

A Rapidly Changing World

An Interview with Douglas Feith

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On March 2, *inFOCUS* editor Matthew RJ Brodsky interviewed Douglas Feith, former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy from 2001-2005. In that role, Feith helped devise the U.S. government's strategy for the War on Terrorism and contributed to policy making for the Afghanistan and Iraq campaigns. Feith also worked in the Reagan administration as a Middle East specialist for the National Security Council and as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Negotiations Policy. Mr. Feith has twice received the Distinguished Public Service Medal, the Defense Department's highest civilian award. Currently Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for National Security Strategies at the Hudson Institute, Feith is the author of *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism*.

IF: Looking around the rapidly changing world, what do you see as the top foreign policy challenges abroad?

DF: In the area of most rapid change at the moment, the Middle East, the challenge is for the U.S. government to help the countries whose leaders have stepped down to create institutions that will allow them to develop democratically. Revolution is one thing; democracy is another. It's wrong to assume that a revolution against an autocrat is automatically a democratic revolution.

If societies evolve democratically in the Middle East, it will ultimately promote stability in the area and benefit the people who live there. It can also ultimately take steam out of the Islamist extremist movement. I say 'ultimately' because in the short term, if people are moving toward democracy, their governments may reflect a popular will in favor of certain policies not friendly to the United States or to our friends in the area, like the Israelis. The political upheaval does not automatically translate into policies we'd be happy with. But the United States still, I think, has a strategic interest in promoting the development of liberal democratic institutions in the Middle East.

IF: On that point, as a whole, are the uprisings we see across the Middle East a positive or negative development for both the U.S. and Israel?

DF: Seeing people demand the removal of oppressive governments is inherently a thrilling and positive spectacle. But no one knows yet whether the removal of the governments in Tunisia and Egypt—and we hope soon in Libya and possibly elsewhere in the Middle East—will be followed by the establishment of liberal democracies. The countries could go in the direction that Iran went after it removed an autocratic leader in 1979, or that Gaza went when the people there removed the corrupt Palestinian Authority. It's too early to say that it's going to turn out well. I think we should be celebrating the accomplishment to date of people demanding freedom, operating largely nonviolently in Tunisia and Egypt, and demanding the removal of oppressive governments. But we should recognize that a lot of work needs to be done to turn that into something beneficial for the Egyptians and Tunisians, for the other people in the region and for the Americans.

IF: How do you see Egypt's future unfolding and what should the U.S. role be there?

DF: There are grounds for hope that the Egyptians will evolve in a benign direction. It's not scientific, but the impressionistic reports that came out from Tahrir Square suggest that the people were not generally

chanting Muslim Brotherhood slogans; they were shouting more generic or secular slogans of opposition against the dictatorship. There was not a lot of anti-Americanism. There was not even a lot of anti-Israelism, although there was some disturbing anti-Jewish rhetoric.

There's reason to hope that this revolution could advance the cause of freedom, democracy, and prosperity in Egypt. But if it goes off in the direction of the Iranian Revolution, it will not do that. Now, the Iranian Revolution didn't have the benefit of its own example. What the Egyptians can see is that the Islamists in Iran and Gaza have not produced political freedom, but oppressive tyranny, and not economic prosperity, but impoverishment. One hopes that those will be important examples in front of the Egyptians as they make major decisions about their future.

IF: Libya appears to be headed for a civil war. What should be the American response?

DF: The first thing to note—and it applies to Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere—is that it was a mistake for the U.S. over the last two years in particular, but even to some extent during the Bush years, not to have been more strategic and active in cultivating contacts and friendly relations with local people interested in liberal political reform.

Libya could descend into a very bloody civil war, which would not be in America's interest. There have been a number of voices calling for different types of action, such as no-fly zones and a beefed-up U.S. naval presence in the Mediterranean. I think one thing hampering the Obama administration is that it believes the United States can act boldly in a situation like this only as part of a broad international consensus. Pragmatically, it can be desirable for the U.S. to act as part of an international consensus. But the idea that we cannot act except in such a consensus is right now interfering with our taking useful action. We are being opposed in the UN Security Council by Russia and China. A more preferable approach would be to recognize that, on an occasion like this, the United States might need to move more quickly than an international consensus can develop. So we should act quickly, boldly, decisively, and while we're at it, we can work to build up as much international support as possible.

IF: How would you characterize the changing American-Israeli relationship since the current administration has been in office?

DF: I see the downgrading by the Obama administration of our relationship with Israel as part of a larger strategy. There have been leaders in various countries throughout history who have large ambitions to reorient their countries. For example, after World War I Ataturk decided that Turkey should look West and become a modern, liberal, democratic state. Sadat also decided to change Egypt's community by pulling Egypt out of the Soviet-bloc in the late 1970s. It's actually also happening now in Turkey, where Prime Minister Erdogan is turning Turkey toward the East. He's trying to do strategically the opposite of what his predecessor, Ataturk, did.

I think that President Obama came into office with an ambition to change America's role in the world. He doesn't favor America's positioning itself as the leader of a community of liberal democratic countries. He seems to want America to function as one of many countries in the various multilateral organizations in the so-called international community. He doesn't want the United States to have the position in the world that George W. Bush promoted, which I think was in line with decades of American tradition. Rather, President Obama set about systematically downgrading our relations with Britain, Japan, the newly democratic countries of Poland and the Czech Republic, and others. At the same time, he reached out in a friendly fashion toward Venezuela, Iran, and Syria, offering them (as he put it) an unclenched fist. I believe the downgrading of our relationship with Israel should be understood as part of that reorienting of the United States.

IF: Looking back on the war in Iraq, what did we get right and what did we get wrong?

DF: There are quite a few things in both categories. The main thing that we got right is that the United States and the world are better off without Saddam Hussein in power and without his two sons in the wings. President Bush was right to conclude that it was riskier to leave him in power than it was to remove him, even though the risks of removing him were obviously large.

I think that the single biggest error we made in Iraq was setting up a protracted occupation government. We aggravated all of our major problems by failing to put substantial sovereign power into the hands of the Iraqis quickly after the removal of Saddam. It was not part of our original concept or plan that we would set the United States up as an occupation government for 14 months after the removal of Saddam. And yet, that's what we wound up doing. I grapple with that issue in my book, *War and Decision*.

IF: As Under Secretary of Defense from 2001-2005, you helped develop the U.S. strategy for the War on Terrorism. How has the Obama administration handled the war since coming to office?

DF: If we compare the administration's actions against statements that candidate Obama made as he was running for president, we'd have to say that it's been a very pleasant surprise. The administration has been responsible in many ways about the War on Terrorism, even adopting, more or less, the Bush administration policies that candidate Obama severely criticized. For example, one of the top Obama administration intelligence officials recently said that if we caught bin Laden, the administration would send him to Guantanamo Bay. The Obama administration has also said in various court cases that despite its preference to use our civil justice system to try terrorism suspects, the president has to retain the ability to hold terrorists indefinitely without trial.

As a senator, Obama was against the Iraq war. Since becoming president, however, he has made a point of not wanting to act irresponsibly and fritter away the substantial American accomplishments in Iraq. So instead of pulling the plug on the military effort, which he had wanted to do in 2007 when congressional Democrats were trying to cut off funding for the Iraq war, Obama as President has continued to prosecute the war. Overall, President Obama has been much more responsible than his campaign rhetoric was.

IF: There are conflicting reports on the effectiveness of the Stuxnet virus and the extent to which it delayed Iran's uranium enrichment process. What should be Washington's next step in dealing with Iran's continued quest for nuclear power?

DF: Washington's efforts to resolve the matter diplomatically have been ineffective. That's not to say the diplomacy has been completely worthless, as sanctions have caused some problems for the Iranian government. But the idea that diplomatic means are going to end the Iranian nuclear weapons program is unrealistic.

President Obama himself and his top officials have used the term 'unacceptable' in describing the idea of Iranian nuclear capability. I think he's right; it should be unacceptable for the United States. But what does it mean that the U.S. is unwilling to accept a nuclear Iran? I don't think there are any easy military answers here. I don't think that anybody can be confident we have good intelligence on what the Iranians are up to. A military strike against the Iranian program would be very risky and the effects would be uncertain. But allowing Iran to obtain nuclear weapons would also be very risky. It could embolden the clerics who run Iran and also trigger widespread nuclear proliferation around the world. The best imaginable outcome would be if the Iranian people swept away the corrupt and extremist clerics that run their country.

IF: Is America a declining power?

DF: I don't subscribe to the argument that there's inevitability to American decline. The answer to that question will hinge, to a substantial extent, on leadership. If the American people elect leaders that understand the way power works in the world, know the kinds of tools that are at the disposal of the United

States, have pride in American history and American political philosophy, and have pride in our ability to create a good life for our own people and help improve the lives of others, America will remain a strong country. I believe that there's broad support for those ideas in the United States.

IF: Thank you very much.

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