Bush-41 Finally Speaks on Iraq War

ExCLUSIVE: A dozen years too late, President George H.W. Bush has given voice to his doubts about the wisdom of rushing into the Iraq War, putting much of the blame on President George W. Bush’s “iron-ass” advisers, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, as ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern explains.

By Ray McGovern

Media reports on Jon Meacham’s biography of George H. W. Bush, the 41st President, have brought me a painful flashback to the deceptive, destructive yet at the same time highly instructive years 2002 and 2003, when his son George W. Bush, the 43rd President, attacked Iraq.

Reality should trump rhetoric regarding that godforsaken war in my view the most unprincipled and consequential foreign policy blunder in U.S. history. This may be reason enough to renew focus on those years because, for many Americans, those events remain cloaked in mystery and misunderstanding.

With his candor about his eldest son, the 91-year-old Bush patriarch also has sounded what may be the death knell for the moribund campaign of his younger son Jeb to be president #45. I do not suggest that #41 did that consciously. His unusually unguarded remarks, though, will lead voters to be chary of yet another Bush, if only on the “fool me once … fool me twice” aphorism that Jeb’s big brother had trouble remembering.

Meacham’s Destiny and Power: The American Odyssey of George Herbert Walker Bush will not be available to the hoi polloi until next week. Details already reported on the critical years of 2002 and 2003, however, permit I think, rather, dictate some preliminary analysis, before the Karl Roves of this world create still more “new history.”

The clear and present danger of getting sucked into yet another quagmire or quicksand pool on false pretenses persists. Thus, it seems fitting and proper to review the lead-up to the unprovoked “shock and awe” on Iraq proudly launched in March 2003 by #43, egged on by Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and other white-collar thugs.

Despite the propaganda and more tangible signs of incipient war in Iraq, my former intelligence analyst colleagues and I with considerable professional experience watching other countries prepare for aggression against others were finding it difficult to believe that the United States of America would be doing precisely that.
Still harder was it to digest the notion that Washington would do so, absent credible evidence of any immediate threat and would “fix” intelligence to “justify” it. But that, sadly, is what happened. On March 19, 2003, U.S. “shock and awe” lit the sky over Baghdad.

A Dozen Years Later

That was more than 12 ½ years ago. That not one of the white-collar crooks responsible for the war and ensuing chaos has been held accountable is an indelible blot not only on our country, but also on international law and custom. After all, the U.S./U.K. attack on Iraq fits snugly the definition given to a “war of aggression” as defined by the post-World War II Nuremberg Tribunal. Nuremberg labeled such a war “the supreme international crime, differing from other war crimes only in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.”

And the evil continued to accumulate: torture, kidnapping, black prisons, extrajudicial killing, massive invasions of privacy, and even the annulment of such basic human rights as the great writ of habeas corpus that was wrested from England’s King John 800 years ago. And, in the wake of this criminality, bedlam now reigns across large swaths of the Middle East driving millions of refugees into neighboring countries and Europe.

That the U.S. and U.K. leaders who launched the Iraq war have so far escaped apprehension and prosecution might be seen as a sad example of “victor’s justice.” But there are no victors, only victims. The reality that President George W. Bush and his co-conspirators remain unpunished makes a mockery of the commitment to the transcendent importance of evenhanded justice as expressed on Aug. 12, 1945, by Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson, the chief U.S. representative at Nuremberg:

“We must make clear to the Germans that the wrong for which their fallen leaders are on trial is not that they lost the war, but that they started it.”

Maybe it is partly because I know the elder Bush personally, but it does strike me that, since we are all human, some degree of empathy might be in order. I simply cannot imagine what it must be like to be a former President with a son, also a former President, undeniably responsible for such trespass on law for such widespread killing, injury and abject misery.

It is something of a stretch, but I have tried to put myself into the shoes of the elder Bush. In them I find myself insecure and struggling like Jacob before his dream about wrestling with God. The story in Genesis shows Jacob full of anxiety, despite God’s promise that God would bless his dynasty. He cannot
overcome his fear and is powerless to control his fate.

Jacob is aware that he is at a pivotal juncture but he is physically spent. Alone in the wilderness facing death, he collapses into a deep sleep, only to find himself wrestling all night with God. At daybreak he awakes with an injured hip; he is disabled but his life is spared. He had come to grips with God and, in the end, receives God’s blessing of peace.

What author Meacham has written suggests to me the possibility that the sins of the son are being visited on the father, to reverse one familiar Biblical expression.

In these circumstances, the tendency to require that thugs like Cheney and Rumsfeld bear their share of the blame seems quite human. And, to his credit, Bush-41 concedes “the buck stops” at the President. But I sense him thinking correctly, in my view that without those two “iron-ass” advisers, things would have been quite different. The son might even have paid more heed to the experienced cautions of the father and his associates.

**Sins of Omission**

As the senior Bush knows, sins of omission can be as consequential as those of commission. Judging from what he is quoted as saying in Meacham’s book, it appears he decided to make a (sort-of) clean breast of things okay, call it a Watergate-style “modified, limited hangout,” if you will. But, clearly, Bush has to be painfully aware that he was one of only a handful of people who might have been able to stop the chaos and carnage, had he spoken out publicly in real time.

He does hedge, saying for example that he still believes the attack on Iraq was the right thing to do. But this is a position he staked out years ago and, especially at 91, it may be too much to expect of him that he acknowledge the full implications of what he says elsewhere in the book about the misguided advice of “hardline” Cheney and “arrogant” Rumsfeld together with where, after all, the buck does stop.

My take is that Bush-41 has not completed his wrestle with the truth and with the guilt he may feel for failing to warn the rest of us what to expect from George, Cheney and Rumsfeld as he watched it happen. The elder Bush did use surrogates including two of his closest and most prominent friends, James Baker, his secretary of state, and Brent Scowcroft, his national security adviser, to speak out against the war.

But here the mainstream media was of no help. Instead of weighing the merits of the strong arguments of Baker, Scowcroft and other experienced foreign policy
professionals made against attacking Iraq, the media gave inordinate attention to incessant debates as to whether the seeming surrogates were actually speaking for the elder Bush.

In effect, the media was demanding what they knew Bush senior would almost certainly not do, “Speak for yourself, George H. W. Bush.” He refused to do it; he would not even comment on the critical views expressed by Baker and Scowcroft on Bush-43’s plan to attack Iraq.

Sure, it would have been hard, but at the time Bush senior was only in his late 70s, as he watched his son fall in with bad companions and join in the dishonesty and foolishness leading up to the attack on Iraq.

With his current modified, limited hangout especially (his richly deserved) criticism of Cheney and Rumsfeld Bush the elder may be able to live more comfortably with himself and to get past what I believe must be his regret now over having made no public effort to stop the madness back then.

The chronology below includes some of the more important events and may help inform those who have not had the time or inclination to follow the play-by-play as Cheney and Rumsfeld played on the younger Bush’s unabashed preening as “the first war president of the 21st century.”

**Keeping a Watching Brief**

The elder Bush knew all too well what was happening. He also knew what his son George was capable of not to mention the inclinations of Cheney, Rumsfeld and other white-collar criminals. To be brutally candid, it is a little late for the family patriarch to be telling us all this while blaming the Iraq debacle mostly on Cheney and Rumsfeld, quintessentially blameworthy though they are.

Worst still, if Bush-43 is to be believed, Bush senior had guilty foreknowledge of the war-crime attack on Iraq. George W. Bush divulges this in his 2014 Virgil-style paean to his father, “41: A Portrait of My Father,” in which he arrogates to himself Aeneas-like filial devotion. (Friends more cynical than me suggest that 43’s panegyric should be construed as a benign pre-emptive move to prevent the father from blabbing to his biographer.)

In any event, Bush-43 includes the following sentences about informing his father about plans to attack Iraq: “We both knew that this was a decision that only the president can make. We did talk about the issue, however. Over Christmas 2002, at Camp David, I did give Dad an update on our strategy.”

By that time, the die had been cast. Frankly, it is as painful as it is instructive to review the flow of key events in the summer and early fall of
2002. But I believe it may be necessary, not only to outline what Bush senior was watching, but also to pre-empt the creation of false history. Here are some selected benchmarks:

**July 23, 2002:** Tony Blair and his principal national security advisers are briefed at 10 Downing Street by MI-6 chief Richard Dearlove, CIA Director George Tenet’s British counterpart, three days after Dearlove met with Tenet at CIA Headquarters. A participant in the July 23 briefing prepares minutes of the meeting that same day. They are eventually leaked and published in the *London Times* on May 1, 2005.

The minutes quote Dearlove, Foreign Minister Jack Straw, and Attorney-General Peter Goldsmith. First Dearlove: “Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD.” [Translation: Saddam Hussein will be accused of having weapons of mass destruction that he could give to terrorists.]

“But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy. … The Foreign Secretary said the case [for war] was thin. … The Attorney-General said that the desire for regime change was not a legal base for military action.”

**August 2002:** President George W. Bush spends from August 6 to 31 clearing brush at his ranch in Crawford, Texas. White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card sets up a White House Iraq Group (WHIG) to “educate the public” on the alleged threat from Iraq. The group includes heavy hitters like political adviser Karl Rove, national security adviser Condoleezza Rice, Bush’s communications director Karen Hughes, and two officials from Dick Cheney’s entourage Irving Lewis “Scooter” Libby, and Mary Matalin. In his memoir, Cheney notes that both Matalin and Libby “wore two hats” serving as assistants to both Cheney and the President.

**August 2002:** With Bush in Crawford, there is trouble brewing for Cheney, Rumsfeld and others pushing for war on Iraq. Close associates of the elder Bush and other senior foreign policy mavens begin to speak out strongly against an attack on Iraq.


Also on Aug. 15, Lawrence Eagleburger, who served the elder Bush briefly as secretary of state, tells ABC News that unless Saddam Hussein “has his hand on a trigger that is for a weapon of mass destruction, and our intelligence is clear,
I don’t know why we have to do it [attack Iraq] now.”

Then on Aug. 25, in a New York Times op-ed, Bush-41’s Secretary of State James Baker adduces, in a lawyerly but compelling way, virtually all the reasons that what Bush-43, Cheney, Rumsfeld et al. had already decided on regarding Iraq would bring disaster.

Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Nebraska, also says openly in August that Secretary of State Colin Powell and his deputy Richard Armitage had earlier advised President George W. Bush of their concerns about the risks and complexities of a military strike on Iraq.

More trouble for hawks like Cheney was brewing in the House. Republican Majority Leader Dick Armey publicly warned that an “unprovoked attack” on Iraq would be illegal, adding, “It would not be consistent with what we have been as a nation or what we should be as a nation.”

(Armey later told Michael Isikoff, during an on-the-record interview for Isikoff’s book Hubris, that he had warned President George W. Bush that war on Iraq might result in a “quagmire.” He added that, while he found questionable the intelligence presented to him in support of such a war, he would give Bush the benefit of the doubt. According to Barton Gellman, author of Angler: The Cheney Vice Presidency, Cheney told Armey that Saddam Hussein’s family had direct ties to Al Qaeda and that Saddam was developing miniature nuclear weapons. Armey then voted for the war, but bitterly complained later that he had been “bullshitted” by Cheney.)

**Stopping the Peace Juggernaut**

With the President clearing brush and Andrew Card proceeding at what must have seemed to Cheney a dilatory pace, given the mounting opposition to war on Iraq, Cheney seized the bull by the horns, so to speak. Without a word to Secretary of State Powell or CIA Director Tenet, and not wanting to interrupt the President’s vacation, Cheney set the parameters for using “fixed” intelligence to reverse the alarming efforts toward peace.

With the apparent endorsement of Bush junior, when the President got back in town on Sept. 1, the juggernaut was redirected toward war. (One stands in awe of the unchallenged power Cheney was able to exert even if it was, technically speaking, *ad referendum* the President.)

Cheney chose to include in an Aug. 26 speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars in Nashville extreme, unsubstantiated charges about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq that set the terms of reference for virtually all that was to follow, including, I regret to say, the National Intelligence Estimate that my former
colleagues were suborned into “fixing” around the policy.

In his Aug. 26, 2002 speech, Cheney broadly warned that Saddam Hussein intends to “subject the United States to nuclear blackmail.” He continued:

“Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction [and] is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us. What he wants is ... more time to husband his resources to invest in his ongoing chemical and biological weapons program, and to gain possession of nuclear weapons.

“Deliverable weapons of mass destruction in the hands of a terror network, or a murderous dictator, or the two working together constitutes as grave a threat as can be imagined. The risks of inaction are far greater than the risk of action. The Iraqi regime has in fact been very busy enhancing its capabilities in the field of chemical and biological agents, and they continue to pursue the nuclear program they began so many years ago.

“Against that background, a person would be right to question any suggestion that we should just get inspectors back into Iraq, and then our worries will be over. Saddam has perfected the game of shoot and retreat, and is very skilled in the art of denial and deception. A return of inspectors would provide no assurance whatsoever of his compliance with UN resolutions.”

Colin Powell, George Tenet and others had five days, before Bush got back in town, to regain their composure after being blindsided by Cheney time enough, apparently, to remind themselves about who it was that really had the President’s ear. There is no sign that either Powell or Tenet chose to make a federal case out of it, so to speak. Also choosing to remain silent was former the CENTCOM commander, Marine Gen. Anthony Zinni, who was right there at the VFW convention.

Hear No Evil, Speak No Truth

Zinni later said he was shocked to hear Cheney’s depiction of intelligence (Iraq has WMD and is amassing them to use against us) that did not square with what he knew. Although Zinni had retired two years before, his role as consultant had enabled him to stay up to date on key intelligence findings.

“There was no solid proof that Saddam had WMD. I heard a case being made to go to war,” Zinni told “Meet the Press” 3 ½ years later.

The question lingers: why did Zinni not go public when he first heard Cheney lie? After all, he was one of the very few credible senior officials who might have prevented a war he knew was unnecessary. A tough, widely respected Marine
intimidated by a Vice President with five draft deferments? It happens. It happened.

Secretary of State Powell was also blindsided, but there is no sign he summoned the courage to voice any objections directly to the President about Cheney’s version of the threat from Iraq and what had to be done about it.

CIA Director Tenet has written that he, too, was taken completely by surprise by what Cheney said. In his memoir, Tenet added, “I had the impression that the president wasn’t any more aware than we were of what his number-two was going to say to the VFW until he said it.” But Tenet, as noted above, knew only too well that the intelligence was being “fixed,” because he was in charge of fixing it.

So for Tenet the surprise was simply one of timing that Cheney would go out on so long a limb before Bush got back from vacation.

From Cheney’s perspective the timing was perfect. With Bush out of town, it was even easier to avoid messy fights with what Cheney considered a troublesome, unnecessary bureaucracy (he had built up his own). And with UK Prime Minister Blair coming to Camp David six days after Bush got back, it would be cumbersome enough to fine-tune and coordinate the appropriate talking points for Bush to use with Blair on Sept. 7.

And so, with the month of August seeing a phalanx of senior Bush foreign policy advisers and other experts, as well as key Congressional leaders, speaking out in a troubling way against the war, an ever decisive Cheney decided he could not abide by the proverbial maxim that Andrew Card actually let drop publicly in early September: “From a marketing point of view, you don’t introduce new products in August.” Just to be clear, the White House chief of staff was talking about marketing war.

By the time George W. Bush got back to the Oval Office, the White House Iraq Group (WHIG) had gotten its instructions from Cheney on the strategy with which to approach Tony Blair to keep him harnessed onto the commander’s Jeep for war with particular attention to the joint U.S.-U.K. “marketing” campaign to be launched, big time, the day after the Bush and Blair met at Camp David.

The media did a little warm-up, with the BBC reporting that President Bush had shared with Prime Minister Blair satellite photographs released by a UN agency that allegedly showed clear evidence that Iraq was developing weapons of mass destruction. “I don’t know what more evidence we need,” said Mr. Bush. (There were no such photos.)

On Sunday, Sept. 8, came the opening salvo of the marketing campaign a major propaganda blitz with all hands on deck. The WHIG had been doing its homework
and was working with very accommodating media. Cheney, Rumsfeld, Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Richard Meyers fanned out to the talk shows right after Bush gave Blair the word at Camp David.

The hot topic was new information, apparently made available by the administration to the New York Times a day or two before, concerning “aluminum tubes,” sought by Iraq, supposedly for use in refining uranium for a nuclear weapon.

Rice claimed that the tubes were “really are only suited to – high-quality aluminum tools that are only really suited for nuclear weapons programs, centrifuge programs.” Rice acknowledged that “there will always be some uncertainty” in determining how close Iraq may be to obtaining a nuclear weapon but warned, “We don’t want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud.” (It turned out the tubes were actually for artillery known to be in Iraq’s inventory.)

Upon her return to the White House from CNN, she must have been awarded WHIG’s first Oscar. Cheney should have been runner-up for his Meet the Press performance accusing Saddam Hussein of moving aggressively to develop nuclear weapons to add to his stockpile of chemical and biological arms. The Vice President actually let slip the White House strategy, expressing hope that Congress would vote for war before it recessed in October (mid-term elections coming the following month).

With members fearing accusations of “softness” if they resisted President Bush’s authorization to use force, Congress voted for war. The war was on.

Also, on Sunday, Sept. 8, 2002, Rumsfeld on Face the Nation warned that inspections in Iraq would have to be intrusive enough to ensure that Saddam Hussein is disarmed. Powell told Fox News that the Bush administration believes that the best way to disarm Iraq “is with a regime change.” And Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Myers on ABC’s This Week added, “We have the forces, we have the readiness. U.S. armed forces will prevail, if called upon to strike Iraq.”

Six Months Later

A half-year later on Feb. 15, 2003, as the elder Bush watched 30 million demonstrators in 800 cities around the world marching against the war for which Bush-43 was so keen, I suspect there may have been a tinge of regret at having pulled strings to ensure young George would not have to experience war by serving in Vietnam.

Unlike his father, George W. had not the foggiest notion of what war is like, and Bush-41 can be thought to have been painfully aware of that. It may have occurred to him to belatedly apply some tough-love to 43 or to even go public in
a last-ditch effort to prevent the coming catastrophe. He probably knew that it was unrealistic to expect that the likes of Scowcroft and Baker could influence 43 to change course.

But George H. W. Bush continued to say and do nothing, waiting until now more than a dozen years after the catastrophic Iraq War was launched to voice his objections. An unhappy ending for the patriarch of a would-be dynasty.

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