

Former Bush Administration Insider Reflects on the Failure of the Iraq War

By [Naman Habtom-Desta](#), [Truthout](#), Published August 4, 2019 ,.Share

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(This is not a short piece, but the similarities of behind-the-scenes manipulation of facts, complete ineptitude and publicized rationale, by U.S. administration war-mongers of the then-Iraqi war and today's dealings with Iran are downright scary. ~ Don Chapin)

“There was a long history of the CIA’s incompetence in trying to get rid of Saddam Hussein,” says retired Col. Lawrence Wilkerson.

Looking back at the march to war in Iraq, Colonel Wilkerson, who served as the chief of staff for Secretary of State Colin Powell from 2002-2005, continues to be unwavering in his criticism of the actors involved. Sixteen years after the invasion, the institutional problems that metastasized then not only predated the George W. Bush administration but continue to plague ongoing U.S. foreign policy, whether it is on the intelligence front, corrosive corporate influence or simply catastrophic decision-making.

Whether discussing the wars in the Balkans, the bombing of the Sudanese al-Shifa pharmaceutical factory or the sustained air campaign against Iraq in the 1990s, Wilkerson says, “The biggest commonality is ... the influence of the military-industrial-congressional complex: Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, [Northrop] Grumman, Boeing and others, plus the members of Congress who are lobbied by them.”

That is to say, the post-Cold War landscape and the U.S.’s approach to it was one guided primarily, if not exclusively, by the military-industrial complex and its congressional partners. This was largely aided and abetted by the relative lack of experience that describes all U.S. presidents since 1993. This inexperience was coupled with a growing desire by arms-procurement companies to export to previously inaccessible markets, such as Poland and the former Soviet Union.

“But much of that was due to Bill Clinton’s ineptitude as a commander in chief. His policy was dictated more or less by the

people who supported him: big money plutocrats who supported him and wanted him to sell arms all across the region,” Wilkerson says. In the decades since, not much has changed, as Donald Trump is similarly beholden to special interests.

While the likelihood for war in Iraq increased significantly following 9/11, the pretext for invasion, arguably making it inevitable, was found as early as the Persian Gulf War. Atrocity stories, including fabricated ones such as the claim that Iraqi soldiers were [throwing children out of incubators](#), were being promoted by Kuwaiti-hired public relations firms with ties to U.S. neoconservatives, which created the irreversible demonization of Hussein.

John Nixon, the first man to interrogate Hussein following his capture, noted that the fallen Iraqi leader had hopes for a [possible rekindling of U.S.-Iraqi cooperation](#) due to a shared animosity toward Sunni fundamentalism, but these hopes were quickly dashed following a decade of sustained vilification.

Wilkerson was acutely aware of this and even recalled how Powell, as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told then-National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft as well as President George H.W. Bush during the Gulf War that they “need[ed] to stop this rhetoric! Saddam Hussein is not Hitler.... Hitler had a hundred divisions on their way to Stalingrad and back; there is no way that Saddam is Hitler and you are going to regret this if you characterize him as such.”

The demonization of the Iraqi leader, intended to rally support around the upcoming U.S. military campaign, was effective in its aims but had long-lasting consequences. Though, while Bush did refrain from doing so later, it was arguably too late since “the cat was out of the bag, and we had branded him thusly.”

The power imbalance between the United States and its allies partially explains why their so-called intelligence was so disastrously wrong. A milieu of sycophancy is encouraged when the world’s sole superpower is undeterred from its objective, with the rest of its subsidiary quasi-client states simply accepting the inevitable and telling Washington what it wants to hear.

As Wilkerson put it, no allied country spends near the amount of money on intelligence as the U.S., but if other countries “find something that is a juicy morsel, they are not going to examine it

that hard, they are just going to pass it to the United States. And if it was passed to Dick Cheney's desk, it meant it was going on the front pages of *The New York Times* and then he would quote *The New York Times* as if it were an intelligence source."

Wilkerson does praise the Europeans for how "they run human agents better" and their overall effective human intelligence efforts, yet this relationship of non-equals enables faulty intelligence to spread from one country to another.

Then-Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet's counterparts in different intelligence services around the world "quickly sniffed out what was to their advantage" when it came to what intelligence to relay forward, Wilkerson says.

The most infamous case in intelligence failure is "Curveball," the code-name of an Iraqi defector who fabricated claims about mobile biological laboratories while seeking asylum in Germany. His supposed evidence filtered its way into Powell's U.N. presentation in February 2003 despite the State Department not hearing the name "Curveball" until August or September of that year.

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Following the invasion, in an email exchange, Tyler Drumheller, the head of the European division of the CIA, confirmed to Wilkerson that then-Deputy Director of Central Intelligence John McLaughlin and Tenet had been told that Curveball's information was unreliable. "I told them that no U.S. intelligence personnel had ever been in the room when the Germans were questioning him," Drumheller told Wilkerson. But his call for caution was not heeded. As Wilkerson bluntly put it, McLaughlin and Tenet, alongside their confederates, "told the secretary of state of the United States a lie."

While the war itself was based on lies propagated by those in the highest offices, the damage was not limited to that. Rather, the feeble attempts at reconstruction efforts were hindered by a preference for loyalty as opposed to competency by figures such as former Vice President Cheney and former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, with the latter having even blocked State Department officers, including Wilkerson, from even engaging directly with the Pentagon.

Recalling how he “smuggled” someone into Iraq, Wilkerson said, “I say ‘smuggled in’ because you couldn’t get anyone into Iraq that wasn’t a Bible-thumping Christian, a registered Republican and so forth. It was a joke! Absolutely a joke! The State Department was being inhibited in what diplomats it could send to Baghdad.”

Integral to the post-invasion difficulties was a decision made by the Coalition Provisional Authority and its head Ambassador L. Paul Bremer: the disbandment of the national army, which caused an explosion in unemployment, resentment and violence.

The primary culprit behind much of this was Ahmed Chalabi, an [Iraqi opposition figure](#) who spent most of his life in the U.S. and Britain where, with the help of foreign funding (including the CIA), he organized efforts to overthrow the government of Iraq under the auspices of the so-called Iraqi National Congress. The National Congress, whose [name was picked by a PR specialist](#) because it sounded similar to the Indian National Congress and the African National Congress, was in effect a U.S.-funded front that did everything from [offering media training to defectors, to engaging in propaganda efforts](#). While Chalabi was quickly sidelined by the U.S., with [an arrest warrant](#) even issued, the damage was already done.

Ambassador Bremer’s claim that there wasn’t an Iraqi army to reconstitute, that it had already collapsed, was “nonsense,” Wilkerson asserts. In a conversation with an officer from the Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, Wilkerson was told of an Iraqi general who had a list of 80,000 names of Iraqi soldiers who would have been prepared to return to service, if for nothing else than the pay being offered. Most of them, denied the opportunity and consistent pay offered by Office, then chose to join the insurgency. They were not only trained soldiers; they were equipped with military-grade weaponry following the disbandment of the army.

The lack of competency or seriousness was not confined to some of the generals but pervasive among the policymakers. Soon upon arrival and at the start of his two-month stint in Baghdad, Lawrence Di Rita, who served as assistant secretary of defense for public affairs as well as Rumsfeld’s spokesman, even told a colonel attached to the Office for Reconstruction that, “We’ll be gone in August [2003],” with the colonel responding that it was logistically

impossible to withdraw 160,000 soldiers that quickly. Undeterred, Di Rita, according to Wilkerson, simply smirked and said, “No, you’re going to be gone.”

Famously, retired Gen. Wesley Clark noted that for the neoconservatives in the Bush administration, Iraq was simply one phase of a larger project, with the expectation to “[take out seven countries in five years](#).” Had it not been for the insurgency tying down the Pentagon, it is very well likely to have unfolded.

When asked if there was anything Hussein could have done to prevent the war, Wilkerson offers a saddening answer: “I don’t think so.” Based on his and his students’ research (he currently teaches government and public policy at the College of William and Mary in Virginia), either Hussein or some member of the Iraqi government did in fact try to reach out either through the Europeans, the Russians or the Turks.

“[Hussein] tried to get the message across, ‘I will do almost anything other than prostrate myself before you in the streets of Baghdad to show you that I don’t have active [weapons of mass destruction] programs in one of the three categories that you are asserting that I do,’” Wilkerson tells *Truthout*. Unfortunately, however, “There was no one in the White House that was going to listen to that message. No one.”

“Our empire is dissipating at our feet, in front of our face.”

For Wilkerson, the early signs of the war and its growing inevitability were largely the result of the protestations by the president’s advisers (“a lot of ex-Reaganites, Prince of Darkness types”) that won President Bush over. In a January 2003 White House meeting attended by Wilkerson and then-Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith, the undersecretary kept insisting that “al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein were locked at the hip, the foot and the brain,” and maintained that Hussein was involved in 9/11 only to be told to hold his peace by then-Deputy National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley. Increasingly, the internal debate was not about whether or not to go to war, but how to sell the war.

More than a decade and a half after the invasion, the retired colonel still expresses many of the same concerns about current U.S. policy, particularly in the face of escalating tensions with Iran. The formation of “a tacit alliance now between Jerusalem, Riyadh and

the Emirates, and all because of Iran” is one with potentially even greater ramifications than Iraq, with Iran being geographically four times larger than its Western neighbor and having three times its population.

At its core, in Wilkerson’s view, lies National Security Advisor John Bolton whose “aim is confusion more than anything else so that Bolton can then seem not responsible for any failure of any particular aspect.” This confusion results in an inconsistency policy to which the Iranian government as well as European allies, who support the Iran nuclear deal, are unable to deal with.

Following a recent meeting with experts on Iran — ranging from academics to former National Security Council members and cabinet officers — Wilkerson was left less than hopeful. “There are so many possibilities for an incident that would spiral out of Trump’s control, one occurring accidentally or one provoked by one of the war-leaning parties,” Wilkerson told *Truthout*.

Though Wilkerson saw Republican Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul’s appointment as Trump’s envoy to Iran as an encouraging sign, resulting in a meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, the lack of a consistent strategy resulted in Zarif being [personally sanctioned](#). “Trump moves in a positive way and then someone like Bolton reverses his move,” Wilkerson said.

All this, combined with the fact that the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman has “created a strategic catastrophe by having a war on one flank with Yemen that he is losing,” in addition to other regional relationships breaking down, Wilkerson says, the situation in the region looks dire. Intertwined in all of this is the United States, with arms sales and intelligence sharing contributing to further instability resulting in U.S.-made weapons [falling into the hands of al-Qaeda](#).

Wilkerson’s dismal outlook is not constrained to the Middle East. The U.S.’s over-extension abroad along with its exploding debt, caused in large part by the Pentagon’s massive budget, is a source of great concern.

“Our empire is dissipating at our feet, in front of our face,” Wilkerson says. “And the rest of the world, as happens when empires begin to collapse, is getting together in various ways to

make sure the dying elephant, which can still thrash a lot of grass, doesn't thrash them.”

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