

AMSPECBLOG

Feith Strikes Back

By Philip Klein on 3.6.07 @ 2:06PM

I just finished listening in on a bloggers' briefing hosted by Rob Bluey of the Heritage Foundation in which the former undersecretary of defense for President Bush fought back against what he called the "false narrative" that has developed both about the use of intelligence in the buildup to the Iraq War as well as the rationale for going to war. He is in the midst of writing a book due out this fall, giving what he believes to be the first thorough and accurate account of the lead-up to war. In the meantime, he has started a website aimed at countering media distortions. He decided to do so in the wake of a Feb. 9 *Washington Post* story that erroneously attributed damaging quotes to the Pentagon's inspector general that actually came from Democratic Senator Carl Levin. While the *Post* was forced to issue a correction on the story, by then it had spread throughout the world as truth. Feith has been frustrated by TV appearances that don't allow him to respond to issues in detail, so he decided to go online.

Feith criticized the Bush administration for not doing more to respond to the media as it developed the narrative that the president lied the country into war by manipulating intelligence. "It was a fascinating thing how the administration convinced itself that it didn't need to respond," Feith said. The people who ran communications would talk themselves into believing that newspaper stories or Seymour Hersh-type articles would be forgotten in a day, and to dignify them with a response would only draw more attention to them. "Part of what was wrong here was there was an idea about disciplining the message that was the wrong strategy for dealing with national security affairs," he said. The Bush communications staff would explain the broad outlines of issues which were adequate for a general audience, but not sufficient for those journalists who cared about getting more specific details. The Reagan administration, Feith said, would have a structure that allowed the President to explain the general policy to a large audience, but then smaller briefings would be held for those were interested in more specifics. The Bush administration, instead, attempted a one-size-fits all approach.

Feith said that there was a broader rationale for invading Iraq than historical revisionism would have you believe, including Saddam's support for terrorism and aggression against other countries. Even the WMD rationale was broader, because it mentioned not just stockpiles of weapons, but weapons programs. As the 2004 election approached, Feith argued, opponents of

the administration seized on the stockpiles as the one thing that was clearly in error, even though there was evidence of WMD programs.

Furthermore, he said his team at the Pentagon did not try to manipulate CIA intelligence; instead, their conflict with the CIA came down to a debate over whether the CIA was suppressing some pieces of intelligence. Feith said one of the ways to prevent intelligence failures is for consumers of the intelligence to interrogate the suppliers of intelligence more thoroughly, and that's what his office was doing.

I asked Feith to respond specifically to an issue I raised in a recent column, essentially, whether the narrative that Bush administration lied America into war using false intelligence would undermine any case for taking military action against Iran, if it came down to that.

"This narrative can serve a lot of useful purposes to people who developed it," he responded. The U.S. government is set up so that the bureaucracy can be a barrier to taking action, and often this is a good thing, but "every once in a while you have to do something about a very real problem," and this bureaucracy gets in the way. "This whole false narrative on Iraq becomes a giant weight on the side of inaction," Feith said.



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