

# Mideast Policymakers Tell Bush, Break With Neo-Cons' Debacle in the Region

by Michele Steinberg

President George W. Bush's speech to the United Nations General Assembly on Sept. 23 dug him deeper into the hole of isolating of the United States—and distancing himself from voters, such that only 26% of Americans support, or believe in, his request for an immediate \$87 billion more for the Iraq occupation. On the day Bush addressed the UNGA, major U.S. media reported that polls projecting the Presidential election of 2004 showed Bush losing to either Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), or Gen. Wesley Clark, who both criticize aspects of the Iraq war policy. Bush failed at the UNGA, by refusing to break with his war-mongering Vice President Dick Cheney, who sponsored the international Synarchists' preventive war doctrine; and by failing to heed the warnings of some of America's best diplomats and military leaders with experience in the Middle East.

On Sept. 7-8, those warnings had been renewed—and the beginnings of a solution for Iraq and the Middle East delivered—by a senior United States Senator from the Republican Party, Chuck Hagel of Nebraska; retired U.S. Army Maj. Gen. William Nash; the Ambassador to Saudi Arabia during the 1991 Gulf War, Chas Freeman; retired U.S. Marines Gen. Anthony Zinni; and a dozen other American leaders. Their stern message to the Administration about the Iraq war quagmire, and the collapse of the Middle East peace process: You broke it—now fix it. And to fix it, the overwhelming message was: Give Iraq back to the Iraqis; go to the UN, the only authority that can oversee the rebuilding of a nation, and get the electricity, water, and jobs for the Iraqi people turned on *now*.

## 'Neo-Conned'

In the phrase of Chas Freeman, the United States was "neo-conned" into war with Iraq, and it is time for Americans to "rededicate" our nation to "an important American tradition," that of being liberators, not imperial administrators. Freeman was the concluding speaker on Sept. 8 at the day-long annual conference of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations (NCUSAR) in Washington, where more than 400 policymakers from the United States and throughout the world assembled to discuss policy alternatives that could avert the violence and destabilizations in the Middle and Near East that "threaten to spiral out of control and engulf the world at large."

Ambassador Freeman was not pessimistic, but he was firm. The Bush Administration is going to have to "eat crow" and go to the United Nations and the international community *immediately*, he insisted, to return Iraq to Iraqis; there is no replacement for the UN Security Council. Freeman said that policy-makers like neo-conservative Richard Perle, who continues to falsely blame Iraq for the attacks of 9/11, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who has turned the occupation of Iraq into a "Pentagon-operated theme park," have to be sidelined. Most importantly, America, which historically "has understood the perils of empire better than most," must give up the imperial trappings that define the neo-cons' Iraq war.

That view had been voiced repeatedly in the dozen panels at the conference, and in the keynote address given by General Zinni, at a reception for conference participants on Sept. 7. Speakers insisted that the United States return to the UN and to international law. The American leaders were joined by government officials, diplomats and business leaders from Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Syria, Yemen, and other Middle East nations, who see that relations between the United States and the Arab world have degenerated under a neo-conservative clash of civilizations bias.

Participants could see the promise of a true partnership and alliance with the Middle East nations for peace. Freeman expressed some confidence that the United States not only *should* return to the American tradition, but that it *would* make such a change, driven by the debacle in Iraq. He saw in Bush's announcement of the \$87 billion request for Iraq, the sign that reality was sinking in; but predicted that America will have to foot the bill *alone* if it does not give the governing of Iraq to UN auspices. In Freeman's estimation, "The neo-cons are not long for this world." That observation, made in the last 30 minutes of the conference, provoked the liveliest of discussions in the next two hours, in the auditorium and corridors—especially on the question of "how" the neo-cons could be ousted from their position of having run a "coup d'état" in the White House.

## Threat to Arafat Ignored

As welcome as was this sober assessment about the Middle East from top American leaders, it was disturbing that the unfolding escalation by the Israeli government of Ariel



*Marine Gen. Anthony Zinni at the U.S./Arab conference, at which all prominent speakers said the neo-cons and their policies had to be dumped: "We developed a security structure which only included the U.S. and the British. We saw only two elements in our policy: the security aspect; and an economic aspect which was always tied to our energy interests."*

Sharon was omitted from the discussion—especially the threats of Minister of Defense Shaul Mofaz to remove, expel, or, as many experts already understood, assassinate Palestinian President Yasser Arafat. After Mofaz “tested the waters on Sept. 12,” and met with a silence read as a “green light” from the Bush Administration, only four days later, the policy was openly adopted by a vote of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s security cabinet. According to one Israeli expert in the United States, the security cabinet decision gave Sharon the “legal authority” to kill Arafat.

This omission was especially ironic, since every speaker who addressed the regional reality, warned that unless there is a peaceful resolution in the Middle East between Israel and Palestine, and progress toward creating “two sovereign states,” there would be no long-term chance of peace and stability in Iraq. Perhaps, the policymakers at the U.S.-Arab meeting believed that by stressing “solutions” and an optimistic approach to peace, there would be momentum to change U.S. policy.

But for many, that hope was dashed a week later, on Sept. 16 at the UN Security Council, when the United States vetoed a UNSC resolution to block the Israeli expulsion of the Palestinians’ elected leader—or any Palestinian national—under the international law that governs the conduct of an occupying country in occupied areas. On Sept. 18, in a press conference with Jordan’s King Abdullah II at Camp David, President Bush belittled, by ignoring it, the Palestinian Authority’s creation of a new government under Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei, and repeatedly denounced President Yasser Arafat by name as a “failure.” Bush showed that he is willing to squeeze the Palestinian people, while ignoring the reality that Sharon had not honored a single word of the obligation to close down

the Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories, and had continued carrying out “targetted assassinations” until the cease-fire agreement which had held for six weeks crumbled. Bush’s statements were praised by neo-con opponents of the Road Map peace plan, and by the Israeli right wing, as encouragement that the killing of Arafat would have “no blowback.”

It is this collapse of the Road Map, and Bush’s mental deficiency—at best—in recognizing the role he played in killing his own Road Map vision, that indicates that the neo-cons may be down, but not out. They are still committed to implementing a notorious policy that several current members of the Bush Administration penned for then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996: “A Clean Break: A New Strategy for the Realm.” In “Clean Break,” authors Richard Perle, Douglas Feith, and David Wurmser pressed for war and regime change in Iraq. Their other policy—abrogate of the Oslo Accord, and exclude the Palestinian National Authority from having any role in representing the Palestinian people—is now in progress. “Clean Break” also demanded war with Syria and Iran—which is a joint policy of the American-based neo-cons, and the Sharon government.

## Running Out of Time

But the policymakers at the NCUSAR conference got one crucial thing right—there is little time to correct the mistakes, especially the neglect of the Iraqi civilians, which is fostering an environment of hatred toward the Americans, which one speaker described as an attitude that “the only good American is a dead American.” Maj. Gen. William Nash (USA-ret.), speaking on the Iraq panel, even suggested a limiting date—the beginning of Ramadan, which is rapidly approaching.

U.S. policy in postwar Iraq was pilloried at the Sept. 8 afternoon panel, on Iran, Iraq, and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Two of the most prominent and experienced Iraq specialists, Dr. Phebe Marr and General Nash, presented a detailed assessment of the disastrous Bush Administration policy, focusing on what must be done immediately to avoid an even greater disaster. Dr. Marr, a top Pentagon expert on the Middle East until her recent retirement, warned that we are near the point of irreversible disaster, if there is not an immediate shift in how the Coalition Provisional Authority under Paul Bremer goes about the reconstruction. She profiled the highly centralized Ba’ath government, and then noted that the so-called de-Ba’athification has meant that all the top military and civilian and security leaders were dumped, creating a vacuum that cannot be filled by lower-echelon people. Marr warned about growing dangers of ethnic and tribal warfare erupting in every part of the country, and noted with particular alarm the assassinations of two of the leading Shi’ite clerics. The ethnic distribution of power in the interim council is likely to exacerbate sectarian conflicts, she said, unless there is a real move to meritocracy. Dr. Marr advised immediately rebuilding the central government, and promotion of the large, secular middle class. She had opposed the

war from the outset; but said that now that the United States is there, the obligation is to make the situation work.

General Nash, who was a Gulf War commander in 1991, and actually led the occupation of parts of southern Iraq at the end of Operation Desert Storm, was much more colorful in his language, describing the Bremer operation as a “total screwup.” He warned that the window of opportunity to clean up the mess is rapidly closing, and that the situation could be out of control by the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, which is expected to start this year on Oct. 27, 2003. Nash said that unless public security is restored and basic services restarted, “all is lost,” and advised launching a “Baghdad Airlift” to assure that every day a C-17 carries vital equipment and parts to Iraq from the United States. The perception in the Arab world is that the United States is all-powerful, Nash said, and therefore, if the situation on the ground in Iraq is in chaos, it is because America wants the chaos.

General Nash thought there was no need for surveys and new plans; Iraqis need energy, fresh water, housing, jobs, etc. Don’t plan, just get things going before it is too late, he urged. “We screwed it up, now we have to fix it.” Nash added that Bush should put Secretary of State Colin Powell on a plane and send him to the region to convey the U.S. commitment. He also called on the Administration to work out border security cooperation with Jordan and Saudi Arabia to stem the flow of fighters into the country, to alleviate a part of the security burden.

The call for peace through humanitarian action and protection of the Iraqi population had been the keynote of the entire conference, as expressed by General Zinni, who had headed the U.S. Central Command which includes the Middle East and Persian Gulf, immediately preceding the current Iraq war commander, Gen. Tommy Franks. Both Nash and Zinni were in sharp contrast to the neo-con “chicken-hawks”—including Cheney—who, failing to see stability in Iraq, shriek for more wars, as the “Clean Break” document lays out, using the twisted rationale of the Bernard Lewis/Samuel P. Huntington Clash of Civilizations.

Zinni lambasted the lack of any overriding U.S. strategy for Central and Southern Asia, including the Middle East and the Gulf region. “We have neglected an entire region of the world,” he complained. “We need to step back and see that all these disparate parts are interconnected. You can’t have separate policies for all of these issues. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, we lapsed into a policy of dual containment of Iraq and Iran. This created major problems. We developed a security structure which only included the U.S. and the British. We saw only two elements in our policy: the security aspect; and an economic aspect which was always tied to our energy interests. If there were any attempts to diversify these oil economies, by encouraging tourism and the like, we never made them in consultation and cooperation with the countries themselves. There were no regional collective approaches to deal with these problems.” Urging that the model be the

policies of President Eisenhower and Gen. George Marshall during the postwar period—the creation of a European NATO and the Marshall Plan—Zinni said, “We will have to decide how we will move forward together” with the countries in the region, or have the “mad mullahs on both sides screaming at each other.”

Zinni’s remarks were low-key, in criticizing the U.S. Iraq policy and those in the Bush Administration who had crafted it. But many attendees understood that the “mad mullahs” on the U.S. side were clearly the Clash of Civilizations neo-cons.

## A Republican Senator Speaks Out

Another blow to the neo-con chicken-hawks came from Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.), a Vietnam veteran, who underlined the need for basic economic development in Iraq if it is not to become a morass. Referring to the \$87 billion in new funding that President Bush had asked for the previous night, Hagel said that he and other Senators would be much tougher in getting answers about what this money is going for, to whom, and when.

“Much of the money will be used for improvements in Iraq, not only for the military, but also for the economy,” Hagel stated. “If we don’t connect with a palpable manifestation to the population that things will get better—if you can’t do that—it doesn’t matter how many divisions you send in. It won’t work.” He also urged opening up Iraq to the Europeans and others “in all areas of activity,” not just in the deployment of military forces. “The U.S. will never win in Iraq alone,” Hagel said. “It is the only option we have with the realities we are up against.” He also noted that the UN can do certain things with regard to humanitarian aid, “better than any single country.”

To live up to this idea, Hagel, and his traditional Republican colleagues such as Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, will have to work for the good of the nation to get real answers from the Pentagon. Those he promised to get, are answers that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his neo-con experts in evasion tactics—Paul Wolfowitz, Doug Feith, and Dov Zakheim—had refused to provide to the Senate and House of Representatives before the Iraq war. The Pentagon had stiff-armed the Congress when it called the first Iraq occupation chief, retired Gen. Jay Garner, for hearings. Garner, a crony of the right-wing Pentagon neo-cons from the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA), sent a videotaped testimony to the Senate, instead of appearing personally. The incident was one reason Garner was later canned, and replaced with the current occupation viceroy, Paul Bremer.

From the briefings given at NCUSAR, it is clear that the entire Iraq war cabal, should be ousted. To do so, the American policymakers who spoke there should continue to speak out—with even more pungency and force.

*William Jones and Jeffrey Steinberg contributed to this report.*