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The Deciders

The disastrous Iraq policies that led to ISIS were not President Bush's.

By JOHN HAY

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In May 2003, in the wake of the Iraq War and the ousting of Saddam Hussein, events took place that set the stage for the current chaos in the Middle East. Yet even most well-informed Americans are unaware of how policies implemented by mid-level bureaucrats during the Bush administration unwittingly unleashed forces that would ultimately lead to the juggernaut of the Islamic State.

The lesson is that it appears all too easy for outsiders working with relatively low-level appointees to hijack the policy process. The Bay of Pigs invasion and Iran-Contra affair are familiar instances, but the Iraq experience offers an even better illustration—not least because its consequences have been even more disastrous.

The cast of characters includes President George W. Bush; L. Paul “Jerry” Bremer, the first civilian administrator of postwar Iraq; Douglas Feith, Bush’s undersecretary of defense for policy; Paul Wolfowitz, Bush’s deputy secretary of defense; I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby, chief of staff to Vice President Richard B. Cheney (and Cheney’s proxy in these events); Walter Slocombe, who had been President Clinton’s undersecretary of defense for policy, and as such was Feith’s predecessor; Richard Perle, who was chairman of Bush’s defense policy board; and General Jay Garner, whom Bremer replaced as the leader of postwar Iraq.

On May 9, 2003, President Bush appointed Bremer to the top civilian post in Iraq. A career diplomat who was recruited for this job by Wolfowitz and Libby, despite the fact that he had minimal experience of the region and didn't speak Arabic, Bremer arrived in Baghdad on May 12 to take charge of the Coalition Provisional Authority, or CPA. In his first two weeks at his post, Bremer issued two orders that would turn out to be momentous. Enacted on May 16, CPA Order Number 1 "de-Baathified" the Iraqi government; on May 23, CPA Order Number 2 disbanded the Iraqi army. In short, Baath party members were barred from participation in Iraq's new government and Saddam Hussein's soldiers lost their jobs, taking their weapons with them.

The results of these policies become clear as we learn about the leadership of ISIS. The *Washington Post*, for example, reported in April that "almost all of the leaders of the Islamic State are former Iraqi officers." In June, the *New York Times* identified a man "believed to be the head of the Islamic State's military council," Fadel al-Hayali, as "a former lieutenant colonel in the Iraqi military intelligence agency of President Saddam Hussein." Criticism of de-Baathification and the disbanding of Iraq's army has been fierce, and the contribution these policies made to fueling extremism was recognized even before the advent of the Islamic State. The *New York Times* reported in 2007:

The dismantling of the Iraqi Army in the aftermath of the American invasion is now widely regarded as a mistake that stoked rebellion among hundreds of thousands of former Iraqi soldiers and made it more difficult to reduce sectarian bloodshed and attacks by insurgents.

This year the *Washington Post* summed up reactions to both orders when it cited a former Iraqi general who asked bluntly, "When they dismantled the army, what did they expect those men to do?" He explained that "they didn't de-Baathify people's minds, they just took away their jobs." Writing about the disbanding policy in his memoir, *Decision Points*, George W. Bush acknowledges the harmful results: "Thousands of armed men had just been told they were not wanted. Instead of signing up for the new military, many joined the insurgency."

Yet in spite of the wide-ranging consequences of these de-Baathification and disbanding policies, they—and the decision-making processes that led to them—remain obscure to most Americans. What is more, it is unclear whether Bush himself knew about these policies before they were enacted. In November 2003, the *Washington Post* claimed, "Before the war, President Bush approved a plan that would have put several hundred thousand Iraqi soldiers on the U.S. payroll and kept them available to provide security." There had apparently been two National Security Council meetings, one on March 10 and another on March 12, during which the president approved a moderate de-Baathification policy and a plan, as reported by the *New York Times*' Michael R. Gordon, to "use the Iraqi military to help protect the country." (The invasion of Iraq began on March 19.) President Bush later told biographer Robert Draper that "the policy was to keep the army intact" but it "didn't happen."

So the question remains: if CPA Orders 1 and 2 weren't Bush's policies, whose were they? In 2007, Doug Feith told the *Los Angeles Times* that "until everybody writes memoirs and all the researchers look at the documents, some of these things are hard to sort out. You could be in the thick of it and not necessarily know all the details." Now that the memoirs have been written, it is time to establish just who the policymakers were in May 2003.

The various accounts present an array of neoconservative thinkers—notably Feith, Paul Wolfowitz, and Walter Slocombe—who implemented their own policies rather than those of the president they served. Moreover, one of the major influences on these policies was the Iraqi exile Ahmad Chalabi, who had thought he would be put in charge of postwar Iraq, having “been led to believe that by Perle and Feith,” as General Garner related to the journalist Thomas Ricks. And while the responsibility for what happened ultimately lies with George W. Bush—who, to his credit, avers as much in his own memoir—this episode demonstrates how knowledgeable mid-level advisors can hijack the American presidency to suit their own goals.



At the start of May 2003, the chief administrative entity in Iraq was the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (OHRA), which was replaced shortly thereafter by the CPA under Bremer. The head of OHRA was General Garner, who worked “under the eyes of senior Defense Department aides with direct channels to Rumsfeld, Deputy Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz and Under Secretary for Policy Douglas J. Feith,” according to the *Washington Post*. For his part, Garner strongly favored a policy of maintaining the Iraqi army, and preparations towards this end began almost a year earlier. For instance, Colonel John Agoglia told the *New York Times* that “Starting in June 2002 we conducted targeted psychological operations using pamphlet drops, broadcasts and all sorts of means to get the message to the regular army troops that they should surrender or desert and that if they did we would bring them back.” The *Times* reported earlier that under Garner’s leadership, “Top commanders were meeting secretly with former Iraqi officers to discuss the best way to rebuild the force and recall Iraqi soldiers back to duty when Mr. Bremer arrived in Baghdad with his plan.”

In the same story, the *Times* claimed that “The Bush administration did not just discuss keeping the old army. General Garner’s team found contractors to retrain it.” Bremer, however, showed up with policy ideas that diverged sharply from Garner’s.

In his memoir, Bremer names the officials who approached him for his CPA job. He recounts telling his wife that:

I had been contacted by Scooter Libby, Vice President Dick Cheney’s chief of staff, and by Paul Wolfowitz, deputy secretary of defense. The Pentagon’s original civil administration in ‘post-hostility’ Iraq—the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, ORHA—lacked expertise in high-level diplomatic negotiations and politics. ... I had the requisite skills and experience for that position.

Regarding the de-Baathification order, both Bremer and Feith have written their own accounts of the week leading up to it, and the slight discrepancy between their recollections is revealing in what it tells us about Bremer—and consequently about Wolfowitz and Libby for having selected him. At first blush, Bremer and Feith’s justifications for the policy appear to dovetail, each comparing postwar Iraq to postwar Nazi Germany. Bremer explains in a retrospective *Washington Post* op-ed, “What We Got Right in Iraq,” that “Hussein modeled his regime after Adolf Hitler’s, which controlled the German people with two main instruments: the Nazi Party and the Reich’s security services. We had no choice but to rid Iraq of the country’s equivalent

organizations.” For his part, Feith goes a step further, reasoning in his memoir *War and Decision* that the case for de-Baathification was even stronger because “The Nazis, after all, had run Germany for a dozen years; the Baathists had tyrannized Iraq for more than thirty.”

Regarding the order itself, Bremer writes,

The day before I left for Iraq in May, Undersecretary of Defense Douglas J. Feith presented me with a draft law that would purge top Baathists from the Iraqi government and told me that he planned to issue it immediately. Recognizing how important this step was, I asked Feith to hold off, among other reasons, so I could discuss it with Iraqi leaders and CPA advisers. A week later, after careful consideration, I issued this ‘de-Baathification’ decree, as drafted by the Pentagon.

In contrast, Feith recalls that Bremer asked him to wait because “Bremer had thoughts of his own on the subject, he said, and wanted to consider the de-Baathification policy carefully. As the new CPA head, he thought *he* should announce and implement the policy himself.”

The notion that he “carefully” considered the policy in his first week on the job, during which he also travelled halfway around the globe, is highly questionable. Incidentally, Bremer’s oxymoronic statement—“a week later, after careful consideration”—mirrors a similar formulation of Wolfowitz’s about the disbanding order. Speaking to the *Washington Post* in November 2003, he said that forming a new Iraqi army is “what we’re trying to do at warp speed—but with careful vetting of the people we’re bringing on.”

Simply put, Bremer was tempted by headline-grabbing policies. He was unlikely to question any action that offered opportunities to make bold gestures, which made him easy to influence. Indeed, another quality of Bremer’s professional persona that conspicuously emerges from accounts of the period is his unwillingness to think for himself. His memoir shows that he was eager to put Jay Garner in his place from the moment he arrived in Iraq, yet he was unable to defend himself on his own when challenged by Garner, who—according to Bob Woodward in his book *State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III*—was “stunned” by the disbanding order. Woodward claims that when Garner confronted Bremer about it, “Bremer, looking surprised, asked Garner to go see Walter B. Slocombe.”

What’s even more surprising is how Bremer doesn’t hide his intellectual dependence on Slocombe. He writes in his memoir:

To help untangle these problems, I was fortunate to have Walt Slocombe as Senior Adviser for defense and security affairs. A brilliant former Rhodes Scholar from Princeton and a Harvard-educated attorney, Walt had worked for Democratic administrations for decades on high-level strategic and arms control issues.

In May 2003, the *Washington Post* noted of Slocombe that “Although a Democrat, he has maintained good relations with Wolfowitz and is described by some as a ‘Democratic hawk,’” a remark that once again places Wolfowitz in close proximity to Bremer and the disbanding order. Sure enough, in November 2003 the *Washington Post* reported:

The demobilization decision appears to have originated largely with Walter B. Slocombe, a former undersecretary of defense appointed to oversee Iraqi security forces. He believed strongly in the need to disband the army and felt that vanquished soldiers should not expect to be paid a continuing salary. He said he developed the policy in discussions with Bremer, Feith and Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz. ‘This is not something that was dreamed up by somebody at the last minute and done at the insistence of the people in Baghdad. It was discussed,’ Slocombe said. ‘The critical point was that nobody argued that we shouldn’t do this.’

Given that the president agreed to preserve the Iraqi army in the NSC meeting on March 12, Slocombe’s statement is evidence of a major policy inconsistency. In that meeting, Feith, at the request of Donald Rumsfeld, gave a PowerPoint presentation prepared by Garner about keeping the Iraqi army; in his own memoir, Feith writes, “No one at that National Security Council meeting in early March spoke against the recommendation, and the President approved Garner’s plan.” But this is not what happened. What happened instead was the reversal of Garner’s plan, which Feith attributes to Slocombe and Bremer:

Bremer and Slocombe argued that it would better serve U.S. interests to create an entirely new Iraqi army: Sometimes it is easier to build something new than to refurbish a complex and badly designed structure. In any event, Bremer and Slocombe reasoned, calling the old army back might not succeed—but the attempt could cause grave political problems.

Over time, both Bremer and Slocombe have gone so far as to deny that the policies had any tangible effects. Bremer claimed in the *Washington Post* that “Virtually all the old Baathist ministers had fled before the decree was issued” and that “When the draftees saw which way the war was going, they deserted and, like their officers, went back home.” Likewise Slocombe stated in a PBS interview, “We didn’t disband the army. The army disbanded itself. ... What we did do was to formally dissolve all of the institutions of Saddam’s security system. The intelligence, his military, his party structure, his information and propaganda structure were formally disbanded and the property turned over to the Coalition Provisional Authority.”

Thus, according to Bremer and Slocombe’s accounts, neither de-Baathification nor disbanding the army achieved anything that hadn’t already happened. When coupled with Bremer’s assertion of “careful consideration in one week” and Wolfowitz’s claim of “careful vetting at warp speed,” Bremer and Slocombe’s notion of “doing something that had already been done” creates a strong impression that they are hiding something or trying to finesse history with wordplay. Perhaps *Washington Post* journalist Rajiv Chandrasekaran provides the best possible explanation for this confusion in his book *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*, when he writes, “Despite the leaflets instructing them to go home, Slocombe had expected Iraqi soldiers to stay in their garrisons. Now he figured that calling them back would cause even more problems.” Chandrasekaran adds, “As far as Slocombe and Feith were concerned, the Iraqi army had dissolved itself; formalizing the dissolution wouldn’t contradict Bush’s directive.” This suggests that Slocombe and Feith were communicating and that Slocombe was fully aware of the policy the president had agreed to in the NSC meeting on March 12, yet he chose to disregard it.

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Following the disastrous decisions of May 2003, the blame game has been rife among neoconservative policymakers. One of those who have expended the most energy dodging culpability is, predictably, Bremer. In early 2007, he testified before the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, and the *Washington Post* reported: “Bremer proved unexpectedly agile at shifting blame: to administration planners (‘The planning before the war was inadequate’), his superiors in the Bush administration (‘We never had sufficient support’), and the Iraqi people (‘The country was in chaos—socially, politically and economically’).”

Bremer also wrote in May 2007 in the *Washington Post*, “I’ve grown weary of being a punching bag over these decisions—particularly from critics who’ve never spent time in Iraq, don’t understand its complexities and can’t explain what we should have done differently.” (This declaration is ironic, given Bremer’s noted inability to justify the disbanding policy to General Garner.) On September 4, 2007, the *New York Times* reported that Bremer had given the paper exculpatory letters supposedly proving that George W. Bush confirmed the disbanding order. But the *Times* concluded, “the letters do not show that [Bush] approved the order or even knew much about it. Mr. Bremer referred only fleetingly to his plan midway through his three-page letter and offered no details.” Moreover, the paper characterized Bremer’s correspondence with Bush as “striking in its almost nonchalant reference to a major decision that a number of American military officials in Iraq strongly opposed.” Defending himself on this point, Bremer claimed, “the policy was carefully considered by top civilian and military members of the American government.” And six months later Bremer told the paper, “It was not my responsibility to do inter-agency coordination.”

Feith and Slocombe have been similarly evasive when discussing President Bush’s awareness of the policies. The *Los Angeles Times* noted that “Feith was deeply involved in the decision-making process at the time, working closely with Bush and Bremer,” yet “Feith said he could not comment about how involved the president was in the decision to change policy and dissolve the army. ‘I don’t know all the details of who talked to who about that,’ he said.” For his part, Slocombe told PBS’s “Frontline,”

What happens in Washington in terms of how the [decisions are made]—‘Go ahead and do this, do that; don’t do that, do this, even though you don’t want to do it’—that’s an internal Washington coordination problem about which I know little. One of the interesting things about the job from my point of view—all my other government experience basically had been in the Washington end, with the interagencies process and setting the priorities—at the other end we got output. And how the process worked in Washington I actually know very little about, because the channel was from the president to Rumsfeld to Bremer.

It’s a challenge to parse Slocombe’s various statements. Here, in the space of two sentences, he claims both that his government experience has mostly been in Washington and that he doesn’t know how Washington works. As mentioned earlier, he had previously told the *Washington Post* that the disbanding order was not “done at the insistence of the people in Baghdad”—in other words, the decision was made in Washington. The inconsistency of his accounts from year to year, and even in the same interview, adds to an aura of concealment.

This further illustrates the disconnect between what was decided by the NSC in Washington in March and by the CPA in Iraq in May. In his memoir, Feith notes that although he supported the disbanding policy, “the decision became associated with a number of unnecessary problems, including the apparent lack of interagency review.”

The blame game is nowhere more evident than in a 2007 *Vanity Fair* article entitled “Neo Culpa,” which was previewed online just before the 2006 midterm elections. Writer David Rose spoke with numerous neoconservatives, who roundly censured George W. Bush, Condoleezza Rice, Rumsfeld, and Bremer for the chaos in Iraq. Speaking broadly about the Bush administration, Adelman said, “They turned out to be among the most incompetent teams in the postwar era.” And Perle complained, “The decisions did not get made that should have been. They didn’t get made in a timely fashion, and the differences were argued out endlessly. At the end of the day, you have to hold the president responsible.”

Yet Perle’s reflection on the timeliness of decisions conflicts with President Bush’s account rather strikingly. In his memoir, Bush writes:

I should have insisted on more debate on Jerry’s orders, especially on what message disbanding the army would send and how many Sunnis the de-Baathification would affect. Overseen by longtime exile Ahmed Chalabi, the de-Baathification program turned out to cut much deeper than we expected, including mid-level party members like teachers.

In June 2004, Bill Kristol was already censuring the president for his “poor performance,” musing that his school of thought has been collateral damage in a mismanaged foreign policy: neoconservatism, he wrote, “has probably been weakened by the Bush administration’s poor performance in implementing what could be characterized as its recommended foreign policy.” Kristol argued that “This failure in execution has been a big one. It has put the neoconservative ‘project’ at risk. Much more important, it has put American foreign policy at risk.” Perle echoed this view two years later when he told *Vanity Fair*, “Huge mistakes were made ... they were not made by neoconservatives, who had almost no voice in what happened, and certainly almost no voice in what happened after the downfall of the regime in Baghdad.”

This downplaying of neoconservative influence in “what happened after the downfall of the regime in Baghdad” is curious, and Perle is not the only person to have tried it. Max Boot, writing in the same 2004 collection as Kristol, does the same thing when, after naming Wolfowitz, Feith, Libby, Elliott Abrams, and Perle as neoconservatives who served Bush, he argues:

Each of these policy-makers has been an outspoken advocate for aggressive and, if necessary, unilateral action by the United States to promote democracy, human rights, and free markets, and to maintain U.S. primacy around the world. While this list seems impressive, it also reveals that the neocons have no representatives in the administration’s top tier.

But apparently it didn’t matter that there were no neoconservatives in top positions—not when one considers the knowledge and prior government experience of Vice President Cheney, the

neoconservatives' sponsor. In *A World Transformed*, George H.W. Bush writes of Cheney that he "knew how policy was made." Barton Gellman observes in *Angler*, his book about Cheney: "Most of the government's work, Cheney knew, never reached the altitude of Senate-confirmed appointees. Reliable people in mid-level posts would have the last word on numberless decisions about where to spend or not spend money, whom to regulate, how to enforce." In the end avoiding the highest positions in the administration makes it all the more easy to dodge blame.



Americans are painfully familiar with stories like this one, in which a coterie of advisors takes policy in a dangerous direction with little or no knowledge on the part of the president. But the case of the Iraq War and the decisions that followed the toppling of Saddam Hussein has a unique importance—because we are still living with the consequences, and others are dying for them.

Democrats may be tempted to dismiss all that happened in the Bush years as simply the other party's fault. Republicans have a comforting myth of their own in the belief that President Bush's 2007 "surge" of U.S. forces into Iraq ended the country's instability, which only returned after President Obama fully withdrew troops from Iraq in 2011. But as the role of Walter Slocombe—the Democratic counterpart to Doug Feith in more ways than one—illustrates, Clintons no less than Bushes are susceptible to this personnel problem.

Republicans, meanwhile, should consider retired Lt. Col. Gian Gentile's verdict that "the reduction in violence" in Iraq in 2007 "had more to do with the Iraqis than the Americans," specifically with the Sunni tribesmen's newfound willingness to fight (for a price) alongside Americans against al-Qaeda and with Moqtada al-Sadr's de-escalation of Shi'ite activity. But regardless of what the surge did or did not contribute to quelling the bloodshed in Iraq, the intensity of the civil war that raged there in the first place was in considerable part a product of misguided de-Baathification and disbanding policies—and the Islamic State today depends on the military and intelligence forces that Bremer, Feith, and Slocombe casually dismissed.

When you have the wrong diagnosis, you risk coming to the wrong solution, no matter how clever you think you are. As the GOP candidates for the 2016 presidential election have made their campaigns official, they have been pummeled with hindsight questions about the Iraq War and ISIS, and no one has a harder time facing this than Jeb Bush. In order to correctly address what to do about the Islamic State, it is important to acknowledge what specifically went wrong with decision-making in the Iraq War.

This episode highlights a weakness in the executive branch that is ripe for exploitation under any administration. When the neoconservative Frank Gaffney, speaking about George W. Bush, told *Vanity Fair*, "This president has tolerated, and the people around him have tolerated, active, ongoing, palpable insubordination and skullduggery that translates into subversion of his policies," it seems incredible to think that he failed to see the irony of his assertion. But for those who have a deep understanding of how the government works, it is quite possible to undermine a president, then step back and pretend to have had minimal involvement, and finally stand in judgment. But now that the story is known, the American people can be the judges.

