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Wolfowitz Concedes Iraq Errors

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The deputy secretary of defense said yesterday that some key assumptions underlying the U.S. occupation of Iraq were wrong, tacitly acknowledging the judgment of current and former U.S. officials critical of the occupation planning.

Paul D. Wolfowitz, briefing reporters after a 4 1/2-day trip to Iraq, said that in postwar planning, defense officials made three assumptions that "turned out to underestimate the problem," beginning with the belief that removing Saddam Hussein from power would also remove the threat posed by his Baath Party. In addition, they erred in assuming that significant numbers of Iraqi army units, and large numbers of Iraqi police, would quickly join the U.S. military and its civilian partners in rebuilding Iraq, he said.

But Wolfowitz, who traveled to southern, central and northern Iraq, reported that the south and north are "impressively stable" and said that throughout the country, "we are making a great deal of progress."

His acknowledgment that some assumptions were wrong faintly echoed one of the primary complaints registered by many current and former U.S. officials since before the occupation began. The reconstruction effort, they said, was also undermined by unresolved logistical problems and secretive decision-making by the Defense Department civilians who led the planning. The planning, they said, was also poorly coordinated by the White House.

In recent interviews, Pentagon leaders acknowledged some setbacks in Iraq, but said that assessment does not recognize considerable progress or account for the inherent unpredictability of the most ambitious U.S. effort to remake a country since the reconstruction of Germany and Japan in the 1940s.

"There's been a lot of talk that there was no plan," Wolfowitz said yesterday. "There was a plan, but as any military officer can tell you, no plan survives first contact with reality."

Three months after Hussein's government evaporated, 150,000 U.S. troops are enduring dozens of armed attacks in Iraq each week. The bureaucracy remains dysfunctional. A governing council of 25 Iraqis began sharing limited power with U.S. authorities there only last week.

The U.S. occupation, now costing \$4 billion a month, has no clear end. And an assessment by outside experts commissioned by the Pentagon warned last week that the window of opportunity for postwar success is closing.

Officials critical of the occupation planning said some problems could have been predicted -- or were, to no avail, by experts inside and outside the Pentagon.

Before the invasion, for example, U.S. intelligence agencies were persistent and unified in warning the Defense Department that Iraqis would resort to "armed opposition" after the war was over. The Army's chief of staff warned that a larger stability force would be needed.

Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and his team disagreed, confident that Iraqi military and police units would help secure a welcoming nation.

The State Department and other agencies spent many months and millions of dollars drafting strategies on issues ranging from a postwar legal code to oil policy. But after President Bush granted authority over reconstruction to the Pentagon, the Defense Department all but ignored State and its working groups.

And once Baghdad fell, the military held its postwar team out of Iraq for nearly two weeks for security reasons, and then did not provide such basics as telephones, vehicles and interpreters for the understaffed operation to run a traumatized country of 24 million.

"People always say that sometimes people plan for the wrong war," said Richard N. Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations and former head of the State Department's policy planning office. "One can say in some ways that the administration planned for the wrong peace. In particular, there was an emphasis on preparing for a humanitarian crisis when in fact the larger challenges turned out to be political and security."

Bush administration officials say bad news from Iraq overshadowed extensive planning for calamities that never occurred, such as a chemical weapons attack, a refugee crisis and an oil field disaster.

"Given the magnitude and the complexity of the task, and given how far we have come since the war ended, I think it has been a pretty well-managed process," said Douglas J. Feith, undersecretary of defense for policy and a central player in the occupation planning, in an interview. Pentagon policymakers drew on advice from throughout the administration, he said, and Bush's decision to put the Pentagon in charge of the early postwar period is being "vindicated by events."

But in contrast to the planning for war, other officials said, the Defense Department's attention to the occupation was haphazard and incomplete.

"There was a serious disconnect between the forces necessary to win a war and occupy a country," said a U.S. official who worked in the initial postwar effort and is still in Baghdad. "We fooled ourselves into thinking we would have a liberation over an occupation. Why did we do that?"

Warnings About Obstacles

Preliminary planning for the occupation began in August, one month before Bush signaled in a speech to the United Nations that he was prepared to oust Hussein by force. National Security Council member Frank Miller quietly received instructions to create a structure to study topics ranging from refugees to financial reform.

By early October, officials drawn from agencies across the government were beginning to meet, amid speculation that the United States could be at war by year's end. Considerable attention was focused on a potential humanitarian crisis, and how relief and reconstruction would win Iraqi support for the occupation.

"The whole operation is going to rise or fall on whether Iraqi people's lives are materially improved," said one committee member who reckoned that the Americans would have to deliver visible results within weeks of an invasion.

Veterans of other conflicts soon identified security as the most important requirement for early relief and long-term stability. Secretary of State Colin L. Powell emphasized the need in talks with Bush last fall, aides said, as he urged the president to seek U.N. approval for the war. With U.N. assent, Powell believed, would come troops and contributions from other nations.

Similarly, the intelligence agencies, especially the CIA, were "utterly consistent in arguing that reconstruction rather than war would be the most problematic segment of overthrowing Saddam," a senior administration official said. In classified written and oral reports, the official continued, the intelligence community warned the administration "early and often" about obstacles U.S. authorities were likely to face.

In particular, the agencies repeatedly predicted that Hussein loyalists might try to sabotage U.S. postwar efforts by destroying critical economic targets, the official said. One analysis warned that Iraqis "would probably resort to obstruction, resistance and armed opposition if they perceived attempts to keep them dependent on the United States and the West."

Those concerns, however, were secondary among the principal architects of the Iraq policy, who were concentrated in the Defense Department, the White House and Vice President Cheney's office.

In addition to believing that Iraqi soldiers and police officers would help secure the country, they thought that Iraqis would embrace the American invaders and a future marked by representative government, civil liberties and a free-market economy, and that Iraqi bureaucrats, minus a top layer of Baath Party figures who would quit or be fired, would stay on the job.

Within weeks, if all went well, Iraqis would begin taking control of their own affairs and the exit of U.S. troops would be well underway.

"Everyone thought it could be done on a small investment and that Iraqis could be mobilized to do the bulk of the job," said Tim Carney, a former diplomat recruited to manage an Iraqi ministry.

Through the fall, there was no single coordinator for competing ideas: A proposal to set up a postwar planning office died because the administration feared that it would signal already skeptical U.N. Security Council members that Bush was determined to wage war.

No issue was more contentious than the shape of Iraq's future governing structure. Central to this issue was the role of exile Ahmed Chalabi, the London-based head of the Iraqi National Congress who was reviled by the State Department and CIA as much as he was revered by senior Defense Department officials and some in the White House.

Prominent Chalabi supporters, including some at the Pentagon, backed his demand to create a provisional Iraqi government dedicated to democratic principles and designed to reassure Iraqis that the United States had no colonial intentions. The State Department argued that Iraqis who had suffered under Hussein's rule would be alienated by a wealthy expatriate who left Iraq in 1958 -- and would blame the Americans for backing him.

That debate and others remained unresolved as autumn gave way to winter. It was not until January that Bush designated a coordinator to pull together the various plans. On Jan. 20 -- the day the French foreign minister announced that France would not support a U.N. resolution for war -- Bush signed National Security Directive 24, giving postwar control of Iraq to the Pentagon, which had lobbied hard for the job.

Career civil servants who had helped plan U.S. peacekeeping operations in Haiti, Bosnia and Kosovo said it was imperative to maintain a military force large enough to stamp out challenges to its authority right away. Gen. Eric K. Shinseki, then-Army chief of staff, thought several hundred thousand soldiers would be needed.

Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz rebutted him sharply and publicly.

"It's hard to conceive that it would take more forces to provide stability in post-Saddam Iraq than it would take to conduct the war itself and to secure the surrender of Saddam's security forces and his army," Wolfowitz told the House Budget Committee on Feb. 27. "Hard to imagine."

Powell and his top aides thought it made sense to allow the Pentagon to control the immediate postwar phase, when security would be the dominant issue. Still, they expected to contribute ideas and staffing to the political side of reconstruction -- they even budgeted for an embassy to become the central U.S. institution in Iraq within a few weeks of Hussein's anticipated defeat.

But as the Defense Department put together its occupation plans, the State Department felt doors closing.

'So Much Tension'

The circle of civilian Pentagon officials given the task of planning the occupation was small. From its early work, it all but excluded officials at State and even some from the Pentagon, including officers of the Joint Staff.

"The problems came about when the office of the secretary of defense wouldn't let anybody else play -- or play only if you beat your way into the game," a State Department official said. "There was so much tension, so much ego involved."

The Pentagon planners showed little interest in State's Future of Iraq project, a \$5 million effort begun in April 2002 to use Iraqi expatriates and outside experts to draft plans on everything from legal reform to oil policy. Wolfowitz created his own group of Iraqi advisers to cover some of the same ground.

Defense rejected at least nine State nominees for prominent roles in the occupation; only after Powell and others fought back did Rumsfeld relent. Tom Warrick, leader of the Future of Iraq project, was still refused a place, at the reported insistence of Cheney's office.

Retired Army Lt. Gen. Jay M. Garner, who was appointed to be the first civilian coordinator in the occupation, said in an interview that he asked Wolfowitz for an expert on Iraqi politics and governance.

Wolfowitz turned not to the roster of career specialists in the State Department's Near Eastern Affairs bureau, but to a political appointee in the bureau: Elizabeth Cheney, coordinator of a Middle East democracy project and daughter of the vice president; she recruited a State Department colleague who had worked for the International Republican Institute.

While responsibility for developing an occupation plan resided with Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and Feith -- along with the National Security Council -- a small defense policy shop called the Office of Special Plans was given a key role in developing policy guidance for on-the-ground operations.

Its staff was hand-picked by William Luti, a former aide to Cheney and Newt Gingrich who headed the Pentagon's Middle East and South Asia policy office; they worked in a warren of offices on the Pentagon's first floor. The office held its work so closely that even members of Garner's office did not realize its role until February, a month after Garner was appointed.

That month, 30 people showed up at a meeting called to share the Special Plans work with Garner's office and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

There, the Special Plans staff handed out spreadsheets on four dozen issues, all policy recommendations for key decisions: war crimes prosecution, the elimination of the Baath Party, oil sector maintenance, ministry organization, media strategy and "rewards, incentives and immunity" for former Baath supporters.

Once a policy was approved by the defense secretary's office and the interagency principals, it would become the operating guidance for the U.S. Central Command, whose troops would occupy Iraq.

To the outsiders at the meeting, it looked like a *fait accompli*. "We had had no input into the Special Plans office," said one reconstruction official who was there.

A senior defense official, however, played down the office's role in occupation planning. He said Special Plans "had influence into the process. We were not the nerve center."

As for complaints that the office was secretive or exclusive, he said: "There are a lot of crybabies everywhere. . . . I cannot account for people's hurt feelings." To say the office was isolated, he added, "is laughable."

Garner worked closely with Rumsfeld and Feith and met about once a week with national security adviser Condoleezza Rice. Only seven weeks before the war began, Garner's staff members could be counted on one hand, but he eventually assembled a staff that drew from a number of agencies. He said they spent 30 to 40 percent of their time planning for humanitarian crises, refugees, hunger, chemical weapons attacks and oil field fires.

By March, after Garner arrived at a staging site in Kuwait, members of his own team believed that the administration had poorly prepared both Iraqis and Americans for what was to come.

One U.S. official recalled, "My uniformed friends kept telling me, 'We're not ready. We're going into the beast's mouth.' "

'It Was Just Chaos'

As war drew nearer, the matter of Iraq's political future became more urgent.

Despite Pentagon support for a provisional government led by Chalabi, Bush rejected that option. Instead, he took the State Department's view that exiles and internal Iraqi figures should be given an equal chance to prove themselves in an Interim Iraqi Authority to be created immediately after the war.

But Chalabi continued to work closely with Feith and others at the Pentagon, staying in touch by satellite telephone from Iran and northern Iraq. Officials at the National Security Council and the State Department were stunned to learn in early April that U.S. military authorities had flown Chalabi and 700

hurriedly assembled fighters into southern Iraq. The vice president concurred in the decision to airlift him.

Feith said it was strictly a decision made on military grounds by U.S. Central Command, but his Pentagon critics believe that he and Wolfowitz were trying to boost Chalabi's political prospects.

After the fall of Baghdad on April 9, the scenario on which the occupation plan was based never materialized. If there was no humanitarian crisis, neither were there cooperative Iraqi police, soldiers or bureaucrats. Instead, a security crisis led to a cascade of other crises:

The U.S. military did not stem extensive looting. The looting crippled government ministries and police stations beyond any expectation of the Defense Department's leaders. With too few soldiers to provide security and logistics to Garner and his team, the military delayed his entrance into Baghdad for 12 days. The crippled institutions, and the delay, left a power vacuum that his staff could not fill.

Lacking virtually any working phones, Garner's staff members could hardly communicate with one another at their headquarters in Hussein's 258-room Republican Palace. They were not prepared for an overhaul of Iraqi media. They had few means of projecting a sense of American intentions or authority.

"There wasn't any way out of the chaos," said a former official who worked in Baghdad. "It was just chaos."

As Garner's effort faltered, the administration accelerated the deployment of L. Paul Bremer, whose long-planned role was to take command of reconstruction and direct the creation of a new political structure.

Bremer's "job was to go there and make it clear that we had a grip on this deal, that we were serious, that we were there to stay," a senior U.S. official said. "And to give confidence to the Iraqis and the rest of the world that we had a plan."

Staff writers Glenn Kessler, Vernon Loeb and Thomas E. Ricks contributed to this report.

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