

# The Washington Post

## The True Rationale? It's a Decade Old

The Washington Post – "Outlook"

Mar 7, 2004

By James Mann

The Bush administration has offered a series of shifting justifications for the war in Iraq. Each has been quite specific: The war was to uncover Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction; to dislodge a brutal dictator; to combat Iraq's support for terrorism; to deal with what President Bush called a "grave and gathering threat."

Which was the real one? That's the overarching question that has dominated public debate in recent months. But the question is too narrow. The underlying rationale was both broader and more abstract: The war was carried out in pursuit of a larger vision of using America's overwhelming military superiority to shape the future.

The outlines of that vision were first sketched more than a decade ago, immediately after the Soviet Union collapsed. Some of the most important and bitterly debated aspects of the war in Iraq -- including the administration's willingness to engage in preemptive military action -- can be traced to discussions and documents from the early 1990s, when Pentagon officials, under then-Defense Secretary Dick Cheney and then-Undersecretary of Defense Paul D. Wolfowitz, led the way in forging a new, post-Cold War military strategy for the United States.

The gist of the strategy they formulated was that the United States should be the world's dominant superpower -- not merely today, or 10 years from now, or when a rival such as China appears, but permanently. The elements of this vision were couched in bland-sounding phrases: The United States should "preserve its strategic depth" and should act overseas to "shape the security environment." What could potentially flow from those vague words was, however, anything but bland: The recent war in Iraq was, above all, an effort to shape the security environment of the Middle East.

This account of how that strategy was developed -- and how it has influenced the policies of the current Bush administration -- is based on documents and interviews with many of those involved in the discussions 12 years ago, during what turned out to be the final year of the first Bush administration. Early in 1992, officials in the Pentagon began putting together a document called the Defense Planning Guidance. This statement of America's military strategy, prepared every two years, serves as the blueprint for upcoming defense budgets. As the first since the Soviet collapse, the '92 version took on special significance.

An early draft of the document was leaked to reporters, and has been the stuff of legend ever since. A mostly fictional version of that event has been passed down over the years, and it goes like this: Wolfowitz, the undersecretary of defense, had drafted a version of American military strategy in which the United States would move to block any rival power in Europe, Asia or the Middle East. After the leaked document caused a furor, the first Bush administration retreated. The document was toned down and its key ideas were abandoned.

But interviews with participants show that this version is wrong in several important respects. Wolfowitz didn't write the original draft. While the draft was rewritten, it was not really toned down. Indeed, in subtle ways, using careful terminology and euphemisms, the vision of an American superpower was actually made more sweeping. And although Wolfowitz and his staff played key roles, the ultimate sponsor of the new strategy was Cheney.

It all began two years earlier. The Berlin Wall came down in November 1989, effectively ending the Cold War and prompting the Pentagon to undertake a search for a new set of principles, in part to prevent Congress, then controlled by the Democrats, from slashing the defense budget. The key participants were Cheney, Wolfowitz and Colin L. Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. While Powell sometimes disagreed with the two civilian leaders on other issues (including the events of 1990 and '91 leading up to the Persian Gulf War), the three men worked closely together on forestalling cutbacks. The Soviet Union's collapse added new urgency to their task. "What we were afraid of was people who would say, ' . . . Let's bring all of the troops home, and let's abandon our position in Europe,'" recalled Wolfowitz in an interview.

The job of writing a new Defense Planning Guidance was assigned to Zalmay Khalilzad, then a Wolfowitz aide and now U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan. Khalilzad produced a draft that stressed the need to prevent the emergence of any rival power, particularly among the "advanced industrialized nations." (It is largely forgotten now, but at the time, there were fears that Japan and Germany, two of America's closest allies in the Cold War, would eventually become post-Cold War competitors.) Khalilzad's draft also suggested that in this new environment, the United States might sometimes act through "ad hoc assemblies" of nations, rather than through permanent alliances; this was an early rendition of what the second Bush administration would later call "coalitions of the willing." The draft said the United States "may be faced with the question of whether to take military steps to prevent the

development or use of weapons of mass destruction" -- an allusion to the possibility of preemption or preventive war.

When he finished, Khalilzad sent copies to others in the Pentagon, asking for comment. Within days, an account of this draft appeared on the New York Times front page. The reaction was immediate. Officials in Japan, Germany and other European countries were less than thrilled at the notion that the United States might try to limit their military and economic power. Presidential candidate Bill Clinton's spokesman said that the document represented an effort by the Pentagon "to find an excuse for big budgets instead of downsizing."

Wolfowitz hadn't even seen Khalilzad's draft before it was leaked, and he kept a certain distance from the controversy. But Cheney, as defense secretary, was effusive in his praise. "He said to me, 'You've discovered a new rationale for our role in the world,' " Khalilzad told me in an interview.

Pentagon officials set out to smooth over the rough edges of the draft without giving up its essentials. The job was given to Wolfowitz's top aide, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, then principal deputy undersecretary of defense for strategy and now Vice President Cheney's chief of staff.

Now came the subtle, crucial change. Libby and others recognized that the notion of America blocking a rival power was the part that had engendered controversy. Yet they also knew this wasn't saying very much: Realistically, there couldn't even be a rival to American power in Europe or Asia for another decade or two, if not longer.

So Libby's new draft dropped the language about competitors. Reporters were then told that the idea had been abandoned, and their stories created the impression that the draft had been softened.

But it hadn't been. Instead, using careful language, Libby's rewrite encompassed a more breathtaking vision: The United States would build up its military capabilities to such an extent that there could never be a rival. America would develop such enormous superiority in military power and technology that other countries would realize it would be self-defeating to try to compete. A country such as, say, China might embark on an intensive 30-year drive to match America's military might -- but doing so would be prohibitively expensive, crippling other efforts at economic development, and even then, might not succeed.

Instead of talking about blocking rivals, Libby's revision spoke more vaguely about preserving America's "strategic depth" -- a term that Cheney had begun to use in congressional hearings on the defense budget.

In military terms, "strategic depth" usually connotes additional territory that provides an extra margin of safety in combating adversaries. For example, a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan was said to give Pakistan "strategic depth" in dealing with India. When Pentagon officials began using the term in 1990, it had this same geographical connotation: Withdrawal of Soviet forces from Eastern Europe gave America and its NATO allies "strategic depth" in protecting Western Europe. But in Libby's rewrite, the phrase took on a broader and more abstract meaning; "strategic depth" referred to America's advantageous position in the world, its extensive network of bases, weaponry and advanced levels of military technology.

The other key idea in the rewrite was that the United States would not wait passively to see if a rival emerged. It would act to ensure events moved in ways favorable to U.S. interests. This was called "shaping the future security environment." The concept included everything from peacekeeping missions to stopping the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Libby's rewrite altered the wording of some other groundbreaking ideas in Khalilzad's draft as well, without changing the meaning. The revised draft omitted the discussion of "ad hoc assemblies," but it said America had to be ready to protect its critical interests abroad "with only limited additional help, or even alone, if necessary." The new version didn't mention preemption specifically, but noted that "sometimes a measured military action can contain or preclude a crisis."

Ordinarily, the Defense Planning Guidance is a classified document. But Cheney liked the revised draft so much that he ordered parts of it to be declassified and made public. "He took ownership of it," recalled Khalilzad. In January 1993, as the first Bush administration was leaving office, the document was published as a government document under Cheney's name as America's "Defense Strategy for the 1990s."

The Clinton administration set aside Cheney's vision without actually repudiating it. A decade later, as the second Bush administration moved toward war with Iraq, the ideas in the '92 document took on heightened significance. What the Pentagon officials had succeeded in doing, within months of the Soviet collapse, was to lay out the intellectual blueprint for a new world dominated -- then, now and in the future -- by U.S. military power.

James Mann is senior writer in residence at the Center for Strategic & International Studies. This article is based on his new book, "Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet" (Viking).