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Secret Reports Dispute White House Optimism

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On May 22, 2006, President Bush spoke in Chicago and gave a characteristically upbeat forecast: "Years from now, people will look back on the formation of a unity government in Iraq as a decisive moment in the story of liberty, a moment when freedom gained a firm foothold in the Middle East and the forces of terror began their long retreat."

Two days later, the intelligence division of the Joint Chiefs of Staff circulated a secret intelligence assessment to the White House that contradicted the president's forecast.

Instead of a "long retreat," the report forecast a more violent 2007: "Insurgents and terrorists retain the resources and capabilities to sustain and even increase current level of violence through the next year."

A graph included in the assessment measured attacks from May 2003 to May 2006. It showed some significant dips, but the current number of attacks against U.S.-led coalition forces and Iraqi authorities was as high as it had ever been -- exceeding 3,500 a month. [In July the number would be over 4,500.] The assessment also included a pessimistic report on crude oil production, the delivery of electricity and political progress.

On May 26, the Pentagon released an unclassified report to Congress, required by law, that contradicted the Joint Chiefs' secret assessment. The public report sent to Congress said the "appeal and motivation for continued violent action will begin to wane in early 2007."

There was a vast difference between what the White House and Pentagon knew about the situation in Iraq and what they were saying publicly. But the discrepancy was not surprising. In memos, reports and internal debates, high-level officials of the Bush administration have voiced their concern about the United States' ability to bring peace and stability to Iraq since early in the occupation.

[The release last week of portions of a National Intelligence Estimate concluding that the war in Iraq has become a primary recruitment vehicle for terrorists -- following a series of upbeat speeches by the president -- presented a similar contrast.]

On June 18, 2003, Jay Garner went to see Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld to report on his brief tenure in Iraq as head of the postwar planning office. Throughout the invasion and the early days of the war, Garner, a retired Army lieutenant general, had struggled just to get his team into Iraq. Two days after he arrived, Rumsfeld called to tell him that L. Paul "Jerry" Bremer, a 61-year-old terrorism expert and protege of Henry A. Kissinger, would be coming over as the presidential envoy, effectively replacing Garner.

"We've made three tragic decisions," Garner told Rumsfeld.

"Really?" Rumsfeld asked.

"Three terrible mistakes," Garner said.

He cited the first two orders Bremer signed when he arrived, the first one banning as many as 50,000 members of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party from government jobs and the second disbanding the Iraqi military. Now there were hundreds of thousands of disorganized, unemployed, armed Iraqis running

around.

Third, Garner said, Bremer had summarily dismissed an interim Iraqi leadership group that had been eager to help the United States administer the country in the short term. "Jerry Bremer can't be the face of the government to the Iraqi people. You've got to have an Iraqi face for the Iraqi people."

Garner made his final point: "There's still time to rectify this. There's still time to turn it around."

Rumsfeld looked at Garner for a moment with his take-no-prisoners gaze. "Well," he said, "I don't think there is anything we can do, because we are where we are."

He thinks I've lost it, Garner thought. He thinks I'm absolutely wrong. Garner didn't want it to sound like sour grapes, but facts were facts. "They're all reversible," Garner said again.

"We're not going to go back," Rumsfeld said emphatically.

Later that day, Garner went with Rumsfeld to the White House. But in a meeting with Bush, he made no mention of mistakes. Instead he regaled the president with stories from his time in Baghdad.

In an interview last December, I asked Garner if he had any regrets in not telling the president about his misgivings.

"You know, I don't know if I had that moment to live over again, I don't know if I'd do that or not. But if I had done that -- and quite frankly, I mean, I wouldn't have had a problem doing that -- but in my thinking, the door's closed. I mean, there's nothing I can do to open this door again. And I think if I had said that to the president in front of Cheney and Condoleezza Rice and Rumsfeld in there, the president would have looked at them and they would have rolled their eyes back and he would have thought, 'Boy, I wonder why we didn't get rid of this guy sooner?'"

"They didn't see it coming," Garner added. "As the troops said, they drank the Kool-Aid."

What's the Strategy?

In the fall of 2003 and the winter of 2004, officials of the National Security Council became increasingly concerned about the ability of the U.S. military to counter the growing insurgency in Iraq.

Returning from a visit to Iraq, Robert D. Blackwill, the NSC's top official for Iraq, was deeply disturbed by what he considered the inadequate number of troops on the ground there. He told Rice and Stephen J. Hadley, her deputy, that the NSC needed to do a military review.

"If we have a military strategy, I can't identify it," Hadley said. "I don't know what's worse -- that they have one and won't tell us or that they don't have one."

Rice had made it clear that her authority did not extend to Rumsfeld or the military, so Blackwill never forced the issue with her. Still, he wondered why the president never challenged the military. Why didn't he say to Gen. John P. Abizaid at the end of one of his secure video briefings, "John, let's have another of these on Thursday and what I really want from you is please explain to me, let's take an hour and a half, your military strategy for victory."

After Bush's reelection, Hadley replaced Rice as national security adviser. He made an assessment of the problems from the first term.

"I give us a B-minus for policy development," he told a colleague on Feb. 5, 2005, "and a D-minus for policy execution."

Rice, for her part, hired Philip D. Zelikow, an old friend, and sent him immediately to Iraq. She needed ground truth, a full, detailed report from someone she trusted. Zelikow had a license to go anywhere and ask any question.

On Feb. 10, 2005, two weeks after Rice became secretary of state, Zelikow presented her with a 15-page, single-spaced secret memo. "At this point Iraq remains a failed state shadowed by constant violence and undergoing revolutionary political change," Zelikow wrote.

The insurgency was "being contained militarily," but it was "quite active," leaving Iraqi civilians feeling "very insecure," Zelikow said.

U.S. officials seemed locked down in the fortified Green Zone. "Mobility of coalition officials is extremely limited, and productive government activity is constrained."

Zelikow criticized the Baghdad-centered effort, noting that "the war can certainly be lost in Baghdad, but the war can only be won in the cities and provinces outside Baghdad."

In sum, he said, the United States' effort suffered because it lacked an articulated, comprehensive, unified policy.

Lessons From Kissinger

A powerful, largely invisible influence on Bush's Iraq policy was former secretary of state Kissinger.

"Of the outside people that I talk to in this job," Vice President Cheney told me in the summer of 2005, "I probably talk to Henry Kissinger more than I talk to anybody else. He just comes by and, I guess at least once a month, Scooter [his then-chief of staff, I. Lewis Libby] and I sit down with him."

The president also met privately with Kissinger every couple of months, making him the most regular and frequent outside adviser to Bush on foreign affairs.

Kissinger sensed wobbliness everywhere on Iraq, and he increasingly saw it through the prism of the Vietnam War. For Kissinger, the overriding lesson of Vietnam is to stick it out.

In his writing, speeches and private comments, Kissinger claimed that the United States had essentially won the war in 1972, only to lose it because of the weakened resolve of the public and Congress.

In [a column in The Washington Post on Aug. 12, 2005](#), titled "Lessons for an Exit Strategy," Kissinger wrote, "Victory over the insurgency is the only meaningful exit strategy."

He delivered the same message directly to Bush, Cheney and Hadley at the White House.

Victory had to be the goal, he told all. Don't let it happen again. Don't give an inch, or else the media, the Congress and the American culture of avoiding hardship will walk you back.

He also said that the eventual outcome in Iraq was more important than Vietnam had been. A radical Islamic or Taliban-style government in Iraq would be a model that could challenge the internal stability of the key countries in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Kissinger told Rice that in Vietnam they didn't have the time, focus, energy or support at home to get the politics in place. That's why it had collapsed like a house of cards. He urged that the Bush administration get the politics right, both in Iraq and on the home front. Partially withdrawing troops had its own dangers. Even entertaining the idea of withdrawing any troops could create momentum for an exit that was less than victory.

In a meeting with presidential speechwriter Michael Gerson in early September 2005, Kissinger was more explicit: Bush needed to resist the pressure to withdraw American troops. He repeated his axiom that the only meaningful exit strategy was victory.

"The president can't be talking about troop reductions as a centerpiece," Kissinger said. "You may want to reduce troops," but troop reduction should not be the objective. "This is not where you put the emphasis."

To emphasize his point, he gave Gerson a copy of a memo he had written to President Richard M. Nixon, dated Sept. 10, 1969.

"Withdrawal of U.S. troops will become like salted peanuts to the American public; the more U.S. troops come home, the more will be demanded," he wrote.

The policy of "Vietnamization," turning the fight over to the South Vietnamese military, Kissinger wrote, might increase pressure to end the war because the American public wanted a quick resolution. Troop withdrawals would only encourage the enemy. "It will become harder and harder to maintain the morale of those who remain, not to speak of their mothers."

Two months after Gerson's meeting, the administration issued a 35-page "National Strategy for Victory in Iraq." It was right out of the Kissinger playbook. The only meaningful exit strategy would be victory.

Echoes of Vietnam

Vietnam was also on the minds of some old Army buddies of Gen. Abizaid, the Centcom commander. They were worried that Iraq was slowly turning into Vietnam -- either it would wind down prematurely or become a war that was not winnable.

Some of them, including retired Gen. Wayne A. Downing and James V. Kimsey, a founder of America Online, visited Abizaid in 2005 at his headquarters in Doha, Qatar, and then in Iraq.

Abizaid held to the position that the war was now about the Iraqis. They had to win it now. The U.S. military had done all it could. It was critical, he argued, that they lower the American troop presence. It was still the face of an occupation, with American forces patrolling, kicking down doors and looking at the Iraqi women, which infuriated the Iraqi men.

"We've got to get the [expletive] out," he said.

Abizaid's old friends were worried sick that another Vietnam or anything that looked like Vietnam would be the end of the volunteer army. What's the strategy for winning? they pressed him.

"That's not my job," Abizaid said.

No, it is part of your job, they insisted.

No, Abizaid said. Articulating strategy belonged to others.

Who?

"The president and Condi Rice, because Rumsfeld doesn't have any credibility anymore," he said.

This March, Abizaid was in Washington to testify before the Senate Armed Services Committee. He painted a careful but upbeat picture of the situation in Iraq.

Afterward, he went over to see [Rep. John P. Murtha](#) in the Rayburn House Office Building. Murtha, a

Pennsylvania Democrat, had introduced a resolution in Congress calling for American troops in Iraq to be "redeployed" -- the military term for returning troops overseas to their home bases -- "at the earliest practicable date."

"The war in Iraq is not going as advertised," Murtha had said. "It is a flawed policy wrapped in illusion."

Now, sitting at the round dark-wood table in the congressman's office, Abizaid, the one uniformed military commander who had been intimately involved in Iraq from the beginning and who was still at it, indicated he wanted to speak frankly. According to Murtha, Abizaid raised his hand for emphasis, held his thumb and forefinger a quarter of an inch from each other and said, "We're that far apart."

Frustration and a Resignation

That same month, White House Chief of Staff Andrew H. Card Jr. prepared to leave the administration after submitting his resignation to Bush. He felt a sense of relief mixed with the knowledge that he was leaving unfinished business.

"It's Iraq, Iraq, Iraq," Card had told his replacement, Joshua B. Bolten. "Then comes the economy."

One of Card's great worries was that Iraq would be compared to Vietnam. In March, there were 58,249 names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. One of Kissinger's private criticisms of Bush was that he had no mechanism in place, or even an inclination, to consider the downsides of impending decisions. Alternative courses of action were rarely considered.

As best as Card could remember, there had been some informal, blue-sky discussions at times along the lines of "What could we do differently?" But there had been no formal sessions to consider alternatives to staying in Iraq. To his knowledge there were no anguished memos bearing the names of Cheney, Rice, Hadley, Rumsfeld, the CIA, Card himself or anyone else saying "Let's examine alternatives," as had surfaced after the Vietnam era.

Card put it on the generals in the Pentagon and Iraq. If they had come forward and said to the president, "It's not worth it," or, "The mission can't be accomplished," Card was certain, the president would have said "I'm not going to ask another kid to sacrifice for it."

Card was enough of a realist to see that there were two negative aspects to Bush's public persona that had come to define his presidency: incompetence and arrogance. Card did not believe that Bush was incompetent, and so he had to face the possibility that, as Bush's chief of staff, he might have been the incompetent one. In addition, he did not think the president was arrogant.

But the marketing of Bush had come across as arrogant. Maybe it was unfair in Card's opinion, but there it was.

He was leaving. And the man he considered most responsible for the postwar troubles, the one who should have gone, Rumsfeld, was staying.

Bill Murphy Jr. and Christine Parthemore contributed to this report.

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