

## Neoconservative Propaganda Campaign Led to Iraq War

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**Former Pentagon Insider:  
'Neoconservative Propaganda Campaign Led to Iraq War'**

By Karen Kwiatkowski  
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**Lt. Col. Karen Kwiatkowski, a former Pentagon insider, concludes her observations on the run-up to the Iraq war in this last of a three-part series.**

As the winter of 2002 approached, I was increasingly amazed at the success of the propaganda campaign being waged by President Bush, Vice President Cheney, and neoconservative mouthpieces at the Washington Times and Wall Street Journal. I speculated about the necessity but unlikelihood of a Phil-Dick-style minority report on the grandiose Feith-Wolfowitz-Rumsfeld-Cheney vision of some future Middle East where peace, love, and democracy are brought about by pre-emptive war and military occupation.

In December, I requested an acceleration of my retirement after just over 20 years on duty and exactly the required three years of time-in-grade as a lieutenant colonel. I felt fortunate not to have being fired or court-martialed due to my politically incorrect ways in the previous two years as a real conservative in a neoconservative Office of Secretary of Defense. But in fact, my outspokenness was probably never noticed because civilian professionals and military officers were largely invisible. We were easily replaceable and dispensable, not part of the team brought in from the American Enterprise Institute, the Center for Security Policy, and the Washington Institute for Near East Affairs.

There were exceptions. When military officers conspicuously crossed the neoconservative party line, the results were predictable—get back in line or get out. One friend, an Army colonel who exemplified the qualities carved in stone at West Point, refused to maneuver into a small neoconservative box, and he was moved into another position, where truth-telling would be viewed as an asset instead of a handicap. Among the civilians, I observed the stereotypical perspective that this too would pass, with policy analysts apparently willing to wait out the neocon phase. In early winter, an incident occurred that was seared into my memory. A coworker and I were suddenly directed to go down to the Mall entrance to pick up some Israeli generals. Post-9/11 rules required one escort for every three visitors, and there were six or seven of them waiting. The Navy lieutenant commander and I hustled down. Before we could apologize for the delay, the leader of the pack surged ahead, his colleagues in close formation, leaving us to double-time behind the group as they sped to Undersecretary Feith's office on the fourth floor. Two thoughts crossed our minds: are we following close enough to get credit for escorting their office, and do they really know where they are going? We did get credit, and they did know. Once in Feith's waiting room, the leader continued at speed to Feith's closed door. An alert secretary saw this coming and had leapt from her desk to block the door. "Mr. Feith has a visitor. It will only be a few more minutes." The leader craned his neck to look around the secretary's head as he demanded, "Who is in there with him?"

This minor crisis of curiosity past, I noticed the security sign-in roster. Our habit, up until a few weeks before this incident, was not to sign in senior visitors like ambassadors. But about once a year, the security inspectors send out a warning letter that they were coming to inspect records. As a result, sign-in rosters were laid out, visible and used. I knew this because in the previous two weeks I watched this explanation being awkwardly presented to several North African ambassadors as they signed in for the first time and wondered why and why now. Given all this and seeing the sign-in roster, I asked the secretary, "Do you want these guys to sign in?" She raised her hands, both palms toward me, and waved frantically as she shook her head. "No, no, no, it is not necessary, not at all." Her body language told me I had committed a faux pas for even asking the question. My fellow escort and I chatted on the way back to our office about how the generals knew where they were going (most foreign visitors to the five-sided asylum don't) and how the generals didn't have to sign in. I felt a bit dirtied by the whole thing and couldn't stop comparing that experience to the grace and gentility of the Moroccan, Tunisian, and Algerian ambassadors with whom I worked.

In my study of the neoconservatives, it was easy to find out whom in Washington they liked and whom they didn't. They liked most of the Heritage Foundation and all of the American Enterprise Institute. They liked writers Charles Krauthammer and Bill Kristol. To find out whom they didn't like, no research was required. All I had to do was walk the corridors and attend staff meetings. There were several shared prerequisites to get on the Neoconservative List of Major Despicable People, and in spite of the rhetoric hurled against these enemies of the state, most really weren't Rodents of Unusual Size. Most, in fact, were retired from a branch of the military with a star or two or four on their shoulders. All could and did rationally argue the many illogical points in the neoconservative strategy of offensive democracy—guys like Brent Scowcroft, Barry McCaffrey, Anthony Zinni, and Colin Powell.

I was present at a staff meeting when Deputy Undersecretary Bill Luti called General Zinni a traitor. At another time, I discussed with a political appointee the service being rendered by Colin Powell in the early winter and was told the best service he could offer would be to quit. I heard in another staff meeting a derogatory story about a little Tommy Fargo who

was acting up. Little Tommy was, of course, Commander, Pacific Forces, Admiral Fargo. This was shared with the rest of us as a Bill Luti lesson in civilian control of the military. It was certainly not civil or controlled, but the message was crystal.

When President Bush gave his State of the Union address, there was a small furor over the reference to the yellowcake in Niger that Saddam was supposedly seeking. After this speech, everyone was discussing this as either new intelligence saved up for just such a speech or, more cynically, just one more flamboyant fabrication that those watching the propaganda campaign had come to expect. I had not heard about yellowcake from Niger or seen it mentioned on the Office of Special Plans talking points. When I went over to my old shop, sub-Saharan Africa, to congratulate them for making it into the president's speech, they said the information hadn't come from them or through them. They were as surprised and embarrassed as everyone else that such a blatant falsehood would make it into a presidential speech.

When General Zinni was removed as Bush's Middle East envoy and Elliot Abrams joined the National Security Council (NSC) to lead the Mideast division, whoops and high-fives had erupted from the neocon cubicles. By midwinter, echoes of those celebrations seemed to mutate into a kind of anxious anticipation, shared by most of the Pentagon. The military was anxiously waiting under the bed for the other shoe to drop amidst concerns over troop availability, readiness for an ill-defined mission, and lack of day-after clarity. The neocons were anxiously struggling to get that damn shoe off, gleefully anticipating the martinis to be drunk and the fun to be had. The other shoe fell with a thump on Feb. 5 as Colin Powell delivered his United Nations presentation.

It was a sad day for me and many others with whom I worked when we watched Powell's public capitulation. The era when Powell had been considered a political general, back when he was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, had in many ways been erased for those of us who greatly admired his coup of the Pentagon neocons when he persuaded the president to pursue UN support for his invasion of Iraq. Now it was as if Powell had again rolled military interests—and national interests as well.

Around that same time, our deputy director forwarded a State Department cable that had gone out to our embassy in Turkey. The cable contained answers to 51 questions that had been asked of our ambassador by the Turkish government. The questions addressed things like after-war security arrangements, refugees, border control, stability in the Kurdish north, and occupation plans. But every third answer was either "To be determined" or "We're working on that" or "This scenario is unlikely." At one point, an answer included the "fact" that the United States military would physically secure the geographic border of Iraq. Curious, I checked the length of the physical border of Iraq. Then I checked out the length of our own border with Mexico. Given our exceptional success in securing our own desert borders, I found this statement interesting.

Soon after, I was out-processed for retirement and couldn't have been more relieved to be away from daily exposure to practices I had come to believe were unconstitutional. War is generally crafted and pursued for political reasons, but the reasons given to Congress and the American people for this one were so inaccurate and misleading as to be false. Certainly, the neoconservatives never bothered to sell the rest of the country on the real reasons for occupation of Iraq—more bases from which to flex U.S. muscle with Syria and Iran, better positioning for the inevitable fall of the regional sheikdoms, maintaining OPEC on a dollar track, and fulfilling a half-baked imperial vision. These more accurate reasons could have been argued on their merits, and the American people might indeed have supported the war. But we never got a chance to debate it.

My personal experience leaning precariously toward the neoconservative maw showed me that their philosophy remains remarkably untouched by respect for real liberty, justice, and American values. My years of military service taught me that values and ideas matter, but these most important aspects of our great nation cannot be defended adequately by those in uniform. This time, salvaging our honor will require a conscious, thoughtful, and stubborn commitment from each and every one of us, and though I no longer wear the uniform, I have not given up the fight.

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