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Presenter: Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz

Friday, May 9, 2003

Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz Interview with Sam Tannenhaus, Vanity Fair

Q: What do you think all the conspiratorial talk is? Do you have any notion, in Europe and here? What are people looking at this way?

Wolfowitz: I think it's pretty obvious and I think it's pretty disgraceful but all you can do is ignore it and go on and get the job done.

Q: What is it? I mean some say anti-Semitism I guess in Europe that would be --

Wolfowitz: I just said all I'm going to say about it.

Q Okay

There's a question now as to whether in Iraq itself --

Wolfowitz: You know it's completely out in the open who holds what views in this Administration. You couldn't be more transparent about what the arguments are. The most significant thing that has produced what is admittedly a fairly significant change in American policy is the events of September 11th which are going to count as one of the -- If you had to pick the ten most important foreign policy things for the United States over the last 100 years it would surely rank in the top ten if not number one. It's the reason why so much has changed, and people who refuse to look at that, for whatever reason, or are unwilling to face up to the implications of that then go around and look for some nefarious explanation. But it's shameful.

Q: Since you brought that up let me ask you something related to that. I've looked at the remarkable Defense Policy Guidance of 1992 --

Wolfowitz: Wait a minute. Did you look at the guidance or did you look at the draft that was leaked before I saw it?

Q: That's a very good point. Actually all I saw were summaries of it. Is there a big discrepancy as to what was reported and what was in it?

Wolfowitz: Yes. In short. At some point I guess it's acquired such a life of its own I ought to go back and refresh my memory.

But the way I remember it approximately is as follows. I gave a quite substantial briefing to Secretary Cheney and what was then called I guess the Defense Resources Board on a post-Cold War defense strategy, the essence of which was to shift from a strategy for being prepared to fight a global war, to being focused on two possible regional conflicts. And to downsize the U.S.

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military by some 40 percent.

That was sort of taken to the President, promulgated in a speech in Aspen on August 2, 1990, which you may recall happened also to be the day that Iraq invaded Kuwait. In fact we had, in that briefing that I gave in May I think, it focused on the Iraqi threat to the Arabian peninsula as one of the regional problems we needed to be prepared to deal with. At the time that was considered a revolutionary idea. By the time the President gave the speech it had already happened. [Laughter]

Then that general briefing had to be translated into a guidance document for the department. Some people on my staff wrote a draft. Before I even got to see the draft someone leaked it to the New York Times, apparently because they didn't like it. The New York Times then wrote about the draft.

If you go back, and you can do this with Lexis/Nexis. If you go back, the excerpts from the draft are nowhere near as hysterical as the way the New York Times reported it. So people in the first place were reacting to the New York Times description of the draft as opposed to the actual text of the draft which the Times in fact did publish.

I repeat, it was not a draft that I'd even reviewed yet.

As I recall, one of the pieces of hysteria was the idea that this is a blueprint for a massive increase in U.S. defense spending, when in fact it was a blueprint for a 40 percent reduction in U.S. defense spending. It goes on from there.

When we did a revised draft that in fact I had reviewed carefully, the State Department initially didn't want us to put it out, I think because it was a little too much. Well, I don't know why. They didn't want us to put it out. I don't want to speculate on motives. But in January of 1993 as we were about to leave, I said to Cheney don't you think we should publish it? And he said yes, we should. So it's available in the full text as the Regional Defense Strategy of January, 1993.

I know people say oh well, they just sanded off the corners because the real thing received such an adverse reaction. But the truth of the matter is what the Times was writing about was something that I'd never seen. What is published, while I will admit some of the corners are rounded off on it, reflects my views.

Q: What did you make of the reaction at the time? You were an important public official then, but you weren't particularly visible. And I looked at the Times -- That was the right hand column front page story on the same day, by the way, that the Whitewater story broke in the paper, March 8, 1992.

And of course there were Democratic primaries coming up, Super Tuesday. Was this your first taste of what the media will do to you when they think they have a story? Or were you schooled in that before?

Wolfowitz: I've run into it before. If the media had more of a right wing bias I would have run into it in a major way with the Philippine policy. We had a few shots at us from the conservative press that we were undermining Reagan's good friend Ferdinand Marcos. No, I've been shot at from both directions.

I think the first time was over the Team B exercise back in 1976.

Q. Oh, that's right.

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Wolfowitz. It seems to go with the territory.

Q And there again you'd written a fairly straightforward account, wasn't it of intermediate missiles or something?

Wolfowitz: That's right Which turned out to be, I wouldn't say prophetic, but it was prescient. It was completely borne out by what came subsequently, but it was again -- I don't know whether people caricature it in order to discredit it, or they caricature it because they don't understand it Or maybe some of both.

But the way I would put it in terms of the '92 document and briefings is that, you have to remember, the Cold War had ended. There were a lot of people who said we don't need any of these Cold War alliances any more. We don't need NATO any more. Then President Bush was asked why do you need NATO now that the threat's gone away? He said the threat's still there. They said what is it? He said the threat's uncertainty, and people sort of laughed at that.

Well, it's not a bad description for what's happened in the Balkans in the intervening period And what we were basically arguing in that document is that while we can manage with a substantially reduced U S. defense force, for a lot of people to retain 60 percent of it in those alliance commitments, they somehow, I guess, thought we could go to complete disarmament or something. I'm not sure what their model was.

In fact the New York Times specifically had this absurd line, I remember, that we had abandoned 50 years of reliance on the doctrine of collective security, I think. I'd have to go back and get the quote. But basically it's as though for 50 years we'd been relying on the United Nations and this document was going to undo it, as opposed to for 50 years we'd relied on NATO and our alliances in Northeast Asia and this document was trying to support them

I remember at the time that a couple of Democratic senators -- It's easy to recover them. You just go and look in Pat Buchanan's book -- sort of became hysterical about this grand plan for continuing and maybe even expanding American commitments Because we did, in a sense one of the more radical things in there was, if I can use an awful phrase, the adumbration of NATO enlargement. We weren't quite so bold as to say it but we were hinting at it. There was some discussion about, in a complementary document that was also leaked, about whether the United States could honor a defense commitment to Lithuania if we had one This was considered wildly outrageous and various Democratic senators attacked us.

Pat Buchanan's "Republic Not an Empire" book spends its first chapter attacking the so-called Wolfowitz Memorandum.

Q Right, I know that book.

Wolfowitz: And he laments the fact that these same Democratic senators who were attacking--in his view, appropriately attacking--the Wolfowitz Memorandum, had climbed on board the whole policy when it became Clinton's policy in the mid 1990s. He's correct in saying that what was considered by the New York Times to be such an outrageous document was U.S consensus foreign policy, but during the Clinton Administration, not in this Administration. That is that these alliances needed to be retained, that NATO could be enlarged successfully, that we could downsize our military but we needed to retain a capability to deal with two major regional conflicts, which, by the way, is something that needed revision by the time I got back here. But it was the defense policy of the Clinton years, ironically.

Q In fact John Louis Gaddis said that.

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Wolfowitz: Who?

Q: John Louis Gaddis has said that, that if you look at Clinton's policy it actually does come out of the '92 guidance to some extent.

Wolfowitz: Not to some extent. It's pretty much verbatim.

Q: But you're --

Wolfowitz. -- without acknowledgement.

Q: Except you have been skeptical about Clinton's, the sentimental liberalism in his ideas, his approach to foreign policy, right?

Wolfowitz: Well, yes but let's remember that -- I think they made a serious over-reach in Somalia when they went beyond just ending starvation and tried to do nationbuilding. I think Haiti was a waste of American effort. I think, as we've learned, the North Korea Framework Agreement was delusional. But on two of the key things they did, namely Bosnia and Kosovo, Bob Dole supported Clinton quite strongly and I would say courageously on Bosnia and I'm proud to claim some credit in having advised --

Q: You did too.

Wolfowitz: I did too, but I also was there when Dole was being pushed by some of his Republican colleagues to go after Clinton saying this would be a catastrophe. I said no it won't be, and moreover, it's the right thing to do.

If they had dropped the arms embargo on the Bosnians as they promised to do when they came into office it might not have been necessary to still have thousands of foreign troops in Bosnia. But by the time you got to it in 1995 it was the only alternative.

And similarly, on Kosovo, when Bush was deciding whether to support it or not, I was strongly urging him to do so. When some Republicans tried to undercut Clinton on Kosovo, it was Bush and McCain together who told them don't do that. It's wrong.

So it's not that everything they did was wrong, but I think things like Haiti and Somalia were over-reached and generally there was, I think, a difficulty in distinguishing what was American interest from what were sort of vaguely seen as international community preferences. But I'm not a unilateralist by any means. In fact I don't think you can get much done in this world if you do it alone.

Q: Do you think there was a reluctance on their part even to use the threat of force? To make force an option in the way that it's now become -- I think about North Korea, Syria and Iran, and actually --

Wolfowitz: And Iraq

Q: And Iraq. When I think about it, these other three that have now been brought up, being discussed, have actually been very kind of multinational and diplomatic and yet it's partly the threat of force that seems to strengthen the approach, doesn't it?

Wolfowitz: There's no question that in certain -- First of all, diplomacy that it's just words is rarely going to get you much unless you're dealing with people who basically share your values and your

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interests. I'm not against, I mean sometimes it does help to just have a better understanding.

But if you're talking about trying to move people to something that they're not inclined to do, then you've got to have leverage and one piece of leverage is the ultimate threat of force. It's something you need to be very careful about because, as Rumsfeld likes to say, don't cock unless you're prepared to throw it.

By the way I think there was a tendency to cock it too often with Kosovo. If you go back and look at the year and a half or so leading up to when we finally did use force there were so many empty threats issued that Milosevic clearly concluded, ultimately wrongly, that we weren't serious.

So I think yeah, I think the threat of force is one of the instruments of diplomacy, but it's one that needs to be used carefully.

I'm going to have to break here for a few minutes and we'll try to get back to you soon.

Q. Thanks so much. Goodbye.

[Session Two, Saturday, May 10, 2003]

Wolfowitz. Hello

Q: How are you doing?

Wolfowitz: Pretty good. How are you?

Q: Okay I will try to make this painless. It reminds me of an interview I read with Philip Ross once in the Times and he said what a day. First the dentist, now a journalist. [Laughter]

Wolfowitz: The dentist was easy, so I hope you can stay below his threshold. [Laughter]

You're kind of faint.

Q: I was telling Kevin, I have a headset and I type as we speak, which is one reason I'll want to see the transcript just so I don't make errors. I'm reliable, but I'm not a letter-perfect typist and I won't always be able to keep up with you

Can you hear me okay now?

Wolfowitz: Pretty well. It's okay.

Q: This is a feature magazine and people want to know a little about you so let me just lead you through a few questions there.

One is, where were you on September 11th? Were you at the Pentagon when --

Wolfowitz I was in my office. We'd just had a breakfast with some congressmen in which one of the subjects had been missile defense And we commented to them that based on what Rumsfeld and I had both seen and worked on the Ballistic Missile Threat Commission, that we were probably in for some nasty surprises over the next ten years.

Q. Oh, my gosh.

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Wolfowitz: I can't remember, then there was the sort of question of what kind of nasty surprises? I don't remember exactly which ones we came up with. The point was more just that it's in the nature of surprise that you can't predict what it's going to be.

Q: Do you remember then the impact of the plane into the Pentagon? Or had you first heard stories about New York? What was --

Wolfowitz: We were having a meeting in my office. Someone said a plane had hit the World Trade Center. Then we turned on the television and we started seeing the shots of the second plane hitting, and this is the way I remember it. It's a little fuzzy.

Q: Right.

Wolfowitz: There didn't seem to be much to do about it immediately and we went on with whatever the meeting was. Then the whole building shook. I have to confess my first reaction was an earthquake. I didn't put the two things together in my mind. Rumsfeld did instantly.

Q: Did he really?

Wolfowitz: Yeah. He went charging out and down to the site where the plane had hit, which is what I would have done if I'd had my wits about me, which may or may not have been a smart thing to do. But it was, instead the next thing we heard was that there'd been a bomb and the building had to be evacuated. Everyone started streaming out of the building in a quite orderly way. Congregated on the parade ground basically right in front of the Pentagon which would have been about the worst place to have a crowd of a couple of thousand people in that moment if we'd again had our wits about us. But we were out of the building anyway.

Q: Let me ask you then about the next couple of days. There is --

Wolfowitz: Just to complete it. We went back into the building and that was an experience I won't ever forget. There was a huge fire, there was smoke gradually filling -- not all, just the small number of us who were basically in the command group. Rumsfeld was there and General Myers who was still the Vice Chairman at that point. The Chairman was on his way back from overseas and I was there. We were in the National Military Command Center and there was this acrid smoke gradually seeping into the place. Rumsfeld simply refused to leave. He finally made me leave, which I was not happy about.

I went up to this bizarre location that was prepared to survive nuclear war.

Q: Really?

Wolfowitz: Yes.

Q: In the Pentagon.

Wolfowitz: No, no. Way out of town.

Kellems: That's why he left, was to separate them.

Q: I see.

Kellems: To provide continuity.

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Q: And then in the next few days, then there was the statement which now looks remarkably [prescient] when you said this is a campaign. At that point, I think it was the 13th, at that point was Iraq sort of moving into the scope, under the radar screen? What was your thinking at that point?

Wolfowitz: I know my thinking at that point was that the old approach to terrorism was not acceptable any longer. The old approach being you treat it as a law enforcement problem rather than a national security problem. You pursue terrorists after they've done things and bring them to justice, and to the extent states are perhaps involved, you retaliate against them but you don't really expect to get them out of the business of supporting terrorism completely.

To me what September 11th meant was that we just couldn't live with terrorism any longer.

Throughout the '80s and '90s it was sort of, I've never found quite the right words because necessary evil doesn't describe it, but a sort of an evil that you could manage but you couldn't eliminate. And I think what September 11th to me said was this is just the beginning of what these bastards can do if they start getting access to so-called modern weapons, and that it's not something you can live with any longer. So there needs to be a campaign, a strategy, a long-term effort, to root out these networks and to get governments out of the business of supporting them. But that wasn't something that was going to happen overnight.

Q: Right. So Iraq naturally came to the top of the list because of its history and the weapons of mass terror and all the rest, is that right?

Wolfowitz: Yes, plus the fact which seems to go unremarked in most places, that Saddam Hussein was the only international figure other than Osama bin Laden who praised the attacks of September 11th.

Q: So now there is the much-reported, I just want to make sure I get it right, famous meeting at --

It's been reported in a couple of different ways, and I'd like to get it in your words if I can, the famous meetings that first weekend in Camp David where the question of Iraq came up. I believe the President heard you discussing Iraq and asked you to elaborate on it or speak more about it. Can you give us a little sense of what that was like?

Wolfowitz: Yeah. There was a long discussion during the day about what place if any Iraq should have in a counterterrorist strategy. On the surface of the debate it at least appeared to be about not whether but when. There seemed to be a kind of agreement that yes it should be, but the disagreement was whether it should be in the immediate response or whether you should concentrate simply on Afghanistan first.

There was a sort of undertow in that discussion I think that was, the real issue was whether Iraq should be part of the strategy at all and whether we should have this large strategic objective which is getting governments out of the business of supporting terrorism, or whether we should simply go after bin Laden and al Qaeda.

To the extent it was a debate about tactics and timing, the President clearly came down on the side of Afghanistan first. To the extent it was a debate about strategy and what the larger goal was, it is at least clear with 20/20 hindsight that the President came down on the side of the larger goal.

Q: Believe it or not, because this is a feature magazine, I'd like to ask you a little bit about your background. None of this is going to be personal. I know that you protect the privacy of your family so this has really nothing to do with that.

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But there seems to be very little doubt that everything came at the Iraqi regime much faster than they expected it. That the war began sooner, that the ground troops moved in faster, that they moved up north faster, that they moved into Baghdad faster, and a lot of things happened before for that matter some of the meddling neighbors could interfere, either.

One of our senior generals in a discussion of a related but different subject made the observation that speed kills, as in it kills the enemy, and that getting to an objective quickly is often the thing that's most effective militarily. There's always usually a tradeoff between speed and mass.

Q: And then the last question, you've been very patient and generous. That is what's next? Where do we stand now in the campaign that you talked about right after September 11th?

Wolfowitz. I think the two most important things next are the two most obvious. One is getting post-Saddam Iraq right. Getting it right may take years, but setting the conditions for getting it right in the next six months. The next six months are going to be very important.

The other thing is trying to get some progress on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. I do think we have a better atmosphere for working on it now than we did before in all kinds of ways. Whether that's enough to make a difference is not certain, but I will be happy to go back and dig up the things I said a long time ago which is, while it undoubtedly was true that if we could make progress on the Israeli-Palestinian issue we would provide a better set of circumstances to deal with Saddam Hussein, but that it was equally true the other way around that if we could deal with Saddam Hussein it would provide a better set of circumstances for dealing with the Arab-Israeli issue. That you had to move on both of them as best you could when you could, but --

There are a lot of things that are different now, and one that has gone by almost unnoticed--but it's huge--is that by complete mutual agreement between the U.S. and the Saudi government we can now remove almost all of our forces from Saudi Arabia. Their presence there over the last 12 years has been a source of enormous difficulty for a friendly government. It's been a huge recruiting device for al Qaeda. In fact if you look at bin Laden, one of his principle grievances was the presence of so-called crusader forces on the holy land, Mecca and Medina. I think just lifting that burden from the Saudis is itself going to open the door to other positive things.

I don't want to speak in messianic terms. It's not going to change things overnight, but it's a huge improvement.

Q: Was that one of the arguments that was raised early on by you and others that Iraq actually does connect, not to connect the dots too much, but the relationship between Saudi Arabia, our troops being there, and bin Laden's rage about that, which he's built on so many years, also connects the World Trade Center attacks, that there's a logic of motive or something like that? Or does that read too much into --

Wolfowitz: No, I think it happens to be correct. The truth is that for reasons that have a lot to do with the U.S. government bureaucracy we settled on the one issue that everyone could agree on which was weapons of mass destruction as the core reason, but -- hold on one second --

(Pause)

Kellems: Sam there may be some value in clarity on the point that it may take years to get post-Saddam Iraq right. It can be easily misconstrued, especially when it comes to --

Wolfowitz: -- there have always been three fundamental concerns. One is weapons of mass destruction, the second is support for terrorism, the third is the criminal treatment of the Iraqi

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people. Actually I guess you could say there's a fourth overriding one which is the connection between the first two. Sorry, hold on again

Kellems: By the way, it's probably the longest uninterrupted phone conversation I've witnessed, so --

Q. This is extraordinary

Kellems: You had good timing

Q: I'm really grateful.

Wolfowitz: To wrap it up.

The third one by itself, as I think I said earlier, is a reason to help the Iraqis but it's not a reason to put American kids' lives at risk, certainly not on the scale we did it. That second issue about links to terrorism is the one about which there's the most disagreement within the bureaucracy, even though I think everyone agrees that we killed 100 or so of an al Qaeda group in northern Iraq in this recent go-around, that we've arrested that al Qaeda guy in Baghdad who was connected to this guy Zarqawi whom Powell spoke about in his UN presentation.

Q: So this notion then that the strategic question was really a part of the equation, that you were looking at Saudi Arabia --

Wolfowitz: I was. It's one of the reasons why I took a very different view of what the argument that removing Saddam Hussein would destabilize the Middle East. I said on the record, I don't understand how people can really believe that removing this huge source of instability is going to be a cause of instability in the Middle East.

I understand what they're thinking about. I'm not blind to the uncertainties of this situation, but they just seem to be blind to the instability that that son of a bitch was causing. It's as though the fact that he was paying \$25,000 per terrorist family and issuing regular threats to most friendly governments in the region and the long list of things was of no account and the only thing to think about was that there might be some inter-communal violence if he were removed.

The implication of a lot of the argumentation against acting -- the implication was that the only way to have the stability that we need in Iraq is to have a tyrant like Saddam keeping everybody in check -- I know no one ever said it that way and if you pointed it out that way they'd say that's not what I mean. But I believe that really is where the logic was leading.

Q: Which also makes you wonder about how much faith there is in spreading democracy and all the rest among some of those who --

Wolfowitz: Probably not very much. There is no question that there's a lot of instability that comes with democracy and it's the nature of the beast that it's turbulent and uncertain.

The thing is, at a general level, I've encountered this argument from the defenders of Asian autocracies of various kinds. Look how much better off Singapore is than Indonesia, to pick a glaring contrast. And Indonesia's really struggling with democracy. It sort of inherited democracy under the worst possible conditions too, one might say. But the thing that -- I'd actually say that a large part of Indonesia's problems come from the fact that dictatorships are unstable in the one -- worst way which is with respect to choosing the next regime. Democracy, one could say, has solved, not solve perfectly, but they represent one of the best solutions to one of the most

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fundamental instabilities in politics and that's how to replace one regime with another. It's the only orderly way in the world for doing it other than hereditary monarchy which doesn't seem to have much of a future.

Q: Thanks so much.

Wolfowitz: You're very welcome.

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