Wolfowitz: Return to sender?

by Bill_Berkowitz

Recently forced out as president of the World Bank, Paul Wolfowitz, one of the primary architects of U.S. President George W. Bush's Iraq war, is heading back to familiar surroundings. And the Washington-based American Enterprise Institute (AEI), one of the United States' premier conservative think-tanks, is more than pleased to welcome him back.

Earlier this month, AEI President Christopher DeMuth announced that Wolfowitz would be coming on board as a visiting scholar to work on such issues as international economic development, Africa, and public-private partnerships. Wolfowitz told the Financial Times that he would be "explor[ing] some ways to help advance development in Africa, both through the private sector and through foundation work."

Prior to joining the Pentagon in 2001, Wolfowitz served as a member of AEI's Council of Academic Advisers.

After leaving his post as deputy secretary of defense with the Bush administration, the World Bank position appeared to be the perfect fit for Wolfowitz; a place to rehabilitate a reputation badly damaged by his serial misjudgments over developments in Iraq.

However, nearly midway through his term at the World Bank, things started to unravel as evidence mounted about Wolfowitz's ethical lapses. His efforts to get his girlfriend (a bank employee) promoted, charges that he was a poor manager, and a growing concern among member countries that he was using the bank to advance U.S. interests fueled the fire.

As Graydon Carter, editor of Vanity Fair magazine, pointed out in his June "Editor's Letter" (written prior to Wolfowitz's World Bank exit strategy), things had gotten so bad for Wolfowitz that he had become "a source of ridicule within the international organization that employees have published a satirical monograph called 'La Banca Swirlla' ('Bank Swirled')."

According to RightWeb, a project of the International Relations Center, Wolfowitz received mixed reviews for his work at the World Bank. On the plus side, "He badgered the United States and other wealthy countries to cut subsidies to aid development in poorer countries, fervently pursued anti-corruption policies, and announced moves aimed at strengthening the bank's internal watchdog, the Department of Institutional Integrity."

Critics, however, were quick to point to the fact that Wolfowitz, a controversial choice to begin with because of his involvement with the Iraq War, exacerbated the controversy by choosing to bring on board "close

associates and supporters" of the Bush administration's "war on terror." The case for dumping Wolfowitz was likely sealed earlier this year when it was revealed that he was deeply involved in getting a pay raise and a new job at the State Department for his girlfriend, Shaha Riza, a career bank staffer.

Wolfowitz is familiar with the world of conservative think tanks and public policy institutes. In addition to his previous AEI work, he was a paid speaker for the Heritage Foundation and the Hudson Institute. He was also an original signatory with William Kristol's Project for the New American Century.

Despite his dismal performance within the administration and his questionable activities at the World Bank, Wolfowitz has been welcomed back into the fold. And, unlike other Bush administration employees â€“ such as FEMA's Michael Brown, who was forced to resign after his incompetent handling of Hurricane Katrina; or Vice President Dick Cheney's top aide Lewis "Scooter" Libby, who will be forever linked with the outing of a CIA operative, a subsequent conviction for perjury and obstructing justice, and a presidential commutation; or former Interior Deputy Secretary J. Steven Griles, who was convicted, and recently sentenced to jail time, for withholding information from the Senate Indian Affairs Committee in 2005 about his meeting with Republican Party Ã¼ber-lobbyist, now imprisoned, Jack Abramoff â€“ Wolfowitz is once again in a position to influence public policy.

During the early part of its more than 30-year existence, the conservative AEI was seen as "a mainstream economic policy and political science think tank." A number of respected centrist analysts still at the institute, such as William Schneider and Norman Ornstein, still "embody that old style," Benjamin Wallace-Wells wrote in a December 2003 piece in the Washington Monthly.

In the early 1980s, AEI was no match for the Heritage Foundation, a younger, Washington-based think tank steeped in hard-core conservative politics. The Heritage Foundation combined a capacity to raise significant amounts of money from other conservative foundations with a voracious appetite for publicity. It was able to raise its institutional profile through its unceasing communications with both right-wing and mainstream media sources.

After DeMuth took over the AEI's reins in 1986, the organization"put in place an astonishingly successful formula for attracting money and garnering influence, which has matched the increasingly aggressive style of Washington's conservative community," Wallace-Wells pointed out.

DeMuth hired the godfather of neoconservatism, Irving Kristol, and the late Jeane Kirkpatrick, who was Ronald Reagan's foreign policy adviser in his 1980 campaign and who had become the first woman to serve as the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

From her position as an AEI fellow, Kirkpatrick promoted the policies pushed by the Project for the New American Century, described by RightWeb as "a letterhead group" based in the same office building as AEI

and headed by several neoconservative notables, including Irving Kristol's son William. Both before and after the 9/11 attacks, PNAC played an aggressive role encouraging the Bush administration to invade Iraq.

Several other Iraq war architects have also been connected to AEI, including Richard Perle, Cheney, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton, and former undersecretary of defense for policy Douglas Feith.

In February 2003, President Bush delivered a major policy speech to AEI, mapping out his war plan, "thanking them [AEI] for their service" and support for the invasion. It is not, however, a question of that was then and this is now. AEI's influence within the administration persists to this day.

According to Think Progress, a project of the Center for American Progress Action Fund, Bush's escalation plan is largely based on a November 2006 paper by AEI analyst Frederick Kagan, who argued that the U.S. should "reenter [Iraq] in large numbers."

In his interview with the Financial Times, Wolfowitz indicated that he did not think he was through with public service. "Twenty years ago I was American ambassador to Indonesia, and I have to freely acknowledge, because it is pretty much an open secret, that I fell in love with that country," he said. He added that he "wouldn't mind working on some countries like Indonesia and Turkey that I've had a long association with."

Given his miscalculations on Iraq and his sullied performance at the World Bank, another Bush appointment would be a political resurrection for the ages.

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