Colin Powell when he wanted to present his perspective to the president.

Powell's role was particularly important for President Bush. Powell was the only person in the administration with sufficient stature and clout to be able to present an alternative perspective to the hard line point of view of Cheney, Rumsfeld, and

Wolfowitz. Rice could arrange for Powell to see the president, but she did not see it as her role to make a strong case in opposition to the other principals. It was Powell who put together the coalition in support of U.S. military action in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001. In 2002 it was Powell who persuaded the president to go to the UN for a resolution in support of U.S. demands on Iraq. And it was Powell who led the diplomacy to get Security Council approval of UN Resolution 1441. Whether these presidential decisions were wise or not, it was only Powell who could have made the case credibly to the president.

Thus President Bush's approach to his advisory system was personal rather than procedural and structural. He used his national security team effectively for his purposes. Even though he often did not feel comfortable with the policy advice of Colin Powell, he took his advice at key points (most importantly, the decision to go to the UN for a resolution on Iraq) and depended upon Powell to put together international coalitions in support of U.S. policy. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the policy outcomes, President Bush did consider a range of options from his national security team. But that range of options was dependent upon his personal advisors rather than on a formal policy making process.

ENDNOTES

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