



MSNBC News



Newsweek

▶ Home Page ▶ Cover Story ▶ Archives ▶ Feedback ▶ Index

World News

- News
- Business
- Sports
- Tech • Science
- Living
- Travel
- Health
- TV News
- Opinions
- Weather • Local
- Shop@MSNBC
- MSN.com



Patrick Andrade / Gamma for Newsweek

The body of an Iraqi fighter, killed near a suspected terrorist camp

The Mideast: Neocons on the Line

A growing number of critics on Capitol Hill and around the world are questioning the Bush administration's credibility—and its assumptions—as never before.

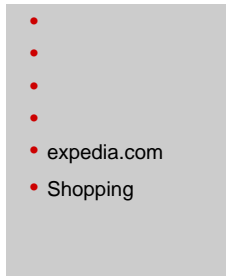
By Michael Hirsh
NEWSWEEK

June 23 issue — Paul Wolfowitz seems a bundle of contradictions, all of them roiling inside him. Calm yet driven, a champion of bold action who speaks in a soft, somewhat quavery voice, Wolfowitz today finds himself pacing the world stage like a nervous father. He is a father in a sense—to an idea, one that has taken on a life of its own and, somewhat in the manner of a wayward child, is causing its parent no end of grief.

• E-MAIL THIS

• COMPLETE STORY

ADVERTISING ON MSNBC



IT WAS WOLFOWITZ, the gentlemanly superhawk, who within days of 9-11 prodded the Bush administration into a radical new strategy: forcefully confronting states that sponsor terrorism. It was Wolfowitz—the ex math whiz who fell in love with the idea of “national greatness” as a youth and is now seen as the Bush administration’s chief intellectual—who pressed Bush hardest to transform the war on terror into a campaign for regime change and democracy in rogue nations, especially in Iraq and the Islamic world.

Now the deputy defense secretary and his fellow neoconservatives are on the defensive. They are battling a growing crowd of critics on Capitol Hill and around the world as the Bush administration’s credibility—and its assumptions—are tested as never before. In Iraq, after another week in which U.S. troops died and got into fierce fire fights, elements of more than half of America’s Army divisions are tied down. Some U.S. officials have begun muttering the dreaded Q word—quagmire, a term Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had mocked on a visit to Baghdad in the days just after the three-week war. In the Mideast, the hard-liners’ move to replace Yasir Arafat with the moderate Mahmoud Abbas—and to ignore the conflict until after the Iraq war—has touched off a new cycle of violence that stunned even the White House in its savagery. It seems increasingly difficult to argue that “the road to Jerusalem runs through Baghdad.” In the face of a possible congressional probe into why Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction have not been found, two Pentagon neocons, Doug Feith and Bill Luti, sought earlier this month to identify themselves with, of all people, Bill Clinton. In a fumbling news conference, they insisted that their intel squared with the previous administration’s.



Today show

FREE VIDEO

START ▶

Is Iran the next target for regime change?

May 27, 2003 — Sen. Joseph Biden, (D-Delaware) tells “Today” host Katie Couric he feels the United States should finish up operations in Iraq and Aghanistan before considering new hotspots, including Iran.

QUESTIONS ON U.S. CREDIBILITY

Fairly or not, Paul Wolfowitz has become a lightning rod for

much of this criticism, and to “cry Wolfowitz” has already become a catchphrase for the pressing questions about U.S. credibility. At a recent Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, Wolfowitz—always a striking presence with his thick black hair, vaguely lupine looks and air of tense repose—was rocked by hostile questioning. Wolfowitz not long ago dismissed Army chief Eric Shinseki’s call for a large peacekeeping force as “wildly off the mark.” Now he indicated that Iraq looked more complicated than Bosnia. “We’ve been in Bosnia for eight years,” Sen. Joseph Biden snapped back. “That would seem to compute that we’re likely to be in Iraq for a long time—a long time.”

Deputy Defense Secretary Wolfowitz pushed the Bush administration toward 'ending states' that sponsor terrorism



David Hume Kennerly / Getty Images for Newsweek

Wolfowitz himself never thought that his long-sought goal of democratic transformation would be easy. This week, Wolfowitz and the neocon elite gather again for their annual conclave in Beaver Creek, Colo., the ritzy ski resort where last year Natan Sharansky, the Israeli politician and hard-line advocate of Arab democracy, gave the keynote speech (inspiring Dick Cheney, among others). And in Beaver Creek the neocons can—and will—claim an uncertain triumph. There is a kind of emerging democracy in the Palestinian territories. And there is regime change in Iraq. If WMD evidence remains elusive, the horrific evidence of Saddam’s savagery only grows: many Iraqis remain grateful for the U.S. intervention. In some ways, things have been easier than expected: U.S. troops scored a lightning victory in Iraq and the worst fears proved unfounded. Americans were not hit by chemical or biological weapons, and the country hasn’t yet disintegrated into civil war as some warned. Certainly no one expected a sudden flowering of Mideast peace.

Yet even as the neocons savor these victories, some critics suggest their moment may already have passed. Few in the Bush administration invoke the toppling of Saddam’s statue in Baghdad any longer, as they did so euphorically in early May. The future does look messier and more ambiguous than some neocons had hoped, and the hawks now have to figure out how to build things up, rather than knock them down. Among those at last year’s Beaver Creek gathering—which is sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute, the neocon think tank—was Ahmad Chalabi, the Iraqi exile leader who was then seen as the neocon candidate of choice to lead postwar Iraq. Now he’s been sidelined by the American czar in Baghdad, State Department careerist L. Paul Bremer. Other key neocons, like Wolfowitz’s old ally and friend Richard Perle, have withdrawn from public view; Perle resigned

as chairman of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board in March amid questions over alleged conflicts of interest related to his business dealings. Most deflating of all, a new Pew Research poll shows rampant anti-Americanism has overtaken even formerly pro-American Muslim countries like Indonesia and Nigeria, both chaotic places where terrorists can congregate.



'North Korea poses considerable threat'

May 19, 2003 — "Today's" Matt Lauer takes a tour of the DMZ with the commander of U.S. forces in South Korea Gen. Leon Laporte.

FREE VIDEO

START ▶

PAINTED INTO A CORNER?

Just as worrisome is the issue of how to confront other state sponsors of terror and WMD, like Iran, Syria and North Korea. The administration seems far less willing to go to war in those places than it was in Iraq, pushing for multilateral solutions for the moment. But "the neocons have painted themselves, rhetorically, into a corner," says a former senior Bush official. "They're kind of stuck in a position where they can't just let this go. If they're not seen as doing something to get Syria and Iran to take care of terror, they'll look incoherent."

Yet on these issues the administration seems adrift, and once again internally conflicted. Officials talk of waiting for grass-roots democracy in Iran, but some civilian hawks are still discussing a strategy with parallels to their pre-invasion designs on Iraq: funding covert activity and sponsoring exile leaders like Reza Pahlavi, the son of the late Shah of Iran. North Korea is again brazenly threatening to build nuclear weapons and here, too, the administration is flirting with regime change, reducing food aid in an apparent effort to strangle the totalitarian state. Wolfowitz, on a recent trip to South Korea, commented that North Korea "is teetering on the edge of economic collapse."

In the wake of a string of suicide attacks in Israel, like this one that killed 17 people last week, Wolfowitz has suggested that Bush will press Israelis to give up their settlements



Shlomy Cohen / AFP-Getty Images

Hovering over all this is a more philosophical question: can democracy really be imposed by force, or even outside pressure? And is it such a panacea?

What is clear is that the neocon vision has become the hard core of American foreign policy, making the neocons every critic's favorite demon. Wolfowitz and Perle are the leading lights, most agree, joined by a supporting cast including I. Lewis (Scooter) Libby, Cheney's chief of staff; Feith, the Pentagon's No. 3, and leading ideologues in the Beltway commentariat like William Kristol and Robert Kagan. Collectively, they are often misportrayed as a cabal of conspiring former Democratic hawks who grew alienated from their party after Vietnam. Typically, the neocons are characterized as intellectual groupies who worship Leo Strauss, a mid-20th-century philosopher who idealized Platonic virtues in rulers and whose views have been summed up as "it's the regime, stupid."



Foreign Policy: Israel & The Neo-Cons

- [Audio: Josh Hammer, NEWSWEEK Jerusalem Bureau Chief and Michael Hirsh, NEWSWEEK Senior Editor](#)
- [Audio: Listen to the complete weekly On Air show](#)

In fact, some like Perle and Kagan say their views have nothing to do with Strauss, and Wolfowitz, for one, mocks the idea that he is a Straussian. Yes, he took two college courses from Strauss, but he asks, chuckling, "You need an obscure political philosopher to understand that it makes

a difference what kind of regime rules Iraq?" The neocons, many of whom are Jewish, are also sometimes maliciously caricatured as shills for Israel's hard-right Likud Party—even by some in the senior GOP establishment. But that does little to explain how the neocons have won the hearts and minds of good Methodists like Cheney, Presbyterians like national-security adviser Condoleezza Rice or WASPs like Rumsfeld.

A MARRIAGE OF POWER AND PRINCIPLE

The neocon view is, in truth, far more complex than most of these portraits suggest. Essentially a rebirth of Reaganism, today's neoconservatism has deep roots in the old ideological fights of the cold-war era. It stands at heart for a robust marriage of power and principle, a fusing of America's precision-guided ability to change regimes with an evangelical belief that the only right regime is democracy. Driving it all is the idea that thanks to America's unrivaled might, this is the moment in history to complete the global transformation begun by Ronald Reagan—who declared in 1982 that tyranny was destined for the ash heap of history—and left unfinished after the cold war. Especially in a post-9-11 world, this is no time for old-fashioned conservatism. It is a time to be bold. Sharansky, who first got to know the neocons when he was a Soviet dissident, says hard-liners like Wolfowitz and moderates like Secretary of State Colin Powell are mainly refighting the battles of detente vs. confrontation over the Soviet Union. "It's the same debate—trying to make dictators more friendly or replacing them with democracy and not with other dictators."

Wolfowitz, for one, resists neat labels to describe his views. He also denies that he has any grand global strategy. For hawks like him, the invasion of Iraq was in large part about finishing a

war that never really ended in 1991. But it was also about dispensing with a traditional GOP foreign policy dependent on careful consensus and alliance-building in favor of a more aggressive one. Leaving Saddam in power in 1991, merely handing Kuwait back to its rulers after the gulf war, had been a classic “realist” response once favored by the GOP establishment. But after 9-11 conservatives considered the decision to restore the Arab status quo their biggest mistake, the chief sin of Bush the father. Over the next decade it generated hatemongers like Osama bin Laden, left WMD in the hands of defiant tyrants like Saddam and “peace” in the hands of corrupt autocrats like Yasir Arafat. September 11 was an indictment of every policymaker over the decade who’d seen the Arab world merely as a gas station to the globe. The Arabs had to change, too, fundamentally.

Partly what fuels the neocons’ air of certainty is the sense that they’ve been vindicated by history. Wolfowitz, like Perle, is only in his latest of many incarnations in power. Thirty-four years ago he and Perle had first worked together in pushing for missile defense, decrying the arms-control accords that needlessly held America’s superior technology back, fulfilling the agenda of their mutual mentor, cold-war hawk and grand theorist Albert Wohlstetter. On this, as on so many things, they believed they had been prescient: the Soviet Union, more economically backward than anyone knew, collapsed in the face of U.S. Defense spending, unable to keep up with the high-tech wizardry that today gives America its unparalleled might. It was Wolfowitz who, as far back as the Carter administration, also first warned of the danger from Saddam. And it was Wolfowitz who, in 1992, authored a Defense planning paper that stirred a huge controversy in Washington by declaring that America intended to remain the world’s only great power.

THE NEO-REAGANITE VISION

This aggressive world view has, by most accounts, won over George W. Bush, who is himself far more of a Reaganite than he is an acolyte of his father. The neo-Reaganite vision has provided a liturgy and a purpose to the president’s Christian evangelical sense of destiny, and imbued his Texas tough-guy persona with a historic mission. Even before 9-11, the neocons felt they had a soulmate, says Perle—that the son had “a more robust world view” than the father. “He was prepared to assume greater risk for greater gains,” says Perle.

Until now, Democrats and moderate Republicans have found themselves at a loss to counter this ideological onslaught. “These guys are the conservative version of the best and brightest,” says Biden, harking back to the Democratic-policy establishment during the Vietnam War. Republican-establishment types, meanwhile, grumble that

Newsweek International June 23rd Issue

- [International Editions Front](#)
- [Atlantic and Asia Pacific Cover Story: Al Qaeda in America](#)
- [Latin America Cover Story: Can He Do the Job?](#)
- [World View: How to Make Friends in Iraq](#)
- [Letter From America: Land of the Free, Home of the Brave?](#)

their revered Grand Old Party has been body-snatched by a foreign host, former Democratic hawks who have tossed moderation to the winds. “I think the party basically has been taken over by the neocons,” says a senior official from the first Bush administration.

- [International Periscope & Perspectives](#)
- [International Mail Call](#)
- [The Last Word: Michael O'Leary](#)

For Wolfowitz, the irony is that while he is known as the most powerful neoconservative in Washington, he's never swallowed all of the neocon Kool-Aid. True, he seems to have been a hawk from childhood, deeply influenced by his father—famed mathematician Jack Wolfowitz, a Vietnam hard-liner who drilled the lessons of the Holocaust (appeasement never works) into his children. (Wolfowitz's sister, Laura Sachs, says her brother often jokingly told their father: “You have only yourself to blame for all this.”) Later, at the University of Chicago grad school, a haven for right-wing thinkers, Wolfowitz was smitten with the grandeur of great empires, says Charles Fairbanks, a fellow Chicago grad and friend. Fairbanks remembers a long drive back from Chicago to New York with Wolfowitz. “He had just been reading Livy's history of Rome. He was obviously somehow in love with political greatness, I think in the same way as the young Lincoln was. He talked for hours at a time about the ancient Romans, about what kind of men they were and what they achieved.”

But Wolfowitz is far too pragmatic and smart to push blindly for regime change everywhere. “I actually am a great believer in the importance of evolutionary change,” he says. On Mideast peace, Wolfowitz has privately suggested that the Bushies will end up where Clinton did: pressing the Israelis to give up their settlements (though as yet Ariel Sharon is adamantly resisting). Wolfowitz's sister, who is an Israeli citizen and holds moderate political views, says her brother “is not a Likud supporter. He believes in the peace process.” And even as Wolfowitz talks of economic collapse in North Korea, he is still seeking to prod dictator Kim Jong Il to follow China's path: reform from within. On Iran, says Fairbanks, it was Wolfowitz who 20 years ago suggested regime change may not always be a good thing. As State policy-planning chief in 1982, when he and others were conceiving the Reagan Doctrine (the precursor to today's democracy-transformation vision), Wolfowitz cited the disaster of the then young Khomeini revolution. The Islamist takeover, of course, had been inspired by a 1953 U.S.-orchestrated coup that installed the shah.

The problem that Bush hard-liners must confront is that power and democracy don't mix easily, that America is not the Rome of Livy. Speaking in the sober tones now coming out of the White House, one senior administration official sums up the problem: America has the power of a true empire, like Rome or like Britain in the 19th century, but not the taste for acting like one. “Look at us in Iraq—how much difficulty we have in saying we will not anoint people to run the country. Does anyone think the Romans or the Brits would have been deterred for one second?” he says. “People keep accusing the administration of being imperialist, or neo-imperialist, or seeking an American

empire. It's just not in our nature to be imperialist."

It is possible the neocon embrace of regime change and pre-emption may prove to be as important and enduring as cold-war-era containment doctrine. Or it may just be that the military triumph in Iraq marks the high tide of neocon thinking. Having had two regime-changing wars, and having corrected the historic mistake of 1991, the hawks don't seem eager for another. Even Kristol, never shy about asserting U.S. power (he can afford to be: he's a magazine editor, not a policymaker), says, "I don't quite know what to do about North Korea." The ultimate question, he adds, is whether "Iraq was sort of a one-off deal. Bush understands that if North Korea and Iran are still chugging toward nukes a year from now unimpeded in any way, and the dynamics of the Middle East haven't been changed at all, then the Bush doctrine gets called into question." Paul Wolfowitz may be the one who is called in to answer.

With Dan Efron in Jerusalem and Tamara Lipper in Washington

© 2003 Newsweek, Inc.

MORE NEWSWEEK INTERNATIONAL

- STORY** [The Mideast: Neocons on the Line](#)
- STORY** [The Front Lines: A Job For The Agency](#)
- STORY** [Washington: The New Man to See](#)
- STORY** [How to Make Friends in Iraq](#)
- STORY** [Special Section: The War On Iraq](#)
- HOME** [MSNBC Cover Page](#)

[Periscope](#) | [National News](#) | [World News](#) | [Business & Money](#) | [Tech & Science](#)
[Health & Lifestyle](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Tip Sheet](#) | [Feedback](#)
[Archives](#) | [International Editions](#) | [Subscriber Services](#) | [About Newsweek](#)

MSNBC READERS' TOP 10

Would you recommend this story to other readers?

not at all **1** - **2** - **3** - **4** - **5** - **6** - **7** highly

BACK TO TOP ↗



MSNBC is optimized for
• Microsoft Internet Explorer
• Windows Media Player

• [MSNBC Terms, Conditions and Privacy](#)
© 2003

Cover | News | Business | Sports | Local News | Health | Technology & Science | Living | Travel
TV News | Opinions | Weather | Comics

InfoCenter | Newsletters | Search | Help | News Tools | Jobs | Write Us | Terms & Conditions |
Privacy

Advertisement

MSN - More Useful Everyday

[MSN Home](#) | [My MSN](#) | [Hotmail](#) | [Search](#) | [Shopping](#) | [Money](#) | [People & Chat](#)

©2003 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved. [Terms of Use](#) [Advertise](#) [Truste Approved](#) [Privacy Statement](#) [GetNetWise](#)

- [The Mideast: Neocons on the Line](#)

- [The Front Lines: A Job For The Agency](#)
- [Washington: The New Man to See](#)
- [How to Make Friends in Iraq](#)

Newsweek

- [Dickey: The Man Who Would be King of Iraq](#)
- [Q&A: Barney Frank on 'Charlie Lawrence'](#)
- [Patti Davis: Hillary vs. Hollywood](#)
- [Iraq: Inside the Hunt for Saddam's WMD](#)