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British Embassy Washington

From the Ambassador
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IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN: CONVERSATION WITH WOLFOWITZ

1 Paul Wolfowitz, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, came to Sunday lunch on 17 March.

2 On Iraq I opened by sticking very closely to the script that you used with Condi Rice last week. We backed regime change, but the plan had to be clever and failure was not an option. It would be a tough sell for us domestically, and probably tougher elsewhere in Europe. The US could go it alone if it wanted to. But if it wanted to act with partners, there had to be a strategy for building support for military action against Saddam. I then went through the need to wrongfoot Saddam on the inspectors and the UN SCRs and the critical importance of the MEPP as an integral part of the anti-Saddam strategy. If all this could be accomplished skilfully, we were fairly confident that a number of countries would come on board.

3 I said that the UK was giving serious thought to publishing a paper that would make the case against Saddam. If the UK were to join with the US in any operation against Saddam, we would have to be able to take a critical mass of parliamentary and public opinion with us. It was extraordinary how people had forgetten how bad he was.

4 Wolfowitz said that he fully agreed. He took a slightly different position from others in the Administration, who were forcussed on Saddam's capacity to develop weapons of mass destruction. The WMD danger was of course crucial to the public case against Saddam, particularly the potential linkage to terrorism. But Wolfowitz thought it indispensable to spell out in detail Saddam's barbarism. This was well documented from what he had done during the occupation of Kuwait, the incursion into Kurdish territory, the assault on the Marsh Arabs, and to hiw own people. A lot of work had been done on this towards the end of the first Bush administration. Wolfowitz thought that this would go a long way to destroying any notion of moral equivalence between Iraq and Israel. I said that I had been forcefully struck, when addressing university audiences in the US, how ready students were to gloss over Saddam's crimes and to blame the US and the UK for the suffering of the Iraqi people.

5 Wolfowitz said that it was absurd to deny the link between terrorism and Saddam. There might be doubt about the alleged meeting in Prague between Mohammed Atta, the lead hijacker on 9/11, and Iraqi intelligence (did we, he asked, know anything more about this meeting?). But there were other substantiated cases of Saddam giving comfort to terrorists, including someone involved in the first attack on the World Trade Center (the latest New Yorker apparently has a story about links between Saddam and Al Qaeda operating in Kurdistan).

6 I asked for Wolfowitz's take on the struggle inside the Administration between the pro- and anti- INC lobbies (well documented in Sy Hersh's recent New Yorker piece, which I gave you). He said that he found himself between the two sides (but as the conversation developed, it became clear that Wolfowitz was far more pro-INC than not). He said that he was strongly opposed to what some were advocating: a coalition including all outside factions except the INC (INA, KDP, PUK, SCIRI). This would not work. Hostility towards the INC was in reality hostility towards Chalabi. It was true that Chalabi was not the easiest person to work with. Bute had a good record in bringing high-grade defectors out of Iraq. The CIA stubbornly refused to recognise this. They unreasonably denigrated the INC because of their fixation with Chalabi. When I mentioned that the INC was penetraded by Iraqi intelligence, Wolfowitz commented that this was probably the case with all the opposition groups: it was something we would have to live with. As to the Kurds, it was true that they were living well (another point to be made in any public dossier on Saddam) and that they feared provoking an incursion by Baghdad. But there were good people among the Kurds, including in particular Salih (?) of the PUK. Wolfowitz brushed over my reference to the absence of Sunni in the INC: there was a big difference between Iraqi and Iranian Shia. The former just wanted to be rid of Saddam.

7. Wolfowitz was pretty dismissive of the desirability of a military coup and of the defector generals in the wings. The latter had blood on their hands. The important thing was to try to have Saddam replaced by something like a functioning democracy. Though imperfect, the Kurdish model was not bad. How to achieve this, I asked? Only through a coalition of all the parties was the answer (we did not get into military planning).