

Top Republican Evokes Eisenhower, Blasts ‘Cheney-Rumsfeld Cabal’

by Edward Spannaus

A scathing attack on the Cheney-Rumsfeld “cabal” that is running the current Administration, and high praise for Presidents Dwight Eisenhower and George H.W. Bush, were delivered on Oct. 19 by Col. Larry Wilkerson (ret.), who served as chief of staff for former Secretary of State Colin Powell from 2001 to early 2005. Wilkerson’s statement, delivered at the New America Foundation in Washington, was taken as representing the thinking of a section of traditionalist Republicans, and at least some of the Bush 41 circle.

No Administration in history has screwed up the national security decision-making process as badly as the George W. Bush Administration, Wilkerson said. He blamed this on “a cabal” between Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, which made decisions for the Administration in secret, and who represented what Eisenhower called the “Military-Industrial Complex.”

Wilkerson served 31 years in the U.S. Army, and worked for 16 years for Colin Powell, including in the Bush 41 Administration, in which Powell was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He is the former Associate Director of Policy Planning for the U.S. Department of State, and has taught at both the Naval War College and the U.S. Marine Corps War College.

Wilkerson was introduced by Steve Clemons of the New America Foundation, who referenced the policy debates and discussions within the Eisenhower Administration. Following are excerpts of Colonel Wilkerson’s remarks:

Col. Larry Wilkerson: I couldn’t help but grow somewhat nostalgic as Steve was talking about Dwight Eisenhower. Though I was 7 to 15, roughly, during his tenure as President, I sometimes find myself longing for it, especially President Eisenhower’s rather conformistic—if that’s not too big a word—approach to the 1947 National Security Act. In other words, he thought it was a piece of legislation that was passed by the Congress of the United States, the people’s representative, and he damn well ought to follow it, and did so probably to an extent that few Presidents, if any, have since. . . .

I have two approaches to what Steve was alluding to as my topic today. The one is the approach of an academic. For some six years at the Naval War College at Newport, and then

at the Marine Corps War College at Quantico, I taught some of the brightest people in America, 35- to 40-year-old military officers of all services, both genders, and all professional skills within the services. . . .

Now, before I turn to the formal part of my presentation, which is a little bit of history, let me just say that the other side the reason my views are bifurcated—the other side—is my practical experience; practical experience sitting at the right hand of a very powerful chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, underneath a very powerful Secretary of Defense by the name of Richard Cheney, and watching probably one of the finest Presidents we’ve ever had—that’s how I feel about George H.W. Bush—exercise one of the greatest adeptnesses at foreign policy I’ve ever seen. So many things happened in George H.W. Bush’s four years, that I think when historians write about it with dispassion—25-30 years from now—they’re going to give that man enormous credit for knowing how to make the process work. It took them awhile; took them about nine to ten months to get their act together, but once they did, they worked very well. . . .

I saw the Clinton Administration, up close and personal. It took them a little longer than that to get their act together; and in a very intimate way, I saw the George W. Bush Administration, from 2001 to early 2005. . . .

So I have two approaches, if you will: the academic over here, and the practitioner over here, and sometimes I get them confused. The ground is so rich for an academic, and for a person who has taught the National Security Act, and what has come out of the National Security Act, that I sometimes get too candid, if you will.

On the other hand, as a practitioner and as a citizen of this great Republic, I kind of believe that I have an obligation to say some of these things, and I believe, furthermore, that the people’s representatives over on the Hill, in that other branch of government, have truly abandoned their oversight responsibilities in this regard, and have let things atrophy to the point that if we don’t do something about it, it’s going to get even more dangerous than it already is. . . .

Decisions that send men and women to die, decisions that have the potential to send men and women to die, decisions that confront situations like natural disasters, and cause needless death or cause people to suffer misery that



New America Foundation/Sarah Brennan

Col. Larry Wilkerson (ret.): “What I saw was a cabal between the Vice President of the United States, Richard Cheney, and the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, on critical issues that made decisions that the bureaucracy did not know were being made. . . . America is paying the consequences.”

they shouldn’t have to suffer—domestic and international decisions—should not be made in a secret way. That’s a very, very provocative statement, I think. All my life I’ve been taught to guard the nation’s secrets. All my life I have followed the rules. I’ve gone through my special background investigations and all the other things that you need to do, and I understand that the nation’s secrets need guarding, but fundamental decisions about foreign policy should not be made in secret.

Let me tell you the practical reason. . . . If you as a member of the bureaucracy do not participate in a decision, you are not going to carry that decision out with the alacrity, the efficiency, and the effectiveness you would if you have participated. When you cut the bureaucracy out of your decisions, and then foist your decisions, more or less out of the blue, on that bureaucracy, you can’t expect that bureaucracy to carry your decision out very well. And furthermore, if you’re not prepared to stop the feuding elements in that bureaucracy as they carry out your decision, you’re courting disaster.

And I would say that we have courted disaster in Iraq, in North Korea, in Iran. Generally, with regard to domestic crises like Katrina, Rita, and I could go on back, we haven’t done very well on anything like that in a long time. And if something comes along that is truly serious, truly serious, something like a nuclear weapon going off in a major American city, or something like a major pandemic, you are going

to see the ineptitude of this government in a way that will take you back to the Declaration of Independence. . . .

Now, let me get a little more specific. . . . Almost everyone since the ’47 act, with the exception, I think, of Eisenhower, has in some way or another perturbed, flummoxed, twisted, drew evolutionary trends with, whatever, the national security decision-making process. I mean, John Kennedy trusted his brother, who was Attorney General—made his brother Attorney General, far more than he should have. Richard Nixon, oh my God, took a position that was not even envisioned in the original framers of the Act’s minds, National Security Advisor, and not subject to confirmation by the Senate, advice and consent— took that position and gave it to his Secretary of State, concentrating power in ways that still reverberate in this country. Jimmy Carter allowed Zbig Brzezinski to essentially negate his Secretary of State.

Now, I could go on and say what Sandy Berger did to Madeleine Albright in the realm of foreign policy, and I could make other provocative statements too, but no one, in my study of the Act’s implementation, has so flummoxed the process as the present Administration.

. . . But the case that I saw for four-plus years was a case that I have never seen in my studies of aberrations, bastardizations, perturbations, changes to the national security decision-making process. What I saw was a cabal between the Vice President of the United States, Richard Cheney, and the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, on critical issues that made decisions that the bureaucracy did not know were being made. And then, when the bureaucracy was presented with the decision to carry them out, it was presented in such a disjointed, incredible way that the bureaucracy often didn’t know what it was doing as it moved to carry them out. . . .

In so many ways I wanted to believe for four years that what I was seeing—as an academic now—what I was seeing was an extremely weak National Security Advisor, and an extremely powerful Vice President, and an extremely powerful, in the issues that impacted him, Secretary of Defense. Remember, a Vice President who has been Secretary of Defense too, and obviously has an inclination that way, and also has known the Secretary of Defense for a long time, and also is a member of what Dwight Eisenhower warned about— God bless Eisenhower—in 1961, in his farewell address,¹ the Military Industrial Complex, and don’t you think they aren’t among us today, in a concentration of power that is just unparalleled? It all happened because of the end of the Cold War. Harlan [Ullman] will tell you how many contractors who did billions of dollars or so of business with the Defense Department we had in 1988 and how many do we have now. And they’re always working together.

If one of them is a lead on the satellite program—I hope there’s some Lockheed and Grumman and others here today,

1. For background on the Eisenhower Farewell Address, see “The Enigma of the Fulbright Memorandum,” by Edward Spannaus, *EIR*, Feb. 15, 2002.

Raytheon—if one of them is a lead on satellites, the others are subs [subcontractors]. And they’ve learned their lesson; they’re in every state. They’ve got every Congressman, every Senator. They’ve got it covered. Now, that’s not to say that they aren’t smart businessmen. They are. But it’s something we should be looking at.

So you’ve got this collegiality there between the Secretary of Defense and the Vice President, and you’ve got a President who is not versed in international relations, and not too much interested in them either. And so it’s not too difficult to make decisions in this what I call Oval Office cabal, and decisions often that are the opposite of what you’d thought were made in the formal process. . . .

Now, let’s get back to Dr. Rice again. For so long I said, “yeah, Rich, you’re right”—Rich being Undersecretary of State Richard Armitage—“it is a dysfunctional process.” . . . Now I’ve come to a different conclusion, and after reading [George] Packer’s book, I found additional information, or confirmation for my opinion, I think. I think it was more a case of—in some cases there was real dysfunctionality, there always is—but in most cases it was Dr. Rice made a decision . . . She made a decision that she would side with the President to build her intimacy with the President.

And so what we had was a situation where the National Security Advisor, seen in the evolution over some half-century since the Act as the balancer or the person who would make sure all opinions got to the President, the person who would make sure that every dissent got to the President that made sense—not every one, but the ones that made sense—actually was a part of the problem, and probably on many issues sided with the President and the Vice President and the Secretary of Defense. And so what you had—and here I am the academic again—you had this incredible process where the formal process, the statutory process, the Policy Coordinating Committee, the Deputies Committee, the Principals Committee, all camouflaged, the dysfunctionality camouflaged the efficiency of the secret decision-making process.

And so we got into Iraq . . . And there are so many decisions. Why did we wait three years to talk to the North Koreans? Why did we wait four-plus years to say we at least back the EU-3 approach to Iran?

. . . [I]t made decisions in secret, and now I think it is paying the consequences of having made those decisions in secret. But far more telling to me is, America is paying the consequences. You and I, and every other citizen like us, is paying the consequences, whether it is a response to Katrina that was less than adequate certainly, or whether it is the situation in Iraq, which still goes unexplained. You know, if I had the time I could stand up here today I think, and make a strategic case for why we are in Iraq and why we have to stay there, and we have to get it right. . . .

Wilkerson responded to a question about the Bush 41 Administration, as follows, in part:

I think what George H.W. Bush did in the short four years that he was in office was just phenomenal. Let’s just begin the discussion with the reunification of Germany. When I say secretive, I don’t necessarily mean exposed to the full public glare on the front page of both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. I mean the leaders involved in it, the allies involved in it, and those who will be impacted by it, largely in this case the Russians, are not only consulted but asked for their opinion, and even have evidence to take back with them that their opinion was not just listened to, but the better points—and there are almost always good points in even the Russians’ presentation—have been implemented, or seem to be being implemented.

There’s a whole road of difference, a huge interstate of difference, between diplomacy conducted with all the parties that might be impacted by the results of that diplomacy, and a decision being made and foisted on the world, as it were. . . .

When you put your feet up on a hassock and look at a man who’s won the Nobel Prize and is currently the President of South Korea, and tell him in a very insulting way that you don’t agree with his assessment of what’s necessary to be reconciled with the north, that’s not diplomacy, that’s cowboyism. And I went to high school in Houston—I’ve got some connections with Texas. But there’s just a vast difference between the way George Bush dealt with major challenges, some of the greatest challenges at the end of the 20th Century, and effected positive results, in my view, and the way we conduct diplomacy today.

I like to use the word gracelessness, and I use that word because grace is something we have lost in the modern world. It’s a very important product. It’s very different, for example, to walk in with a foreign leader and find something you can be magnanimous about. You don’t have to win everything. You don’t have to be the big bully on the block. Find something you can be magnanimous about, that you can give him, that you can say he gets credit for, or she gets credit for. That’s diplomacy. That’s diplomacy. You don’t walk in and say, I’m the big mother on the block and if everybody’s not with me, they’re against me, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. The difference between father and son, in my mind, sort of comes from that attitudinal approach to the world.

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